



# UKRAINE ELECTIONS: WHY SHOULD THE EU (AND ITALY) CARE?

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The 31 March presidential elections in Ukraine matter to Ukraine, its region and the EU. While the majority of experts deem it impossible to have a winner in the first round and, thus, expect a second one in April<sup>1</sup>, the March contest will be a first important step in the crucial process of determining the direction the country will take. Thus, while we should not hold our breath on election day, we should definitely keep a close eye on the contest and its outcome<sup>2</sup>.

First of all, these mark the first elections in Ukraine's history when a "pro-Russia" foreign policy card cannot be played by the political candidates. If in 2013 the Association Agreement with the European Union and the Customs Union with Russia were two rival projects for Ukrainians<sup>3</sup>, in 2019 support for the EU is prevailing among the population – 50% of Ukrainians support the country's integration into the EU, while only 9% are in favour of the Customs Union<sup>4</sup>. Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic course has also been recently voted in to become a part of Ukraine's constitution.

And yet Ukraine's pro-Western integration course is far from being undisputed. First, support for the EU is very unevenly spread across the country, ranging from over 80% in the western oblasts to some 30% in the Donetsk, Luhansk and Odesa oblasts<sup>5</sup>. Second, while none of the three candidates currently leading the polls – the incumbent president, Petro Poroshenko, the

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former prime minister and ex-energy tycoon Yulia Tymoshenko, and the comedian and political newcomer Volodymyr Zelensky – questions EU integration on paper, some candidates' electoral programmes or actions look at odds with this goal. On paper, Tymoshenko supports good relations with Brussels – and, eventually, a possible EU membership – but she criticizes the reforms promoted by the EU and IMF and advocates economic isolationism. Zelensky's fussy approach is also critical of the IMF while giving lukewarm support to EU integration<sup>6</sup>. As of March 2018, it is Zelenskyi who is leading the race, with some 25% of support<sup>7</sup> while Poroshenko and Tymoshenko keep shifting in and out of second place in various polls. Importantly, some 26% - in fact, the "golden share" of these elections – of those who are going to vote, are still undecided about their choice, which may bring some surprises on the day of the poll.

Finally, these elections will likely feature an unusually high turnout in Ukrainian terms – as of March 2019, 83% of Ukrainians declared that they are going to participate in the elections (in the 2014 presidential elections turnout reached 60%)<sup>8</sup>. This is likely a sign of increased civic mobilization and the perception of civic responsibility among Ukraine's citizens, which grew more acute after the Euromaidan and the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

### **PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2019: OFFERS AND EXPECTATIONS**

What do Ukrainians expect from the candidates? Predictably, the two key concerns of Ukrainians revolve around security – in traditional, i.e. hard security, and economic terms. When asked about key concerns, the conflict in the eastern Ukraine, the increase in the cost of utilities and low salaries/pensions traditionally top the chart<sup>9</sup>, with all candidates competing as to who will make the best offer about improved living standards. Hence, we continue to observe a legal mismatch and low political literacy in the minds of the Ukrainian population – Ukraine is a parliamentary-presidential republic, with the president's core functions pertaining to foreign and security policy. Hence, while the expectations of the president's conflict settlement are legitimate, economic issues are outside his/her domain.

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Still, it looks like the presidential candidates seek to cater to the voters' whims rather than to outline their agendas according to the letter of the constitution. The pre-election programs of Zelenskyi, Poroshenko and Tymoshenko feature numerous promises in all realms, from security to healthcare and education, obviously advertising the agendas of their political parties ahead of the parliamentary elections, scheduled for October 2019. While all three candidates pledge to restore Ukraine's territorial integrity, they tackle the issue in rather vague terms – the views on the preferred way of conflict settlement vary widely across the population and hence open support for any one option poses a risk of alienation of the wide majority of the electorate.

Poroshenko, Tymoshenko and Zelenskyi offer more or less "traditional" ways of conflict settlement with the engagement of the diplomatic support of Western partners, but Zelenskyi has stirred public resonance by asserting a possibility of bilateral negotiations and "a compromise" between himself and Vladimir Putin<sup>10</sup>. Neither Tymoshenko nor Zelenskyi make a path to EU membership the leitmotif of their election campaign, something which appeals to the latter's south- and east- based core electorate.

It is also worth noting that big money and oligarchs continue to be a crucial factor in Ukraine's political system. Thus, Dnipro-based oligarch Ihor Koloimoiskyi, who is in opposition to President Poroshenko, is not concealing his sympathies for both Tymoshenko and Zelenskyi<sup>11</sup> and is suspected of providing financial and/or administrative support to Zelenskyi.

## **RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA AND CONFLICT IN THE EAST**

Meanwhile, the conflict in the east continues, with over 13,000 dead and over 30,000 injured in the five years since the war started<sup>12</sup>. The Minsk agreements are not observed, starting with ceasefire violations on an almost daily basis: the OSCE SMM mission detected over 270,000 ceasefire violations in 2018 alone<sup>13</sup>. In November 2018, the situation escalated further in the Kerch Strait, when Russia attacked three Ukrainian ships and took 24 Ukrainian sailors as war prisoners<sup>14</sup>. The Crimean Peninsula is also militarized, with the number of Russian troops increasing from 12,500 in 2013 to 31,500 as of September



2018<sup>15</sup>. The Normandy Format – the negotiation format including Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany – has not met on the highest level since October 2016, with Russian President Vladimir Putin openly stating that he is waiting for the next Ukrainian leadership to take over<sup>16</sup>.

The relations between Ukraine and Russia remain tense on all levels, although Ukrainians seem to distinguish between the Russian state and the Russian people: 63% of Ukrainians believe Russia to be an aggressor against Ukraine but at the same time 57% of Ukrainians have positive attitudes towards Russia<sup>17</sup>. This paradoxical simultaneity could be explained by the fact that Ukrainians distinguish between the Russian people and the Russian authorities: according to the same poll, while 77% of Ukrainians have positive attitudes towards the Russian people, only 13% of Ukrainians have the same feelings towards the Russian state. Friendly attitudes towards the people could be partially explained by family and economic ties between some Ukrainians and Russians, especially in the east and south of Ukraine. Meanwhile, only a third of Russian citizens (37%) have positive attitudes towards Ukrainians<sup>18</sup>. As for the conflict settlement measures, the Ukrainian public is very divided: opinions differ from supporting the Budapest Format (which would imply involving the UK, the US, France, Russia and China in the negotiation format; some 20% of Ukrainians are in favour of it) to carrying on with the Minsk format, holding bilateral negotiations with Vladimir Putin and even abandoning the occupied territories altogether – each option enjoying the support of roughly one in ten Ukrainians<sup>19</sup>.

## **CIVIL SOCIETY**

With the as yet unpredictable outcome of the elections, Ukraine is facing another five years of uncertainty and flux. Under such conditions, the only actor on whom the country can rely to right the ship is its civil society. Despite a dramatic surge of activism and volunteering in 2013-2015, sociologists do not detect substantial increases in Ukraine's civil society, either among activists (in 2018, as in 2013, only 7% define themselves as activists), or within NGO membership (around 85% not belonging to any civic associations in 2018 as

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well as in 2013)<sup>20</sup>. While the authorities are generally more open to cooperation with civil society than before 2014, the year 2018 witnessed a “shrinking space” for journalists and activists in Ukraine, with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reporting 164 violations of fundamental freedoms in Ukraine such as freedom of thought and expression of opinion, peaceful assembly, freedom of religion and conviction, etc. in the period from 1 January 2018 to 15 January 2019<sup>21</sup>. One of the most resonant cases was the violent murder of a Kherson activist, Kateryna Handziuk<sup>22</sup>, who died as a result of acid burns. At the time of writing the investigation is still ongoing.

#### **WHAT'S AT STAKE FOR THE EU?**

The EU has many reasons to pay attention to these elections. While the official position expressed by the High Representative Federica Mogherini is that the EU will follow the elections closely and continue to work with Ukraine “whatever the outcome of the elections”<sup>23</sup>, individual EU states’ stances and interest in the elections vary greatly. But these elections bear significant consequences – for individual member states, as well as for the EU as a whole.

First and foremost, the elections may prove to be a test for the success and credibility of Brussels’ flagship foreign policy initiative, the Eastern Partnership (EaP), or the EU’s regional integration scheme for its “eastern neighbours”. Ukraine signed an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU in 2014 after years of negotiations and the Euromaidan revolution that led to regime change. Becoming a full-fledged EU member state has been an aspiration of important sectors of Ukraine’s elites and civil society alike. Last January, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said that Ukraine would apply for EU membership in 2024<sup>24</sup>. Yet the option of membership was never on the table officially; plus, so-called “enlargement fatigue” and the wave of populism and euroskepticism in European capitals suggest that it is not going to happen anytime soon. The very AA was rejected by Dutch voters in the 2016 referendum<sup>25</sup> and, in order to save the deal, European leaders had to spell out that Ukraine was not promised EU membership, or any military assistance in the case of invasion<sup>26</sup>.

Furthermore, there has been some discontent on both sides: while the EU

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complained about the speed of the decentralisation reforms and the insufficient efforts in fighting corruption and oligarchisation<sup>27</sup>, Ukraine blames the EU for failing to honour its promises<sup>28</sup>. Therefore, the big issue is how the EU will manage to keep supporting Kiev's reform attempts without a credible membership prospect as a powerful incentive at its disposal. It is true that reforms have to be carried out if and when they are believed to be in the country's best interest, not just because of the EU's so-called "golden carrot". Yet frustration within the population over the perceived lack of EU support and commitment may be used by some politicians to disrupt the reform efforts. These elections will be an important signal of Ukraine's willingness to keep up with the political course it has embarked on.

On the other hand, these elections will also determine which attitude the new Kiev government will adopt *vis-à-vis* Russia. The candidates have shown different approaches and concrete proposals to solve the longstanding conflict in the Donbas region<sup>29</sup>. The evolution of the security situation has far-reaching implications for the EU, too; Brussels has severed its already complicated ties with Moscow to a considerable extent over the Ukraine crisis, and it has linked the suspension of its anti-Russian sanctions to the full implementation of the Minsk agreements. Improved relations between Ukraine and Russia may lead to overcoming the current impasse, where Ukraine and Russia blame each other for the lack of progress in conflict resolution. Conversely, the status quo or even the worsening of relations between Kiev and Moscow would certainly not facilitate the normalization of EU-Russia relations.

Finally, the EU should watch these elections closely also because they display several trends likely to be at play also in the upcoming European elections in May. The first of these trends is the rise of populism that has already concerned many European countries<sup>30</sup>. If we follow the definition of "populism" as being essentially an "anti-elite" movement<sup>31</sup>, then two out of three top candidates in Ukraine deserve such a label. Today, Zelensky's anti-establishment rhetoric makes the headlines, but Tymoshenko has also been building upon a strong anti-elite discourse, even though she has been part of Ukraine's political and economic elites for decades. The way she frames her

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opposition to IMF requirements<sup>32</sup> as well as her most recent attack on the health minister, the Ukrainian-American Ulana Suprun, as somebody "sent by foreigners" who wants to "experiment on Ukrainians"<sup>33</sup> showcase a heavy use of the "external threat" rhetoric, which is a typical trait of populism<sup>34</sup>. If we also consider another important dimension of populism - i.e. the populist politicians' attempts to win the support of ordinary people "by giving them what they want"<sup>35</sup>, often through unrealistic promises – these candidates seem to tick all the boxes as well, with, for example, promising to fight corruption or pledging to cut gas prices.

The second trend is the increasing fear both in Ukraine and in the EU of external powers' interference in the electoral process, through disinformation during electoral campaigning and cyber disruptions at the polls. There have been allegations of meddling in several EU countries' elections over the last few years. A Eurobarometer survey reveals that a majority of EU citizens are worried that disinformation campaigns, data breaches and cyberattacks will interfere with the May elections<sup>36</sup>. Given the general climate of suspicion about external actors' interference, some Ukrainians fear the same type of attack from Russia. According to a Politico editorial, Ukraine has allegedly become a "test bed for cyberweaponry" and "a live-fire space for hackers"<sup>37</sup>. It is hard to say whether this is an overexaggeration or whether it mirrors reality; the risk of disinformation has been mitigated through laws – often criticized<sup>38</sup> – limiting or prohibiting broadcasting by certain Russian media, while the fact that voting takes place through paper ballots and not e-voting technologies limits possible cyberattacks on the voting system. Nonetheless, the EU should pay attention to potential threats to the still-fragile Ukrainian democracy and assist, together with the OSCE, the country in ensuring a smooth and fair election.

## WHAT ABOUT ITALY?

Traditionally, Ukraine has not ranked high on Italy's media and political agenda. There is scarce interest for the country's culture and language, reflected in the few academic poles where Ukrainian is taught compared to other Slavic





languages. Plus, as Kateryna Zarembo notes, in Italy there is a “widespread perception of Ukraine as a weak state not worth investing in”<sup>39</sup>. Despite a strong presence of Ukrainians in the country – over 235,000, among the five most numerous non-EU foreign communities in Italy, according to official statistics<sup>40</sup> – Ukraine is perceived as “far away”; at best, its political affairs are seen through the lenses of Russia’s. Therefore, it is understandable that the upcoming presidential elections are not attracting much attention in general.

Italian media are focusing on two specific elements. The first one is Zelenskyi’s candidacy, which is associated with the political vicissitudes of Beppe Grillo, the Italian comedian turned politician and “brain” of the Five-Star-Movement, one of the two political forces currently in power. Popular newspapers such as *La Stampa* or *Il Foglio* published stories about Zelenskyi making direct or indirect links with the situation in Italy – “Also in Ukraine, a comedian runs for president”, a headline goes<sup>41</sup>. Their analyses usually tap into wider considerations of the political situation in Italy and Europe at large. Zelenskyi, defined by the Ukrainian philosopher Mikhail Minakov as an “empty box where Ukrainians are putting their anger and frustration”<sup>42</sup>, resembles the attitude of several populist European politicians, who capitalise on citizens’ discontent with mainstream parties. The second element grabbing Italians’ attention is far more “pop”. Over the last few weeks, Ukrainian security services have blacklisted the famous Italian singer Al Bano for his sympathy for Russia’s actions in Crimea<sup>43</sup>, and threaten to do the same with Toto Cutugno<sup>44</sup>.

If Italian media widely discuss these elements, an in-depth and constructive debate about Ukraine’s politics and the security situation is missing so far. That is unfortunate, given that the election results will also affect relations between Russia and the EU, a topic that is way more discussed and relevant in Italy. Rome is seen as Moscow’s ally in Europe, labelled by some reports as its “Trojan horse”<sup>45</sup>, even before the Ukraine crisis. The current government exacerbated this image, especially due to Vice-PM Matteo Salvini’s staunch opposition to sanctions against and declarations of admiration for Russia’s President Vladimir Putin. The drivers and roots of Italy’s relations with Russia are often exaggerated but are indeed long-standing and multifaceted. Italy





could capitalize on these to act as a mediator between Ukraine and Russia, something that the government of former Italian PM Matteo Renzi advocated for<sup>46</sup> Russia's political and economic isolation is not perceived as being in Italy's best interest, but an excessively Russia-leaning attitude and a possible breach of its EU commitments would also harm Rome's image and interests. Establishing a good working relation with the new government in Kiev and playing the role of a credible mediator would enable Italy to enhance its status in Europe while preserving its relations with Moscow.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Even though large sections of the Ukrainian population and political elites champion a pro-European course, the upcoming elections pose substantial threats for the country's future development and the region at large. Apart from mounting confrontation with Russia and security challenges in the eastern parts of the country, a key factor in the elections is populism, which also serves as the guise for de facto anti-European, although not overtly Russophile, candidates. Apart from paying close attention to the March elections, the EU should be ready to keep cooperating with Ukraine, whoever the future president is, so that the reforms within the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement are implemented. It is equally important to ensure that the EU and Italy's declared goal of improving relations with Russia does not happen at the expense of defending the principles of the inviolability of international borders and law.



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