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Ukraine's anti-establishment upset

TV star and political newcomer Volodymyr Zelenskiy won the first round of Ukraine's presidential elections by a wide margin

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How do you evaluate the outcome of the first round of Ukraine's presidential elections?

According to four exit polls from different polling organisations, Volodymyr Zelenskiy and Petro Poroshenko have made it to the second round of Ukraine's presidential elections. It looks like they'll be facing each other in a runoff on 21 April. Although the polls since the beginning of the year saw newcomer Volodymyr Zelenskiy ahead in the race – while putting the incumbent Petro Poroshenko and former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko alternatively on second and third place –, the margin by which Zelenskiy won the first round comes as a surprise. He might have missed the absolute majority with 30.4 per cent, but he left incumbent Poroshenko far behind with 17.4 per cent.

This shows the dissatisfaction of the Ukrainian population with the political establishment: a comedian, who only announced his candidacy three months before the elections and who has neither political experience nor a functioning party, can win one third of all votes. Yulia Tymoshenko, who was leading in the polls until Zelenskiy came around, didn't make it to the second round. It's already the third time that she lost out in the presidential elections.

The voter turnout was slightly higher than 2014 with almost 64 per cent, but it does put the fragmented outcome into perspective: in the end, every candidate has garnered absolute approval only from a relatively limited number of voters after the first round. The distribution of votes between so many candidates also shows the country's polarisation. Poroshenko and Tymoshenko in particular have conducted a fierce campaign against each other. The fact that the most "pro-Russian" candidate, Yuriy Boyko, could reach almost 10 per

cent, also demonstrates that many Ukrainians wish for a more conciliatory stance towards Russia.

Were the elections conducted in a transparent and democratic manner?

Even before the elections, many observers have spoken and speculated about vote-rigging. And indeed, the circumstances suggest that there was manipulation. Many have already criticised the government's "pre-election gifts" like the increase in the minimum wage, one-time payments to pensioners as well as relatives of military personnel, and the financial compensation for the increase in gas prices.

On top of that, a significant number among the 39 candidates was merely "technical", meaning that they were not only completely unknown, but they also didn't campaign. The purpose was to divert votes and secure representatives at the polling stations and commissions. There were also accusations of vote-buying and irregularities such as the absence of whole buildings from the electoral register. On the day of voting, the interior ministry received more than 1600 complaints with regards to vote-rigging. Most of the complaints referred to Poroshenko and Tymoshenko.

However, even if we take into account that the election results were partially manipulated, it's very unlikely that Zelenskiy's significant lead came about mainly through manipulation. Moreover, the interior ministry, which is headed by Arsen Avakov, a strong opponent of Poroshenko, declared that complaints from election day wouldn't really make a difference regarding the results.

Which were the central topics in this election campaign?

The election campaigns didn't follow any classic conflicts lines. In general, one could have the impression that content and topics weren't really important. Most candidates don't have full-fledged election programmes, but rather centred their campaign on their own personality. Towards the end of the campaigning period, personal attacks, scandals and populism increased. Of course, almost all candidates talked about territorial integrity, the relationship with the EU and Russia as well as the necessity domestic reforms.

However, it was difficult to distinguish the candidates according to their political propositions. That's not surprising in a post-Soviet country, where no tradition of ideologically robust parties exists. The array of political parties is flexible and fragmented. Political parties are barely horizontally organised, but rather concentrated around strong personalities.

Poroshenko, on the other hand, focussed on topics like "army, religion, language" the more he trailed in the polls. For instance, when the incidence in the Strait of Kerch happened, he declared martial law for 30 days. After that, he could chalk up a win with the independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. That's when his approval ratings soared again.

Zelenskiy is considered as an anti-establishment candidate. Has that been decisive in these elections?

Zelenskiy's campaign was special insofar as he avoided any interviews or the typical public campaigning events. Instead, his campaign unfolded in entertainment shows and events, so that the line between real campaign and fiction became increasingly blurry. Ukrainians mostly know him from the popular TV show "Servant of the People". In the show, he plays a teacher who surprisingly gets elected as president and uses his powers to tackle oligarchy and corruption in the country. This was also the central promise of his campaign and his new party "Servant of the People". Zelenskiy eschewed traditional mainstream media, he rather focussed on social and online media.

Zelenskiy has been leading the polls in the last few months. Why do Ukrainians trust an actor without any political experience to run their country?

The high approval ratings show, first and foremost, Ukrainian's disappointment with the political establishment. They don't believe that neither Poroshenko, who was the embodiment of hope after Maidan, nor any of the other familiar candidates can deliver real change.

Ukrainians know Zelenskiy as a comedian and actor, but he's an absolute newcomer on the political stage. In comparison to his opponents, he seems young, fresh and, most importantly, not involved with the political elite and old-boy networks. Despite his profitable production company "kvartal95", he doesn't belong to the economic elite of the country. This distinguishes him from Poroshenko as well as Tymoshenko and increases the population's trust in him.

Perhaps, the Ukrainian people also believe that he's the only one capable of uniting a polarised society: he's popular in the West and the East, in the city and the countryside, and he has the lowest negative ratings. Those that think beyond a pure protest vote hope that he will fight corruption seriously and bring fresh ideas to the political debate. The accusation that he's controlled by Ihor Kolomoyskyi, one of the most well-known oligarchs in the country whose TV channel broadcasted the popular TV show with Zelenskiy,

didn't really do harm to his image.

What's Poroshenko's strategy with regards to Zelenskiy?

Poroshenko will focus his campaign until 21 April on the inexperience of his opponent. He will try to frame this lack as a security risk for a Ukraine that continues to be at war.

In this context, it's not yet clear whether the frontrunner can really win against the unpopular incumbent. We also don't know how the other candidates will act. The conservative-liberal Anatolij Hryzenko, for instance, didn't want to choose any side on the evening of the first round. Despite all of this, it will be extremely difficult for Poroshenko to catch up with Zelenskiy.

What do you think about the campaign of Petro Poroshenko?

His election campaign differs from the one in 2014 in many respects. Back then, he was perceived as an inclusive, pro-European and politically experienced manager. People believed that he could lead the country through the difficult times after Maidan, the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war, all the while keeping the country united.

The population hoped that he would use the energy from the "revolution of dignity" for comprehensive domestic reforms. But after he initiated a few good reforms like decentralisation, the dynamic abated more and more. Many reforms, especially in the area of tackling corruption, weren't followed through. On top of that, the social situation in Ukraine didn't improve. That's why Poroshenko's approval ratings dropped and, today, he's the candidate with the highest negative rating. That could be part of the reason why he directed his campaign more strongly towards polarising topics such as "army, religion, language". His firm pro-Western stance was one of the few and successful common threads of his political orientation. He used it to generate an image as Ukraine's „saviour from the Russian" and constructed his political message around it.

Yulia Tymoshenko ran for president for the third time already – and she lost again. Why?

Yulia Tymoshenko is a controversial figure because of her fluid political past with different alliances and domestic as well as foreign policy approaches. While many regard her as populist and insincere, others believe in her strength and will to advance Ukraine as a sovereign country and with social policies.

She's most popular with ordinary citizens and outside of the big cities,

where people hope that she would contribute to an improvement of their social situation. Her approval ratings were relatively high before Zelenskiy entered the race. But that was also a consequence of discontent with Poroshenko. Zelenskiy then offered voters a better option, or at least one with less political baggage.

However, Tymoshenko already announced that she will not recognise the result of the elections because of vote-rigging. On election night, she published an alternative exit poll that would see her on second place. Now, she will announce her next steps after all ballots have been counted, while she continues her own count. At the moment, however, we don't expect any bigger unrest. In any case, she will not be able to pose a threat to Zelenskiy.

In the end, Tymoshenko will prepare herself and her party "Fatherland" for the parliamentary elections. Currently, she has good chances to expand her faction in the Verkhovna Rada. Through clever coalition-building, she could even become prime minister again.

The decisive fight will happen on 21 April in the second round. If Poroshenko doesn't win: which impact will it have on Russian-Ukrainian relations? Will the new president change Ukraine's foreign policy?

If Zelenskiy will really become Ukraine's new president on 21 April, he will continue the policy of rapprochement with the West. That's not only part of his meagre election programme, but also included in the Ukrainian constitution by now. It's unclear, however, how hr will position himself towards Russia in the face of persistent war in Donbas. During the election campaign, he stunned everyone with saying that Ukraine would have to negotiate with Putin about ending the war. But Zelenskiy didn't propose any concrete demands or offers. Ultimately, it will be crucial to see which advisors Zelenskiy will pick for his team.

The interview was conducted by the IPS editorial team.



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