ZELENSKY UNCHAINED: WHAT UKRAINE'S NEW POLITICAL ORDER MEANS FOR ITS FUTURE

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SUMMARY

- Five years on from the Maidan revolution, Ukraine's voters were open to a change of course: weary of war with Russia, disillusioned in Europe, and convinced of economic decline.
- Volodymyr Zelensky embodied Ukrainians' demands for something 'new' in this year's presidential election, succeeding in becoming many things to many people.
- Zelensky's deployment of populism in combination with the latest technology has allowed him an unprecedented direct relationship with voters.
- Despite the president's sweeping victory, many factors still constrain Ukraine: Russian aggression in Donbas, Ukrainian dependence on the West, and endemic corruption in government – including ongoing oligarchical influence that could hamper reform.
- Western partners should embrace the recent renewal of the Rada, supporting the new administration, increasing Europe's security presence in Ukraine, and helping battle Russian disinformation, while remaining vigilant for any return of corruption.

Introduction

Volodymyrska Hill, Kyiv, on a June evening in 2019. Kyivans and tourists stroll along the riverside park's newly relaid paths, many wending their way to the brand new footbridge and across to the People's Friendship Arch monument; stunning views of the Dnipro abound. Suddenly, a young passer-by answers his phone: "Hello! Presidential Office here." Was this a joke – or was he serious?

Following Volodymyr Zelensky's election as president in April, it is not in the least outlandish to imagine almost anyone entering the heart of government; nor for them to be taking official calls while walking through a city-centre park. Characteristic initiatives launched since Zelensky's resounding victory include his LIFT platform, which allows citizens to send in ideas and projects, apply for jobs with the government and local authorities – and to even join his team. In this new era, unstructured 'e-gestures' form an integral part of Zelensky's approach to campaigns and governance: in June, he asked his Facebook followers to pick the new governor of Lviv from a list of three. The country has seen nothing like this before.

Ukrainians and Ukraine-watchers are still absorbing the reality of a comedian becoming head of state – one who followed up on an unprecedented 73 percent of the vote in the presidential election by winning an absolute majority in the snap parliamentary poll that he called for July. Like many populists, Zelensky came to power by demonising his predecessor; indeed, he appears determined to overturn almost every aspect of the old regime. He is both the latest and, in many ways, the most radical example of an insurgent outsider who has won power. His successes entitle him and his movement to comparisons with Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron's La République En Marche! Some have even likened his Servant of the People party to the Bolsheviks.

Zelensky defies easy analogies: he is a specifically Ukrainian phenomenon. This paper examines the origins and significance of Zelensky's meteoric rise, considers his prospects for transcending Ukrainian politics as normal, and sets out recommendations for Western partners of Ukraine to follow as they support the country in the next stage of its eventful post-independence journey.

Ready for a reset

Ukrainian presidents always lose power at the end of their first term – and Zelensky's predecessor, Petro Poroshenko, was no exception. Zelensky is the sixth Ukrainian president since independence in 1991. Only one has won re-election – Leonid Kuchma in 1999 – but he did not do so by free and fair means. Support for every president of Ukraine has declined at similar rates during the course of their term.

But the mood around this year's presidential election portended change even more strongly than at previous polls. Seventy percent of Ukrainians thought the country was heading in the wrong direction, and only 16 percent the right direction. Attitudes towards political institutions were extraordinarily negative: only 16 percent of Ukrainians trusted the president and 70 percent did not, giving Poroshenko a trust rating of minus 54 percent. Trust in the government was even lower, at minus 63 percent – and hit minus 72 percent for the Rada, Ukraine's parliament.

Internal enemies

Polls also showed that the population believed corruption to be widespread. This was not always the case: "corruption wasn't really discussed on oligarchic TV before 2014",[1] recalls Volodymyr Paniotto from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS). But, after the incoming Poroshenko administration pledged to take action on corruption, the media began to cover the issue more comprehensively. This translated into a sense of faltering progress at the national level. According to leading sociologist Iryna Bekeshkina, "people think there is more corruption in society as a whole than they report in their daily lives."[2] Indeed, comparing the KIIS indexes of the "Perception of Individual Well-being" and of the "Perception of Public Well-being" revealed that the former regularly

outdid the latter: people felt that their personal health and material circumstances had improved in the last few years – if not by much. But they thought things had become worse in society as a whole.[3]

Objectively speaking, the economy has been improving. After two severe recessions in 2008-2009 and 2014-2015, the Ukrainian economy began growing again from 2016 onwards. In 2018 GDP rose by 3.3 percent. But, to deploy the ubiquitous Ukrainian word *zrada* – meaning "betrayal" – there was nevertheless a prevailing sense of everything going downhill, with politicians' corruption and incompetence largely responsible for this. Ukrainians have interpreted the events of the last five years through a meta-narrative of disappointment and betrayal; they were certainly ready for a change of approach.

Attitudes to neighbours

The broader regional and international context is also vital to understanding how Ukraine has developed since the Maidan revolution five years ago. Today, attitudes towards Russia, war, and revolution no longer define everything as they did when the war began in 2014.[4] Negative attitudes towards Russia peaked at 66 percent in 2014-2015, with positive attitudes correspondingly low at 26 percent. Polls show that positive attitudes recovered, however, to 37 percent in 2017; to 48 percent in 2018; and then to 57 percent in 2019. Incidentally, in Russia, attitudes have not changed, with stable negative feeling towards Ukraine standing at 55 percent – testifying to the influence of state propaganda.

This gradual shift has fed through into politics. As in Georgia, Ukraine has witnessed the revival of openly pro-Russian politics as a significant marginal, but not mainstream, option. This disguises itself as 'pro-peace' politics and shares in the general disdain for the politics of the Poroshenko era that grew over that period. Previously, pro-Russian forces in Ukraine – Viktor Yanukovych and the Party of Regions – used to win elections, even if not always honestly. But the Party of Regions' successor, the Opposition Bloc, won only 9.4 percent in the 2014 parliamentary election. The new Opposition Platform–For Life alliance campaigned for "peace" and won 13.1 percent of votes in 2019.

That said, public opinion in southern and eastern Ukraine has not hardened in favour of or against the West either. "Silent Kharkiv", a paper published by the New

Europe Centre think-tank in 2018, revealed that 32 percent of people in Kharkiv support Ukraine's accession to the European Union and 27 percent back Russia's customs union – but a full one-third of the population are unsure about the issue. More recent polls show that 69 percent would still back accession to the EU. But, in response to a more general question, only 38.8 percent felt that "Ukraine has to move more resolutely towards Europe and the West". It is true that just 6.8 percent said that "Ukraine has to move more resolutely towards Russia and the east", but close to half agreed that "Ukraine should choose its own path of development, based on its own resources". Only a minority may support pro-Russian policies but voters do not necessarily buy pro-Western, Ukrainian national packages either.

Ukraine's own way?

Indeed, together, the annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas, and Ukrainians' belief that the Western response to these events has been only limited have led to rising support for NATO, but also to growing self-reliance – and even to a nativist discourse. Disillusion over the Budapest Memorandum has played a significant role in this: Ukrainians perceive this agreement to protect Ukraine's security as having been worth little, and they feel they bear the brunt of the war and the effort of resisting the threat from Russia, despite Western efforts such as the Normandy format.

This shift towards a feeling that the country will have to stand on its own two feet without being held up from either the West or Russia also likely helped weaken the pro-Western, 'inflexibly' anti-Russia Poroshenko. This created space for Zelensky to stress Ukraine's ability to do things in its own way – which proved to have a broader appeal.

The campaign begins

Given this backdrop, the incumbent faced an uphill struggle to win re-election. In 2014 Poroshenko's slogan was "Living in a new way"; in 2019 he made a narrowly nationalist appeal to "Army! Language! Faith!", with no mention of cost of living issues or reform. The zeitgeist was against him. During 2018, it was former prime minister Yuliya Tymoshenko who had spotted the opportunity, as she set about posing as both the champion of the aggrieved and the representative of everything

new. But as soon as Zelensky joined the race, stealing the president's traditional limelight with a social media announcement on New Year's Eve, his radical newness outshone her fake newness. Tymoshenko ultimately performed much as she had in the 2014 election (with her share of the vote rising from 12.8 percent to 13.4 percent), receiving most of her support from the elderly and rural and small-town central Ukraine. There was nothing new in her campaign at all – but she had helped frame the key question of the election as: 'What would be new?' Rock star Svyatoslav Vakarchuk could have fitted the bill, but he dithered for too long and, it transpired, did not have Zelensky's ability to appear all things to all Ukrainians. Some observers claim that "any anti-establishment politician could have won".[7] This is putting it too strongly, but the opportunity to eject Poroshenko was certainly there. In the end, only Zelensky would be able to win big. He was well-known. He could be flexible. He was the perfect personality politician.

In this shifting, complex context, Zelensky hit the sweet spot. In fact, he debuted in the lead at 22 percent in the opinion polls before he had even really done anything. Only 10 percent of his supporters were familiar with any of his policies.[8] Similarly, Zelensky's pop-up party, Servant of the People, started polling at 40 percent before it had announced its platform or its list of candidates. He was essentially a blank slate on which voters could write their aspirations.

The Opposition Platform–For Life proposed a rapprochement with Russia, and suggested Ukraine should be a non-aligned country that rejects any prospect of joining NATO in the future. Russia tried to boost its fortunes by promising its leaders cheap gas and the release of Ukrainian war hostages. The alliance was also strongly backed by the expanding media empire of oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk: the result was a modest but significant rise in its support to 13.1 percent in the Rada election in 2019, and 11.7 percent for its leader Yuriy Boiko in the presidential election. Opposition Platform-For Life eventually came second in the Rada vote – and might have done even better had its rise not been hampered by 'clone' candidates backed by the Poroshenko administration and leading eastern Ukrainian oligarchs. Together, the clones won 4.1 percent in the presidential election and 3.1 percent in the parliamentary vote. The pro-Russian Opposition Platform can, therefore, claim to be the official opposition – Poroshenko's European Solidarity came in fourth place.

Does the country turning against Poroshenko in this dramatic way mean that Ukrainians had turned against the memory of 2014? Zelensky may have been an anti-establishment candidacy, but political scientist Oleksiy Haran maintains that he was "not the candidate of anti-Maidan. He is the candidate of anti-politics. You can be anti-political without being anti-Maidan."[9] Many Maidan supporters backed Zelensky. According to Paniotto, "this was not a split over civilisational choice", unlike in elections dominated by language or foreign policy. "It's not existential."[10]

Indeed, Zelensky's success was possible because the security situation was better than in 2014. But he represents an eclectic view of Ukrainian identity mingled with a certain amount of war-weariness and ongoing demand for reform. Some of his regular speaking points during the campaign – blaming Poroshenko for the war and oligarchs for making a profit out of it – overlapped with those of the Opposition Platform-For Life, whose leaders were also seeking to exploit Ukrainians' disgruntlement with the results of the previous five years of reform.

The power of e-campaigning

But Zelensky innovated more than other candidates. For example, his campaign was hyper-modern in its use of the newest technology, its broadly participative nature, and the direct connection it sought to establish with voters. The result was the rapid creation of a new party populated with faces from outside politics. The "e-Ze" ("e-Zelensky") campaign was devised by Zelensky's media team, led by Mykhailo Fedorov of the agency SMM Studio, and was way ahead of its opponents in exploiting the potential of social media. Zelensky was easily the most visible candidate on Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and – with his comedy videos and vlogs – YouTube. "ZeBots" left his logo everywhere. Online volunteers, "Ze Lyudy" ("Ze People"), tweeted and messaged their support and rebutted the arguments of his opponents.

However, analysts dispute the extent to which social media won Zelensky the election. He was ubiquitous on Ukraine's largest television channel, 1+1. It constantly aired his show Servant of the People, rebroadcast his documentaries, and even featured a new show on Ronald Reagan, the 'great communicator', which Zelensky narrated. The channel is owned by Zelensky's alleged sponsor, the

oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky. A key test of Zelensky's independence will be whether he needs TV or social media more.

Either way, for security-minded Ukrainian nationalists and Poroshenko supporters, Zelensky is too virtual. "Our elections were hacked using a fictional character. But the voters don't care, because [they say] 'it can't get any worse'", says Ukrainian thinker Volodymyr Yermolenko.[11] They believe him to be too casual about serious matters and too naïve about the Russian threat: "Petro Poroshenko's mistakes cost him a second term. Zelensky's mistakes could cost us the country", warns Nataliya Popovych of the Ukraine Crisis Media Centre.[12]

Russian propaganda played its part too, of course. It was uncertain about how to react to Zelensky, but it constantly criticised the old regime and talked up the desire for peace. In 2018 the pro-Russian Medvedchuk, whose daughter's godfather is Vladimir Putin, took over the TV channels 112 Ukraine and NewsOne – both of whose audiences are largely Russian-speaking. He then added the channel ZIK, which is based more in central and western Ukraine. It was rumoured that he was eying other channels too, including looking at buying Channel 5 and Priamyi from Poroshenko, and, the biggest prize of all, Inter. The three channels on their own gave Medvedchuk an audience share of about 5 percent, but all were news channels. He therefore controlled 70 percent of political talk shows and 20 percent of news programmes.

As through TV, Russia was also extremely active in feeding the discourse of disillusionment on social media. "There was now a symbiosis of Russian active measures and the Ukrainian domestic political agenda", argues media expert Yevhen Fedchenko.[13] This overlapping discourse allows pro-Russian forces to use Zelensky's presidency to "test the limits of possible revanche",[14] reviving talk of dialogue with Russia and compromise over the Minsk Agreements.

Zelensky may have been the right person at the right moment to ride the wave of voters' ongoing demand for reform, as well as to capitalise on the vague talk of peace. But what will this now mean for the content and style of his government? What can and will the comedian-president do for Ukraine?

The e-populist president?

Zelensky and Servant of the People now have extensive power. The president received an exceptionally strong mandate to create a new Ukraine, but its outlines remain blurry. He has promised to "break the system". This is explicitly what Ukrainians want, and the extraordinarily high support for him, including from the young voters that he mobilised, has led to comparisons with the 2014 Maidan revolution: "Zelensky's presidency is a kind of Third Maidan. But a virtual one. Against the system as-perceived", comments Roman Vybranovsky of the Ukraine Crisis Media Centre.[15]

Zelensky's supporters argue that Ukraine will have to find its own path. Since 2014, Russia has become the ultimate anti-model, and the EU remains an aspiration. But EU states are too different to be an off-the-shelf model. And they are not necessarily as inspiring as they were a few years ago. Neighbouring Poland, while thriving economically, is backsliding democratically, and no longer offers a template for post-Soviet states. Supporters further claim that "Zelensky doesn't copy others": his mission is to recreate Ukraine without reference to a pre-existing format.[16] The country therefore faces five years of experiments, risks, and inevitable mistakes, but also creative challenges to the old, stale formula.

E-politics

Zelensky has followed the title of the show that set him on the road to the presidency and promised to be a "servant of the people" – one in as much direct contact with ordinary Ukrainians as possible, using methods such as his pre-election tours of the country with his comedy show, and his campaign on social media. This has been hailed as "populism 2.0" – a new era of government by meme and gesture, often staged for online channels. Indeed, e-participation is a central component of the Zelensky 'project': the LIFT platform was launched shortly after the presidential election. This direct style of communication has continued as his presidency has gone on, with Zelensky regularly posting spontaneous videos of his presidential activities, from his private life, or with important messages for the nation, often straight to his 8.4 million followers on Instagram.

World leaders' social media followers

EUROPEAN COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
ecfr.eu

	Volodymyr Zelensky	Donald Trump	Boris Johnson	Vladimir Putin
Instagram	8.5m followers @zelenskiy_official	14.7m followers @realdonaldtrump	206k followers @borisjohnsonmp	No official account
Twitter	137k followers @ZelenskyyUa 128k followers @APUkraine (Office of the President of Ukraine)	64.7m followers @realDonaldTrump	1.1m followers @BorisJohnson	3.39m followers @KremlinRussia 736k followers President of Russia @KremlinRussia_E
Facebook	89,969 likes 109,437 followers @official.zelensky	24,376,744 likes 25,813,494 followers @DonaldTrump	711,743 likes 718,877 followers @borisjohnson	No official account

Data collected September 2019

The Rada too is now a body very much made in Zelensky's image. Servant of the People can govern alone – a first in Ukraine's history. But, crucially, 79 percent of members of parliament are new, in comparison to 51 percent of MPs in the previous parliament. This is even more than the 200 new MPs that La République En Marche! brought to the French National Assembly in 2017.

Why so many new faces? Zelensky's pitch to the nation is that new recruits, found partly via open competition and the LIFT project, "won't bring informal politics back in with them", according to one analyst.[17] The pro-European liberal Holos party adopted a similar approach, by not accepting any former MPs on its lists. There was a certain amount of carefully 'managed participation' in constructing the Servant of the People party list: there were write-in nominations, 'filters' excluded five candidates who faced online criticism, and popularity polls meant candidates could rise up or slip down the lists.[18] Servant of the People presented its candidates live on a Channel 1+1 show – which originally broadcast the eponymous series.

The effect of this new approach to populating politics is as yet entirely unknown.

Servant of the People's Rada majority could remain stable, as most of its MPs owe their election to Zelensky's personal brand. Yet Zelensky cannot take their support for granted: he hardly knows them as individuals. The party's list was assembled in a matter of weeks, and its new MPs have little experience of the world of politics, let alone the Rada or this particular political party.[19] Moreover, Ukraine has a mixed electoral system, in which half of the MPs are chosen from party lists via a proportional method and the other half comes from single-mandate districts (SMDs). MPs elected from SMDs usually prove harder to control, which in time could contribute to party indiscipline.

Still, Zelensky has an opportunity to combine form with content. He has assembled a young team that is keen to make a mark. The new government elected on 29 August has an average age of 39. The new prime minister, Oleksiy Honcharuk, is just 35. As head of the Office of Effective Regulation since 2015, he has promoted deregulation to encourage a boom in small and medium-sized enterprises and foreign direct investment. Fedorov, who is now deputy prime minister and minister for digital transformation, is 28. He is in charge of e-reform, while Tymofiy Mylovanov, honorary president of the Kyiv School of Economics, has ambitions to be Zelensky's 'ideas factory' and heads an expanded economic development ministry.

On the other hand, the controversial Arsen Avakov, aged 55, was retained as head of the Interior Ministry. The Interior Ministry has become his own personal empire since 2014, allegedly providing a krisha (protective 'roof') for organised crime and far-right militias. This made Avakov powerful enough to challenge Poroshenko, and to make a big show of preventing egregious election fraud by the outgoing regime. Zelensky seems to owe him a favour. The new foreign minister, Vadym Prystaiko, who is 49, is experienced and well known in the West, having previously served as the head of Ukraine's Mission to NATO and as deputy foreign minister. But there are few like him. The Zelensky team as a whole has little foreign policy experience.

Elsewhere, Zelensky has promised a big expansion of e-government: a "state in a smartphone". Several key services were available online before the election, but Servant of the People argues that take-up has been too low: there had been no mass switchover to e-services, which need improvement in the design of the user experience.

Moreover, Zelensky's team is already actively working on e-elections. Fedorov expects that a new portal, "The Vote", will allow Ukrainians to vote online by the time of the next presidential election, scheduled for 2024. However, even if this is technically possible, future e-elections would have to overcome low public trust in Ukrainian institutions. If there is no trust in e-voting, the system could further undermine trust in Ukrainian democracy. There are also security issues: the 2017 NotPetya cyber attacks inflicted millions of dollars' worth of damage on Ukraine, when few government functions were yet online.

Nevertheless, some emerging hi-tech solutions are innovative: prior to becoming an MP in the election this year, Halyna Yanchenko ran an anti-corruption NGO in which she developed online tools such as Repairs Map to improve the efficiency and transparency of public works, and Hidden Interests, which catalogues potential conflicts of interest and corruption in those public works.[20]

Over the next five years, Ukraine could well prove to be a fascinating laboratory in fostering creativity. Zelensky's supporters claim that this is endorsed at the top, pointing to his business success in creating the production company Studio Kvartal 95. Ukrainians are yet to experience what this means in practice, however. Digital populism in the West, as seen in the Five Star Movement in Italy, tends to involve the approval of leadership-selected policies online rather than a real choice. Given the populist, opponent-demonising politics with which he won the election, Zelensky could transform e-politics, e-government, and e-democracy into something quite unanticipated.

E-populism

Is Zelensky a populist? There is no single definition of populism, but its core element is always opposition to some enemy that oppresses 'the people', who are righteous. In this sense, populists are divisive, defensive, and revanchist, focusing

on an enemy rather than building something that is beneficial to society.

Zelensky has clearly fulfilled the first part of this, identifying corruption and the old regime as the enemy. Unlike Trump or Viktor Orban, however, Zelensky has not demonised any ethnic or outsider group. His arguments hold that corruption and the war in Donbas together stifle Ukraine's progress. Zelensky has also promised a more positive tone, rather than simply targeting opposition politicians or conspiratorial enemies. For the moment, rhetoric about unity and inclusiveness come naturally: the president's ratings are still high. But this is unlikely to last forever: "The logic of his type of populism", argues Yermolenko, is that he needs an enemy to bind his disparate supporters together. "Ukraine still needs Europe … [so] … it'll have to be Russia again. Or he has to find an internal enemy", which most likely will be "the old regime".[21]

Some opposition politicians expect the new elites to use their positions to conduct a form of revenge politics. Revenge, just like *zrada*, is a common theme in Ukrainian public life, particularly when divisions are rife and distrust is high. Any policy that runs contrary to the policy of the previous government can be branded as revenge. There may already be the first signs of this, such as Zelensky's rumoured plans to cancel or amend the language law – just because it was of crucial importance for Poroshenko. Some opposition politicians actively expect Poroshenko and members of his administration to face prosecution. The former president has already been asked to provide evidence in cases against him; former deputy prime minister Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, has branded recent events as " political persecution – and not only against a political opponent but against an entire political force [Poroshenko's party]". Zelensky's chief of staff, Andriy Bohdan, now appears to be manoeuvring to oust Kyiv mayor Vitaliy Klitschko.

Unsurprisingly, Zelensky's team rejects these accusations. They argue that Servant of the People has been built on rhetoric of unity and arguments that divisions between Ukrainian-speakers and Russian-speakers, east and west, are old-fashioned. According to Yanchenko, there has been no order to "go after Poroshenko … [this] is not the way the new administration sees the world". For the time being, this appears to the case. But, without an enemy, populism is less viable as a political approach; even Zelensky's apparently more positive variety of populism will need to either find another target or turn into something else

altogether.

The challenges ahead

Symbols

In the first weeks of his presidency, symbolic steps by Zelensky abounded: for instance, he renamed the presidential administration the "president's office" and announced that it would move from the intimidating Bankova Street building to the Ukrainian House on European Square. For Bohdan, this was a way to develop his organisation in a new, modern way, and, crucially, to break with the Soviet legacy: "Bankova" was synonymous with the Communist Party Central Offices. Rebranding the state institution in this way may help improve state institutions' dismal trust ratings.

Zelensky has also set out to dismantle one prime symbol of distrust in Ukrainian institutions – parliamentary immunity. Stripping MPs of immunity from prosecution was one of his key promises in the campaign, and is supported by 90 percent of Ukrainians as a key measure to fight corruption. Rada members have now overwhelmingly voted to deprive themselves of immunity. But Zelensky has taken it one step further by suggesting MPs who fail to toe the party line could lose their seats. The Rada has passed a huge number of bills in early sessions – meeting promises to act quickly, but doing so without adequate scrutiny.

Civil society

As a figure from outside the state apparatus, Zelensky could be expected to be a natural ally of civil society. But, as one commentator has put it, for the president, "institutional civil society and 'ordinary Ukrainians' are two different things. Zelensky does not perceive the former as representative of the latter".[22] He claims to understand the feelings of ordinary Ukrainians. This will matter particularly in his relationship with civil society, whose current form largely developed in the Poroshenko years and whose members were, broadly speaking, geared towards supporting the Maidan agenda.

Will he, therefore, work with civil society? They certainly got off to a bad start. Mutual distrust abounds: "Zelensky doesn't trust NGOs created by grants. What is

their legitimacy?" asks one observer.[23] "Zelensky's guys think institutional civil society is pro-Poroshenko, so why cooperate with them?," asks another.[24] NGOs have signalled that they do not trust the president: shortly after his election, he received an open letter setting out a comprehensive list of red lines that they had forbidden him to cross. The signatories did not receive a response.[25]

There are exceptions, notably on corruption, where their agendas clearly overlap. And NGO experts such as Yanchenko were on the Servant of the People party list (she was fifth on the list). Yanchenko told ECFR that most of her organisation's work had long consisted of trying to convince politicians to even look at the innovative solutions it was proposing. Now there is the political will to try to implement such reform.[26] Anti-corruption organisations are more confident than most other NGOs that they can work with the president, as he has made this area such a priority; they say they are "cautiously optimistic".[27]

Ukraine needs to recalibrate the role of civil society organisations. The government is right to take more responsibility and not leave NGOs to provide basic state functions, such as supporting the military – as happened in post-Maidan Ukraine. This approach can work as an interim measure, but it is not a viable governance model. However, NGOs are a source of great knowledge and should receive a role in building a modern Ukraine. It would be a shame if the president were to marginalise them. Another risk is that, rejected by those in power, NGOs could become increasingly estranged from the society at large, seen as elitist and irrelevant. A similar scenario has developed in Serbia, where wider society does not recognise the NGOs as their agents.[28]

Reform

Despite the advances Ukraine made in the Poroshenko era, reform barely began in many areas, such as the security services – as a recent ECFR policy brief analysed in detail. Others were deliberately sabotaged, such as judicial reform.

Zelensky has prioritised a fresh start in judicial reform: in August, he set up a commission to assess all aspects of Poroshenko's 'reforms' in this domain. It contains foreign experts, as well as five judges who have been criticised by the Public Integrity Council and other Yanukovych-era officials. The government's exclusion of whistle-blower judge Larysa Holnyk from the process is not a good

sign. There is a danger that Bohdan and his alleged patron Andriy Portnov, who was a key legal 'curator' in the Yanukovych era, will exercise informal control over the legal system.

There is also a danger that Zelensky will bid for quick results rather than true institutional reform. For instance, it could be tempting to 'put some bad guys in jail', particularly on anti-corruption and judicial reform: Zelensky's character in the Servant of the People programme, President Holoborodko, would regularly cut corners and dish out TV justice. But Ruslan Ryaboshapka, deputy head of the president's office, has said that he supports the agenda of the Anti-Corruption Action Center (ANTAC); and ANTAC's Anastasiya Krasnosilska was in eighth place on the Servant of the People list. Ryaboshapka has also spoken warmly of the Agenda for Justice blueprint for reform drawn up by leading NGOs. But the tension between institutional and quick fixes remains.

In parliament, Zelensky does not have a two-thirds majority for constitutional reform – although, with the support of Holos and some independents, it might be possible to enact constitutional changes that require 300 votes (373 MPs voted to abolish their own immunity). In any case, judicial and security service reform will remain the focus of Ukrainians' attention as they monitor the progress of their new president.

And, on the important matter of the church, Zelensky recently met the Ecumenical Patriarch, who granted autocephaly to the new Orthodox Church on Ukraine in December 2018. But the president then promised "not to interfere" in religious affairs, despite a Russian counter-attack against the new church. This issues is not one that is likely to resolve itself quietly.

Oligarchs

One element in Poroshenko's downfall was the public's perception that judicial and security service reforms had slowed – and that this was a deliberate act to protect powerful figures. One lingering question is Zelensky's relationship with Kolomoisky. Allies such as Viktor Andrusiv argue that Zelensky's dependence on the oligarch was mutual and that, with his new power, the president will be able to distance himself from his former patron. However, Andrusiv's prediction that "Kolomoisky will be the Ukrainian [Boris] Berezovsky" may be grossly overstated –

referring as it does to the manner in which Putin dumped would-be Russian kingmaker Berezovsky within months of his election in 2000.[29] Ukraine is not Russia, and Zelensky does not have Putin's security services background or allies. However, there are worrying signs of the president seeking to centralise such authority, both to protect himself from Poroshenko's allies and to do favours for his sponsors. This is probably the best explanation of why Avakov remained in place.

The signs are indeed worrying. There have been plans for tax changes that would benefit Kolomoisky's iron ore interests, and even talk of 'compromise' on Privatbank – which Kolomoisky owned before it was nationalised in 2016, and which has a $5.5 billion hole in its balance sheet. Former National Bank of Ukraine governor Valeriya Gontareva, who oversaw the nationalisation, was the victim of an arson attack in September, and was hit by a car in London, where she now lives.

Economy

Ukraine has huge potential to do much better economically. GDP growth has reached a steady 3 percent. Inflation is under control. The National Bank of Ukraine has a good reputation, and trade and debt deficits have fallen: public debt is only 60 percent of GDP. After 2014, the government pruned and reformed public finances and the banking system on a significant scale. And markets reacted well to Zelensky's twin victories, lowering Ukraine's borrowing and repayment costs.

Ukraine currently needs to engage in a new programme with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but it may no longer need it in a few years' time. An IMF mission arrived in Ukraine in September, generating rumours that a new economic assistance programme worth $5 billion would begin as early as October. If so, the conditions of this programme should focus not on macroeconomics but on getting the all-important judicial reform right this time – and on key reforms to bloated state-owned companies and underperforming small and medium-sized enterprises. With proper land reform, Ukraine could be a world leader in agriculture. The country's IT sector is already booming, but could do even better. Nonetheless, the IMF could walk away if Kolomoisky was allowed to challenge the nationalisation of Privatbank.

Zelensky and Honcharuk promise to prioritise deregulation. Eyebrows were raised

when one of Zelensky's first decrees unilaterally cancelled 161 laws and regulations adopted under his predecessors, some dating back to the Soviet era. The prime minister argued that these were all archaic restrictions on business. A July decree promised initial measures against Ukraine's notorious problem of 'raider' attacks (one oligarch stealing another's business), but largely focused on technical monitoring. The government is now preparing new legislation to strengthen customs cooperation with the EU, to better combat corruption and smuggling. Having characterised the Poroshenko presidency as the "era of poverty", it is above all on bread-and-butter domestic issues that Ukrainians expect Zelensky to deliver.

Donbas

Zelensky's room for manoeuvre in foreign and military policy is limited. Thus far, he has too often worked in soundbites that do not stack up logically. He has said both "I will do anything possible and impossible to return peace to the Donbas" and "We are not trading our territories and our people".

Zelensky will be constrained by Russia's continuing tests on him in Donbas. A recent, major exchange of prisoners was a success, but a difficult such test: Russia achieved the release of Volodymyr Tsemakh, a key figure involved in the air defence of eastern Ukrainian rebels when Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 was shot down in 2014. Zelensky deemed the humanitarian gains, and the public relations benefits, of the exchange to be worth more than the strategic loss.

Many Ukrainian experts and army generals believe that Russia is determined to maintain controlled instability in Ukraine as a policy goal.[30] Indeed, the key elements of the Russia-Ukraine relationship have not changed. Space for compromise is extremely limited. Russia is not interested in untangling the contradictions of the Minsk Agreements or in strengthening Zelensky. Initially, it gave its latest "peace plan" to the Opposition Platform, which the party presents as its own. In July, Medvedchuk presented a "Concept Plan to Resolve the Crisis in the South-East of Ukraine" to an informal meeting at the European Parliament, full of denials that his proposed "special status" plan for Donbas was just reheated federalisation plans from 2014. Zelensky's plan to revive the Normandy Format discussions were stymied by Russia in September 2019. If Zelensky is keen to deliver peace' too quickly and gambles on bilateral discussions with Russia, he will

have few cards to play.

Where Zelensky can have more control and a clear impact is in reconnecting government-controlled territory to eastern Ukraine. Efforts to rebuild civilian infrastructure there are of critical importance – and now is the time to begin them. During an ECFR study trip to Mariupol on 1-3 November 2018, all ECFR's interlocutors stressed the extreme isolation of the city: it takes 17 hours to get there from Kyiv by train, while the airport remains closed for security reasons. Zelensky seems to be serious about reconnecting the east: he recently announced that a major international forum for the restoration of the Donbas is to take place in Mariupol in the autumn.

It will be more difficult to reconnect with the people in the occupied territories, who remain under heavy influence of Russian propaganda and have little access to information from Ukraine – although Zelensky has talked of setting up a Russian-language TV station to reach them. Zelensky hopes that tangible changes, such as the construction of modern checkpoints and the improvement of the border-crossing experience, will slowly change perceptions in the "Donetsk People's Republic" and "Luhansk People's Republic".[31] Currently, there are only five checkpoints that to handle more than a million crossings a month.

Since the elections, events outside Donbas have raised fears in Ukraine that Europe is shifting its position on the conflict. Russia's recent return to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe was perceived in Ukraine as a concession that Russia won without providing anything in return. And many Ukrainians see Trump's willingness to welcome Russia back into the G7 as another sign that the West's Russia policy is going in the wrong direction. Zelensky's adoption of peace rhetoric may have worked in the election campaign as a tool against Poroshenko, but he faces the same strategic dilemmas as his predecessor. The solution to the Donbas war lies in Moscow. Western powers, particularly France, have taken Zelensky's initial moves as a signal to push harder towards their own interest in a broader rapprochement with Russia. This could create the threat of a peace that will not last.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

Zelensky's victory may reflect an ongoing revolutionary mood in Ukrainian society but, as political scientist Olexiy Haran notes, the "parameters haven't changed": Russia is still the aggressor – although Zelensky is not so vigilant about Russian active measures against eastern Ukraine or in Ukraine as a whole; Ukraine still needs the West; the West is still offering the country support; and the oligarchic system is so deeply ingrained that it will remain part of the Ukrainian landscape for some time to come.

However, change is possible. The renewal of the Rada provides hope for general transparency and anti-corruption. Zelensky offers new energy and opportunities. The public have become strikingly optimistic about what they see. During the summer of 2019, Ukrainians' answers to the question "Is the country headed in the right direction?" changed dramatically. "The wrong direction" fell from 70 percent to 39 percent. "The right direction" almost caught up, rising from the 16 percent previously recorded to 34 percent – a larger swing than after the election of Poroshenko in 2014. Ukrainians will be watching carefully for progress that matches up to this dramatic change in mood.

There are numerous steps that Western partners can take to support Ukraine over the next five years.

- **Embrace change in Ukraine:** be open to and supportive of creative, innovative solutions that come from Ukrainians, recognising that Ukraine is unique and prior models do not necessarily apply. Ukraine still has to implement the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU, but it will need a raft of other policies to meet its specific needs as a country.
- **Remain both engaged and vigilant:** support the new government in its efforts at further reform and its commitment to further integrate with Europe. Be vigilant in case reforms take the wrong direction.
- **Symbolic steps are important:** members of the new EU leadership, including the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, should visit Ukraine as a priority.
- **Recognise Ukraine as a key partner for European security:** support Ukraine's

efforts to end the war in Donbas as well, as its efforts to reconstruct government-controlled territories. Do not use Zelensky's openness to new thinking about the war to push him towards concessions with Russia. The early signs are that Western governments are too naïve about Putin's so-called peace proposals.

- **Support Ukraine's efforts in establishing governance:** help to strengthen institutions and extend state services to Ukrainian citizens in Donbas.

- **Build up presence in the Sea of Azov:** the EU should open an EU Advisory Mission office in Mariupol. It should also consider establishing a permanent security presence in the region, which remains a flashpoint. Piecemeal economic reconstruction will have little effect if there is no security umbrella.

- **Support Ukraine's battle with Russian disinformation:** help to strengthen the mission and independence of the public broadcaster Ukraine set up in 2017, but which has struggled to get off the ground, ensuring that it is properly funded and immune from political interference. Continue funding NGOs that fight Russian disinformation online and set up a specialised agency for this purpose.

- **Reassess the role and needs of civil society in Ukraine:** continue supporting NGOs, while diverting more funding to grassroots NGOs that operate outside Kyiv. Also support local cultural institutions such as think-tanks, theatres, community libraries, and business associations that help build trust in society and that help increase resilience at the grassroots level.

- **Study the Ukrainian example more closely:** it is important to better understand the role of technologies in modern democracies, as well as to learn about new, innovative solutions to political problems and how to encourage young people to vote in EU countries.

About the authors

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Acknowledgements

Footnotes

[1] ECFR interview with Volodymyr Paniotto, Kyiv, 26 June 2019.

[2] ECFR interview with Iryna Bekeshkina, Kyiv, 9 April 2019.

[3] Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), The Social Situation in Ukraine and Parliamentary Elections, June 2019

[4] Iryna Bekeshkina, 'Decisive 2014: Did It Divide or Unite Ukraine?', in Oleksiy Haran and Maksym Yakovlyev (eds.), *Constructing a Political Nation: Changes in the Attitudes of Ukrainians During the War in the Donbas*, (Kyiv: Stylos, 2018), pp. 1-34.

[7] ECFR interview with Serhiy Solodkiy, New Europe Centre, Kyiv, 24 June 2019.

[8] ECFR interview with Iryna Bekeshkina, Kyiv, 9 April 2019.

[9] ECFR interview with Oleksiy Haran, Kyiv Mohyla Academy, Kyiv, 24 June 2019.

[10] ECFR interview with Volodymyr Paniotto, Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), Kyiv, 26 June 2019.

[11] ECFR interview with Volodymyr Yermolenko, Kyiv, 25 June 2019.

[12] ECFR Interview with Nataliya Popovych, Ukraine Crisis Media Centre, 26 June 2019.

[13] ECFR interview with Yevhen Fedchenko, StopFake, Kyiv, 25 June 2019.

[14] ECFR interview with Olexiy Haran, 24 June 2019.

[15] ECFR Interview with Roman Vybranovsky, Ukraine Crisis Media Centre, Kyiv, 25 June 2019.

[16] ECFR interview with Viktor Andrusiv, Ukrainian Institute of the Future, 25 June 2019.

[17] ECFR interview with Viktor Andrusiv, Ukrainian Institute of the Future, Kyiv, 25 June 2019.

[18] ECFR interview with Viktor Andrusiv, Ukrainian Institute of the Future, Kyiv, 25 June 2019.

[19] ECFR interview with Yevhen Hlebovitsky, Nestor Group, Kyiv, 24 June 2019.

[20] ECFR interview with Halyna Yanchenko, Anticorruption HQ, 26 June 2019.

[21] ECFR interview with Volodymyr Yermolenko, 26 June 2019.

[22] ECFR interview with Serhiy Solodkiy, New Europe Centre, Kyiv, 24 June 2019.

[23] ECFR interview with Viktor Andrusiv, Ukrainian Institute of the Future, Kyiv, 25 June 2019.

[24] ECFR interview with Serhiy Solodkiy, New Europe Centre, Kyiv, 24 June 2019.

[25] ECFR interview with Yevhen Fedchenko, Stopfake, Kyiv, 25 June 2019.

[26] ECFR interview with Halyna Yanchenko, Anticorruption HQ, *Kyiv, 26 June* 2019.

[27] ECFR interview with Olena Halushka, ANTAC, Kyiv, 25 June 2019.

[28] ECFR telephone interview with Roman Waschuk, Ambassador of Canada to Ukraine, 5 July 2019.

[29] ECFR interview with Viktor Andrusiv, Ukrainian Institute of the Future, Kyiv, 25 June 2019.

[30] ECFR briefing with Lieutenant General Serhiy Nayev, Mariupol, 31 October 2018.

[31] Seminar with civil society representatives in Mariupol, November 2018.

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