

Ukrainian Presidential Elections: Authoritarianism in Action

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March 2019 is notable in the post-Soviet space for three interrelated reasons, all of which deal with Ukraine: it was half a decade ago that Crimea reunited with Russia, after which the country began its descent into failed state status, and now it's poised to hold general elections at the end of the month to decide its future trajectory. While Crimea has flourished as a free and safe society in the time since, the rest of "rump Ukraine" wasn't so lucky since it quickly slipped into civil war and had its entire state apparatus captured by pro-Western oligarchs, the most well-known of which is the incumbent President Poroshenko.

As could have been expected, the economy capsized and the security situation became very dangerous for ethno-religious minorities, especially after Nazi-era ultra-nationalism was made the unofficial national ideology. The dysfunctional nature of post-coup Ukraine is such that no amount of money that was poured into the country by its Western partners could fix its new structural problems, which to the contrary only seemed to get worse the closer that Ukraine moved towards the West. The country is now at a pivotal crossroads as its people decide whether to stay the course and continue with Poroshenko, go "back to the future" and give Tymoshenko a try once more, or throw caution to the wind and support the comedian Zelensky.

It's difficult at this moment to tell which of those three main candidates is leading because Poroshenko controls all of the state machinery and has been accused of using all the means at his disposal to tip the scales to his favor by hook or by crook. Many observers even believe that he staged the November 2018 Kerch Strait incident and subsequent imposition of martial law in order to create the pretext for indefinitely delaying elections or obtaining the cover that he needed for rigging them, both of which are very likely scenarios but were only offset by Western behind-the-scenes pressure after even the US realized that such audacious vote-rigging wouldn't be accepted by the population.

This brings to mind the country's growing protest movement which is comprised of a motley crew of dissidents all opposed to Poroshenko for their own reasons, be it his blatant corruption, dangerous international provocations against Russia, failure to halt the rapid decline of the people's living standards, and even the fact that he isn't "far right enough" for EuroMaidan's original ultra-nationalist militias.

Openly stealing the election through one means or another could trigger a real revolution, especially if Tymoshenko and/or Zelensky seek covert Western support from Poroshenko's international "partners" who might be fed up with him by that point in order to have them back another wave of anti-government protests.

This state of affairs might be why Poroshenko is less overt nowadays about his vote-rigging plans, which might not succeed even if he puts his best efforts behind them because it remains to be seen whether his permanent military, intelligence, and diplomatic bureaucracies (“deep state”) are more loyal to him than they are to foreign patrons, the opposition candidates, or even the country’s national interests as they objectively exist. It can’t be discounted that Poroshenko might win, but it also can’t be ruled out that he won’t, and that his possible loss might be due to the most powerful elements of his “deep state” “betraying” him for the aforementioned reasons.

Poroshenko does have one last trick up his sleeve, though, and that’s if he makes a last-minute appeal to the most ultra-nationalist elements of the population in order to position himself as “their candidate” and promise to “be everything they wanted him to be”, with the hint being that they should take to the streets and wreak havoc if he loses. He might not ultimately play that card, and it might not even rile up the right-wing radicals like he might expect it to because there’s a chance that it could come off as insincere political pandering, but if he does resort to this strategy and it manifests itself in any tangible way, then it would be akin to him holding the country hostage.

Going forward, there are less than two weeks before the first round of elections is held, and it’s foreseeable that they’ll go into a second round if no candidate wins an outright majority. Poroshenko’s primary objective is to ensure that he reaches that stage so that he can have more time to craft a strategy custom-tailored for beating whichever candidate his main opponent turns out to be.

Once he has a clearer idea of who that person is, he can get to work orchestrating the behind-the-scenes pressure campaign and possible public stunts that he thinks are necessary in order for him to retain the presidency, notwithstanding the possible vote rigging that he might order elements of his “deep state” to undertake.

Wrapping up the article by returning to the introductory point, March 2019 is indeed very historic for Ukraine in more ways than one, with voters going to the polls to decide which candidate is best suited to have any chance of repairing the self-inflicted damage to this failing country’s statehood.

Conventional wisdom would suggest that Poroshenko – who greatly contributed to getting them into this situation in the first place and keeping them there for half a decade already – wouldn’t be the one to do so, but it’s precisely because of his oligarchic instinct in wanting to cling to power at all costs that he can be expected to pull whatever tricks are needed to stay in office, though there’s nevertheless no guarantee that he’ll succeed.

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