

# A comedian as Ukraine's next president. How did that happen?

**Volodymyr Zelenskiy has united a polarised country by rejecting angry nationalism - but his politics offer no panacea.**

Monday 22 April 2019, by [ISHCHENKO Volodymyr](#) (Date first published: 3 April 2019).

**A politically inexperienced comedian, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, [is in the lead](#) after the first round of presidential elections in Ukraine - and by a huge margin. He is almost 15 percentage points ahead of the incumbent president, Petro Poroshenko. Zelenskiy's unconventional campaign, relying primarily on Instagram and a TV show in which he plays a fictional Ukrainian president, proved to be far more successful than Poroshenko's attempt to impose a choice of "me or Putin".**

Poroshenko's main messages of "army, language and faith", as well as his recent nationalist initiatives, would easily see him branded as far right in any other European country. Yulia Tymoshenko, a veteran of Ukrainian politics who led the polls until January, failed to present a clear alternative to Poroshenko's aggressive nationalism and ended up in third place in Sunday's first-round vote. The candidates appealing to Russian-speaking voters in Ukraine's south-eastern regions failed to unite. The most popular among them, Yuriy Boiko, came fourth.

However, support for all these "old" politicians was dwarfed by the turnout for Zelenskiy, the "fresh face". Many of his supporters were voting for the first time in their lives. According to the polls, 40% of under-30s supported Zelenskiy. In the run-up to the first round, many observers believed they backed Zelenskiy in the polls "just for fun" and would never actually vote for him. But these sceptics underestimated the rock-bottom [confidence](#) Ukrainians have in their government. With many voters wearied by the "political class", Zelenskiy's lack of experience was seen as a virtue rather than a disadvantage.

Untypically for the normally regionally polarised Ukrainian elections, Zelenskiy's coalition bridged the main divides. He enjoys the most even support across all the language groups. He led everywhere except three Galician regions in the west and two Donbass regions in the east that represent the two pro-western and pro-Russian extremes of Ukrainian politics.

Zelenskiy's rise should be seen in the context of [the global ascent](#) of anti-establishment movements. However, he is different from western rightwing populists in that he does not attempt to capitalise on nationally divisive issues or incite hatred against internal and external enemies. But Zelenskiy is also unlike leftwing populists. His confusing views seem to be rather libertarian; he has endorsed neoliberal technocrats in the Ukrainian government. Most importantly, Zelenskiy does not lead any grassroots movement. His decisions are not restricted by the expectations of ideologically committed activists.

In an eastern European context Zelenskiy is very different from the Hungarian prime

minister, [Viktor Orbán](#), or the leader of the Law and Justice party in Poland, Jarosław Kaczyński (who have much more in common with Poroshenko). The vote for Zelenskiy is instead closer to the vote for the liberal activist Zuzana Čaputová, who [has just been elected as the president of Slovakia](#).

So far, Zelenskiy has been smart enough not to break the diverse coalition that supports him with divisive statements. The second round, on 21 April, will be a de facto referendum on Poroshenko and everything he symbolises: corrupt oligarchy, the lack of economic prospects for the majority of Ukrainians, aggressive nationalism, and authoritarian attacks on dissent and freedom of speech.

Many “liberal” civil society activists and national intelligentsia have labelled Zelenskiy voters as “dumb” and “unpatriotic”. Nevertheless, polls forecast a landslide victory for Zelenskiy, with twice as much support as Poroshenko. It seems Poroshenko could win it only if he resorted to extreme measures: escalation in [Donbass](#) or around Crimea, or perhaps suggesting some kind of deal with Ihor Kolomoisky, a notorious oligarch who supports Zelenskiy.

It looks like the best outcome for Poroshenko would be to lose with a decent percentage of the vote, and provide a rallying point for nationalist opposition to Zelenskiy.

Despite Zelenskiy’s success in unifying almost all the regions of this polarised country, he is unlikely to be able to move Ukraine away from reactionary nationalism. [Nationalist radicalisation](#) trends have deep roots in Ukraine’s politics and civil society. Being president (and not just playing one) will involve making decisions that alienate one or other group of voters, most likely from the south-eastern regions that represent a smaller part of his electorate. Zelenskiy would not have a majority support in parliament during his first six months in office. The best hope from his time in office would likely be a transition to a fully parliamentary republic with a very weak president.

Ukraine’s situation requires something more than the election of a nice guy with a fresh face and no clear vision. Fundamental change comes with the construction of ideas-driven movements and parties, and installing them in power. Zelenskiy’s huge electoral success is partly a result of the large increase in turnout in mostly Russian-speaking south-eastern regions. Hopefully this mobilisation for change will not end at the ballot box.

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This article by Volodymyr Ishchenko, a member of LeftEast’s editorial collective, was originally published in [The Guardian](#).

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