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Ukraine

Ukrainian Elections: The Crisis of Representation and Reconfiguration of Oligarchic Power

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The elections in Ukraine have come a shock and will have an impact not only in Ukraine and East Europe but globally. What does this mean and how did it happen? In order to help understand these dramatic events Christopher Ford organiser of the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign interviewed leading Ukraine specialist Yuliya Yurchenko author of *Ukraine and the Empire of Capital* (Pluto, 2017).

Vladimir Zelensky scored more than 73% with Petro Poroshenko trailing far behind on 24%. Why has a television personality become President of Ukraine?

There is a serious crisis of representation in the country. There were no meaningfully progressive, systemically different candidates in terms of their programme on the ballot.

This vote became a litmus test of public views on the effects of 28 years of “transition to capitalism” and the oligarchic regime that it produced. The country is for once united on something and that is the rejection of the course that its rulers keep pushing despite ongoing popular dissatisfaction and socio-economic problems i.e. economic inequality, unemployment, erosion of quality of and access to public services. In 2014 oligarchs capitalised on Russian annexation of Crimea and incursions in Donbas to secure election victory “ presidential and parliamentary. They knew it then and they know it even better now realising that they wasted the by-chance opportunity to stay in power by not reinventing their policy attitude nor narratives. Poroshenko’s “army, language and faith” slogan could win him votes in 2014-5, maybe even 2016. By now people are tired of war “ even if they still disagree with Russian aggression, many have lost relatives and friends or know someone who has; such social wounds are too much to bear, especially under the rule of someone who promised to end the conflict in months.

Zelensky became popular precisely because he is a complete outsider, he is a protest vote (41% of his voters said it’s a [vote against Poroshenko](#)). It is a worrying trend that the many in the establishment keep failing to address in a constructive manner, in Ukraine and elsewhere. Zelensky’s popularity is a form of a Trumpist phenomenon where populist figureheads that dare to confront the establishment and voice the frustrations of the masses (whatever those may be) can get astounding support despite being clearly professionally unfit and unprepared for the high office. Zelensky and Trump are significantly different in terms of their electorate composition and the interests they represent however both in reality are actually representing a particular fraction of the existing ruling establishment and capitalist class. Nationalist populism is too likely to continue if in a reinvented format as it is a characteristic feature of the current phase of neoliberal discourse where interests of concrete groups are being secured by propagating seemingly national interests in economic and foreign policy. Many of the oligarchs in Ukraine are rather excited about Zelensky’s victory, not least many of those associated with Yanukovich’s Party of Region (now the Opposition Bloc) some of whom are in the self-imposed exile. We can expect a reconfiguration of power among the oligarchic blocs. They will be likely to resist some of the more economically libertarian proposals from Zelensky’s advisor team as those would undermine the main local “competitive advantage” of the oligarchs “ their networks, access to and embezzlement of state subsidies, etc. Whether those proposals will ever go beyond promises we will see in the coming months.

- **Five years ago the Euromaidan popular rebellion removed President Yanukovich, there was an aspiration for ending corruption, greater equality, human rights and democracy. Have these aspirations been realised?**

The short answer is “no” as is evidenced by the recent vote and public frustration that spills into electoral support of inexperienced outsiders. The long answer is that there are initiatives and attempts, top-down and

grassroots, that point in the right direction and those that are confirm retrograde dynamics. Corruption has not been dealt with effectively and according to some commentators has even got worse. Let's just remember the infamous case of Aivaras Abromavicius, Minister for Economy of Ukraine (2014-2016), who resigned over alleged [corrupt vested interests](#) in the ministry or Valeria Gontareva, Chairwoman of the National Bank of Ukraine (2014-2017), who resigned not least due to being [pressured and threatened by oligarchs](#) and is now being tried for her activity when in office.

In 2018 IMF declared [Ukraine Europe's poorest country](#). It also ranks the third lowest in Europe and Central Asia in terms of [inequality](#) across regions according to the World Bank.

During Poroshenko's presidency we saw a lot of authoritarian tendencies, rise in right-wing militancy and incidents of impunity of the right wing "patriotic" brigades in their attacks on left-wing activists and Roma, for example. There were instances of violence against demonstrators at the International Women's Day in recent years, for example, while there is a wider discourse on LGBTI rights happening at the same time. It is a rather uneven picture as one would expect in a society that is transforming while in a state of war and its national identity and sovereignty being questioned by its former colonial ruler.

National identity discourse is only too important in such conditions yet sadly, not least thanks to Poroshenko, it started getting a bitter taste to it which too is damaging. Ukraine's society is multi-ethnic, decolonising (culturally more so than economically), largely ethnically Ukrainian while linguistically bilingual/Russian. Re-establishing the status of Ukrainian culture and language are an inevitable part of the national sovereignty and identity project due to historic and current geopolitical reasons. In a way, Russia's aggression and frequent Kremlin's remarks on Ukraine being a non-country and non-culture in its own right have certainly made a heavy contribution to often near-defensive nationalist argument being based on anything Ukrainian as a non-Russian rather. Such binary dichotomising is limiting and damaging for the process of national identity (trans)formation as (1) their complete separation is impossible due intimate historic intertwining and (2) the future of the Ukrainian needs to be built on its own terms, embracing the nation's multi-ethnicity and multi-culturalism while culturally decolonising; and that includes abandoning ongoing defensiveness that only validates the old colonial narratives. This process cannot be achieved through the socially alienating rhetoric that Poroshenko's rule embraced but rather through a complex and inclusive engagement with our past and present conditions Russian speaking Ukrainians and Russia as an aggressor state should not be bundled together as enemies in a simplistic manner while a steady process of Ukrainian cultural and linguistic revival should be supported, rights of minority languages intact, of course. Ukrainian language politics must be understood in its decolonising context and thus we are talking about reinstating of culture and language that have been historically repressed and thus it is a rebalancing rather than ethno-culturally dominant or supremacist approach. This is an important aspect that often gets lost in the commentaries on Ukraine's cultural and language politics. Poroshenko's administration did endorse the binary, lacking in nuance vision with his politics and electoral slogans. The good news is that society at large does not buy the 'brand' of nationalism, that it rejects it together with Poroshenko; this, however, does not mean that some of the poisonous rhetoric has not polluted public consciousness. The extent to which it was internalised will be become more visible with the passing of time.

While we can talk about essential erosion of democracy evidenced by the crisis of representation, its institutions are intact and are functioning. The latest election has seen very few violations, candidates have abandoned many of their old tricks and that is a great achievement not least for Ukraine's civil society. It is important to understand that this by no stretch of imagination means that corruption is the word of yesterday but it does signal a higher degree of the establishment responsiveness to the public pressure – it was understood that getting away with large scale manipulations will not be tolerated. Virtualisation of politics continues –as we saw with the theatrical exchanges between Zelensky and Poroshenko yet it is a rather different thing from faking ballots.

- **It is argued that Poroshenko prevented the Russian occupation of the Ukraine, has rebuilt the army and**

has been the most pro-Ukrainian President since independence, is this a true assessment?

It is true to say that under Poroshenko's rule Russian backed separatists have been significantly pushed back. There were also significant losses, human and otherwise.

The army is stronger contract army introduced, new ammunition, training, army is trained to partake in the warfare rather than be a latent force. At the same time there is a lot of corruption and embezzlement in the army as was uncovered in a journalist's investigation on February 25.

- **How much has the social conditions of the Ukrainian people featured in this election?**

Not very meaningfully to my understanding. Many populist vague statements about the poor state of economy and levels of poverty yet no proper plans as to how those problems can be solved.

- **Zelensky has announced his new team, indicating a break from the 'old system' and reform in key areas such as corruption. Is this purely electioneering?**

First of all it is important to mention that the 'new faces' in his team are not entirely new. Many in fact are part of various institutions and bureaus implementing Poroshenko's reforms so their newness is questionable. Yet one does not necessarily need, in theory, to have new people to break the old system. The attitude and ideological wiring of the cadre has to change. I cannot identify that in Zelensky's list. They all have some connection to private economic entities and/or are lawyers, sociologists, politics experts who favour capitalist market-based model of economic and social politics. In short, the economic models they support are precisely those that have impoverished masses of population in Ukraine and globally to various extents, depending on the country. So it is difficult for me to see how the 'old system' will be broken. If it was purely about punishing the big shots of corruption networks than they could start with Kolomoysky, their main supporting oligarch, which is hard to imagine happening. There is lack of sobriety and obvious naivete in the hopeful outlook for economic transformation in conditions of unbridled capitalism that the team implicitly and explicitly advocates. Without survivalist nepotic and corrupt networks and with reduced state control over economic activity the country's economic state will invariably worsen.

Foreign Trans National Corporations are more resilient and experienced in such conditions and will put pressure on, and push out domestic businesses from lucrative sectors. This is the logic of capitalist competition and with numerous examples in economic history. Oligarchs, for all their flaws, form a part of the political class which makes them susceptible to public scrutiny, they are politically accountable to an extent, much more so than CEOs of foreign TNCs. I am not advocating for the oligarchic system as it stands but merely highlighting the various degrees of social investment that domestic and foreign capital have and which leads to various degrees of accountability.

What we will get with Zelensky is unbridled neo-liberalism – new and old faces, same and accelerated policies, with little economic basis to trust there will be any positive economic change.

- **The war in the East and Russian occupation of Ukrainian territory has featured prominently, Poroshenko spoke of ending the war when he first stood for election, Zelensky is making similar promises. Is peace and re-unification of Ukraine a realistic prospect?**

It is, reunification even in the short run, reconciliation in a significantly longer perspective; a lot of work will be required. It shall start with the change of attitude, rhetoric and losing of dehumanising and offensive language addressed at LNR/DNR.

Deep dividing lines have been manufactured and became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Dehumanising language used on both sides of the conflict have produced damage that will have to be undone. There is a unifying factor east and west – people are fed up with the establishment. This is the best basis to start building upon towards reunification. For the process to be successful, LNR and DNR leadership will have to be meaningfully involved in the process as well as Russia. Otherwise decisions will not only be ignored but also alienating. All parties will have to compromise and that could be difficult to achieve. The two states are Russia's proxies yet with good degree of autonomy and a strong lack of will to prosecuted for military crimes if reunification/reconciliation is to take place. Russia could potentially lose the two states as they are quite a heavy ballast economically (sanctions and all) and the Kremlin already announced that they are willing to reopen negotiation in exchange of an economic cooperation agreement with Ukraine. In the context of the Deep Comprehensive Trade Agreement with the EU it is very unlikely that that agreement will be possible to achieve even if there is political will. There are many areas that do not align legally if Ukraine is to be part of the EU economic area and the Eurasian Union, for example. Yet without knowing what Russia will want concretely it is hard to tell how feasible the scenario will be; it could be some associated membership format, for example. Whether Ukraine and the EU will consider conditions acceptable is a separate story. Reconciliation though will be more difficult than any economic bartering over reintegration of territories.

- **How will these elections impact on what Ukrainian politics might look like in the build up to the Parliamentary elections?**

We will certainly see reinvigoration of competition and new parties and coalitions forming as a response to any outcome of the presidential election. The combination of forces and interests will be seriously influenced by today's vote. The losing candidate's supporters will try to reclaim the reins of power via control of the parliament. There have already been mentions of a constitutional reform and moving towards a parliamentary republic, now Ukraine is a presidential type.

- **Yanukovich was removed, Poroshenko is facing electoral defeat, can Zelensky last if he does not meet the expectations of the people?**

We are witnessing a catastrophic crisis of representation in the country. At the same time we have an historic bloc-in-itself emerge, it was in formation 5 years ago and it is now maturing. There is a strong rejection of the neo-liberal kleptocracy

Zelensky may not last very long. Firstly he can discredit himself fast enough and he himself declared that he will leave if he is not coping or finding it difficult to implement his programme, however vague that programme is. At the same time the establishment will not accept him and his "reformer team" and they will be opposing him in the parliament; it is very likely that we will be looking at yet another constitutional reform where Ukraine will be turned into a parliamentary rather than a presidential republic (this happened before) and the power will be shifted to the parliament. That way Zelensky's hands will be tied.

- **What are the prospects for a successful alternative to the oligarchic politics which has dominated Ukraine**

There are not very many. A lot of damage was done by the de-communisation laws that vilified political alternatives to the neo-liberal approach. In such a way popular false consciousness is being produced where legitimate grievances of the population caused by a combination of neo-liberal reforms and kleptocracy in what I previously termed as a regime of neo-liberal kleptocracy are being thought of as possible to resolve via more neo-liberal reforms just with a bit more transparency. This approach is dangerously naïve. The above false consciousness and discursive taboos on left wing politics are not easy to break yet the situation is not hopeless. Not least because of the emergent historic bloc I mentioned earlier and proletarianisation of the masses. We also have to remember systematic restriction of domestic politics that are conditioned by Ukraine's debt dependency on IMF and other lenders. A break from

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oligarchy would mean a break from neo-liberal market reform or repossession of assets with consecutive reprivatisation, either would set a negative precedent that International Financial Institutions would be very reluctant to set. We already are witnessing a potential reversal of Privat Bank nationalisation that speaks loud and clear of the grip the oligarchs still have on various systems of Ukraine's state.

Source: [Ukraine Solidarity Campaign](#).

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