

# Ukraine's Post-Maidan Struggles

## THE RISE OF AN “OUTSIDER” PRESIDENT

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In April 2019, Ukraine's highly competitive presidential election delivered a resounding victory for a political newcomer. The winner, leading the March 31 first round with 30.2 percent of the vote and securing an overwhelming 73.2 percent in an April 21 runoff against incumbent Petro Poroshenko, was 41-year-old Volodymyr Zelensky—a comic actor and studio head who portrayed a corruption-busting Ukrainian president in a popular television show. Zelensky's campaign, slick and centered on social media, was largely devoid of any clear statements of ideology or significant policy proposals. Nonetheless, Zelensky tapped into the deep public desire for new faces and disgust with political elites that had been the undercurrent of the 2013–14 EuroMaidan Revolution.

Zelensky's May 20 inaugural address left little doubt that the new president would continue to position himself as a political outsider and disruptor of the corrupt system. At the end of a speech that mixed pro-European rhetoric with calls for national unity, Zelensky informed Ukraine's legislature that he was dissolving its current session. Notwithstanding a legal challenge to this move by one of the current parliamentary parties, it appears as of this writing in June 2019 that the vote to select Ukraine's new legislature will be held in late July rather than October as originally scheduled. Even more than the recent presidential vote, this contest will be a crucial test for Ukraine's democratic future.

The 2019 presidential and parliamentary votes mark the second round of elections and the first regular electoral cycle since the 2013–14 Revolution of Dignity (a widely used term for the EuroMaidan), when three months of continuous mass protests in Kyiv's central square—in response to the canceled signing of an EU association agreement as well as issues of corruption and the rule of law—ended in the flight

and removal of then-president Viktor Yanukovich (2010–14). Most observers see these events as the long-delayed finalization of Ukraine's divorce from the former Soviet Union, fueled by civic anger and resentment.<sup>1</sup> The protests sparked an explosion of energy and activism that was dampened neither by Russia's annexation of Crimea in the weeks following the ouster of Yanukovich, nor by the Russian-orchestrated conflict that subsequently engulfed the eastern Donbas region.

In contrast to the short-lived euphoria that followed the Orange Revolution of 2004, Ukraine's civil society emerged from the EuroMaidan with a grim determination to fundamentally transform the state. Although people were caught up in the excitement of the moment, many reformers were remarkably clear-eyed about the daunting task ahead: not only dismantling the remnants of the communist system, but also overcoming the legacy of more than two decades of mismanagement, cronyism, and corruption that had brought post-Soviet Ukraine to the brink of insolvency.

Over the past five years, Ukraine has made greater progress in shedding the vestiges of its communist past than it had achieved in the years since gaining independence in 1991. The country has pressed ahead with a colossal list of complex reforms while staving off economic collapse and an aggressive eastern neighbor. Nonetheless, the pace and depth of reform have been disappointing for many. Social dislocation caused by war, annexation, and economic hardship have added to public discontent. In this context, the presidential votes were in large part a barometer of public sentiment toward top political elites—sentiment that proved decidedly negative. Still, the competitiveness of the race, which was anyone's contest until the very end, demonstrated how far the country has come over the past five years.

## **Politicians and Power Structures**

Ukraine has a mixed presidential-parliamentary system, which creates competing power centers and complicates effective governance. Following the Revolution of Dignity, Ukraine returned to the post-Orange Revolution constitution, which significantly limits the president's power (amendments to this effect had been nullified under Yanukovich). Ukraine's president is formally in charge of national-security matters, the military, and foreign affairs, and has significant influence over the appointment of key officials in these sectors. The prime minister and other members of the Cabinet of Ministers, however, are appointed by a majority vote in the 450-seat unicameral parliament, the Verkhovna Rada. No matter who the president is, the coalition making up the next parliament will determine the country's trajectory in the years ahead. To be efficient, this governance model requires a strong political-party system, which is still lacking in Ukraine.

Informal power structures also make up a key part of the backdrop to

the 2019 elections. In particular, Ukraine's hyper-powerful elite businessmen—the oligarchs—remain both political players and a topic of debate in their own right. As in other post-Soviet republics, Ukraine's oligarchs grew out of the wild privatization that followed the dissolution of the USSR. The system was consolidated under President Leonid Kuchma (1994–2004), who oversaw a division of power among the top-tier oligarchs. In contrast to neighboring Russia, there is also a broad class of what can best be termed lesser oligarchs (*oligarchyki*) who maintain power in specific regions, which they run as their private fiefdoms. On both the national and the regional level, the resulting system of patronage and clientelism—a common feature of post-Soviet polities—supplanted the state in the lives of citizens while siphoning off billions in state revenues.<sup>2</sup> In addition to bleeding state coffers, this structure is antithetical to the rule of law, and it has forestalled the development both of a public-service-oriented political elite and of public trust in state institutions.

The Revolution of Dignity was in part a powerful outpouring of frustration with this system. Yet Petro Poroshenko was elected president in May 2014 not thanks to his charisma or visionary platform, but rather because he was perceived as a competent manager. He won the race in the first round (a rare outcome in Ukraine), with 54.7 percent support. His closest competitor, Yulia Tymoshenko, had only recently been released from prison, and the forces driving the EuroMaidan protests had not produced a national leader able to challenge the established political elites. A lesser oligarch in a relatively inoffensive industry (the centerpiece of his fortune is the Roshen confections company), he was perceived as something of a self-made man whose ample personal fortune would keep him from being tempted to line his pockets from the state coffers. At the same time, the “chocolate king” wielded sufficient political experience to collect the pieces of the broken country to oppose Russia's military aggression.

The new president's focus quickly turned to the war in the east and the resulting humanitarian crisis. Yet Poroshenko also faced the demands put forward by the EuroMaidan protests to combat the rampant corruption and clientelism that, bolstered by a culture of impunity, had stymied the development of democratic governance. The expectation was that he would decisively break the oligarchs' hold over the country. This was a test Poroshenko only partly met, but it had never been an entirely realistic goal given the problem's scale and the actual power of the presidency. Six months ahead of the 2019 elections, Poroshenko's support barely reached double digits.

The 2019 presidential elections drew a record number of candidates, with 39 contenders ultimately competing in the first round. Despite extensive polling, with some 40 percent of the electorate undecided just days ahead of the vote, the outcome remained uncertain until the very end. A positive sign was that no prominent political figures were denied

registration save Petro Symonenko, the longtime leader of Ukrainian communists. Symonenko was told he could not run as the candidate of his party, which since 2015 has been outlawed in accordance with a set of decommunization laws that banned communist and Nazi ideologies and symbols. (Though litigation on the ban is pending, the party has been barred from electoral participation.) The sheer number of candidates was seen by some as indicative of Ukraine's advanced democracy. In fact, however, it not only bred cynicism and confusion, but also demonstrated a deep political dysfunction.

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Any citizen over the age of 35 who speaks Ukrainian, meets the ten-year residency requirement, and can put down the required deposit of approximately US\$94,000 can run for the presidency. Candidates do not have to collect signatures or represent a political party. While in some ways the system is laudable for its openness, in practice these features mean that money is key—and applicants are not required to declare the source of their deposit. This encourages the registration of so-called technical candidates, who either act as proxies for other candidates or work to discredit or take away votes from specific opponents. In the 2019 presidential race, the most obvious example of the latter was Yuriy Tymoshenko, whose initials, surname, and even listed occupation (member of parliament) were identical to those of former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

Technical candidates can use their official platform to amplify the messages of their patron candidate. Beyond this, since each registered candidate can nominate members of local electoral commissions, primary candidates can stack the commissions using their proxies. In one case in the Chernivtsi region, a representative of Yulia Tymoshenko publicly admitted that she handled nominations to precinct commissions on behalf of eight other candidates. In addition to potentially undermining the integrity of the electoral process, this practice saps public trust in politics.

Technical candidates aside, the presidential contenders included a handful of genuine candidates and a number of politicians looking to use a presidential run to kick-start their parliamentary campaigns. The presidential race was long and dirty, unofficially beginning in mid-2018 with the appearance of billboards that set the tone: inspirational slogans unaccompanied by any concrete platforms or policies. Polling results up to the final days showed that none of the candidates had succeeded in sparking much enthusiasm among the 35 million registered voters. In terms of viewpoints, the most marked features of the campaign were a lack of ideological diversity and a surprisingly empty far-right field.

In the months leading to election day, the race quickly narrowed to three candidates: the incumbent Poroshenko; Yulia Tymoshenko, the established oppositionist; and Volodymyr Zelensky, the political novice. A former prime minister (2005 and 2007–10) and longtime leader of the *Batkivshchyna* (Fatherland) party, Tymoshenko enjoyed an early lead. The 2018–19 campaign marked her third attempt at the presidency. In 2010, she finished second to Viktor Yanukovich with over 45 percent of the vote and was rewarded with a seven-year jail term (nominally over irregularities in the negotiation of a gas contract during her premiership). She ran again in 2014, but having spent the months of protest in jail, she was too detached from the new political environment and garnered only 12.8 percent. Confident that 2019 would be her year, Tymoshenko behaved throughout the campaign as if she were already president. Tymoshenko is a consummate populist, adjusting her positions to appeal to the largest group of voters. This time she honed in on discontent over increases in domestic gas prices, which she promised to cut in half. This pledge was economically ill advised, and it contradicted commitments made by Ukraine to the IMF. But the idea of reducing utility bills resonated well with Tymoshenko's base, which consists primarily of older, less-educated, and rural voters.

Petro Poroshenko started the race with a very low level of public support. He built his campaign on three identity pillars emphasizing Ukraine's detachment from Russia: "Army, Language, Faith." Poroshenko also hoped for a boost from the historic 11 October 2018 decision of the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople to establish an autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine (meaning the church would be independent of the Patriarch of Moscow). This was a longstanding goal for which Poroshenko had intensively lobbied, but despite its popular resonance, it failed to translate into greater support for the incumbent. Instead, Poroshenko's appearances across Ukraine with the decree granting autocephaly (the so-called *Tomos Tour*) drew criticism on the grounds that it was effectively a form of campaigning, and thus constituted an inappropriate use of office and state funds. It also further confused voters as to the role of the presidency.

Volodymyr Zelensky entered the race during a late-night television appearance on New Year's Eve 2018; he was already polling in second place prior to his official entry. Given his lack of clearly articulated positions and avoidance of interviews and public appearances, Zelensky served as something of blank screen onto which voters could project their hopes or assumptions. This meant that many impressions of the candidate were likely drawn from the character he played on his popular show *Sluha Narodu* (Servant of the People), a straight-talking and impecunious history teacher who wins the presidency largely by accident after his explosive-laced outburst about politics is surreptitiously recorded and picked up by social media. Zelensky's celebrity status gave him a huge advantage.

Many have speculated about the new president's ties to Russia and his relationship with the oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky, owner of the television channel that broadcast Zelensky's series. After a brief post-EuroMaidan stint as governor of Dnipropetrovsk in eastern Ukraine, Kolomoisky had ended up in exile and seen his influence diminished and the bank he co-owned nationalized under the Poroshenko administration. Zelensky's inexperience has also drawn concern. As of yet, there are far too few facts available to offer any clear prognosis. His victory, while in many ways remarkable and disquieting, did reflect a campaign that tapped into public sentiments misread or ignored by more seasoned politicians. Zelensky's closest competitors seem to have made a losing bet that social anxiety and security fears would outweigh demands for change.

Several other presidential candidates represented political forces that will be significant in the coming parliamentary elections. On the pro-Russian front, the contenders were Yuriy Boyko, who finished with 11.6 percent, and Oleksandr Vilkul (4.2 percent). Late 2018 saw a major crisis in the Opposition Bloc, the successor to Yanukovich's Party of Regions (historically dominant in the country's east). Several party leaders were expelled, including Boyko, a Yanukovich-era vice-prime minister and allegedly a close associate of oligarch Dmytro Firtash. As a result, Boyko teamed up with another Opposition Bloc parliamentarian, the populist television host and channel owner Vadym Rabinovich, and with Viktor Medvedchuk, once chief of staff to President Kuchma. Medvedchuk's influence increased significantly after he inserted himself into negotiating the exchange of hostages between parties in the Donbas conflict;<sup>3</sup> he is a channel for Moscow-Kyiv communications and Putin's de facto representative in Ukrainian politics. Meanwhile, Yanukovich's other vice-prime minister Oleksandr Vilkul was the Opposition Bloc's official candidate and enjoyed the backing of oligarch Rinat Akhmetov.

Perhaps the greatest disappointment of this campaign was the failure of the proreform, liberal, post-EuroMaidan forces to field any effective candidates. Their main representatives were Andriy Sadovy, the long-time mayor of the western city of Lviv and head of the Samopomich (Self-Reliance) party, and Anatoliy Hrytsenko, a former minister of defense (2005–2007) and leader of the Civic Position party. Although Sadovy withdrew his candidacy and endorsed Hrytsenko a few weeks prior to the election's first round, the latter still garnered a mere 6.9 percent of votes. Both veteran politicians, these candidates failed to meet the growing demand for new faces. The inability of the liberal pro-European politicians to form a viable political coalition raises the risk that Ukraine will reprise the scenario of the late 2000s, when dissension within the pro-European camp enabled Yanukovich—whose fraudulent “victory” in the 2004 presidential election had sparked the Orange Revolution—to win the 2010 vote fairly. Many liberal voters were expecting Sviatoslav Vakarchuk, a rock star whose Ukrainian-language songs are popular in

Russia and other neighboring countries, to join the race. Vakarchuk was expected to announce his candidacy during an August 2018 concert; the 100,000-strong crowd heard only music.

Poroshenko's problems grew when, a few weeks before election day, media honed in on an investigation into defense-sector corruption that implicated him. Despite the uncertainty of the preelection period, Zelensky won by a comfortable margin. He received 30.2 percent of the vote, with Poroshenko coming in second at around 16 percent and Tymoshenko third at 13.4 percent (her namesake received only 0.6 percent). This left the comedian and the incumbent facing one another in a three-week-long runoff. By the final week of the contest, Zelensky's first-round lead over Poroshenko had widened dramatically.

In a short video published on social media on April 3, Zelensky challenged Poroshenko to a debate at Kyiv's Olympic National Stadium and gave his rival "24 hours to decide" (the Zelensky campaign's Facebook page featured a countdown clock). Surprisingly, Poroshenko released a video of his own accepting the challenge. Zelensky's response included a demand for drug testing and even an invitation to Yulia Tymoshenko to moderate the debate. This colorful social-media exchange was emblematic of Zelensky's approach to campaigning. It also dominated the media coverage to the point of distracting from any discussion of policy. The debate was a last chance for Poroshenko to demonstrate his political acumen and draw a contrast with the inexperienced Zelensky. Ultimately, however, what took place at the stadium was more spectacle than serious political discussion. Zelensky, living up to his showman reputation, was short on substance but managed to throw out a pithy phrase that summed up the campaign: "Mr. Poroshenko, I am not your opponent. I am your verdict." Despite being bolstered by a large and vocal crowd of supporters, Poroshenko failed to gather more than a few additional votes. The April 21 runoff saw him take a mere 24.5 percent of votes to Zelensky's 73.2 percent. In a graceful concession speech, Poroshenko stated his readiness to help Zelensky during the transition.

### **Assessing the Election**

The run-up to the election witnessed a number of irregularities and considerable mud-slinging. (Prior to the campaign's official start, for instance, billboards purporting to be from Tymoshenko's own movement announced, "Last Chance for Grandma.")<sup>4</sup> Yet as domestic election monitors observed, while previous elections had seen direct violations of Ukrainian law, this contest was marked more by manipulations in gray areas that violated international standards. The observer mission fielded by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) found that there was a lack of good faith in following the law, some misuse of state resources, vote-buying, and a biased media en-

vironment, but fundamental freedoms were respected and candidates could campaign freely.<sup>5</sup> While further attention to campaign-finance regulation is clearly needed, the campaign was a marked departure from those prior to 2014. In contrast to past elections where one dominant status quo candidate squared off against one principal challenger, in 2019 there was no concentration of financial and administrative resources behind a single candidate.

Fears concerning election security and even the prospect of postponement plagued the campaign from its outset. These worries intensified as a result of a November 2018 incident in the Kerch Strait (a waterway running between Russia and Crimea), in which the Russian coast guard fired on Ukrainian naval vessels and detained 24 servicemen. Fortunately, although martial law was declared in certain regions for a month following the incident, matters did not escalate further and the campaign started on time. As the vote approached, there were warnings of dangers ranging from vote-buying to cyber attacks to election-day violence, and even a new revolution. While much of this messaging came from Russian sources, it was unfortunately echoed by the candidates themselves, with several—Tymoshenko most prominently—announcing their intention to contest the results if things did not go their way.

The massive field of 39 candidates, each entitled to her or his own observers, also led to concerns about crowded polling stations and intentional slowing of the vote count. The registered domestic observation groups could field up to 80,000 observers, in addition to the more than 2,300 international observers deployed for the first round. One of the 139 domestic groups was the far-right National Corps, whose representatives openly stated that they would use violence to address what they considered to be “irregularities” in the poll. A more mundane concern was the lack of experienced electoral-commission members due to high turnover.

As it turned out, both rounds of voting were calm, orderly, and without major incident. While there were procedural issues with the vote tabulation and some allegations of voter fraud,<sup>6</sup> the first-round election day was “assessed positively overall” by the OSCE mission, which also found the runoff to be “competitive and held with respect for fundamental freedoms.”<sup>7</sup> The domestic civic organization OPORA described the environment for the first round as “competitive” and found that there were fewer violations than in 2014.<sup>8</sup> The campaign may have been uninspiring, but the voters and electoral process rose above it. Compared to 2014, voter turnout was higher nationwide—63.5 percent according to Ukraine’s Central Election Commission—and significantly higher in the east, indicating greater security in the region overall.

The election saw a small number of localized incidents, including a bomb scare at a polling station in Lviv, but few procedural complaints were filed. All observers reported that the elections were orderly and



conducted according to procedures. In short, the fears that Ukraine would fail to demonstrate democratic progress proved baseless. The polling-station chaos that had been feared also failed to materialize. There were minor problems, notably in the first round, but these were largely due to logistical difficulties—for instance, with so many candidates, the first-round ballots were about eighty centimeters long—rather than malicious intent.

Two new features changed the game in the 2019 election. One was the competition both among oligarchs and among law-enforcement services; the second was the influence of social media. The most visible indication of the first trend was the fragmentation of the ex-Party of Regions bloc, previously notable for its party discipline. This reflected a divergence of interests among politically formidable oligarchs who control key economic sectors in the east, opening the political playing field and creating an opportunity to reform power structures.

The competition among law-enforcement bodies also proved important for the race. Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, who controls the National Guard and allegedly has influence over far-right groups, decided to back Tymoshenko. He exchanged accusations of electoral violations with the Security Service of Ukraine, which is under presidential control and therefore represented Poroshenko's interests; the Prosecutor General's Office also backed Poroshenko. This dynamic served to check both candidates' camps.

## **Challenges Ahead**

There are anxieties about what an inexperienced president with undefined loyalties and policies will mean for Ukraine's besieged, relatively young democracy. Much like Poroshenko before him, Zelensky has in many ways assumed the least-enviable office in the world. His biggest asset is his undeniable mandate. Bluster aside, it is unlikely that he expected to win the presidential race when he launched his campaign. And yet no previous Ukrainian president has won by such an overwhelming margin. Zelensky was propelled to victory by deep distrust of the political elite, disappointment over what voters see as unfulfilled promises, and emotional exhaustion with the ongoing war and economic hardship.

During the campaign, Zelensky's lack of defined positions meant that he could appeal to diverse groups with different, often contradictory, demands and unrealistic expectations. As president, he will not be able to sustain this approach. He does not have a core support base on which he can rely, either in the public or among elites. During his first few months in office, Zelensky will be tested by his opponents and critics, both external and domestic.

The top three tasks facing Zelensky are to stabilize government, as-

sert his position on the international stage, and satisfy at least some of the public's demand for justice. Yet the actual powers of the presidency in Ukraine are more restricted than many imagine them to be. Zelensky's biggest quandary will be how to avoid losing his public support amid the disillusionment that is likely to grow, possibly fueling support for radical or marginal political groups.

Ukraine's president is primarily responsible for foreign policy. While Zelensky enjoys wide recognition domestically, until very recently he was all but unknown among Ukraine's Western partners. He will have to build trust in order to smooth difficult negotiations ahead and to reassure the international community that Ukraine is staying the course set five years ago. The country remains dependent on international support. By in turn pushing and supporting Ukraine through its transition, foreign donors have contributed significantly to the progress made thus far. These donors are also aware that all the reforms enacted are still reversible, and many have yet to be fully implemented.

Zelensky will face a sharp learning curve to come up to speed on Ukraine's finances and to take steps to prevent economic collapse. In 2019 alone, Ukraine needs to return about \$14 billion to its international lenders, including the IMF. These lenders are open to negotiation, but have consistently demanded progress in implementing reforms. The new president will have to navigate international commitments, explicitly tied to financial aid, that sooner or later will require the dismantling of the oligarchic superstructure of the state. This task is intertwined with the building of public trust in state institutions, and it will require the combined efforts of the president and parliament.

In an environment of growing discontent, the new president will have to work through a long list of reforms affecting almost every aspect of citizens' lives. In addition to expediting the launch of the recently established High Anti-Corruption Court, Ukraine must continue structural reforms, avoid irresponsible macroeconomic decisions, and keep strengthening government institutions, especially the judicial system. Zelensky has voiced support for opening up the agricultural-land market (shut down by a legal moratorium since 2001), a move that would send positive signals to investors. So, too, would the large-scale privatization of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Many parties will have an interest in the outcomes of these reforms, but with a strong commitment to the rule of law it will be possible to ensure transparency and avoid undue involvement by oligarchs. Zelensky could initiate privatization via the electronic public-procurement system ProZorro, adopted in 2015 as the culmination of a major civil-society-led reform effort, and channel the revenue to areas—such as infrastructure and social benefits—that are important to average citizens. So-called small privatization of SOEs has already been launched successfully using the procurement system and is expected to continue.

On the anticorruption front, Zelensky could propose relaunching the National Agency on Corruption Prevention, which in its current form is largely seen as a failure. He has already called for the Rada to pass a law lifting immunity for MPs and, as he promised during the campaign, has introduced a bill setting out procedures for presidential impeachment (competing versions of which were circulating in the Rada). Yet the drafting of Zelensky's bills suggests that these may have been more political moves aimed at garnering support for the coming parliamentary elections than serious policy proposals, and they have met with rejection in the legislature. Lacking a transition team, Zelensky pulled together an initial staff consisting mainly of trusted associates with whom he worked on his show.

Ukraine needs allies not only to help it through its transition, but also to offer support in the face of Russian pressures. Vladimir Putin already tested the president-elect in April 2019 by simplifying the procedure for Ukrainian citizens residing in the occupied part of the Donbas to obtain Russian passports. Zelensky responded by suggesting that Ukraine might do the same for Russians persecuted by the Kremlin regime. The Kremlin, however, has the means at its disposal to escalate, and the threat of a full-scale war remains. It will also have the leverage provided by Nord Stream 2, a plan for a trans-Baltic pipeline that would weaken the position of Ukraine and other transit countries for Russian gas on its way to Europe. The current transit agreement between Russia and Ukraine expires in December 2019, and the Kremlin will almost certainly use the pipeline project to pressure Kyiv to accept unfavorable terms or risk losing the roughly \$3 billion that it receives annually in gas-transit revenue.

### **Parliamentary Prospects**

Domestically, Zelensky will need to strike a balance between maintaining popularity and plunging into the murky waters of Ukrainian politics. A number of sitting ministers, including Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman, initially declared their willingness to work with the new president. Tensions have grown, however, since the inauguration, when Zelensky not only called snap parliamentary elections but asked for the government's resignation.

Zelensky's outsider image may suffer if the need for quick policy wins forces him to make compromises with establishment elites—one possible motive for moving up the election date. In addition, early elections will make it easier for Zelensky to capitalize on his current popularity: By the originally scheduled date of October 2019, his support will likely have fallen, since the public expects immediate and radical changes that he simply cannot deliver.

Zelensky already has a party bearing the same name as his television

show, Servant of the People, and its poll numbers have been rising—jumping to 48.2 percent among likely voters by early June 2019. As of this writing, Zelensky’s party is followed by the Opposition Platform–For Life (Boyko, Rabinovych, and Medvedchuk) with 10.7 percent support, Poroshenko’s bloc with 7.8 percent, Batkivshchyna with only 6.9 percent, and the new party Holos (Voice), launched by the singer Vakarchuk, with 5.6.<sup>9</sup> Though a resurgence of right-wing and nationalist forces cannot be excluded, support for these has dwindled to the single digits. Most likely, the new parliament will be fragmented. Even if “new faces” enter the legislature, there will likely be overall continuity in its composition since the influence of the oligarchs has not been dismantled.

Despite its popular support, as of this writing Zelensky’s party remains in many ways a virtual one, its membership and agenda not yet defined. A spokesperson recently declared the party’s ideology to be libertarianism, but the contours of its platform remain vague. Like “outsider” candidates elsewhere in Europe, Zelensky has voiced general support for direct democracy and the increased use of referendums. In late May, Servant of the People issued a call for online applications to run on its party list. Zelensky may also invite parliamentarians from other political forces to join; this might strengthen the party’s structure, but would alienate the many supporters who do not want to see any familiar political faces in its ranks.<sup>10</sup>

The post-EuroMaidan, pro-European electorate will have many options. President Poroshenko will try to rebrand his party (recently renamed European Solidarity) and maintain a strong faction in parliament. But two of Poroshenko’s allies, Prime Minister Groysman and Kyiv mayor Vitaliy Klychko, have already indicated their intention to run independently, with the former establishing his own party. Despite almost zero percent support, an army of more than eighty parliamentarians representing former prime minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk’s party Narodny Front (the People’s Front) will also compete for the same voters. Vakarchuk’s new party will add to a long list of difficult-to-distinguish reformist political projects, including the initiatives of young liberal parliamentarians Mustafa Nayyem and Hanna Hopko and the small grassroots parties Syla Liudey (Power of the People) and Democratic Alliance. And of course, Yulia Tymoshenko’s strength and determination, combined with her long-developed network of activists and party branches, should not be underestimated.

The developments on the pro-Russian and pro-oligarchic front are easier to forecast. Boyko will continue to consolidate his support, primarily in industrial centers in the east and south where distrust toward Kyiv and skepticism about the benefits of reform are more prevalent. These are also former Party of Regions strongholds where local party development was long stifled. Although Zelensky won in all these regions, Boyko will likely rally the more radical pro-Russian electorate

angered by a language law, passed in the waning days of Poroshenko's term, that mandates the exclusive use of Ukrainian by officials carrying out public business. Those who are more ambivalent about the Russian language will remain with Zelensky.

Boyko's party will also enjoy the support of the Kremlin, including its disinformation machine and financial means. Given its powerful backers and perceptions that the quality of life has not improved in the regions that make up its base, the Opposition Platform has the potential to make a dramatic comeback—an outcome that would mean the return of many discredited and corrupt Yanukovich allies. Ukraine's modern history has witnessed similar reversals before: In the 2006 parliamentary elections, the forces that had backed the Orange Revolution only two years earlier suffered a major defeat that enabled Yanukovich to become prime minister.

### Progress and Setbacks

Overall, this fragmentation reflects a continued failure to build viable political parties. Few Ukrainian political forces have defined ideologies; most have little beyond a menu of issues on which they focus, generally without offering concrete policy solutions. There is little evidence of long-term strategic thinking or investment in nationwide party structures. Most “parties” are in reality political projects built around a particular person, often financially backed by a patron, making the entire system vulnerable to control by vested interests both foreign and domestic.

The Ukrainian parliament is a mixed system, with half the MPs elected through closed party lists and the other half representing single-mandate districts. While this should enable direct representation of particular constituencies, in practice it also lowers the cost of buying influence (patrons need finance only a single campaign rather than a party structure). Contests for the single-mandate seats are particularly vulnerable to manipulation and vote-buying, a factor that could open the door to undemocratic or openly pro-Russian political players. (President Zelensky has called for electoral-law changes eliminating the use of single-mandate districts, but, as with his other proposals, this suggestion has gone nowhere in the Rada.) This system, exacerbated by opaque party and campaign financing, allows oligarchs and *oligarchyki* to maintain control, advancing their interests at the expense of the state. A skewed and oligarch-dominated media environment exacerbates the problem.

Despite the damage done to many of their interests by the ongoing conflict with Russia, Ukraine's oligarchs remain forces to be reckoned with. After losing about a half of his fortune due to the war, Rinat Akhmetov quickly adjusted to the new political circumstances and remains the richest person in Ukraine. With wealth estimated at over \$12 billion, Akhmetov controls more than a hundred companies in mining, steel, and power

generation and owns the most popular television channel, Ukraïna. President Kuchma's son-in-law Viktor Pinchuk comes second on the list of richest Ukrainians, with about \$2.7 billion (drawn mainly from the steel industry). He also owns several popular television channels. The strongly pro-Russian Vadym Novynsky owns a stake in Akhmetov's mining and metals giant as well as other assets in the oil and gas sector, shipbuilding, and agriculture, totaling an estimated \$2.3 billion. Ihor Kolomoisky and his lower-profile business partner Hennadiy Boholiubov are worth approximately \$1.6 billion each. In addition to oil- and gas-sector holdings, they owned a major bank that was nationalized in December 2016, the subject of an ongoing legal dispute. Kolomoisky's media assets include the 1+1 television network and the UNIAN news agency. Petro Poroshenko's wealth is estimated at \$1.1 billion, and in addition to Roshen he owns a shipbuilding and armaments company, a bank, a television channel, and numerous agricultural businesses. New faces from new industries, such as IT, are also starting to appear on lists of the richest people in Ukraine, which will change the dynamic of this elite over time.<sup>11</sup>

Reforms enacted since 2014 have begun to shut off some of the most lucrative sources of illicit wealth, including the gas market, public procurement, and the tax administration, returning some \$6 billion per year (roughly 5 percent of GDP) to public coffers. But stalling on judicial reform and backsliding on anticorruption measures have raised concerns.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Ukraine risks stagnation if it does not definitively separate financial and political power, a serious challenge given the oft-noted resilience and adaptability of the oligarchs.<sup>13</sup> Again, Zelensky is not in an enviable position. But as many have noted, there are ways of mitigating the dominance of the oligarchs without resorting to direct prosecution and asset seizure. These hinge largely on long-term efforts to decentralize power and to strengthen independent state institutions.

The hallmark of previous Ukrainian administrations was a highly centralized government, which concentrated power, corruption, and decision making in Kyiv. In 2014 the post-EuroMaidan government launched comprehensive decentralization reforms that merged local administrative divisions and gave more power and resources to subnational authorities. These changes are having a major impact: The devolution of authority has made governance something more concrete and immediate, altering the population's relationship with political power and restoring public trust in the democratic process. Local governments and bureaucracies likewise have become more aware of their accountability to local communities. The process has been uneven to say the least, and there are some apprehensions about the strengthening of local power players. Nonetheless, over the long term, decentralization remains the key to developing a new power dynamic and propelling Ukraine further along its path of democratic renewal.

## NOTES

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