

How Zelenskiy Beat Ukraine's Establishment

Volodymyr Zelenskiy won by promising always to ask the people first.

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Volodymyr Zelenskiy **Tatyana Zenkovich / EPA / TASS**

The landslide victory of comedian and TV producer Volodymyr Zelenskiy in Sunday's run-off presidential election in Ukraine poses a problem both for the country's Western backers and those in the Kremlin who hope to exert control again. The Ukrainian people haven't voted for a specific path, or even simply against politics as usual: They voted against being told what to do.

Zelenskiy will be the country's sixth president in almost 28 years of independence. That's more heads of state than any other post-Soviet country has had. That in itself shows Ukrainians are hard to please. But Zelenskiy's way of winning tells a more important truth

about them: Ukrainians are loath to accept any kind of authority. That complicates Ukraine's position as perhaps the world's most important buffer nation, sitting between Fortress Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's European flank.

It's easy for an optimist to find nice things to say about Ukraine's upcoming transition. Incumbent Petro Poroshenko, who spent his term consolidating power and trying to pick off rivals, is giving up his office peacefully, and he hasn't made any kind of effort to rig the election — perhaps because he erroneously believed that voters loved him (73 percent chose his opponent), and perhaps because Ukrainians find it easy to take to the streets at the first sign of such cheating.

Zelenskiy is Jewish, and he speaks better Russian than Ukrainian, which means most voters have proved unsusceptible to hardcore Ukrainian nationalism, which is traditionally anti-Semitic and intolerant to all things Russian. Zelenskiy is only 41, and he's not a member of the post-Soviet political elite, a notoriously corrupt and self-serving bunch, and he's a self-made millionaire with a successful production company.

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But none of this is as important as why, and how, he won.

Poroshenko's strategy had been to stress his dedication to nation-building: An alliance with the West, strengthening the military, gaining spiritual independence from the Russian Orthodox Church, supporting the Ukrainian language.

Handouts for the poor were also part of his campaign. He was going for a father of the nation image; even as he presented himself as the only alternative to Russian President Vladimir Putin's taking over Ukraine, he used a slogan once adopted by Putin: "There are many candidates but only one President."

Zelenskiy beat him by ridiculing the paternalistic ambition, desacralizing Poroshenko's office and mocking his gravitas. That was especially evident in the three weeks between the first and second rounds of the election.

The president wanted an earnest debate in a TV studio, but Zelenskiy forced him into an unprecedented face-off in Kiev's biggest soccer stadium. The spectacle was preceded by a public drug test, which did nothing to hurt Zelenskiy (the Ukrainian public has seen racier stuff from him) but subtly demeaned Poroshenko. During the stadium debate, Zelenskiy, who played an unlikely president of Ukraine in a TV series called "Servant of the People," dropped easily to his knees before an audience of thousands, leaving Poroshenko no choice but to follow suit awkwardly.

"I'm not your opponent, I'm the verdict on you," the comedian told Poroshenko during the duel. That was more than a pithy one-liner. Poroshenko had seemingly forgotten that the Revolution of Dignity, which led to his election in 2014, was essentially leaderless, a feat of direct democracy and self-organization. Zelenskiy purposefully revived that memory.

The comedian has made almost no promises of any kind, not even to people who helped him

win. It's still unclear who will be appointed to key posts.

On Sunday night, I asked former Economy Minister Aivaras Abromavicius, who had arranged Zelenskiy's meetings with investors to help him look legitimate to Ukraine's Western backers, if he was happy with Zelenskiy's victory and if he would keep working with him in some capacity. "I'm certainly happy!" he messaged back, sending me a picture of himself with an arm over a smiling Zelenskiy's shoulder. No answer to the other question.

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Zelenskiy's views, expressed in a few nebulous interviews and press conferences, emerge as vaguely pro-European and economically libertarian, but nothing he has said ties his hands in any way — except the one promise he has consistently made: to consult the people before doing anything serious, through referendums or, for smaller issues, through some kind of social network-based, crowdsourcing mechanism.

It's no coincidence that the only Western leader Zelenskiy has met before winning the election was French President Emmanuel Macron, who has just held a nationwide "great debate" to solicit the public's views on top policy matters.

Zelenskiy's commitment to direct democracy is yet to be tested. It could merely be a clever ploy by his campaign advisers or a smokescreen for a weak presidency meant to restore assets and influence to the comedian's enthusiastic backer and business partner, fugitive billionaire Igor Kolomoisky.

But that's the "servant of the people" promise on which Zelenskiy won.

Poroshenko and other Ukrainian politicians don't seem to take this seriously yet. They're making plans for the October parliamentary election (or an early one if Zelenskiy can find a legal way to dissolve the parliament so close to the end of its term), hoping to prevent Zelenskiy's start-up party (called Servant of the People, of course) from gaining a majority.

But if they do well and Zelenskiy is beaten back, he'll have no other option but to turn directly to the people, and to Ukraine's powerful civil society, every time he's thwarted in parliament.

The high likelihood that Zelenskiy's rule will be a direct democracy experiment poses challenges both for Westerners hoping the country will remain on a path toward NATO and European Union membership and for Putin allies hoping Ukraine will slip back into the Russian fold. Neither group is likely to have reliable interlocutors in Zelenskiy's Ukraine. Both will have to go directly to the Ukrainian people by any means they can find.

Whether a country as big, complex and besieged as Ukraine can be run in this way remains to be seen. But the roots of Ukrainian democracy are in the Cossack self-government of the 16th through 18th centuries, and the country appears to revert to them at turning points in its history. Today, progress requires, for example, a complete overhaul of Ukraine's rotten judiciary, and it's possible that referenda and constant pressure from civil society are the only effective means to that end.

Zelenskiy's victory is another tantalizing chance for Ukraine to find a way of government

suitable to its peculiar, anarchic national character. Like Poroshenko's short reign, it could be a wasted chance — or it could finally free up the creative energy Ukraine needs for a leap forward.

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