

Sanctions against Poroshenko: the start of Ukraine's election campaign?

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On 13 February, President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a decree approving the National Security and Defence Council's (NSDC) decision to impose sanctions on former president and leader of the largest opposition group in parliament, Petro Poroshenko, along with four oligarchs: Ihor Kolomoisky (currently in pre-trial detention), Hennadiy Boholyubov, Kostyantyn Zhevago, and Viktor Medvedchuk (all of whom reside abroad). The sanctions include a series of restrictions, notably asset freezes, a ban on transferring capital abroad, and limitations on defence-related purchases. In a statement, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) stated that the measures were imposed due to "threats to national security, territorial integrity, and state sovereignty". Poroshenko denounced the NSDC decision as unconstitutional and politically motivated.

The decision to impose restrictions on a leading opposition politician is unsurprising, given that speculation about such a move had been circulating in the media for several weeks. However, its implementation indicates that Zelensky has chosen to break the increasingly fragile consensus, which entailed refraining from personal attacks on key figures (including the president and party leaders) during the full-scale war. Targeting Poroshenko could be seen as part of early preparations for an election campaign. However, this move carries risks, as the prospect of an election remains uncertain and it undermines social cohesion at a time when national unity is crucial. Additionally, it could hinder Ukraine's progress towards European integration.

Commentary

- **The imposition of sanctions against the leading opposition figure reflects the increasing role of domestic politics in Zelensky's political calculations**, particularly in relation to potential presidential and parliamentary elections, which remain contingent on a ceasefire and the lifting of martial law. Launching an election campaign in the current circumstances is particularly risky, as there is no guarantee – despite pressure from the United States – that elections will be held within the next few months or even within the next year.
- **Poroshenko has a sufficiently large negative electorate, making his victory in a presidential race effectively unrealistic**, although his party has a strong chance of performing well in a parliamentary election. Various accusations, including those concerning his alleged collaboration with Russia, could further consolidate his supporters

and deepen social polarisation. In early February, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology conducted a poll on the potential imposition of sanctions against Poroshenko. The results showed that 31% of respondents perceived this move as an attempt to distract citizens from the difficult situation at the front, 24% saw it as an effort to neutralise the opposition, and 27% believed it was a law enforcement initiative aimed at punishing those deemed guilty.

- **A possible trigger for the authorities in Kyiv may have been Poroshenko's travels between late January and early February to Warsaw, Paris, Brussels, and Washington,** during which he met with prominent politicians and gave interviews to foreign media. Zelensky's team may have regarded his international contacts, diplomatic experience, and strong communication skills as significant advantages for the opposition leader in a potential electoral confrontation with the incumbent president.
- **The decision to impose sanctions on Poroshenko was taken despite its potential negative consequences for Ukraine's European integration process.** In a report published in October 2024, the European Commission provided a detailed assessment of Ukraine's preparedness for EU accession, highlighting concerns regarding insufficient parliamentary oversight of government actions, particularly in monitoring the legislative process. The report also criticised the Verkhovna Rada's leadership for restricting foreign travel for opposition MPs (see '[A window with a view of membership: Ukraine's and Moldova's progress on the path to the EU](#)'). These concerns were reiterated by Gert Jan Koopman, head of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), at a conference in Kyiv on 7 February. He made the Commission's approval for opening the fundamentals cluster conditional on Ukraine's progress in addressing these issues. The authorities in Kyiv expect that a decision on this matter will be **taken** during Poland's presidency of the EU Council in the first half of 2025.
- **The freezing of Poroshenko's assets will have little impact on him personally.** The former president had already transferred ownership of his most significant businesses (including those under the Roshen conglomerate) to his son, Oleksiy. A similar arrangement was made with two television channels, in which journalists working for them became their formal shareholders. However, it remains unclear how the sanctions will impact the financing of Poroshenko's party, European Solidarity. Another notable aspect of the presidential decree is the restriction on defence-related acquisitions. Poroshenko's charitable foundation is among the largest donors to the Ukrainian army. Nevertheless, the former president has actively leveraged these donations for self-promotion, which has been a source of irritation for the ruling camp.