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Ukraine's Presidential Election: A Preview

On March 31, 2019, Ukraine is scheduled to hold its first presidential election since 2014, the year Russia began to occupy Ukraine's Crimea region and launched a separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine. Because Ukraine's president shares executive power with a prime minister, the election's full political significance will depend on October 2019 parliamentary elections. The outcome of the presidential election, however, is likely to influence voter preferences in parliamentary elections.

The presidential election is a competitive one. The top three candidates are incumbent President Petro Poroshenko, former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, and well-known actor-comedian Volodymyr (or Vladimir) Zelensky. For months, Tymoshenko was the frontrunner in most election polls, but some recent polls have Zelensky in the lead. Poroshenko is running third in most polls, although many observers consider the incumbent president to be a viable contender for a runoff election. Most observers believe it is unlikely any candidate will receive a majority of votes in the March 31 election, leading to a second round in April.

Major themes surrounding the election include Ukraine's reform course, the fight against corruption, defense against Russian aggression, conflict resolution, and the development of Ukraine's national and spiritual identity. As in 2014, elections are unable to be held in Russian-occupied Crimea and several districts in eastern Ukraine that the government does not control.

The United States and European allies support Ukraine's continued reform efforts, effective defense, territorial integrity, and resolution of the conflict. Since the onset of conflict, Congress has strongly supported Ukraine's national security and economic development, including through the Ukraine Freedom Support Act of 2014 (22 U.S.C. 8921). For more on U.S.-Ukraine relations, see CRS Report R45008, *Ukraine: Background and U.S. Policy*.

Top Candidates

President Petro Poroshenko

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, 53, is campaigning for a second term. It is uncertain if he will succeed. Recent polls suggest he is in third place, with the support of around 12%-13% of likely voters. If undecided voters tilt toward Poroshenko in sufficient numbers, however, the prospects for his reelection could be greater than polls suggest.

Poroshenko supports Ukraine's integration with the European Union (EU) and NATO, but he is campaigning under a more nationalist slogan of "Army! Language! Faith!" The slogan reflects Poroshenko's efforts to gain popular support as a defender of Ukraine's national identity and interests.

Poroshenko portrays himself first as Ukraine's wartime commander in chief, who has built up Ukraine's military forces and is standing firm against Russian aggression. He also has cultivated an image as a defender of Ukrainian identity, including via legislation that prioritizes the use of Ukrainian language in education, media, and government. Finally, he seeks credit for the recent recognition by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople of an independent (autocephalous) Ukrainian Orthodox Church, fully separate from the Russian Orthodox Church.

Many observers contend that Poroshenko's record on economic and governance reform is mixed, however. Some consider Poroshenko's decline in popularity to be due in part to the government's failure to meet the reform expectations set by Ukraine's 2014 Revolution of Dignity (also known as the Euromaidan) and his inability to restore the country's economic health after almost five years of conflict. Some observers have expressed concern that the government will misuse official resources (such as the security apparatus, state employees, and financial resources) to benefit Poroshenko's campaign.

Poroshenko initially was elected president in May 2014, after Russia annexed Crimea and as the conflict in eastern Ukraine began to unfold. He won 55% of the popular vote. His popularity was based on his promises to move Ukraine closer to the West, fight corruption, and tamp down the separatist conflict that had emerged in eastern Ukraine.

Before becoming president, Poroshenko was a wealthy businessman, member of parliament, and supporter of the 2014 protests that led to the removal of Ukraine's previous president, Viktor Yanukovich. Poroshenko's holdings include the Roshen confectionary company and the Channel Five television station. Poroshenko held political office under Ukraine's two previous presidents, including as foreign minister (2009-2010) and minister of trade and economic development (2011-2012).

Former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko

Former prime minister and member of parliament Yulia Tymoshenko, 58, positions herself like Poroshenko as a pro-Western politician. Her platform, "A New Course for Ukraine: New Opportunities for Everyone," is mainly a populist one. In recent polls, Tymoshenko garnered the support of around 12%-16% of likely voters.

Tymoshenko and her party, Fatherland (*Batkivshchyna*), have been critical of government-led economic reforms, including pension reform, increased gas prices, and land sales, that are supported by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the EU, and the United States. Some observers anticipate that she would adjust her position on these issues if she were to become president.

Tymoshenko served as Ukraine's prime minister in 2005 and 2007-2010. She ran for president in 2010 but lost 49%-45% to Yanukovich. She again ran for president in 2014 and came in second place, with 13% of the vote. She also has served as deputy prime minister for energy and coal mining (1999-2001).

In 2011, Yanukovich's government imprisoned Tymoshenko on what many observers considered to be politically motivated charges. She was convicted on abuse of power charges, ostensibly related to a gas deal she made with Russia in 2009, and sentenced to seven years in prison. Tymoshenko's release from prison was a key element of negotiations between the EU and the Yanukovich government on an EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. After Yanukovich was removed from power in 2014, Tymoshenko was released from prison.

Actor-Comedian Volodymyr (Vladimir) Zelensky

Political novice Volodymyr Zelensky, 41, is polling first in recent polls, with support of around 16%-17% among likely voters. Zelensky is a well-known comedic actor and founder and art director of the *Kvartal 95* production studio.

Observers consider Zelensky's political appeal to stem in part from his starring role in the popular television show *Servant of the People* (*Sluha Narodu*). In the show, Zelensky plays a schoolteacher who is unexpectedly elected president of Ukraine after a video of him delivering an anti-corruption rant goes viral.

Zelensky is from the city of Kryvyi Rih in the Dnipropetrovsk region, north of Crimea, and could appeal to Russian-speaking Ukrainians (among others) who reject the alleged corruption or pro-Russian sentiments of politicians previously close to ex-president Yanukovich. Some observers note that even if Zelensky fails to enter a runoff, his campaign could boost the prospects of his new political party, Servant of the People (*Sluha Narodu*), in October 2019 parliamentary elections.

Many observers believe Zelensky is supported by wealthy businessperson Ihor Kolomoysky, who reportedly controls Ukraine's most popular television station, 1+1, which airs Zelensky's shows. Poroshenko appointed Kolomoysky governor of the Dnipropetrovsk region in 2014. He served in the post for a year, but tensions arose between the two over control of pipeline company UkrTransNafta and, subsequently, the nationalization of PrivatBank, Ukraine's largest commercial bank, which Kolomoysky previously controlled.

Other Candidates

Ukraine's Central Election Commission approved the registration of 44 candidates to compete in the presidential election. Some observers believe the government encouraged the entry of a large number of candidates to help divide the opposition vote. Tymoshenko, in particular, has accused the government of supporting the candidacy of a similarly named parliamentarian, Yuriy Tymoshenko, in an attempt to confuse a portion of her electorate.

Table 1. Leading Presidential Candidates

(by opinion poll ranking)

Name	Party	Recent Polling (among likely voters)
Volodymyr Zelensky	Servant of the People	16%-17%
Yulia Tymoshenko	Fatherland	12%-16%
Petro Poroshenko (incumbent)	Petro Poroshenko Bloc "Solidarity"	12%-13%
Yuriy Boyko	Opposition Platform – For Life	7%-9%
Anatoliy Hrytsenko	Civil Position	6%-7%
Oleh Lyashko	Radical Party	5%-6%
Undecided	—	14%-22%

Sources: Polling results from Rating Group Ukraine, January 16-24, 2019; SOCIS Center, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), and the Razumkov Center, January 16-29, 2019; and Rating Group Ukraine, Social Monitoring Center, and Info Sapiens, January 19-30, 2019.

Notes: The list of potential candidates includes those who have received at least 5% support in recent polls.

Only three other candidates received more than 5% support in recent polls. Of these, **Yuriy Boyko**, 60, is the leading candidate among the elites of eastern Ukraine, who typically are referred to as "pro-Russian" (a label that often refers to economic, not ideological, interests). Boyko was a member of ex-president Yanukovich's Party of Regions before 2014. Boyko has a long history in Ukraine's energy industry, an economic sector many observers consider to have been highly corrupt under past administrations. Boyko also is linked to Viktor Medvedchuk, who is considered one of Ukraine's most pro-Russian political figures.

Anatoliy Hrytsenko, 61, is characterized by many as the leading "pro-Western" alternative to Poroshenko and Tymoshenko. Hrytsenko is a former minister of defense (2005-2007) who has twice run for president. Hrytsenko is campaigning on a platform of anti-corruption, anti-oligarchy, and Western integration, and he supports Ukraine's return to a strong presidential system. Some observers have questioned Hrytsenko's pro-Western commitment, however, based on comments appearing to signify approval of "enlightened authoritarianism."

Oleh Lyashko, 46, is considered by many to be a nationalist-populist politician akin to Russia's Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. In parliament, Lyashko rails against corruption, the EU, the IMF, and Western-supported nongovernmental organizations. Many observers believe Lyashko is supported by Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine's richest person and a member of the eastern Ukrainian elite.

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