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## Ukraine: Another try to surprise the world



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The first try was in 2005 during the Orange Revolution. The second was in 2014 during the Revolution of Dignity. And now in April 2019, the third try with the presidential elections that took the country and the world by surprise by such an unprecedented outcome. A popular TV actor and successful film producer who brilliantly played the role of a school teacher, who won the presidential race in the TV series “A Servant of the People” and eventually pulled the country out of a nosedive, suddenly grabs a landslide victory in the real-life election campaign. Soon, Vladimir Zelensky, or Mr. ZE, as he has nicknamed himself, is to be inaugurated as Ukraine’s sixth President. Something that no one in Ukraine or abroad would have thought possible a few months ago.

### *Some preliminary thoughts and conclusions about this remarkable event*

First and foremost, Ukraine has firmly established herself as a vibrant and modern democracy, probably the only post-Soviet country where a positive result for the incumbent cannot be guaranteed by the administrative and law enforcement systems and the outcome lies firmly in the hands of the people. Power in Ukraine, as these elections have so eloquently demonstrated, is vested, indeed, with the people. *Vox Populi Vox Dei* – and it is about present-day Ukraine.

Secondly, despite quite intensive “dirty linen” campaigning on both sides, the elections took place without any major violations or disruptions and were characterised, in the end, even by certain gallantry so unknown in the post-Soviet political space. To give him credit, the incumbent Petro Poroshenko, for whom and for whose closest circle the loss of power could mean even criminal prosecution for corruption and misuse of power, promptly acknowledged his defeat and offered the winner his hand for the office transition period.

Thirdly, these elections will probably be considered as something akin to a revolutionary disruption of established rule books for conventional political technologies and strategies. Consider this. Against all odds, a powerful and experienced President-oligarch, whose political career spans from the Party of the Regions to the political block in his own name, and whose

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public service record ranges from security council to central bank, from economy to foreign affairs ministries, has been beaten in a landslide (almost 75% to 25) by the successful entrepreneur, a popular household entertainment name, but a complete beginner in politics.

Mr ZE's campaign was a mixture of "scheduled concert tours", regular TV shows of sharp political satire, YouTube announcements and appeals, intensive web media interventions and finally the broadcast, a few days before election day, of a much expected sequel to the popular "Servant to the People" series. And the last "brick" in this "political campaign innovation" was a carefully planned grand political duel between the two front-runners at the national Olympic stadium set up as a unique show. Mr. ZE and his supporters created and acted the script but, most importantly, managed to impose the scrip and the tempo onto the opponent.

To a large extent, this remarkable election phenomenon has to do with the undeniable fact that during independence years Ukrainians have lost completely confidence and trust in the country's rotten and oligarch-dominated political establishment. This establishment consistently betrayed its electoral promises and thrived on corruption and greed. The Poroshenko era has been the straw that broke the camel's back.

But there are other implicit conclusions that can be drawn.

One is that the people are completely fed up with the artificial divisions of the country (East vs West, Ukrainian vs Russian-speaking, pro-war vs anti-war, etc.) that the ruling elite has continuously deployed and abused. The proof of this is that Mr. ZE, whose views may seem moderate and sometimes even naïve, has nevertheless managed to get the upper hand in all but one Ukrainian province (Lviv).

The second is that Poroshenko, whose aggressive political rhetoric aimed to consolidate the public in his support against the Russian aggression, didn't impress the vast majority of the people who aspire for the end of war and hostilities.

For a long time, opinion polls in Ukraine have shown that most people considered ending the war and a peaceful solution of the conflict as the number one priority. But Poroshenko who was elected in 2014 on his promise to end the hostilities within several months completely failed to make this a reality.

*What does this "unexpected" political turn in Ukraine mean for geopolitics in the region?*

There is already a sufficient evidence to argue that Ukraine will not be guided by President-elect Mr ZE away from its EU aspirations and established foreign policy priorities. The goal of NATO membership will have to be tested through a popular referendum. The war in Donbas will have to be dealt with through a strengthened and enlarged Minsk format. So, Ukrainian allies and supporters should not worry. The country will be guided mostly on a business-as-usual course. Perhaps, even more efficiently if the President-elect's words correlate with his deeds.

*What challenges does Mr. ZE face?* Several and serious.

Oligarchy and political corruption. Unless and until he resolutely breaks the neck of this Hydra, his win may turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory. Ukraine will not move ahead. Here, his business partnership with another notorious oligarch is yet to be proven as an arm-distance relationship.

Plus, his political battlefield skills may soon be tested by quite a few open and hidden enemies in a new Parliament to be elected this autumn or possibly sooner.

Economic stagnation and labour migration. Even though the country has been registering positive growth for several years, the war-related impact on the economy has been taking its toll. Future projected growth (3-4% per annum), without massive investment, new markets and creation of new jobs, will not be able to stop the dangerous outflow of skilled labour. With arising retired population and a shrinking labour force, Ukraine's competitiveness and longer-term prospects may be at stake. What ZE team will need is a clear and a realistic economic policy.

And, finally, restoring the people's trust in the political system and politicians that is so important for consolidating this great nation to make a real Ukrainian breakthrough.

A tough job but possible if the President-elect will become a true "Servant of the People".

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