

# Ukraine and Russia Gird for Presidential Election

Written by Trivun Sharma

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TRIVUN SHARMA, MAR 10 2019

Ukraine is gearing up for a presidential election that will set its course for the next five years, perhaps most crucially in terms of the country's relations with Russia. A record 44 candidates have registered to run in the March 31<sup>st</sup> election, though three dominate the polls, according to research conducted by Sociological Group Rating in January: Volodymyr Zelensky of the Servant of the People party, with 19%; All-Ukrainian Union Fatherland candidate, former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, with 18.2%, and President Petro Poroshenko, with 15.1%. While Zelensky topped this poll, the majority suggest an eventual run-off between Poroshenko and the populist Tymoshenko, with Zelensky and other candidates most likely seeking to increase their visibility ahead of the parliamentary election later this year. However, the possibility of a Zelensky victory can not be ruled out, following the increase in his popularity.

It is therefore important to consider what a Poroshenko, Tymoshenko or a Zelensky victory could mean for the country's engagement with Russia and whether the election will bring any change to the ground reality in the country.

### Ukraine's Election Scene

Poroshenko came into power following the 2014 revolution, which saw Victor Yanukovich's Russia-friendly government ousted from power. This revolution was spurred on by the public's public resentment towards the Yanukovich government and the economic and political direction of their country. Five years later, despite Poroshenko's reform efforts, public resentment still lingers. While Poroshenko has undertaken changes to modernise the economy and strengthen the army, some Ukrainians feel they have seen little improvement in their living standards or in the government's efforts to fight corruption. The economy is fragile, with high levels of emigration, inflation, poverty and foreign debt. This largely explains why Poroshenko's approval ratings have lagged behind other candidates in the upcoming presidential election.

Meanwhile, Kiev has consistently increased military spending from \$1.9 billion in 2013 to \$2.35 billion in 2017 and \$3.02 billion in 2018. Under Poroshenko, the Ukrainian parliament has approved a law on national security and revised the country's military doctrine, both aimed at countering Moscow. This will make annual defence spending at least 5 per cent of the country's estimated GDP, including 3 per cent for the Armed Forces alone.

The Poroshenko government has made conflict with Russia a key talking point in the election campaigns. Asserting that Russian President Vladimir Putin wants to destroy Ukrainian independence and labelling the election a general battle for Ukraine. Poroshenko's aim has been to project an image of a strong leadership in confronting Russian aggression.

While Russia is a genuine threat, the continuous playing of the Russia card to garner support – both domestically and internationally – is a key element of the Poroshenko government's strategy. The Kerch Strait incident serves as an example. The incident occurred when Russia blocked three Ukrainian naval vessels from crossing the Kerch Strait into the Sea of Azov. Both countries blamed each other for the incident. Ukraine accused Russia of blocking its access to the sea, while Russia accused Ukraine of illegally entering its territorial waters. The fallout resulted in Ukrainian ships being seized and its sailors arrested. The Ukrainian government made it a point to draw global attention to the incident. As a result, both EU and US officials have agreed on an agreement to impose new sanctions against Moscow.

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If Poroshenko remains in power, efforts to stand up to Russia are not expected to change. Time and again, he has advocated closer integration with the West. He has criticised Russia for annexing Crimea and continuing its destabilising efforts and support for separatists in the Donbas region. His efforts to counter Russian aggression are the basis for his support, while at the same time, Vladimir Putin's approval rating skyrocketed following the annexation of Crimea. These trends make concessions unlikely from either side.

However, there is one candidate who may be willing to negotiate with the Russian government. Tymoshenko is a seasoned politician and holds a strong approval rating in most of the opinion polls. She has been critical of Poroshenko's economic reforms, accusing him of "fake patriotism". At the same time, her Russian links – both in business and politics – are well known. In 2008, during her time as prime minister, she made every effort to prevent Ukraine from receiving a NATO Membership Action Plan, provoking a conflict with then-President Viktor Yushchenko. She also refused to condemn Russia's attack on Georgia and prevented Ukrainian warships from blocking Russian vessels in the Bay of Sevastopol in Crimea, exposing Georgian armies to bombardment from the sea by the Russian Black Sea Fleet. In 2009, she concluded a gas deal with Putin that was ultimately unfavourable for Ukraine. It is no surprise that the Kremlin would opt for her over the incumbent president. While she offers anti-Russian rhetoric, her victory could be beneficial to Moscow, particularly if she opts for a quick deal to settle the countries' differences.

A surprise entrant into the election race is Volodymyr Zelensky. A comic actor by profession, Zelensky has no political experience however his growing popularity in recent months has made him a strong contender to win against both Poroshenko and Tymoshenko. Zelensky has declared that negotiations with Russia are inevitable if the conflict in eastern Ukraine is to be brought to an end. Zelensky comes from the eastern region of Dnipro and his television show is quite popular among the Russian speaking population in the region. The will to negotiate with Russia and his political inexperience would make him a favourable choice for the Kremlin, although the direction in which he will lead Ukraine remains ambiguous and hard to predict.

## Diverging Interests

No matter who wins the election, confrontation between the two nations will continue, similar to that which sparked the Kerch Strait incident. To complicate matters, this year will also see the completion of two gas pipeline projects – Nord Stream II and Turk Stream – that will allow Russia to supply natural gas to the EU and Turkey without having to go through Ukraine, giving Moscow leverage over Kiev. Ukraine will not only lose transit revenue, which is roughly estimated at \$2-3 billion annually, but will also lose control over the transiting pipelines as the Gazprom-Naftogaz transit agreement, which is set to expire in January 2020. In other words, the two countries' strategic interests will continue to diverge.

Ukraine's concern is protecting its sovereignty and safeguarding against Russian aggression. For Russia, however, the geopolitical importance of its neighbour cannot be overlooked. Strategic depth provided by buffer states is the basis of the country's national security strategy. A buffer with Europe has enabled Russia to absorb, weaken, and destroy numerous attacks, with the invasions by Napoleon and Hitler serving as the most prominent examples. But after the end of the Cold War, one set of buffer states – the Baltic nations – joined NATO. It would clearly not be in Russia's interests if Ukraine – or even Belarus, at some point in the future – followed the same path. Russia may not wish to conquer Ukraine, but it also doesn't want its neighbour to join NATO and will seek to make that process difficult and cumbersome, at the very least.

These security and sovereignty issues can best be understood by examining the situation in the Donbas area. The Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine are currently under the control of separatist rebels, over whom the Ukrainian government has little to no control. The rebels enjoy backing and support from Russia. Skirmishes between the Ukrainian Ground Forces and the rebels continue, undermining the progress of the Minsk II agreement.

In November 2018, Donetsk and Luhansk held an election that was denounced by the Ukrainian government. The US special representative for Ukraine, Kurt Volker, labelled it a sham, while France and Germany issued statements condemning the vote and calling for the parties to adhere to the Minsk II agreement. However, Russia recognised the

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vote as legitimate, arguing that it would stabilise the rebel-held regions. For Moscow, Donetsk and Lugansk are bargaining chips that can be used to increase its influence over the Ukrainian government. And it has invested considerable money to keep the separatist areas afloat: German newspaper *Bild* reported in 2017 that Russia was spending EUR1 billion annually on public service salaries and pensions alone in the separatist region.

Russia knows that Donetsk and Lugansk are not going to march on Kiev and bring Ukraine back into Moscow's sphere of influence. However, it also understands that Kiev cannot exercise complete control over the region with Donbas in its current state. The options are to either accept the status quo or negotiate some kind of settlement.

## Conclusion

Having said that, the outcome of the presidential election is sure to bring interesting results for the future engagement between Ukraine and Russia. A win for Zelensky or Tymoshenko could create an opening for Putin to exert greater influence in Ukraine. For Russia, the focus would be on having a less anti-Russian government in power. A Poroshenko victory would mean Ukraine would continue its efforts to limit Russia's influence and forge deeper ties with the West. Therefore, with one candidate devoted to bringing Ukraine closer the West and another, who has a history of pro-Russian leanings, and a fresh newcomer who lacks any political experience, the country is standing at a crossroad.

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## About the author:

Trivun Sharma is a Ph.D. scholar at the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies, University of Warsaw, Poland. His working thesis is entitled, "Changing Dynamics of European Geopolitics: A Case of Russia-Germany Relations". His primary research interests include European geopolitics, the role of Germany in Europe and Russia's foreign and security policy.