





POLICY BRIEF

Which Direction Will Volodymyr Zelenskiy Go?

VOCAL
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1. Introduction

The 2019 Ukrainian presidential elections were concluded on 21st of April. In the second round of the elections two candidates claimed people's vote, the actor Volodymyr Zelenskiy and the former President and “chocolate king”¹, Petro Poroshenko. The Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, was considered an outsider, nonetheless, he received a 73,22% of the national vote² and his inauguration took place on May 20³.

Volodymyr Zelenskiy used to be the star of the show “Servant of the People”⁴, presenting the story of an ordinary guy, who was elected for the presidency and the title of the show was given to Volodymyr Zelenskiy's real-life political party. It seems that here we have one of these extraordinary cases, when real life seems to copy a TV program.

His election has raised some questions such as how it will affect Ukrainian-Russian relations, how Russia views him, what are the reactions of the EU and what will happen to EU-Ukrainian relations.

2. State of play

2.1 Relations with Russia:

After the elections, the majority of world's most powerful leaders immediately gave their wishes to the new President⁵. Theresa May⁶, Angela Merkel⁷, Justin Trudeau⁸, Donald Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker were amongst them. Donald Trump, the U.S.A. President, congratulated Volodymyr Zelenskiy and stated his support and commitment to work together, in order to help Ukraine implement reforms for democracy, prosperity and counter-corruption⁹.

However, Russia's reaction was different. Despite the new presidency, it seems that the relations between the two countries will continue being tense, since there are still many rivalries between them (e.g. Sea of Azov¹⁰, Crimea¹¹ and Donbass¹²) and issues to negotiate and talk about. Vladimir Putin, the Russian President, hasn't officially congratulated Volodymyr Zelenskiy, as other leaders have done, since it was considered “premature”¹³ to do so. In a visit to China, Vladimir Putin made a mention to Volodymyr Zelenskiy's presidency and stated that if there was a possible meeting between them at some point, they could have some negotiations on how to end the conflict in the southeast of Ukraine¹⁴. Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin spokesperson, has stated that it is too early to congratulate

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/profile/petro-poroshenko/#21bb3cf223be>

² <https://www.cvk.gov.ua/pls/vp2019/wp300pt001f01=720.html>

³ <https://www.france24.com/en/20190520-ukraine-president-zelenskiy-early-elections-inaugural-speech>

⁴ <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Series/ServantOfThePeople>

⁵ <https://en.hromadske.ua/posts/world-leaders-congratulate-ukraines-zelenskiy-with-election-victory>

⁶ https://twitter.com/theresa_may/status/1120284905773109248?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1120284905773109248&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fen.hromadske.ua%2Fposts%2Fworld-leaders-congratulate-ukraines-zelenskiy-with-election-victory

⁷ <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/suche/bundeskanzlerin-merkel-gratuliert-dem-gewachlten-praesidenten-der-ukraine-herrn-wolodymyr-oleksandrowytsch-selensky-1602218>

⁸ https://twitter.com/JustinTrudeau/status/1120119443177312256?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1120119443177312256&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fen.hromadske.ua%2Fposts%2Fworld-leaders-congratulate-ukraines-zelenskiy-with-election-victory

⁹ <https://publicpool.kinja.com/subject-in-town-pool-report-4-1834208078>

¹⁰ <https://www.dw.com/en/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-conflict-in-the-sea-of-azov/a-46461361>

¹¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/01/ukraine-still-hopes-to-reclaim-crimea-and-donbass-from-russia.html>

¹² (Ibid.)

¹³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-22/russia-keeps-expectations-low-as-comic-wins-ukraine-presidency>

¹⁴ <https://globalnews.ca/news/5210820/putin-zelenskiy-meeting/>

the Ukrainian President and it is also too early to talk about working together¹⁵. Furthermore, Dmitry Medvedev, the Prime Minister of Russia, stated that “there is still a chance for Ukraine to improve relations with Russia”¹⁶ with:

pragmatic and responsible approach with due account for all the current political realities in Ukraine, primarily in the east of the country. Therefore, the main thing we can wish the new Ukrainian leadership is common sense, as well as to understand the inherent value of relations between the peoples of our countries that transcend all momentary political considerations¹⁷.

One of the first challenges for Volodymyr Zelenskiy came just a few days after his election. Vladimir Putin expressed his intention to ease the offer of a Russian passport to Ukrainians that live in the breakaway regions of the south-east of the country. This move wasn't welcomed neither from Volodymyr Zelenskiy nor from the EU and the USA¹⁸, since it was perceived as a pretext to put specific locations under the Russian sphere of influence and thus, to make the situation there even more complicated¹⁹.

Volodymyr Zelenskiy answered that the Ukrainian people don't need the Russian citizenship: “[...] we know perfectly well what a Russian passport actually provides. This is the right to be arrested for peaceful protest. It is the right not to have free and competitive elections. This is the right to forget about the existence of natural rights and freedoms”²⁰. He also added that Ukraine should be the “example of democracy to the post-Soviet countries”²¹. Finally, Volodymyr Zelenskiy has expressed his plans to continue the negotiations with Russia, backed-up by the EU and to keep Ukraine pro-European²².

2.2 Relations with the European Union (EU):

Ukraine is characterized as a “priority partner”²³ for the EU. The ties between Brussels and Kiev are mainly governed by the East Partnership²⁴, the Association Agreement²⁵, the Support Group for Ukraine (SGU)²⁶, created by the European Commission, etc. According to the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU seeks to provide aid for Ukraine in:

Ensuring a stable, prosperous and democratic future for all its citizens. The EU is unwavering in its support for the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty and sees the full implementation of the Minsk agreements as the basis for a sustainable, political solution to the conflict in the east of the country²⁷.

¹⁵ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/04/22/putin-wont-congratulate-zelenskiy-on-ukraine-presidential-win-kremlin-says-a65338>

¹⁶ https://www.facebook.com/Dmitry.Medvedev/posts/10155914578871851?_tn=-R

¹⁷ (Ibid.)

¹⁸ <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/30/europe/ukraine-president-is-already-getting-tough-with-vladimir-putin/index.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/24/russia-passports-ukrainians-breakaway-regions-decree-ukraine>

²⁰ <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/30/europe/ukraine-president-is-already-getting-tough-with-vladimir-putin/index.html>

²¹ (Ibid.)

²² <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/zelensky-victory-ushers-in-new-era-for-ukraines-post-soviet-politics/>

²³ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-Homepage/4081/eu-ukraine-relations-factsheet_en

²⁴ <https://eap-csf.eu/front-page-full-width/eastern-partnership/>

²⁵ http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2016/november/tradoc_155103.pdf

²⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/ukraine/sgua_en

²⁷ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-Homepage/4081/eu-ukraine-relations-factsheet_en

The President was cordially greeted by the representatives of the EU. With a joint letter²⁸, President Donald Tusk and President Jean-Claude Juncker congratulated Volodymyr Zelenskiy for his election. In this letter they declared that Ukraine has the support of the EU when it comes to rule of law, fighting against corruption, maintaining macro-financial stability and pursuing the essential reform of the energy sector. German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, congratulated Volodymyr Zelenskiy as well, and stated that Germany will continue supporting Ukraine when it comes to its “right to sovereignty and territorial integrity”²⁹.

2.3 The future prospects of Ukraine with the EU and Russia

Volodymyr Zelenskiy, a candidate that seemed to come out of nowhere, managed to win even when he had no former political experience. This could possibly mean that people decided to vote based on their hope that a fresh face could bring a sense of air of innovation to the internal and external political scene. In reality, it is too early to say how the President will respond to all the challenges that might come up, so up to a point there will be a veil of mystery surrounding his future presidential course.

Whichever the case might be for the future decisions and moves of Volodymyr Zelenskiy, one thing is for sure: It would be beneficial for Ukraine to try to ameliorate its relations with Russia and strengthen its cooperation with the EU.

As far as relations with Russia are concerned, there are many areas to focus on, as mentioned above. For now, Volodymyr Zelenskiy has given an idea on how cold the relations with Russia are, by responding to Putin’s remarks that “[the] Russians and [the] Ukrainians are really one people [...], people who share a common history and culture and are ethnically close”³⁰ with:

The reality is that today, after the annexation of Crimea and the aggression in the Donbass, the only thing we have left in ‘common’ is the state border. And Russia must return control over every millimeter of the Ukrainian side. Only then can we continue searching for ‘commonalities’³¹.

Volodymyr Zelenskiy’s unexpected appearance in the political scene and his previous non-related to the politics career means we can only speculate on how he will handle this yeasty political scene. Negotiations, political dialogue and diplomatic planning are some general instruments that the soon-to-be government can wisely use, potentially learning from past failures, to be internationally recognized as a reckoned political interlocutor to Russia’s government.

Finally, in the upcoming years, Volodymyr Zelenskiy will have the chance to show whether he can resolve territorial conflicts, where people from both sides have lost their lives, through peaceful measures, respecting human rights. This would prove that his election was a prudent decision and could create a positive opinion to the people living there, as well as to Russia.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Kiev had the need for alliances and partnerships that would help it to redefine itself and its position as a country situated between the EU and Russia. For this reason, it made a move, in 1995, towards the EU, that would support its reforms³². The EU and Ukraine seem to be on good terms and they have both expressed their willingness to further cooperate. Among

²⁸ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39211/joint-letter-to-h-e-volodymyr-zelensky-190422.pdf>

²⁹ <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/suche/bundeskanzlerin-merkel-gratuliert-dem-gewaehlten-praesidenten-der-ukraine-herrn-wolodymyr-oleksandrowytsch-selensky-1602218>

³⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TW-fngFAN_Y

³¹ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/05/03/ukraines-zelenskiy-border-only-thing-left-in-common-with-russia-a65478>

³² file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/1_25819951028en00630064.pdf.en.pdf

others, an area that the President could further explore if he decided to focus more on the trade with the EU would be the provisional application of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement³³ (but by taking into consideration the concerns that it has already provoked to Russia³⁴). As mentioned above, Volodymyr Zelenskiy has already expressed his interest in having the EU's support and also to continue investing in the values that the EU promotes since its inception. He has also declared his intention to make steps towards EU integration and a NATO membership³⁵.

According to some analysts³⁶, Volodymyr Zelenskiy's win will not change the relations of Ukraine and the EU and the reforms in Ukraine will continue. However, the implementation of these reforms demands the President's attention to specific issues such as the need to form a "professional government"³⁷ and the fact that "rule of law must be the absolute priority"³⁸, in order to respond to all the difficulties (e.g. Donbass) and "[to] mobilize domestic resources"³⁹ when it comes to economy. Furthermore, the lack of parliamentary majority could pose difficulties in passing any reforms⁴⁰.

It remains to be seen in the upcoming years whether he will vindicate the trust and support of Brussels towards him, given the fact that the Ukrainian leadership has been both pro-European and pro-Russian during the last decades.

3. Conclusion

Volodymyr Zelenskiy is caught between Moscow and Brussels, having to find the balance that geopolitics demand for his country. Russia as well as the EU hope that this unusual election will be for the better of each side's bilateral relations with Ukraine. Will Volodymyr Zelenskiy's political inexperience make him move along with Russia's orbit, or will it translate to a new constructive direction in Ukrainian politics? Is this maybe the chance for Ukraine-Russian relations to turn the page and start fruitful negotiations? Since Volodymyr Zelenskiy doesn't have any past political experience, only time can answer these questions and outline the type of cooperation that he will have with Russia and with the EU.

Be that as it may, we cannot help but notice that Ukraine is one of the ultimate and topical examples of the appeal of the EU values and principles. That could remind us that despite the problems, the unavoidable disagreements and disputes that arise in the EU and among Member States, the Union's values aim at positively affecting many aspects of its citizens' lives (as professionals, consumers, citizens, voters, students, travellers, etc.⁴¹) and could possibly act as an inspiration for others that seek reform.

³³ <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/ukraine/>

³⁴ https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_31_Russia-Ukraine_0.pdf

³⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/53caf8cc-6db9-11e9-80c7-60ee53e6681d>

³⁶ <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/78993>

³⁷ (Ibid.)

³⁸ (Ibid.)

³⁹ (Ibid.)

⁴⁰ <https://www.dw.com/cda/en/ukraine-president-zelenskiy-disbands-parliament-on-inauguration-day/a-48800069>

⁴¹ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2017/603902/EPRS_ATA\(2017\)603902_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2017/603902/EPRS_ATA(2017)603902_EN.pdf)

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