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Enter: Volodymyr Zelenskiy

What we know about the Ukrainian President-elect's political platform when it comes to corruption – and Russia

Read this interview in German.

Political newcomer Volodymyr Zelenskiy swept President Poroshenko from office with over 73 per cent of the vote – how do you explain that?

We can explain Zelenskiy's high approval ratings by the high disapproval rating of the incumbent president who disappointed the Ukrainian people, especially on social issues and in the sluggish fight against corruption. In addition, citizens cite the ongoing war in the east of the country as their biggest concern. Zelenskiy managed to address these weaknesses and to score points with the electorate on the basis of very few promises – an unusual phenomenon for Ukrainian politics.

Poroshenko even raised the issue of his challenger's asymmetric election campaign, twice took a blood tests in front of running cameras, and debated him in the Kyiv Olympic Stadium in front of 22,000 people. Although this debate resulted in vicious insults, it shows the liveliness of Ukrainian democracy and an openness to political debate – something that's unimaginable in many other countries in the region.

But Zelenskiy's success has other reasons too: the comedian, who also enjoys popularity beyond Ukraine, simply fulfilled the desire for a fresh face. He benefits from the failure of the post-Euromaidan civil society forces to consolidate in political parties and to find even a suitable candidate. It's astonishing to realise that despite the war, the majority of Ukrainians are open to a political experiment.

How's this election perceived in Russia?

Russia has some rethinking to do, too. The narrative of "fascist Ukraine" is hardly convincing in view of a Russian-speaking president

of Jewish descent from the southeast. Prime Minister Medvedev's reaction was modestly favourable: he hopes for good cooperation, but he was realistic.

According to Kremlin spokesman Peskov, it's still too early for any congratulations from Putin, as Zelenskiy has to be judged by his actions. This shows that even the Russian leadership seems to have difficulty with Zelenskiy's asymmetry, as this character simply doesn't fit into the script. Over the long term, it will likely be difficult to portray Zelenskiy, who is also very popular in Russia, as merely a clown and puppet of the oligarchs.

What do Zelenskiy's foreign and security policy ideas look like?

He's in favour of a ceasefire and ready to negotiate with Russia on the issue of Donbass and Crimea. He's abiding by the Minsk Agreements, but wants to expand the Normandy format to include the US and the UK. He also intends to resume the pension payment for people in the occupied territories, so that they no longer have to risk their lives by travelling across the line of contact. Generally, he wants to show people in the East that Kyiv has not forgotten them.

Zelenskiy would not give up Crimea and would make every effort to campaign for its return. But, due to the conditions of realpolitik, doesn't promise to be able to actually do so. He and his team stand for European integration and a consistent continuation of the course taken under Poroshenko. However, a NATO accession would have to be preceded by a referendum.

What's Zelenskiy's domestic policy, above all in the fight against corruption?

He proposes waiving the immunity from legal proceedings for officials and judges, the establishment of a High Economic Court and the withdrawal of the right of security authorities to investigate economic and financial crimes. The anti-corruption authorities should be formed through independent international selection commissions.

The wages of civil servants, especially teachers and doctors, shall be drastically increased. In addition, Zelenskiy proposes repealing parliamentary immunity, more direct democracy, the possibility of dismissing deputies, and a simplified procedure for the impeachment of the president. As for economic policy, he's no friend of the IMF, but admits that there's no way to avoid cooperation with it. The state should invest more in infrastructure to attract investors. In social policy, he proposes the introduction of social insurance in health care and pensions. In tax policy, he calls for the replacement of corporation tax by a capital gains tax.

What do we know so far about the team with whom he intends to implement these goals?

His team has so far included political newcomers and a few experienced reformists. Former Finance Minister Danilyuk is responsible for foreign affairs and fiscal policy. He's basically a candidate for any higher government posts. He had been forced to give up his position in a dispute with President Poroshenko. A number of recognised anti-corruption activists are also part of his team.

Zelenskiy has also given a central role to close friends from show business and his hometown of Kryvyi Rih. His childhood friend Ivan Bakanov, for example, is chairman of his "Servant of the People" party. As with the comedy TV series of the same name, he seems to put most of his trust in these people.

The campaign was managed very professionally by the young policy advisor Dmitry Razumkov, who we'll be certainly hearing more from. The "Euro-optimist" Serhiy Leshchenko is also a member of his team. Ivan Aparshyn, a colonel in the general staff, is responsible for defence policy. However, thus far there are only rumours about specific assignments of government posts.

In Ukraine, nobody has ever gone far without oligarchic financiers. To what extent does this also apply to Zelenskiy?

The intensity of the connections to various oligarchs, first and foremost Ihor Kolomoyskyi – Poroshenko's archenemy and owner of Zelenskiy's "home channel", the 1+1 Media Group – are largely unclear. We should not hold any great illusions, given the functioning and rules of Ukrainian politics. After all, President Poroshenko himself was an oligarch whose business interests were not limited to chocolate but reached into the armaments sector.

As it often happens, however, there are only indications that point to a certain connection to Kolomoyskyi and others: for example, concerning personal ties to consultants and lawyers. At the least, Kolomoyskyi is not an enemy of Zelenskiy, as made evident by the strong support from 1+1. Kolomoyskyi finds himself in a legal dispute with the Ukrainian tax authorities over PrivatBank, which he formerly owned before it was nationalised during Poroshenko's presidency. Kolomojskyi, who's living in exile in Israel, has since demanded back USD 2bn in equity. However, nationalisation was the responsibility of then Minister of Finance Danyliuk – who today is an important pillar of Zelenskiy's team.

The election campaign continues. How important are the

parliamentary elections on 27 October?

The constitution provides the president with full power only in the area of foreign and security policy. However, most of Zelenskiy's promises can only be implemented by Parliament, which also elects the Prime Minister. He won't have his own majority there until the fall. An alliance of dissenters from all factions in support of Zelenskiy has already been initiated. We can expect a defection of at least 50 deputies from all political groups – partly including ordinary opportunists, who have quickly changed sides after Maidan. However, it's uncertain whether a majority can be formed. According to recent polls, Zelenskiy's party will have to form a coalition and make compromises after the elections. He indicated that all parties except the pro-Russian "Opposition Platform – For Life" party and the Petro Poroshenko bloc can be considered for a coalition.

It's encouraging that at present, no right-wing extremist or nationalist party could make it into parliament. Due to the short-lived and largely ideology-free nature of Ukrainian parties, there should be many surprises in the coming weeks and months. And who knows whether, in addition to a popular actor, a no less popular singer will soon make an entrance on the stage of Ukrainian politics: Slava Vakarchuk? He's preparing his own political project, which will likely appeal to young, pro-European and patriotic voter groups.

The interview was conducted byJoanna Itzek.