

The Poroshenko Phenomenon

ELECTIONS AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

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Back in 2005, it seemed that Petro Poroshenko, then serving as secretary for the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, would be entirely eliminated from political activity through his rivalry with then-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. However, in the 2014 presidential election, Poroshenko defeated Tymoshenko and all other contenders in a landslide. Evidently, the Euromaidan movement has changed the whole political dynamic in Ukraine. Why did the country's political crown fall into the hands of Poroshenko? Will he be able to fulfill the demands of the Euromaidan demonstrators, especially considering the fact that the president's power is now more limited with the country's rollback to the 2004 constitutional amendments? How will he manage Ukraine's domestic and external pressures?

The Election: Post-Euromaidan Environment and Poroshenko's Electoral Strategy

Poroshenko, the fifth president of Ukraine, is the first president since Leonid Kravchuk was elected in December 1991 to win a presidential election by an absolute majority in the first round. Poroshenko was elected on a tide of enormous popular dissatisfaction with his predecessor's corrupt political culture. Similar to the situation in 1991, Ukrainians also wanted to divorce themselves from dangers emanating from Moscow.

To some extent, Poroshenko's success is based on the new Ukrainian political situation after the Euromaidan revolution, which transformed peoples' perception of political leadership as they reevaluated all the major players. Before the revolution, political leaders had used either their charisma or populist appeal to impose decisions on their constituents. However, the events of December 2013–February 2014 revealed that all too often the so-called leaders of the Euromaidan, including Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Vitali Klitschko, and Oleh Tyahnybok, were one step behind the people's demands. Although

key opposition players behaved responsibly in many cases, they often fell short in explaining the motives and goals behind their decisions.

In this context, Poroshenko distanced himself from conventional Ukrainian politics and played the role of civil activist. On December 1, 2013, he was the only well-known politician who tried to stop violent protesters from storming the presidential administration building. In January 2014, Poroshenko won the sympathy of protesters by helping to save the life of Dmytro Bulatov, the kidnapped and tortured leader of the “Automaidan” civil movement. Poroshenko also avoided endorsing the agreement on resolving the crisis between President Victor Yanukovych and the opposition.

Another factor that helped Poroshenko rebrand himself as a “new politician” was that he distanced himself from the process of power distribution among the winners. Although Poroshenko played an important role in building the new interim coalition, he decided not to use his influence in the parliament to struggle with Tymoshenko’s party for the positions of parliamentary chairman or prime minister.

Meanwhile, Tymoshenko’s party *Batkivshchyna* (Fatherland) became the major holder of key positions in the parliament and government. Her right-hand man, Oleksandr Turchynov, was chosen to be the new parliamentary chairman and became the country’s acting president. Arseniy Yatsenyuk was appointed prime minister, and six other ministerial positions were given to *Batkivshchyna* members. Tymoshenko was thus regarded as a central player wielding executive power by proxy. She also did not rule out her own presidential run. In the eyes of the Ukrainian people who had just disposed of a president who had been abusing his power, such actions were somewhat suspect.

Moreover, people were wary of Tymoshenko and her businesslike approach to decision making. Her rivals cast her past cooperation with Russian president Vladimir Putin as one of the causes of Ukraine’s weak response to the occupation of Crimea. Deputies loyal to Klitschko and Poroshenko speculated that the gas contracts Tymoshenko negotiated with Putin in 2009 now made Ukraine vulnerable to Russian pressure.

Poroshenko has also been known for opportunism. He has often allied himself with the strongest players at the table, including former presidents Leonid Kuchma, Viktor Yushchenko, and Yanukovych. In 2001, he was among the founders, together with Yanukovych, of the Party of Regions. In 2005, he used his power as secretary of the National Security and Defense Council to participate in oligarchic wars for the redistribution of privatized state property and television channels. In 2009, he made a deal with Tymoshenko to support her presidential campaign in exchange for the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs. In 2012, Poroshenko agreed to promote Yanukovych’s ties with the European Union and for half a year served as minister of economic development and trade.

As for his attitudes toward Russia, in 2005, Poroshenko lobbied for developing close ties between the “Orange team” and Putin’s inner circle. In May 2005, Poroshenko and Russian parliamentary chairman Boris Gryzlov even signed a memorandum of cooperation between Yushchenko’s Our Ukraine party and Russia’s ruling party, United Russia. While positioning himself as a pro-European politician and arguing that a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the EU was not compatible with membership in the Russian-led Customs Union, Poroshenko still acknowledged that Ukraine had to take Russian interests and concerns into consideration.

Poroshenko’s actions during the crisis in Crimea decisively shifted public opinion in his favor. His trip to occupied Simferopol, his appeals to void the controversial abolition of Ukraine’s language law, and his efforts to eliminate armed pro-Russian groups led people to view him as a moderate but strong leader. He also managed to recruit deputies and regional leaders who were well known in southern and eastern Ukraine (such as Inna Bohoslovska from Kharkiv, Oleksiy Hocharenko from Odessa, and Andriy Derkach from Sumy) and bring his message to former supporters of the Party of Regions. Judging from the results of the elections, this strategy worked well: Poroshenko won all electoral districts in eastern and southern Ukraine, with the exception of the separatist-held areas that obstructed the vote and one district in the Kharkiv region (see **Table 1** for candidate polling and election results).

An agreement with Klitschko practically secured Poroshenko’s victory in the election. Early in the campaign, Klitschko stepped down from the election and called on his supporters to vote for Poroshenko. Uncomfortable in a coalition with the nationalistic *Svoboda* and Tymoshenko’s *Batkivshchyna*, and with no interest in wielding interim authority, Klitschko concluded a marriage of convenience with Poroshenko and concentrated his efforts on winning local elections in Kyiv.

Meanwhile, Poroshenko distanced himself from the feuds among other opposition and Euromaidan contenders. He refused to react to Tymoshenko’s accusation that he was an “oligarchic puppet.” Instead, he focused on his plans for reconstructing Ukraine’s economy and implementing the Association Agreement with the EU.

In April 2014, as armed conflict was unfolding in the Donbas, Poroshenko stressed that a sustainable peace could be established only if the president were decisively elected in the first round of voting. While Tymoshenko and former members of the Party of Regions (Serhiy Tihipko and Mykhailo Dobkin) looked to reconcile with the armed men who occupied administrative buildings in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, Poroshenko consistently rejected any negotiations with “terrorists” and called for the use of force against them. Nonetheless, in contrast to the nationalists or populists (such as Oleh Lyashko), Poroshenko stated that he would support giving more power to local authorities and respect the rights of the Russian-speaking population.

Table 1. Public Opinion Ratings¹ and Election Results² for Major Presidential Candidates (the figures in brackets show ratings among respondents who were confident they would vote)

	December	January	February*	March	April	May	Elections
Petro Poroshenko Independent	8.6	11.2	19.8	24.9 (36.2)	32.9 (48.4)	34 (53.2)	54.7
Vitali Klitschko UDAR	19.1	16.1	12.1	8.9 (12.9)	-	-	-
Yulia Tymoshenko <i>Batkivshchyna</i>	13.0	13.9	8.4	8.2 (12)	9.5 (14)	6.5 (10.1)	12.81
Serhiy Tihipko Formerly Party of Regions	-	-	8.0	7.3 (10)	5.1 (7.4)	5.8 (8.8)	5.23
Mykhailo Dobkin Party of Regions	-	-	3.6	4.2 (5.3)	4.2 (6)	3.5 (4.9)	3.03
Petro Symonenko Communist Party	4.2	3.3	5.0	3.6 (5)	4 (5.6)	2.2 (3.1)	1.51
Oleh Lyashko Radical Party	-	-	-	3.5 (5)	3.2 (4.6)	4.1 (6.3)	8.32
Anatoliy Hrytsenko "Civil Position"	-	-	4.6	3.2 (4.6)	3.4 (5)	3.6 (6.2)	5.48
Oleh Tyahnybok <i>Svoboda</i>	5.2	2.0	1.7	1.7 (2.5)	1.4 (2.1)	1.3 (2)	1.16
Dmytro Yarosh Right Sector	-	-	-	0.9 (1.4)	0.7 (0.9)	0.6 (0.9)	0.7
Olha Bohomolets Independent	-	-	-	-	2.5 (3.6)	1.9 (2.9)	1.91
Oleh Tsarov Formerly Party of Regions	-	-	-	-	0.8 (1.1)	-	-
Viktor Yanukovich Party of Regions	29.7	20.8	-	-	-	-	-
Others	2.4	4.0	-	3.4	0.9	-	-
Don't know	8.8	15.8	17.7	14.1	14.6	23.4	-
Against all	3.1	-	17.6	9.7	9	-	-
Not voting	-	12.5	3.2	5.8	7.7	11.7	-

*Last poll conducted in Crimea.

¹ Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology

² Source: Central Election Commission

Poroshenko did not rule out the possibility of cooperating with all political parties that respect Ukrainian sovereignty. Therefore, his victory was acknowledged by a majority of contenders with the exception of the pro-Russian Communists and separatist supporter Oleh Tsariov. Runner-up Tymoshenko and third-place finisher Lyashko even pledged to support the new president in his efforts to restore the integrity of the country.

Poroshenko's Challenges: The Donbas Conflict and Early Parliamentary Elections

During his first two months in office, Poroshenko tried to balance various coercive and conciliatory instruments to pacify the pro-Russian separatists and maintain the conflict at a level of minimal violence. However, hostilities during the ten-day unilateral ceasefire and fruitless OSCE-mediated negotiations with leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk "People's Republics" (DNR and LNR) led the new president to order an offensive against the Kremlin-backed separatists.

The crash of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 confirmed the president's strategy to dismiss any talks with the "terrorists" of the DNR and LNR and to address the people of Donetsk and Luhansk directly. Poroshenko immediately ordered the restoration of social welfare and utility services as well as the provision of free food to the inhabitants of areas taken back from the separatists. Activities of the Ukrainian army, volunteer battalions, and civil activists were promoted on television and the Internet. This combination of military, humanitarian, and media elements in Poroshenko's counterinsurgency operation served to restore the legitimacy of the central government in the Donbas and undermine the separatist's "Novorossiya" project.

One of Poroshenko's biggest challenges in Donbas has been to prevent a conflict against diverse groups of pro-Russian militants from turning into a full-scale war with Russia or civil war. Heavy collateral damage, disruption of critical infrastructure, and poor economic conditions alienate people in Donbas, leading some to join DNR and LNR separatists. Upon conclusion of the military operations, Poroshenko will have to invest a great deal of money into the region and provide welfare to its discontented population.

On the national level, Poroshenko faces the dilemma of being a president elected with high expectations but limited constitutional power. He has promised to dissolve the discredited parliament and push forward with necessary political and economic reforms. By mid-summer, however, Poroshenko was already finding it difficult to steer the government and was getting squeezed between the reform requirements of the International Monetary Fund and oligarchic interests.

Early parliamentary elections – tentatively scheduled for the fall – will give Poroshenko the chance to form a loyal coalition and establish a government with the presence of non-partisan technocrats willing to make unpopular decisions. The problem, however, is

that Poroshenko can likely secure an absolute majority in parliament only in coalition with other parties (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. Political Party Ratings

Parties and Blocks	Percentage of respondents who are confident they will vote
<i>UDAR+Solidarity</i> (Klitschko and Lutsenko)	19.3
<i>Batkivshchyna</i> (Yatseniuk and Tymoshenko)	16.8
<i>Radical Party</i> (Liashko)	23.2
<i>“Civil Position”</i> (Hrytsenko)	10.6
<i>Svoboda</i> (Tyahnybok)	6.1
<i>“Strong Ukraine”</i> (Tihipko)	6.0
<i>Party of Regions</i> (Dobkin)	2.9
<i>Communist Party</i> (Symonenko)	5.6
Others	9.5

Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology poll, July 2014

Also, the upcoming parliamentary elections will test the president’s ability to contain the influence of Ukraine’s oligarchs. All of Poroshenko’s predecessors failed to limit big money’s intervention into state policy. So far, Poroshenko, himself a chocolate magnate, has selectively appointed to the highest positions in his administration extremely wealthy individuals, including former media tycoon Boris Lozhkin and poultry mogul Yuriy Kosiuk. They have been entrusted to increase the efficiency of the state bureaucracy. It is possible that Poroshenko will urge oligarchs to support his party during parliamentary elections and contribute to Ukraine’s reconstruction and European integration.

Conclusion

Untouched by the failures of other opposition leaders during the Euromaidan movement, Poroshenko was able to distance himself from the mistakes of the interim authorities and win the approval of the Ukrainian people. Although Poroshenko came from the same political and business environment, he outmatched his rivals by promising a new quality of governance. Nonetheless, after winning the election, he has had to work with old enemies and face new challenges, which can make it difficult to avoid the mistakes and political schemes of the past.

From the outset, Poroshenko invested his political capital and diplomatic skill in the military campaign against Russian-backed separatists to restore order to Donbas. This has made him dependent on its success. In addition, Ukraine’s new president has to make a “new deal” with the country’s oligarchs, reducing their influence and forcing

them to contribute to the reconstruction of the country. By calling for early parliamentary elections, Poroshenko will look to extend his power over government and institute loyal political structures in parliament in order to achieve his goals.

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