



UKRAINE'S ANGRY VOTE

Carmen Claudín, Associate Senior Researcher, CIDOB

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Ukrainians are fed up with unfulfilled promises of regeneration and low standards of living. That their vote in the presidential elections is a punishment seems as evident as it is deserved. But the worrying thing, as the journalist Vitaliy Portnikov has pointed out, is that people seem to hope that Volodymyr Zelenskiy, the winner of the first round, has a magic wand for solving all problems.

Where there have been reforms they have been slower than the country needs, and corruption has tarnished every political leader, including President Poroshenko and his circle. No surprise then that these reforms and the mechanisms for implementing them – independent courts and a competitive economy – have been at the heart of the electoral promises. The ongoing war in the part of Donbass under Kremlin control has also never been out of sight.

Zelenskiy, the clear winner of the first round, has the look of an anti-establishment option. He follows in the tradition of comedians entering politics begun, albeit briefly, by Coluche in France, and continued, with far more pernicious consequences, by Beppe Grillo in Italy. And beyond his great media popularity and despite the rumours about his links with Ihor Kolomoisky, a well-known oligarch, it is his prior absence from the political arena that enables him to boast of his integrity and proximity to the people. That he is Jewish and Russian-speaking means several stereotypes about Ukrainians can be refuted. As he is well known only as a comic and consummate businessman, no analyst, either inside or outside Ukraine, dares predict the direction this new political player will take: he has almost no programme and gave barely any interviews. The country's Europeanist orientation seems likely to continue, but it is unclear what Zelenskiy's stance will be on Russia. Few doubt, though, that he will win the second round, in all likelihood benefitting from the voters of defeated candidates such as Yulia Tymoshenko. The more or less populist profile of the four leading contenders is a point of overlap that will facilitate transfers of votes.

But whoever ends up prevailing, following the first round of the Ukrainian elections some analysis can already be made.

Competitiveness – The results show that unlike in Russia, as no one holds all the power in Ukraine, there is a genuine political contest. In the post-Soviet space, the mere fact that nobody knows in advance who will win the elections is remarkable and sets Ukraine apart. All the more so in a country with a military front that has been open for five years (with 13,000 fatalities since 2014), two semi-blockaded ports in the Sea of Azov and an illegally annexed territory, Crimea, all thanks to its powerful neighbour – its “older brother” from a not-so-distant past.

Legitimacy – The electoral process has been observed by several independent organisations, both international and Ukrainian (such as the respected OPORA), and, a few odd incidents apart, none disputes the fairness and validity of the vote. What is more, citizen mobilisation to turn out and vote has been substantial: according to the Central Electoral Commission of Ukraine, at 63.48% participation has been somewhat higher than in the 2014 elections (60.29%). So the Russian media's contemptuous narrative notwithstanding, the Kremlin cannot say that the Ukrainian government is illegitimate.

Greater cohesion – Another crucial aspect revealed by the electoral results is the lack of a notable regional division between pro-Western and pro-Russian positions, as was the case in the 2014 elections. The war simmering in the part of Donbass under the control of pro-Russian insurgents has clearly contributed to shifting public support towards Kiev and its pro-European positions.

Irrelevance of the far right – Finally, for those regularly predicting the rise of the Ukrainian extreme right – whose penchant for displays of muscle and militaristic paraphernalia is the same as its counterparts the world over – it is worth noting that, in these elections, the candidate from the far-right party, Svoboda (Freedom), received a meagre 1.63%, while the sinister National Militia has kept a low profile. This result therefore challenges the allegation that the country is taking a far-right turn and gives the lie to Russian propaganda claiming that the government that emerged from Euromaidan is in the hands of fascists.

But while the threat from Russia is a permanent hindrance, and all too real while the current regime remains in Moscow, Ukraine's main problems are of its own making. The progress made in some areas, such as the public e-procurement system, and the national Open Data portal, is not enough, while reforms in the fields of justice and public administration remain pending. Without these, the new institutions dedicated to fighting corruption lack the necessary strength to enforce their decisions and economic activity cannot develop to its full potential. Generational change in decision-making positions is urgently needed because one legacy of the past is the presence of senior figures in the government, the presidential administration and the parliament seeking to prevent or hamper genuine change to the mechanisms of power in order to protect the foundations supporting the interests of the oligarchs.

The most decisive moment for the country is therefore likely to be a few months from now, when the parliamentary elections are held in October. With a semi-presidential system such as the Ukrainian, much depends on the balance of power in parliament and on the parliament's relationship with the executive. But the current house remains a long way from working towards the legislation Ukraine needs to become a state in which the rule of law is consolidated. It is vital that representatives from the new generation of Ukrainians – young people who are well educated, trustworthy and clear-sighted about the country's endemic problems and aware of the enormity of the task of enacting the necessary reforms – are able to enter parliament. They are the ones asking for foreign aid to be conditional on the completion of the democratic reforms promised by the political leaders elected in the wake of the Euromaidan in 2014.

And in a space in which regional and European stability is at stake every time a potential change of government takes place in one of the region's countries, the political nature of the Ukrainian regime is a key factor.