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# Stakes and Outlook for the Ukrainian Presidential Election

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Just one week before the Ukrainian presidential election, this article aims to highlight the main issues at stake in this vote in a country undergoing fundamental political change and marked by five years of undeclared war with Russia. After setting the scene in which the election is taking place, the aim will be to understand the main security, political, social and economic stakes (influence of armed conflict in the Donbass, social reform and expectations, power games between oligarchs) at the heart of the candidates' electoral strategies. This will help us expose the complex set of interests of both economic and political stakeholders, bearing witness to a highly corrupt political system, which is impeding the implementation of reform in Ukraine initiated in 2014, and contributing to increasing mistrust amongst the population as far as their political elites are concerned. The aim will also be to place this election in the context of wider international mechanisms by analysing the view the EU and Russia have of this election. Finally, particular attention will be given to the role played by Ukrainian civil society in the next electoral cycle (legislative elections in October 2019 and local elections in 2020), and to the initiative of new dynamics in the country since the Revolution of Dignity of 2013-2014.

## 1. CONTEXT

On 31st March 2019, Ukrainians are being called to ballot, to elect their president. Five million of them (i.e. nearly 12% of the population) will not be allowed to vote since the election will not take place either in Crimea, annexed by Russia in 2014, or in the separatist provinces of Donbass<sup>[1]</sup>, thereby reducing the influence of the "pro-Russian" electorate. However, 1.7 million "internally displaced" refugees will be able to vote, whilst others (Ukrainians from Russia, citizens with dual Russian and Ukrainian nationality) will be subject to severe restrictions and pressure. Yet, in 2014, just 10 % of them voted, even if Ukrainian consulates and embassies were welcoming them.

But as the country suffers the fifth year of war in its industrial region, the Donbass, a great lassitude is now emerging. Since the spring of 2014, more than 10,300 people have died, of whom 3,000 were civilians. Every month the cease-fire is breached more than a thousand times – despite its establishment through the Minsk Agreements, signed in September 2014 and renewed in February 2015. Sometimes this figure rises to 10,000, as in October 2018. Now most

Ukrainians want peace. And the candidates running in the presidential election have understood this, but it remains to be seen under what conditions. Although for the present president Petro Poroshenko no concessions must be made to Russia, some say they are prepared for them, like Vladimir Zelensky, actor and comedian, who is leading in the polls, whilst Yulia Tymoshenko and Yuri Boyko, legacies of the old system, stand as the only spokespeople with Moscow.

In addition to the economic crisis which has gripped the country over the last few years, now there are also deep rifts within a society that is united in its pain, but divided and easily manipulated, and also marked by a bloody Revolution that the judicial system still has not succeeded in appeasing. Despite this, the last few years have seen spectacular progress in Ukraine. After having lived for nearly a century under the administrative authority of the USSR, Ukraine is generally still seen as a weak nation, with unstable State structures. However, the major institutional reforms in the wake of the Maidan launched by Petro Poroshenko with the support of the European Union and other international organizations, after 2014, and the role played by civil society in guaranteeing

[1] Oleksandr Ivantcheshkil, «  
Вибори президента України 2019: цифри, дати і кандидати  
» (Presidential election in  
Ukraine 2019: figures, dates  
and candidates), Pravda.  
com.ua, 3rd January 2019, in  
Ukrainian.

their implementation, is the source of the most optimistic ambitions in Europe and across the world. Especially because since 2014 Ukraine has achieved many more reforms than in the period following 1991. At a time when campaign promises are in full swing Ukrainians are demanding “change”. Alternately the candidates are drawing up a “new path for Ukraine” (Tymoshenko), supplemented either by enthusiasm for “direct and participative democracy” (Zelenskiy) or by loyalty of a people united by its “Church, army and its language” (Poroshenko).

But there is a great amount of doubt about the country’s fate: in January 2019 around 40% of the electorate were still undecided about their choice[2]. Moreover, the pollsters, caught up in the games of the oligarchs, are calling for a careful interpretation of these figures. Finally, the high number of candidates – 39 – might disturb the electorate at the time of voting[3]. Only one thing seems certain: whoever the elected candidate is, he or she should maintain the main political guidelines of a Western model of governance oriented towards the “country’s gradual integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures”[4], much to Russia’s regret, which, for its part, is trying to place its pawns on the Ukrainian political board via various strategies of influence.

## 2. ELECTION STAKES AND ELECTORAL STRATEGIES OF THE MAIN CANDIDATES

Amongst the 39 candidates[5], Vladimir Zelenskiy, supported by oligarch Kolomoiskyi, is forecast to win 20.7% of the vote, ahead of his main rivals, Petro Poroshenko (13.2%), and Yulia Tymoshenko (11%), according to a survey published by SOCIS in March 2019[6]. However, this figure does not guarantee victory for certain, indicating a turbulent second round on 21st April. According to this study the Ukrainians’ concerns are focused on three main themes: security (war in the Donbass, 61.4%), the economy and social issues (price increases 30.9%, unemployment 22.5%, low wages 55.2%) and political questions (the fight to counter corruption 21.8%). The question here is to understand how the lead candidates’ electoral strategies are being

shaped in view of what the Ukrainians consider to be important in this election.

## 3. SETTLING ARMED CONFLICT IN DONBASS

After five years of fighting that led to the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia and the birth of self-proclaimed republics in the east of Ukraine, the end of the war has become the principal issue at stake in this presidential election. The war, the cause of many ills in Ukrainian society, has become a source of deep lassitude on the part of the population, who do not identify (or no longer identify) with this conflict. Indeed, a type of “anti-war populism”[7] is starting to emerge both amongst the population and the elites, who now direct their discourse towards the settlement of the conflict and not its continuation.

Everyone is calling for an end to the conflict – without however establishing any type of real action plan – except for Petro Poroshenko, who despite evident criticism amongst the political classes[8], is building an extremely firm discourse vis-à-vis Moscow. Petro Poroshenko has been preparing his re-election for a long time. The discourse he has adopted, containing patriotic declarations advocate political “continuity” that he has embodied since 2015. From his triptych “Army! Language! Faith!” he has moved on to “either me (Poroshenko), or Putin”. Regarding Russia, he is not planning any negotiation without the full implementation of the Minsk Agreements. Also, it must be remembered that the outgoing President was the only one able to sign the Association Agreement with the EU.

Vladimir Zelenskiy and Yulia Tymoshenko seem to be more open towards Moscow. Whilst the former is planning to “sit down at the table” with Putin and negotiate the re-establishment of peace “point by point” – a proposal that is really not taken seriously by everyone – the latter is talking of her political experience to reassure voters of her ability to negotiate with the Kremlin. She is notably suggesting a wide negotiation format for peace “Budapest Plus”, -integrating the USA.

[2] Boulègue, M. *Les élections présidentielles ukrainiennes de mars 2019. Enjeux du scrutin et stratégies des candidats.* (Note de Recherche n°71) IRSEM, 28th February 2019.

[3] For example, due to the homonym (Yulia Tymoshenko and Yuri Tymoshenko) if Yu. Tymoshenko only appears on the voting slips.

[4] Boulègue, Op. cit..

[5] The Central Electoral Commission officially registered 44 candidates out of the declared 89. Since the launch of the campaign 5 have given up the electoral race.

[6] The survey was undertaken amongst 2000 people from all of the country’s regions (except in annexed Crimea).

[7] Taras Kuzio, « Anti-war populism is set to dominate the 2019 elections », *Kyiv Post*, 13th October 2018.

[8] Christine Dugoin-Clément, « Ukraine, Russie et mer d’Azov : mutation du conflit ? », article, *Revue Défense Nationale*, December 2018.

#### 4. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL STAKES IN THE ELECTION

##### Difficult reforms to implement

Since 2014, Ukraine has undertaken major economic and social reform, which has been closely monitored by an extremely active civil society, supporting the State structures that have been gripped by the events in Crimea and on the country's eastern flank. Indeed, Maidan led to the emergence of a dynamic civil society, which has contributed to public debate over major issues like corruption, wages, social security etc ... by way of newly created public and non-governmental organisations (ONG). Significant progress has been achieved by Petro Poroshenko regarding the banking and energy sectors, decentralisation and in his relations with the European Union (establishment of a visa free system). Recently, the recognition of ecclesiastical independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by the Patriarch of Constantinople helped Petro Poroshenko gain in popularity.

But it seems that this progress has reached its limits. On the one hand, the outgoing president's action trying to drive out all types of opposition within the State has angered reformers, who have been dismissed to the benefit of more "loyal" people in key posts in the State structures<sup>[9]</sup>. On the other hand, suspicion continues regarding the outgoing president's determination to voluntarily weaken structures responsible for new reform, in order to protect the interests of the oligarchs close to power.<sup>[10]</sup> There is a long way to go therefore in terms of countering corruption and in the legal system, which Vladimir Zelenskiy is quick to recall, as he stands as the "anti-system" candidate and the "servant of the people"<sup>[11]</sup> with a discourse that is winning over more and more amongst public opinion.

##### Regarding the economic crisis, high social expectations

In Ukraine, living standards are low. Wages and retirement pensions are not enough to guarantee the

stability of households, who have a growing fear of fuel price increases. With the war, the country's economic situation has weakened, and the population's living conditions have deteriorated significantly. Destruction on a daily basis is depriving thousands of households of water and electricity and endangers the populations living near the front-line. Every day nearly 35,000 people cross the line to meet their relatives, risking their life in this region that has become one of the most mine-filled in the world.

Given this humanitarian, economic and social crisis most of the candidates have made social issues central to their electoral strategy. Hence for her third bid since 2010 Yulia Tymoshenko can count on a loyal electorate (mainly older people from the poorest levels of society, living in the countryside and villages in the west or centre), who are sensitive to her discourse: she is promising to respond to the social expectations of the population, notably via reductions in communal tariffs and the price of gas, which is worrying international financial backers.

#### 5. POLITICAL DIMENSION

The election is attracting a record number of candidates. It could be interpreted both as a sign of good health in the country and as a sign of political crisis. But this is not frightening voters since 80% of them say they are certain to go and vote in the second round. 50% of Ukrainians say they do not trust their political élites, which means there might be an increase in "default votes".

##### A crisis of representation?

During a conference in Paris on 14th March last Volodymyr Fesenko, director of the Ukrainian Centre for Political Studies "Penta" deplored the total loss of confidence by Ukrainians in their political élites. "The situation in Ukraine is comparable to that of France; people are critical of all of the institutions [...] they vote for a candidate and then criticise that representative." How can this confidence crisis be explained? A first

*[9] Appointment of Ihor Kononenko as Vice-President of the Poroshenko Bloc (BoP) in the Rada despite his suspension in the Abromavicius scandal in January 2016 and who holds strong sway over the National Bureau for the Fight to Counter Corruption (NABU).*

*[10] Since 2014, NABU's work, which came on the request of civil society and international creditors is constantly challenged by institutional disagreements with the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption (NAPC).*

*[11] Volodymyr Zelenskiy played the role of president in a TV series (Servant of the People) about a history teacher whose discourse regarding corruption went viral on YouTube and took him to office.*

answer lies in the expectations and hopes raised across the country by the Maidan in 2013-2014, and the brutality with which the Ukrainians saw them evaporate with the arrival of Petro Poroshenko in 2015, who now has a firm grip over the political system (slowing judicial reforms and the fight to counter corruption in particular). A second answer might lie in the total loss of confidence<sup>[12]</sup> of the population in the political authorities. Regularly candidates' promises are swept aside by corruption affairs and scandals in which the candidates are involved, and which blacken the portrait of a "Dream Ukraine"<sup>[13]</sup>.

Indeed, most Ukrainians hope for a renewal of the political class and the emergence of new faces, who are prepared to govern at the service of the people and not for financial interests. According to Volodymyr Fesenko, "voters are prepared to vote not for a candidate but for a man, who can break the link between business and power."

This is how the popular myth around Vladimir Zelenskiy has grown<sup>[14]</sup>, who now leads in the polls. Seen as a "stranger" to the system, he has caused surprise in the country and abroad. He is putting forward a type of direct and participative democracy to end corruption and to surround himself with "young professionals without any prior political experience"<sup>[15]</sup>. His message is being heard by a young electorate which no longer has any trust in the country's leaders. For the first time he is rallying voters from both the most Russian-speaking areas in the east and in the more European regions of the west. Hence, the disappearance – still weak but present – of the regional split in the face of Zelenskiy's candidacy is a source of fascination.

But he is not the only one to position himself as an "actor of change". Yulia Tymoshenko is waging everything on this. She has exchanged her traditional blond plait for a more modern, updated style. If she hopes to reach the second round, she will need to convince a younger urbanised electorate.

However, it seems that relations between the candidates, notably with the powerful oligarchs is

contributing to the disenchantment of some voters, who are disappointed more than ever before.

### The role of the oligarchs

Despite the efforts made by civilian society since 2014, the oligarchs still play a decisive role in the construction of the Ukrainian political system.

On the one hand economic and political life still very much depends in part on the interests of the oligarchs, thereby leaving the country's future to a handful of extremely influential men. The presidential election has not been an exception to this: in four years Petro Poroshenko has built up some powerful support<sup>[16]</sup>, which can influence the choice of the electorate if he were to qualify for the second round against Tymoshenko or Zelenskiy. His alliances with personalities such as the oligarch Rinat Akhmetov have helped him increase his audience (TV channel Ukrayina) although his open battles with Igor Kolomoyski or Arsen Avakov are preventing him from leading in the polls. For her part, Yulia Tymoshenko is supported by oligarch Igor Kolomoyskiy (financial support to her campaign) and by the Interior Minister, Arsen Avakov. Finally, Zelenskiy is said to be working in close relation with oligarch Igor Kolomoyskiy, who incidentally owns the TV channel "1+1" on which the series, to which the candidate owes his popularity, is broadcast.

On the other hand, most of the media are owned by the oligarchs. It is important to point out this fact in a country in which 80% of the population receives most of its information via the TV and believes this media to be "reliable", without them seeking out any alternative sources of information.

Hence the oligarchs position themselves as stakeholders in the election. True strategists, they ensure the protection of their economic and financial interests and fight for power. Despite constant disagreements and conflicts of interest, most of them speak rather more in support of the political continuity advocated by P. Poroshenko, with the aim of maintaining the political system as it is, without having to give account to the judicial system.

<sup>[12]</sup> According to recent survey by SOCIS, 50% of Ukrainians have no confidence in their elites.

<sup>[13]</sup> « The Ukraine of my Dreams », the slogan of candidate V. Zelenskiy.

<sup>[14]</sup> TV series *Sluha Narodu* (Servant of the People), *op. cit.*

<sup>[15]</sup> *Boulègue*, *op. cit.*

<sup>[16]</sup> Former president Viktor Yushchenko, the new metropolitan bishop of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church whose independence he won or the Mayor of Kyiv, Vitali Klitschko

## 6. INTERNATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

### The European Union

For the European Union, the war in the Donbass is a major issue. As of 2014 both France and Germany positioned themselves at the heart of the negotiations between Russia and Ukraine (signature of the Minsk Agreements, establishment of a Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine[17]), to bring the armed conflict to an end. As diplomatic relations between Kyiv and Moscow have deteriorated the Franco-German couple has been sorely tested in its quest for legitimacy in the eyes of other Member States of the Union, which itself is experiencing a deep crisis due to Brexit.

“The European Union supports none of the candidates, but a people,” explains Peter Wagner, Director in Chief of the support group for Ukraine at the European Commission’s DG “Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations”. But whichever the candidate is elected, those in power should follow a rather more pro-European political line in support of reform or face the risk of causing a wave of discontent in the country. Amongst the candidates from the opposition who support reform, Andriy Sadoviy, of the Samopomish Party and Anatoliy Hrytsenko, of the Civic Position Party, even if they do not reach the second round, might have their word to say in the general elections in October. Credited respectively with 3% to 4% and 6% to 10% in the polls, they are standing as pro-European reformers, in support of NATO and against Russia and the interests of the oligarchs.

### Russia’s Strategy of Influence

Since 2014, the Kremlin has witnessed several of its levers of influence impeded by the reforms in the Ukraine (official status of the Ukrainian language, recognition of the independence of the Ukrainian church, several Russian media blocked etc ...). Hence its strategy has now changed: firstly, this means ensuring that the issue of Crimea disappears from public debate to guarantee the recognition of its annexation to Russia, in exchange for the separatist territories. Secondly

Moscow deems that it is ensuring Ukraine’s “security” by fighting against radical nationalism[18] said to be spreading across the country. Hence, although they have all but disappeared from the Ukrainian political landscape, the ultranationalist or far right parties[19] in Ukraine feature regularly on the front pages of the pro-State media in Russia. The image of Ukraine falling prey to a “fascist junta” is a source of concern, thereby contributing to the country’s instability, sought by Moscow so that it can assert the strength of its own regime.

The Kremlin is counting therefore on the presidential and legislative elections, in the hope that a wide coalition will form against Petro Poroshenko if he is elected and which will discredit his place as Head of State. Hence, it is supporting personalities like Yulia Tymoshenko for key posts in power in Kyiv, since she shares ideas similar to Putin - she is against NATO, for the Orthodox Church under the Patriarchy of Moscow - and Viktor Medvedchuk, who is close to Putin and the KGB.

However, the candidate that Moscow would like to see elected is Yuri Boyko. The candidate of compromise between several political forces gathered on the opposition platform Za Zhitya. Yuri Boyko might play a significant role, even if his electoral chances appear very weak. He is the only candidate, in his opinion, to be able to bring peace in the negotiations with Moscow, he can count on a pro-Russian electorate in the country’s eastern regions and a strong media coverage thanks to his alliances with many influential oligarchs.

## 7. THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

“If the support programmes of the European Union to the Ukraine are to remain in place, all of the conditions must be fulfilled. Both the presidential and legislative elections must be free, fair, transparent and credible.” The intervention of Peter Wagner is a warning, “Ukraine’s greatest enemy is the country itself.” Europe has established “all of the structures it possibly could” to monitor the election, since the aim is to limit the risk of electoral fraud. The OSCE’s Office for

[17] The trilateral contact group on Ukraine includes Ukraine, Russia, the OSCE and representatives of the separatist territories of Donetsk and Luhansk.

[18] Inozemtsev. V. Kremlin-linked forces in Ukraine’s 2019 elections. *On the Brink of Revenge?* Institut Français de Relations Internationales, February 2019.

[19] Their scores are due to be close to 1%.

Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) will be present to ensure that the electoral process proceeds smoothly. But it is especially on the work of the organisations in Ukrainian civil society, particularly active since 2014, that the country can count, like the citizens' initiative OPORA[20] for the observation and long-term analysis of the electoral process; citizens' monitoring the Parliament and the political parties; the analysis of legislation and policies being implemented; the protection of citizens' interests and rights.

And yet it would be a mistake to believe that everything is settled during an election. The work of civil society organisations in support of reform and a more democratic society have been operating long-term, on a daily basis, and with great enthusiasm, as explained by Oleksandra Matvitchuk, the founder and director of the NGO "Centre for Civil Liberties"[21].

[20] OPORA is one of the main non-governmental civilian initiatives which organises the monitoring of the elections.

[21] The Centre for Civil Liberties is an organisation for the defence of Human Rights created in 2007 in Kyiv.

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In a recent poll, VoxChek 2018 placed the Yulia Tymoshenko in the lead in terms of the candidates who

had lied the most (31% truth, 27% manipulation, 33% lies and 8% exaggeration), followed by Oleg Liachko (41% truth, 17% manipulation 31% lies and 11% exaggeration) and Petro Poroshenko (56% truth, 16.5% manipulation 14.8% lies and 16.3% exaggeration).

The mistrust of the Ukrainian population of its leading classes goes without saying and despite polls placing Zelenskiy in the lead, uncertainly still reigns just a few days before the election. His electorate, comprising young people in the main, is also the least motivated share of the population and they might finally not turn out to vote. If the scores prove to be close between two candidates, the election might not be recognised by all (notably by Russia) and then deemed to be fraudulent.

The issues at stake are very important, whether it is for the Ukrainian population, which is exhausted by the economic crisis and the war ongoing now for 5 years in Donbass, as it will be for the international community, for whom the balance of States is increasingly a challenge of size in an economic context of ever stronger interdependence.

## ANNEX 1

Interview with Oleksandra Matvitchuk,  
Founder and Director of the NGO *Centre for Civil Liberties*

### **In which context did civil society in Ukraine mobilise in 2014?**

After Euromaidan, there was no renewal of the political system. It is one of the main reasons that explains the extremely fragmented nature of the reforms undertaken over the last five years. On the one hand, the political elites have tried to provide a certain number of positive changes to the lives of the citizens, and on the other, they have tried to retain their control over the main institutions. It is important to see whether there is enough will to take a leap forward to bring Ukraine out of the transition zone in which it now finds itself. In other words, have the positive changes reached a turning point?

### **What has the role of civil society been in the implementation of the reforms since 2014?**

Most of the positive changes have been undertaken under pressure or with the help of civil society. Following the demonstrations and the collapse of Viktor Yanukovich's authoritarian regime, a phenomenon emerged called "Euromaidan energy". It involved hundreds of thousands of self-organised people, who for the first year of the war, took on government roles. They were volunteers and activists from civil society, who helped reform the army, they helped more than a million and a half-displaced people and drafted and implemented reforms. The recipe to achieve positive

change is quite simple – kicked off by civil society, with the help of the international community – the under-reformed machine then starts moving in the right direction. And the Centre for Civil Liberties, helps towards this work.

### **How are organisations in civil society guaranteeing the smooth functioning of the elections?**

The Centre for Civil Liberties is constantly observing the situation in terms of the respect of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in Ukraine. The electoral process does not take place in a closed room and it is not just about filling in and place the voting slip in the ballot box. The elections must respect democratic standards, and this is why it is very important to monitor both direct breaches of the electoral process, but also the level of guarantee in terms of freedom of expression, access to justice etc.

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