

Poroshenko stands alone. Ukraine politics in a pre-election year

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The year 2019 will be an election year in Ukraine, with a presidential election in the spring and a parliamentary election in the autumn. The short timeframe and the order in which these two elections will be held increase the chances of the winner of the presidential election forming the largest faction in parliament. The first phase of election campaigning has already begun, with Petro Poroshenko and Yulia Tymoshenko as the main contenders, but opinion polls are inconclusive. The atmosphere surrounding the campaign is one of mistrust on the part of voters in the authorities and the political class. Ukraine's Euromaidan Revolution created expectations politicians could not fulfil.

The incumbent president is trying to consolidate those closest to him and eliminate any rivals so as to become the only choice for governmental rule before active campaigning begins. Poroshenko is also bringing financial, media, and administrative resources to bear to reduce his rivals' potential and increase his impact on voters. In addition to stressing foreign policy successes and achievements in reforming the country, campaigning will also feature anti-Russian rhetoric and an emphasis on the sense of subjectivity that Ukraine and its people, (re)gained as a result of the Revolution. More assertive rhetoric towards international financial institutions, the EU, and certain Member States can also be expected.

Though the electoral mechanism is set to go into full swing in September, whether the campaign will ultimately be successful remains in doubt. Support for Poroshenko is declining and is at its lowest since 2014. Cracks within the ruling camp are increasingly evident, with no apparent vision as to how to compete effectively with Yulia Tymoshenko, tipped by polls as the favourite. Tymoshenko has profited from both errors and inaction, and from reform carried out by the post-Maidan authorities which has had painful consequences for society. The president's chances of re-election will be slight without some new and irrefutable success to show the electorate. Partners and other key political players cannot fail to notice the signs of Poroshenko's vulnerability. Their current support for Poroshenko is not absolute, and they could shift their support to a more promising candidate. This means that in Ukraine the old alliances are going out of fashion, and at the same time no new alliances have yet been established. An intense battle has begun behind the scenes between the oligarchs and politicians, from which the main contenders for power in 2019 will emerge.

Seeking a Ukrainian Macron

Four years after the Revolution of Dignity, Ukrainian society has grown weary of war and dismayed at the slow pace of change and poor

standard of living. Seventy-four per cent of the population think that Ukraine is heading in the wrong direction. Ukrainians list the main barriers to the country's development as the Donbas conflict, the fact that economic reconstruction

is taking too long, and the lack of visible progress in the fight against corruption¹. A Rating Group poll in April 2018 showed that Petro Poroshenko has just 9% support, and his party only 7.5%. Arseniy Yatsenyuk and the People's Front are below the level of statistical error, whereas trust in politicians and state institutions is at its lowest since the revolution (see annex). The populist groups, Oleh Lashko's Radical Party, Servant of the People (Sluha narodu), For Life (Za zhyttia), and Fatherland (Batkivshchyna), are gaining in popularity, with combined support of almost 40%. These parties are proposing simple but unrealistic solutions for the country's development.

More than 20% of voters are unable to say whom they intend to vote for, more than 10% would vote for someone not mentioned in the poll, and almost 50% would seek an alternative among the new parties.

Another result of the disappointment at the lack of anticipated changes following the Revolution of Dignity is the public's need for new faces in politics – people who have not been publicly discredited. In the presidential election poll mentioned above, 17% of voters said they were considering voting for either singer Svyatoslav Vakarchuk or satirical actor Vladimir Zelenskiy², and in Kyiv the names of Naftohaz president, Andriy Kobolyev, and the director of the National Anti-corruption Bureau of Ukraine,

¹ Findings of sociological research *Кому довірити боротися з корупцією і формувати Антикорупційний суд – думка населення* of December 2017 conducted by Centrum Razumkova and Fundacja Demokratyczne Inicjatywy, <http://dif.org.ua/article/komu-doviriti-borotysya-z-koruptsyyu-i-formuvati-antikoruptsiyniy-sud-dumka-naselennya>

² Vakarchuk is frontman of the group Okean Elzy, and is pro-western and pro-reform, but in the past has been unwilling to run for election. Zelenskiy presents a popular satiric programme on the television station 1+1, owned by oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskiy. This suggests that if he or his party Servant of the People (in practice this party does not exist) decided to take part in the election this would be at the inspiration of the oligarch.

Artem Sytnyk, have also been circulating. At the same time, more than 20% of voters are unable or unwilling to say which candidate they intend to vote for, and more than 10% would vote for somebody not mentioned in the polls. Almost half would look for an alternative among the new parties.

The crisis in the ruling camp and the fall in the approval rating of the incumbent president is due to a number of factors, primarily the failure to deliver on his promises of quick and far-reaching changes in the country: ending the war in the Donbas, de-oligarchisation, fighting corruption, or selling Roshen, for instance. The disappointment is exacerbated further by the public's high expectations of the new, post-revolution authorities. Poroshenko has not managed to avoid corruption scandals involving his closest business partners. His approval rating has also decreased following revelations about his luxurious lifestyle³. When voting for a party or a politician, Ukrainians consider first and foremost what they offer with regard to social and economic support⁴. In this area, the president has not enjoyed any clear successes. Moreover, as head of state and negotiator of loan agreements with the International Monetary Fund and EU, he is commonly associated, along with Yatsenyuk, with rising utility bills and the low rate of the hryvnia, exacerbating the decline in the standard of living.

Re-election strategy

Poroshenko has begun moves aimed at re-election, although no official statement has been made, by attempting to close ranks and neutralise potential rivals. He has taken measures to consolidate the ruling camp and agree a formula for the two coalition parties, the Poroshenko Bloc and People's Front, to join forces.

³ One week's holiday in the Maldives at a supposed cost of USD 500 000.

⁴ Poll by Rating Group *Суспільно-політичні настрої населення: нові виклики*, April 2018, http://ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/rg_ukraine_042018_press_ua.pdf

This attempt proved unsuccessful, however The People's Front and Prime Minister Volodymyr Hroisman, who work together, are said not to have agreed to share places on a joint list⁵ as this was not in their interest. The failure of the talks is a symptom of a deepening crisis of faith in the ruling coalition. The tension can be seen in particular in relations between the prime minister and the president: Poroshenko, who introduced Hroisman to high-level politics following the Euromaidan Revolution (he was mayor of Vinnytsia at the time), now regards him increasingly as a potential rival. In turn, Hroisman has been distancing himself from his formal benefactor and promotes an image of himself as the greatest reformer in the ruling camp, building his own political camp at the same time and working more closely with the People's Front. The relations between the presidential camp and that party, which is a consortium of separate groups centred around individual politicians, often take the form of rivalry rather than cooperation. One example is Arsen Avakov, Interior Minister since 2014, who is emerging as the second most important person in the country due to his influence over the National Police and the National Guard and a strong financial position. Avakov is a public figure who openly demonstrates that an alliance with the president is not the only solution. Although the key players in the ruling camp are aware that a possible early parliamentary election, held in 2018⁶, would probably mean losing power, this will not stop them making "separatist" attempts to gain the best possible starting position before next year's election. Poroshenko needs a consensus in the ruling camp in order to be able to make effective use of the so-called *adminresurs*, being bureau-

cratic, administrative and financial resources at the disposal of the executive powers: state regional and district administration authorities. The open procedure to appoint heads of those authorities was abolished in order to achieve this⁷. The president also aims to gain the support of the mayors of the major cities, which is evident from the personnel-related concessions made to the UDAR party of Kyiv's mayor, Vitali Klitschko (part of the president's party).

Poroshenko began measures for re-election by increasing his influence over the media, neutralising rivals, and entering into arrangements with oligarchs and people in local government.

It can also be seen by the prolonged court trial of Kharkiv mayor, Hennadiy Kernes, and proceedings concerning Odessa mayor, Hennadiy Trukhanov. The president's other allies are to be candidates for seats in single-seat constituencies – supposed to receive budget subsidies for their regions and political support during the parliamentary election⁸ in exchange for canvassing on behalf of the head of state during the presidential election. Poroshenko has weakened his opponents at the same time: embroiling the leader of Self-Reliance and popular Lviv mayor, Andriy Sadovyi, in the "waste disposal site scandal"⁹, or bringing about the deportation of Mikheil Saakashvili. In March, the president attempted to discipline Hroisman, also without success, due to opposition from the People's Front, by taking soundings in par-

⁵ Команди Порошенка й Яценюка домовляються про об'єднання, "Українська правда", 13.09.2017, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2017/09/13/7155038/>

⁶ Early elections are possible in early autumn 2018 at the latest because under the Constitution they can be held no less than 6 months prior to a presidential election, which is planned for 31 March 2019.

⁷ Рада підтримала «ручне» призначення губернаторів, „Українська правда”, 9.11.2017, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2017/11/9/7161224/>

⁸ Р. Романюк, Бояри Петра II. Вертикаль переобрання Порошенка, „Українська правда”, 20.12.2017, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2017/12/20/7166135/>

⁹ T. Piechal, *The ecological crisis in Lviv*, „OSW Analyses”, 15.06.2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-06-15/ecological-crisis-lviv>

liament regarding his dismissal¹⁰. Meanwhile, the pro-European opposition, made up of the interfactional union of “Euro-Optimists”, minor political parties such as the Democratic Alliance and People’s Power, or for example a broad range of pro-reform NGOs, is on the one hand too weak and disintegrated, and on the other has support from the West which is strong enough to deter the presidential camp from taking more serious measures to weaken it.

Poroshenko also sees greater control over the media as a way of strengthening his position. The presidential camp made an unsuccessful attempt to take over the most popular news channel, *112*, created a new, pro-presidential medium of that type – *Priamyj*, and cut off financing for public television, which stopped being biased in favour of the ruling powers following the Revolution of Dignity.

Moves to win over the oligarchs

The ruling party has also reached an arrangement with the oligarchs – owners of the most influential media and businesses, which employ in total hundreds of thousands of people (who are thus part of the electorate). In 2016 the *Rotterdam+ Formula* came into force, which is a new model for calculating the price of coal for electricity producers. The main beneficiary of such a scheme is the richest Ukraine citizen Rinat Akhmetov – owner of DTEK (a share of approximately 30 per cent in electricity production) and popular media such as the television station *Ukraina* and the daily newspaper *Siegodnia*. Some of the measures taken could be interpreted as gestures favouring the Dmytro Firtash Group, which controls the most popular television station, *Inter*. Firtash himself has benefited from an increase in excise duty on the import of fertiliser from Russia, omissions when changing the management board of Zapo-

rozhye Titanium & Magnesium Plant¹¹, and the blocking by the authorities of liberalisation of the internal gas market¹². In turn, another representative of the group, Yuriy Boyko, currently the leader and likely candidate for the Opposition Bloc in the presidential election, was exonerated in a case involving fraudulent use of public funds for procurement of drilling platforms in 2011¹³.

Poroshenko’s negative trend in the polls will cause past allies to desert, further reducing his chances of re-election.

The ruling camp is also trying to avoid antagonising other oligarchs, such as the owner of the Starlight Media group, Victor Pinchuk, and seeking to ensure support of the influential agricultural lobby¹⁴. In fact, it is the oligarchs, as the principal owners of the regional electricity production and distribution companies (Oblenergo), that are intended to be the main beneficiaries of the new rules covering settlement of payments between public authorities and these owners¹⁵. The only oligarch with whom the president has a conflict remains Ihor Kolomoyskyi, owner of the influential 1+1 Media group, although in recent months the presidential camp seems to be attempting to come

¹⁰ Р. Романюк, *Любов кризь зуби, або «Дружня зустріч» Порошенка і Гройсмана*, „Українська правда”, 18.04.2018, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2018/04/18/7178076/>

¹¹ О. Мойсеєнко, *Врятувати рядового олігарха: як держава допомагає Фірташу не втратити заводи*, „Економіческая правда”, 3.04.2018, <https://www.epravda.com.ua/publications/2018/04/3/635557/>

¹² О. Kharchenko, *Good to Be King: Ukraine’s Fugitive Oligarch Blocks Reforms and Benefits from International Handouts While Under House Arrest*, Atlantic Council, 27.03.2018, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/good-to-be-king-ukraine-s-fugitive-oligarch-blocks-reforms-and-benefits-from-international-handouts-while-under-house-arrest>

¹³ For more information, see: О. Шалайський, *12 друзів «вишки Бойка»*, «Дзеркало тижня», 17.02.2018, https://dt.ua/internal/12-druziv-vishki-boyka-269593_.html

¹⁴ О. Пирожок, *Ігри в дотації: як аграрії взяли 4 мільярди*, „Економіческая правда”, 1.02.2018, <https://www.epravda.com.ua/publications/2018/02/1/633634/>

¹⁵ А. Åslund, *Why Ukrainians Are So Upset about New Electricity Tariffs*, Atlantic Council, 5.03.2018, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-ukrainians-are-so-upset-about-new-electricity-tariffs>

to an arrangement with the oligarch and at least guarantee his neutrality. At the same time, most of the arrangements described above are dictated by the current situation, and could easily change if the negative tendency for Petro Poroshenko in the polls persists.

Campaign Message

As the campaign gains momentum, the president will aim to reverse the negative trend in the polls by turning voters' attention to the achievements of the last four years. The emphasis will be on foreign policy, domestic reforms, and security issues. Poroshenko will certainly stress the clear successes such as the liberalisation of the visa regime for Ukraine by the EU and the signing of an association agreement, goals which were fought for on the Maidan in 2013 and 2014. Another subject will be that of ending dependence upon gas supplies from Russia and Ukraine's victory in the dispute with Gazprom in the Arbitral Tribunal in Stockholm. As the supreme commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian army, the president will stress the reform and modernisation of the army, a strategic partnership with the US, illustrated by deliveries of Javelin anti-tank systems, and a consolidated approach of the Western world towards Russia, in the form of sanctions. Another relevant issue of the campaign is the war in the Donbas. Citing the formal end of the anti-terrorist operation and commencement of a military operation¹⁶, Poroshenko will prove that he is determined to bring an end to the conflict. The president will also argue that his signature on the Minsk agreements brought an end to the intensity of the conflict and opened the way for an exchange of prisoners. He will also float the idea of a UN peace-keeping mission as an effective instrument for reintegration of the Ukrainian Donbas.

¹⁶ Закон про реінтеграцію Донбасу опублікований в офіційній пресі, Radio Swoboda, 23.02.2018, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news/29058470.html>

Another important element of the campaign will be, for the first time on this scale, identity issues, which are becoming increasingly important in Ukraine. Poroshenko has mentioned these aspects more and more when speaking publicly. The president stresses above all Ukraine's divorce from Russia, the country's 'regaining sovereignty', and the forming of a new Ukrainian identity – European and democratic, separate from the Russian one – autocratic and imperial. In this context, actions such as a greater presence for the Ukrainian language in the media, an education bill promoting the native language, and a ban on the use of Russian social networks will be stressed in particular.

The campaign will feature anti-Russian rhetoric and emphasis on the (re)gained sense of autonomy for Ukraine and its people following the revolution.

The president has also initiated new projects to win over floating patriotic voters. The most important is supporting unification of Ukrainian orthodox churches into a single structure, which could be done with the consent of Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople. It cannot be ruled out that the presidential camp will see this initiative as an opportunity not only to mobilise supporters of the *de facto* Ukrainian national church but also to engender a deep polarisation of society, which would lead to an increase in the popularity of politicians defending Russian orthodoxy: Yuriy Boyko, Vadim Novinsky in the Opposition Bloc), being at the same time convenient opponents in the second round of a presidential election.

Other initiatives in the "patriotic repertoire" entail the conclusion of work on the citizenship act and a Ukrainian language act. These laws, the details of which are not known, could potentially draw a wave of criticism, not only from Russia but also from national minorities.

This could increase tension between Kyiv and its EU neighbours, above all with Hungary. The increasingly prevalent references to “sovereignty” in Poroshenko’s rhetoric towards the West are an element of this narrative¹⁷. At the same time, it is doubtful whether these measures will significantly increase the president’s chances. For Ukrainians, questions such as candidates’ proposals for social solutions, methods of fighting corruption, or solutions for ending the war override language and culture issues when voting for politicians.

Pre-election challenges and dilemmas

One year before the election, Petro Poroshenko remains a major contender in the battle for the second round, yet securing re-election will be hard. Although opinion polls in Ukraine are often a tool for political rivalry and do not truly reflect social feeling, the dynamics indicate that support for the president is steadily decreasing, and 45% of voters say that they will never vote for the present president. This trend will define the *modus operandi* for Poroshenko himself and other political players. At the moment there are no signs of open revolt against the president among members of the ruling coalition. Clashes with Hroisman and Avakov may be treated as an element of negotiation in the process of creating a common front prior to the election, while fundamentally the media and oligarchs remain loyal. It is vital that Poroshenko retains a chance of ultimate success: securing re-election and creating a large faction in the next parliament to form part of the ruling coalition. If this opportunity does not arise at the turn of the year, the current partners – coalition partners, oligarchs and their television stations, members of parliament in single-seat

constituencies¹⁸ and mayors of cities – will desert. They will intensify their search for an alternative method of remaining in politics, placing hope in more promising candidates such as the current leaders in the polls: Yulia Tymoshenko or Anatoliy Hrytsenko – former defence minister (2005–2007) and supporter of strong-arm government, placed among the top three contenders in recent opinion polls. At the same time, Poroshenko’s team does not seem to have any idea for how to compete with his main adversaries, primarily with Yulia Tymoshenko. It is possible that the fear of being compared with Viktor Yanukovich, who led to her imprisonment in 2011, is restraining Poroshenko from making a head-on attack on the former prime minister. Meanwhile, Tymoshenko has so far been very effective in pointing out the current government’s increases of utility bills, and in addition to this she avoids flaunting her wealth and has not been mired in any corruption scandals.

Without a new, undeniable success the chances of re-election will be slight. From Poroshenko’s point of view, the creation of a Ukrainian national church is intended to be just such a success.

Another problem for Poroshenko is that due to anti-Russian social feeling and loss of the Crimea and part of the Donbas, it will be difficult to match his strategies to election campaign techniques that have proven successful in the past: a pro-western candidate versus a proponent of closer relations with Russia. Most of the traditional supporters of the latter option, residing in uncontrolled areas, will not go to the polling stations. In addition, their

¹⁷ Visible in particular in an interview with P. Poroshenko in *Transcript of interview with Petro Poroshenko*, “Financial Times”, 1.03.2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/504403da-205b-11e8-9efc-0cd3483b8b80>

¹⁸ There will presumably be no change to the current mixed electoral code providing for election of half of parliament from nationwide party lists and half from single-seat constituencies, although this was one of the main demands during the Revolution of Dignity.

main political representative – the Opposition Bloc, which was built from the remains of the Party of Regions – has poor social support and is also weak due to internal fighting between the most important stakeholders in the group. The current president faces another challenge in maintaining the West’s support, which is a key source of legitimacy following the Revolution of Dignity. Although Poroshenko is trying to convince the US and EU that he is the best means of guaranteeing that the current pro-reform course is maintained, his credibility is waning and the language used by Western partners towards Kyiv is becoming ever harsher. Poroshenko has a dilemma: more disputes with the West, above all regarding the blocking of anti-corruption reform¹⁹, could lead to further losses in the opinion polls. Should subsequent loan instalments be withheld as a result, it could trigger a financial crisis in the run-up to the election. On the other hand, continuing the reforms

by setting up the Anti-Corruption Court being demanded by lenders will upset the Ukrainian establishment, concerned for assets often gained through corruption, whose support is so important to Poroshenko prior to the election. The stakes in the forthcoming election are high – a win in the presidential election could create a considerable advantage in the autumn parliamentary election and an opportunity to gain full power in the country. The presidential campaign for re-election will have a radically anti-Russian and dignity-related narrative, and in the final stages, when the main opponent emerges, the campaigning will be dirty, with allegations of furthering Russian interests, and a cynical use of those authorities responsible for public order and law enforcement against opponents. While these various themes play out, new revelations or surprises may spring up at the beginning of next year: a new force or new candidate might emerge, a favourite from other than the traditional political camps who is a serious contender for power, or Poroshenko’s withdrawal from the race, if the opinion polls show a clear danger of him losing credibility.

¹⁹ У. Безпалько, *Антикорупційний суд: про що сперечаються Захід і українська влада*, РБК-Україна, 23.01.2018, <https://daily.rbc.ua/ukr/show/antikorruptsionnyy-sud-sporyat-zapad-ukrainskaya-1516716048.html>

APPENDIX

If the Ukrainian presidential election were to be held next week, how would you cast your vote?

	All, %	Percentage of those intending to vote %	Percentage of those intending to vote and have decided how they will vote %
Yulia Tymoshenko	8.8	11.2	14.2
Anatoliy Hrytsenko	6.6	8.6	10.9
Yuriy Boyko	6.0	7.4	9.4
Petro Poroshenko	5.5	7.3	9.3
Svyatoslav Vakarchuk	6.0	7.3	9.2
Oleh Lashko	5.5	6.6	8.4
Vladimir Zelenskiy	5.8	6.5	8.3
Vadim Rabinovich	3.8	5.0	6.4
Andrij Sadovyi	1.9	2.6	3.3
Valentyn Nalyvaichenko	1.2	1.6	2.0

	All, %	Percentage of those intending to vote %	Percentage of those intending to vote and have decided how they will vote %
Oleh Tiahnibok	1.1	1.4	1.8
Arseniy Yatseniuk	1.0	1.2	1.5
Other candidate	10.7	12.0	15.3
Hard to say	19.3	21.5	
I will not be voting	16.9		

If the parliamentary election were to be held next week, how would you cast your vote?

	All %	Percentage of those intending to vote %	Percentage of those intending to vote and have decided how they will vote, %
Batkivshchyna	9.2	12.7	15.6
Hromadians'ka pozycja	5.7	7.9	9.7
Opposition Bloc	6.1	7.8	9.6
Servant of the People	5.9	7.3	9.0
For Life	4.7	6.6	8.2
Radical Party	4.9	6.5	8.0
BPP Solidarity'	4.5	6.1	7.6
Self-Reliance	3.1	4.2	5.2
Svoboda	2.3	3.1	3.8
Agrarian Party of Ukraine	1.9	2.4	2.9
Ukrainian Association of Patriots UKROP*	1.4	1.9	2.3
Other party	7.7	8.2	10.1
Hard to say	17.4	18.9	
I will not be voting	20.3		

* The threshold is 3%, other parties featured in the poll have a support rating of less than 2% of those who intend to vote and have decided how they will vote

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