

# Governing Ukraine Is No Laughing Matter

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*Comedy, it is often said, is unusual people in real situations and farce is real people in unusual situations. No doubt, it can be said that by electing comedian **Vladimir Zelensky** as their new president in a [landslide victory in Sunday's runoff](#), the people of Ukraine find themselves in a farcical situation. To be sure, the country's embrace of an inexperienced showman represented a verdict on three decades of political failure.*

Ukraine's first president in the 'post-Soviet' era Leonid Kuchma told the Russian paper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*,

"Ukraine is tired of its politicians, who for 28 years have been unable to organise life, deliver democracy, well-being or peace. The people are tired, and believe it's time to turn over a new page."

The Ukrainian voters perceived Zelensky as an upright candidate, a straightlaced and open person without a corruption-related past, who personified hope. He was quite tight-lipped about his policies or even about the team he's picked to govern Ukraine. In fact, it's a bit too early to form a full opinion about this political rookie.

Zelensky has offered most things to everyone: from fighting corruption to rising wages and ending the war in the east. But there has been little detail. His slogan was "No promises. No apologies". It worked.

Then, there is the 'known unknown' — his exact relationship with one of the most obnoxious Ukrainian oligarchs, Ihor Kolomoisky, who lives in self-exile in Israel but has extensive business interests in Ukraine and has been linked to organised crime. Putin once openly called the billionaire a 'crook'. A [Reuters report](#) warns that Zelensky's relationship with Kolomoiskiy could prove an Achilles' heel. Indeed, it will be a major test of Zelensky's strength of character whether he will be able to stand his ground. The jury is out.

On the other hand, five years into the so-called 'Euromaidan revolution', a veritable coup that was funded and orchestrated by the West in 2014 to overthrow the elected 'pro-Russian' president **Viktor Yanukovich**, Ukraine remains one of the poorest countries in Europe. There's hardly any foreign investment taking place, judiciary stands utterly corrupted along with the political class, and cronyism, nepotism and venality is rampant.

All that the West achieved in these past 5 years has been to turn Ukraine against Russia but then, the Ukrainian economy was inextricably linked to the Russian production chain and even as President Petro Poroshenko morphed into a hard-liner and a rabid nationalist with links to neo-Nazi groups, Moscow's attitude also hardened.

Living standards are sliding. And then there's the conflict with Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine — the 'Donbass question' — and Russia's annexation of Crimea. There aren't any immediate prospects for a political solution in sight — not even for progress on the humanitarian front, for people on the front lines or for political prisoners.

Zelensky, like Poroshenko, favours Ukraine's accession to the European Union and membership of the NATO and has promised to hold referendums to ascertain popular will. Russia will most certainly oppose the move. Arguably, everything concerning Zelensky's presidency will largely depend on his equations with Moscow. Here, the signs are somewhat ambivalent. Some top Russian officials have voiced cautious optimism.

The Russian **Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev** wrote on Facebook,

"The result showed an explicit request for new approaches in solving the problems of Ukraine."

He added that there are opportunities for improving Russia-Ukraine relations.

"We need a pragmatic and responsible approach, which takes into account all the political realities in Ukraine, including primarily the situation in the east of the country," Medvedev wrote.

Medvedev urged "sanity" and an understanding of the deep value of relations between the two peoples.

On the other hand, the Kremlin spokesman **Dmitry Peskov** [told reporters](#) on Monday that it is premature to talk about Russian President Vladimir Putin's congratulations to Zelensky or their cooperation until Zelensky takes concrete steps.

"It will only be possible to judge [Zelensky] by his actions."

At the same time, back channels must be working and Moscow can be trusted to probe whether a new beginning is possible under Zelensky.

The defining fact in all this is that Ukraine straddles one of the world's great fault lines. Zelensky's best option might be to transform his country from being a battleground between east and west into a strictly neutral buffer state, a little like Finland used to be. But that is easier said than done. For that to happen, the regional balance of power ought to be symmetrical, which is, unfortunately, not the case.

Russia regards Ukraine as part of its sphere of influence, and has profound cultural links with it at the people-to-people, which is almost mystical. The EU, on the contrary, is loathe to concede Russia's legitimate interests but is also not willing or committed to absorbing Ukraine (with its low standard of living, controlled markets and corruption) fully into its economic and financial structures.

Faced with these geopolitical realities, Zelensky's best choice could be a neutral future for his country. The present situation is inherently unstable, for, unsurprisingly, Russia will fight for its interests in Ukraine. It is even possible that Moscow may test Zelensky's resolve at

some point, sooner rather than later. But the logjam cannot be broken easily, either. Plainly put, it will be impossible for any Ukrainian leader to seek partnership with Russia in a foreseeable future so long as Crimea and the Donbass question remain unresolved.

Having said that, everything really depends on the state of play in US-Russia relations. Arguably, it is not even so terribly important who is in power in Kiev. Through the past 5-year period, the US has programmed Ukraine into an 'anti-Russian' mode. And Washington holds the 'software'. The bottom line is that the American calculus is also geared to ensuring the US' trans-Atlantic leadership for which the sanctions against Russia provide a vital underpinning.

This is where the contradiction lies: the "enemy" image of Russia as 'aggressor country', which is the leitmotif of NATO's force projection in Central Europe and the Black Sea, cannot be sustained if the Ukraine crisis gets resolved. Simply put, Zelensky needs to be 'pro-Ukraine' than 'pro-West' — that is to say, he should realise that if Ukraine has any chance of prospering, it must somehow normalise relations with Moscow, which remains its largest trading partner.

But will he be allowed by the West to open a dialogue with Moscow? Therefore, the big question is how long will the momentum out of the wave of optimism that led to Zelensky's election last before it begins to dissipate? The promised fresh start is difficult and comes with the high risk of failure. To be sure, Zelensky cannot solve the daunting problems with the comedian's wit, charm or funny YouTube videos.

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*Featured image: Comedian Vladimir Zelensky sweeps to victory as Ukraine's next president, Kiev, April 21, 2019 (Source: Indian Punchline)*

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