



Can Poroshenko secure his second presidential term in 2019?

Mykola Vorobiov

Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation Fellow

Center for Transatlantic Relations

Johns Hopkins University

SAIS

As Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko prepares to run for re-election in March 2019, his political fate is uncertain at best.

Indeed, one year before Ukraine's next presidential election, Poroshenko's ambition to hold onto power looks unrealistic. According to polls conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KMIS) in February, Poroshenko's support among decided voters stood at a paltry 9.8%. Meanwhile, former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, leader of the "Batkyvshyna" ("Fatherland") party, led the field of candidates with 24.6%. Controversial opposition figure Oleh Lyashko, the head of the populist "Radical Party," and former Minister of Defense Anatoliy Grytsenko polled at 15.5 % and 12.5 %, respectively.¹

The implications are clear—while Ukrainians are divided on who should lead the country, most are united in their distaste for the incumbent. Poroshenko has faced domestic and international criticism for his lavish lifestyle, attempts to intimidate political opponents, and failure to enact many of the sweeping anti-corruption reforms promised after the Revolution of Dignity ousted his predecessor, Viktor Yanukovich, in 2014.

The approval rating of the president's party is even more grim. If the elections were conducted today, "Petro Poroshenko's Bloc" (BPP)—at present, the largest faction in Ukraine's Parliament—would come in fifth place, with just 6.6% of voters supporting BPP. For comparison, Tymoshenko's party would take first place with 22.5 %, and the Radical Party would come second with 13.7%. Four years after Russian President Vladimir Putin's illegal annexation of Crimea, the pro-Russian "Opposition Bloc"—which mostly includes members of Yanukovich's former party, "Party of Regions"—now occupies a close third place (12.4 %).

Poroshenko's dismal numbers are a far cry from his electoral victory in May 2014, when he campaigned on a platform of pursuing a closer relationship with the West to win 54.7% of the vote. If current trends continue, Poroshenko's rating can be expected to decline even further.

While Poroshenko did initially gain support from the United States and European Union, he has failed to fulfill—or even address—many of the campaign promises that brought him to

¹ <http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=753&page=1>.

power. A billionaire businessman who has made much of his fortune from the eponymous chocolate company “Roshen,” Poroshenko had promised to close his firm’s factories in Russia. However, Roshen still operates in Russia, despite the ongoing occupation of Crimea and entrenched conflict in Donbas. As the U.S. and EU governments have imposed strict sanctions on Russia for its actions in Ukraine, many Ukrainians find it ironic that their own president continues to profit from his Russian holdings.

Moreover, Poroshenko still controls the major television station “Channel 5”—a serious conflict of interest for an outlet that claims to be an independent media source. Now, Channel 5 mostly serves as a voice of the Presidential Administration.²

Given the president’s personal entanglements, and his entourage of oligarchs who control Ukraine’s major commercial assets, it is perhaps unsurprising that Poroshenko has hesitated to fulfill another major campaign promise—fighting corruption.

Recent polling from the International Republican Institute (IRI) indicates that Ukrainians rank “corruption” as the most serious challenge facing the country—even higher than Russian aggression. Transparency International ranked Ukraine 130th out of 180 countries in its annual Corruption Perceptions Index. By comparison, Russia occupies 135th place, a negligible difference that falls far short of Ukrainians’ expectations after the 2014 revolution.³

Last but not least, Poroshenko faces criticism for his handling of the ongoing conflict in Donbas. During his campaign, Poroshenko promised to end the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) “in a few hours.” But today, nearly four years later, many Ukrainians perceive their president as detached from the realities of war.

Poroshenko has faced widespread criticism for vacationing in the Maldives and Vienna while the fighting escalates steadily. The Ukrainian military reports casualties almost daily, and the OSCE mission on the ground observes ceasefire violations on a regular basis.⁴

The same factors that contribute to Poroshenko’s unpopularity at home foment distrust abroad, as international institutions hesitate to enable poor governance in Ukraine. For example, the IMF has postponed its next tranche to Ukraine, primarily because of the presidential administration’s resistance to establishing an independent anti-corruption court and increasing heavily-subsidized gas prices.⁵ As Poroshenko owed his initial victory to aligning himself with the West, the IMF’s actions will not only have serious economic consequences for Ukraine, but likely political repercussions as well.

The very factors that dim Poroshenko’s prospects for a second term cultivate the ground for populist politicians and their parties, who now lead in most of the polls. Indeed, the next presidential elections will become a “winner-take-all” rally—both Poroshenko and Tymoshenko, his main opponent, see 2019 as their last chance to remain politically relevant. In the meantime, the next president will also determine the results of parliamentary elections scheduled for fall 2019.

² <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/poroshenkos-declaration-assets-comes-scrutiny.html>.

³ https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017.

⁴ <https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/375691>.

⁵ <http://podrobnosti.ua/2229675-transh-mvf-kak-zaderzhka-vyplat-povlijaet-na-bjudzhet-ukrainy.html>.

If nothing dramatic changes in the next year, Tymoshenko is positioned for the ultimate victory. Given her strong position and grassroots party infrastructure across the country, she does not even have to take any active measures to win the presidency—she can prevail simply by appealing to disillusioned voters with populist, anti-establishment rhetoric. With every misstep Poroshenko takes, Tymoshenko's support becomes stronger.

Moreover, Poroshenko is certainly, if inadvertently, making his opponent's job easier. For example, the botched arrest and extradition of former Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili in February made international headlines, casting Poroshenko as an inept autocrat attempting to silence political critics. Likewise, during the government's forceful dispersal of a small protest camp before the Ukrainian Parliament, dozens of veterans were injured—and many were later sentenced by the National Police.⁶ The heavy-handed tactics of Poroshenko's government, publicized widely on social media, have bolstered the Ukrainian public's appetite for change.

In this situation, Poroshenko has a few options to secure a second term.

His first option is to convince Tymoshenko, whose party now has 23 seats in the Parliament, to form a coalition with BPP. Then, Poroshenko would announce early parliamentary elections in Fall 2018. Assuming that coalition prevails, Tymoshenko would be offered the Prime Minister's chair. In exchange, she would have to agree to support the president for his second term during the campaign in 2019.

In February, rumors swirled around a meeting between Tymoshenko and the President, lending credence to this option. However, the scenario appears unlikely for practical reasons—Tymoshenko has already served as Prime Minister (from 2007 to 2009), and she has ambitions to become president. Given her strength in the polls, she can expect a strong enough performance to win without allying with the unpopular incumbent.

Moreover, the most negative and unpredictable outcome of such an alliance would be the rise of the "People's Front" party, led by former PM Arseniy Yatseniuk and Interior Affairs Minister Arsen Avakov. Despite an abysmal 2-4% approval rating, the "People's Front" has 73 seats in the parliament along with five loyal ministers in the government. But the party's low public support precludes their acceptance of early elections, in which they stand to lose many seats. Yatseniuk and Avakov could thus be expected to act as effective counterweights to a hypothetical Poroshenko/Tymoshenko alliance.

The second option for Poroshenko is to promote some odious pro-Russian candidate to run against him—and likely proceed to the final round by capitalizing on Ukrainians' disappointment with their "pro-Western" path thus far. The most popular among them are former Minister of Energy Yuriy Boyko and leader of the "For Life" party Vadim Rabynovich. Both have relatively high ratings of 9.7 % and 9.5 % respectively. If one decides to withdraw his candidacy in favor of his ally, the rating of a single candidate could become significantly higher. Of course, that candidate would ask the president for something in exchange.

The third possibility would be for Poroshenko to declare a state of emergency in the country if escalations in eastern Ukraine continue. According to the Ukrainian Constitution, elections cannot be conducted under such conditions. As a result, Poroshenko could remain in his

⁶ <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-police-raid-protest-camp-arrest-50-police-injured-clashes/29076388.html>.

current position until the end of such measures—which is to say indefinitely, because the conflict in Donbas shows no signs of ending anytime soon.

The current political landscape in Ukraine is reminiscent of the 2010 presidential campaign, in which Orange Revolution leader and then President Viktor Yushchenko lost to his former rival Yanukovich, garnering only 5.45 % of votes.⁷

For now, it is clear that any candidate who decides to run for presidency not only has to be popular among ordinary people, but also must enlist support from oligarchs. Not only do oligarchs guarantee significant financial assistance to candidates, but they also provide access to national TV channels, which invariably remain under oligarchic control.⁸ Today the so-called “oligarchic consensus” still plays in favor of Poroshenko, but these power-brokers can reconsider their preferred candidate if the president’s public approval ratings will continue their downward spiral.

The more power and influence any president has, the more responsibility he bears before voters, who tend to blame the Administration for all their problems.

Time is running out for Poroshenko to keep any of his campaign promises, so his administration must now invent different tricks for Ukrainian voters and Western partners. Rather than implement comprehensive European reforms, fighting corruption and persecuting oligarchs, Poroshenko decided to become a dealmaker with all those that Euromaidan stood against.

Nothing is certain about what 2019 will bring, but one thing is clear—the next presidential election will determine not only the future of Ukraine, but of the entire post-Soviet region.

⁷http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/fields/field_files_attached/resource/ukraines_2010_presidential_election.pdf

⁸ <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/will-ukraine-s-oligarchs-ever-get-challenged>