

Volodymyr Zelenskiy as Ukraine's "Actor President"

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The world is not so much a stage as a simulacrum for those who think it so. And if the stage goes bad, it is fitting that those who get thrown onto it change it in the most daring and provocative way. Politics is now as much a director's production as it is an estranging show for the participating voter. The shock to such formulae is when a political aspirant decides to either reject the director's cut entirely or, as in the case of Ukraine, embrace it as a mocking demonstration of bankruptcy. We know it is a joke: vote for me as a true expression of the authentic.

The sheer scale of repudiation by the voters on Sunday is striking, saying as much about the victor as the defeated. Comedian Volodymyr Zelenskiy's triumph in an election without precedent (almost 40 presidential candidates, and victory for a Jewish one) was crushing, coming in at 73% over incumbent Petro Poroshenko. Holographic presence on screen – a comedian playing a character in a series who becomes president after a video rant on corruption goes viral – turned reality. "Could I ever imagine that I, a simple guy from Kryvyi Rih, would be fighting for the presidency against a person who we confidently and definitively elected President of the Ukraine in 2014?"

Hope is often a devalued currency, but its vigorous circulation can be gathered in the measurements of public opinion by the Kyiv-based International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) conducted this month. Deputy Chief Anton Hrushetskiy reported [findings](#) of 2004 respondents to the question "Which of the following should the president do in the first 100 days?"

The list is meaningfully desperate and vengeful against state officials: a touch under 40% wish a slash in utility rates; 35.5% demand a removal of immunity for lawmakers, judges and the president; 32.4% wish for an opening of investigations and a speeding up of current ones into corruption-related crimes and abuses; 23.3% hope for commencing talks with Russia; 18.4% demand a reduction of wages of top officials. All this stands to reason: Zelenskiy offers something others have not: a tabula rasa upon which voters can impose their vision. In contrast, Poroshenko, candy billionaire with an acid aftertaste, offered the usual cluttering: Army, language, faith.

The broom for cleaning is being readied. Remarks had been made, some floated from the quarters of Poroshenko, that the new administration would include elements of the old regime. Former Finance Minister and advisor to Zelenskiy, Oleksandr Danyliuk, was [adamant](#) on Ukraine's ICTV this would not be the case:

"Regarding the comment that Volodymyr Zelenskiy's new team will include old staff of the Presidential Administration, the Cabinet of Ministers... I'd like to say this is absolutely not true, this is one of the fake news and bogeyman stories

that your [Petro Poroshenko's] headquarters is spreading."

Political regulars and strategists have brought out their calculators and have been left wanting. Moscow, along with other readers of political entrails, did not see this victory in the offing. Poroshenko offered an ideal target: divisive, army hugging entho-nationalist, with an anti-Russian fixation. He could therefore be, over time, worn down, his country packaged as resoundingly anti-Semitic, fascist and hateful of the Soviet Union's exploits against Nazi Germany. [Preference](#) would have been for Yuriy Boyko, backed by the pro-Russian Viktor Medvedchuk. The results did give their party 16% of the vote, making them second behind Zelenskiy's Servant of the People, which received 26%. Not quite happy days, but perhaps less anxious ones.

From what can be gathered from the new president, some measure of rapprochement towards their fraternal, giant neighbour might be in the offing, even if accompanied by what he terms "a very powerful information war" to end the eastern conflict. Baby steps include lifting restrictions on the use of Russian in the country, which would also entail an end to blocking cultural exchanges and restrictions on accessing Russian social media networks. But to perceive a total change on that front would be to wonder in the realms of fantasy. In the [words](#) of head spokesperson at Zelinskiy's election headquarters, Dmitry Razumkov, "The return of the occupied territories of the Donbass and Crimea must proceed exclusively on Ukraine's terms. Russia, as always, is trying to turn everything on its head and do everything backwards - by holding elections first."

The stage in Ukraine has been going to seed for some years, manuring away in decay and poverty, bleeding in the Donbass region and plundered by self-enriching elites. It took Zelenskiy to come to the fore by stepping off the screen and, quite literally, onto a live stage. Whether he is capable of directing his own show, mastering his own brief, as it were, will be a wonder. For one, parliamentary elections are due in October, leaving the virgin premier with six months of potential obstruction. Poroshenko, for his part, promises to be a vulture in the galley, awaiting any slipups: "I am leaving office, but I want to firmly underline that I am not leaving politics."

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