



# Ukraine's 2019 Elections and the Rise of a New Political Guard

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## Summary

Ukraine held presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019. The results radically altered the political landscape and concentrated power in the hands of a single political group in an unprecedented way. The political novice and former comedian, Volodymyr Zelensky, won the presidency by a huge margin on April 21 and his rapidly formed political party, Servant of the People, won a parliamentary majority just three months later. This concentration of power in the hands of a single group presents a unique opportunity to make a radical leap with much-needed reforms. However, it also presents multiple risks for a country with weak institutions and a short history of democracy.



## Presidential elections

Ukraine held the first round of its presidential election on March 31 and a run-off vote followed on April 21. Despite a proliferation of candidates – there were 44 in total – the real fight for the nation's top job was between the incumbent president, Petro Poroshenko, a multimillionaire, and the actor and comedian, Volodymyr Zelensky, a complete novice in politics.

Zelensky won the run-off overwhelmingly with 73.22 per cent of the vote, as against 24.45 per cent cast for Poroshenko. In addition, Zelensky received a majority of support in all of Ukraine's regions, bridging the traditional east-west divide in the country for the first time since the country's independence in 1991.

In his concession speech, Poroshenko announced that he would be remaining in politics despite the defeat: "We did not win this fight but it certainly does not mean that we lost the war". Zelensky's victory was widely interpreted by observers as a demonstration of the nation's desire to see new faces in politics – a trend that began with "Revolution of Dignity" and the presidential election in 2014. In that election, Poroshenko had run on a slogan of "Living the New Way" and claimed that "fundamental changes are needed for the country, and for each citizen individually". His rhetoric had changed dramatically five years on, when he ran on a conservative slogan: "Army; language; faith".

### Expectations

Poroshenko's departure from his original programme was out of line with the demands of the electorate. According to an April 2019 poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, in the run-up to elections voters were most concerned about the state of the economy, political injustice,

corruption and the war with Russia. The top five expectations for the first 100 days of the new presidency were to: (a) reduce utility tariffs, 39.1 per cent; (b) introduce a draft bill to remove immunity from prosecution for parliamentarians, judges and the president, 35.5 per cent; (c) begin/speed up the largest corruption investigations, 32.4 per cent; (d) start negotiations with Russia, 23.3 per cent; and (e) reduce the salaries of senior officials, 18.4 per cent.

Unlike Poroshenko, Zelensky echoed the people's concerns in his election programme and campaign, albeit in a populist way. His campaign comprised a series of performances by his comedy troupe. Fittingly, his programme read more like a television script than a list of policies that would take care of the country's woes:

*I will tell you about the Ukraine of my dreams. It's the Ukraine where the only shots are fireworks at weddings and birthday parties. It's a Ukraine where it only takes an hour to start a business, it takes 15 minutes to get a passport and it takes a second to vote in elections, via the Internet.... Where there are no adverts about "Jobs in Poland", and Poland has ads about "Jobs in Ukraine". Where a young family has only one challenge, to choose between a flat in the city or a house in the suburbs.... Where doctors and teachers receive real salaries – and corrupt officials real jail time. Where it is the Carpathian forests that are untouchable, not members of parliament. Where an elderly woman gets a decent pension, not a heart attack from her housing bills.*

### Media coverage

Zelensky's campaign relied heavily on coverage from 1+1, one of Ukraine's most popular media outlets, which is owned by his long-time business partner, the dollar billionaire Igor Kolomoisky. The skewed



coverage in favour of Zelensky was the subject of a special review by the regulator, the National Television and Radio Council, on May 17, 2019. The council's monitoring showed that in the two-week period April 8–21, the Kolomoisky's flagship television channel devoted three times more airtime to Zelensky than to Poroshenko. Coverage of Zelensky was on air for 31 hours and 38 minutes, while Poroshenko's campaign received only 11 hours and 34 minutes of airtime.

Zelensky's team also ran a unique and robust campaign across social media – from Facebook to Instagram, YouTube and Telegram – in an attempt to mobilize younger voters. Notably, Zelensky's Telegram channel became the biggest in Ukraine in March 2019 after launching on December 28, 2018. It overtook the massively popular discount travel channel, *Veter Doit*, which had been the market leader in terms of number of subscribers for at least one year prior to the election. Zelensky's mobilization tactics worked well, and he became the leading candidate among younger voters. According to the National Exit Poll, he received 57 per cent of the votes of 18–29-year olds in the first round. Poroshenko received just 14 per cent of the votes of this cohort.

### **Surprise**

Zelensky's victory and its margin were predicted by every poll conducted in the country. Nonetheless, it came as a shock for much of the political elite and to most of those active on social media. Reactions to Poroshenko's defeat from the latter group were bitter and dramatic. A short-lived but highly vocal community formed on Ukrainian social media, calling itself "the 25 per cent movement" in a reference to Poroshenko's share of the vote in the run-off. Members of this community posted hundreds ego-boosting or self-pitying

remarks on social networks. These were often derogatory about Zelensky and his supporters. In one such post that reflects the general sentiment, Poroshenko's adviser, Roman Donik, asked: "Why do we have to be shy about being the smartest and best educated? That's every fourth person in the country – that's us. That we are the only ones capable of critical thinking. That we are statesmen.... We are not afraid to take responsibility and we can take a punch".

### **A clean election**

Both rounds of the presidential election were judged by international and domestic observers to be the cleanest in Ukraine's history. According to a report by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's elections monitoring arm, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), "the 2019 presidential election in Ukraine was competitive and held with respect for fundamental freedoms". The ODIHR report noted, however, that: "the campaign in both rounds lacked genuine discussion of issues of public concern" and criticized skewed coverage by the media, which reflected the business and political interests of owners rather than the public interest. The report also listed a number of legislative and procedural flaws.

OPORA, the domestic election watchdog, reported that both rounds of presidential elections were better run even than the "clean elections" of 2014. The most common violation was attempts by voters to obtain ballots without presenting a passport for identification (14.5 per cent of polling stations experienced this violation). The second most common breach was voters showing their completed ballot to election officials, which was observed at 5 per cent of polling stations. OPORA also



expressed major concerns about the non-transparent funding of elections.

## **An oligarch connection**

Both during the election campaign and since, one of the biggest concerns surrounding Zelensky has been his connection with the oligarch Igor Kolomoisky. Kolomoisky's media empire supported Zelensky during the election and the two have had a close business and personal connection since 2012, when Zelensky's company, Kwartal 95, signed a contract with 1+1 for the production of programmes such as situation comedies and films, most notably his eponymous comedy show.

According to Schemes, an investigative television programme, Zelensky flew to see Kolomoisky in Geneva or Tel Aviv 13 times in the two years when Kolomoisky was living in exile in fear of criminal prosecution in Ukraine. He returned home in May, after the first round of the presidential election. Kolomoisky has publicly acknowledged that he has continued to telephone Zelensky since his election, albeit only "rarely". During a televised debate two days before the election, Zelensky said Kolomoisky would not get any preferential treatment during his presidency: "If Kolomoisky breaks the law, he will go to jail". A series of events surrounding the oligarch, however, suggests that he feels emboldened – and his luck in the courts and in business has changed.

In the spring and summer of 2019, Kolomoisky won a series of court cases related to the nationalization of PrivatBank, which he owned until 2016. There are hundreds of such cases dragging through the courts. Kolomoisky is challenging the legality of the nationalization and is claiming shares in the cleaned-up PrivatBank. Meanwhile, PrivatBank and the

National Bank are filing countersuits in an attempt to prove large-scale fraud and obtain compensation from the oligarch and his multiple companies.

Kolomoisky is claiming \$2 billion from Ukraine for what he considers the unlawful nationalization of his bank. The National Bank spent 155 billion hryvnias (over €5 billion) recapitalizing the ailing bank in 2016. PrivatBank is countering Kolomoisky in the US state of Delaware, alleging large-scale fraud and money laundering. Its complaint also mentions an FBI investigation into the oligarch.

In an unrelated case, a provincial court annulled the operating licence of SkyUp, a budget airline and successful rival of Kolomoisky's Ukraine International Airlines. Investigative journalists discovered that the woman who won the case against SkyUp had never flown with the budget airline and did not file the lawsuit. The same court has made rulings in Kolomoisky's favour in PrivatBank-related cases. The SkyUp decision was reversed on appeal.

In an unrelated series of developments, the former Governor of the National Bank, Valeriya Gontareva, ended up in hospital following a freak hit-and-run traffic incident in London on Aug. 27. Just days later, her daughter-in-law's car was set on fire in Kyiv. Later, her country house outside of Kyiv was burned down in an arson attack.

Gontareva oversaw the clean-up of the banking sector in the years following the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, including the nationalization of PrivatBank. Gontareva has reported receiving threats from Kolomoisky throughout the three years in which she took a leading role in the nationalization. She has announced that she is considering asking for political asylum in the UK, and has said that she fears for her life.



Meanwhile, Kolomoisky has been living a seemingly happy life in Kyiv, giving dozens of interviews, and offering his advice and opinions on practically every aspect of public and economic life in the country. On September 10, the president's office reported that Kolomoisky had met with Zelensky, his chief of staff and the prime minister to discuss "issues around conducting business in Ukraine" and that "the energy sector was discussed". Kolomoisky owns significant energy assets.

The investment banker, Serhiy Fursa, said that the accompanying photograph was "a signal to all officials and especially all managers of state companies: this is your new 'daddy'". The day after the high-level meeting, PrivatBank's headquarters in Dnipro were raided by the police. Two days later, Gontareva's apartment in Kyiv was broken into and searched by 10 unidentified masked law enforcers, even though she had not lived there for a year and had officially informed the authorities that her current place of residence was in London.

Meanwhile, questions remain about PrivatBank's future and this has become a bone of contention between Ukraine and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Ukraine's new government will struggle to get a much-needed new deal from the IMF until the status of PrivatBank is resolved.

## Early parliamentary elections

Despite putting his acting career on hold and opting for politics, Zelensky did not make his audience wait for too long for a new show. At his inauguration speech in parliament on May 20, he made the dramatic announcement that he was dissolving parliament and calling an early election for July 21. He also asked the outgoing members of parliament to support a number of urgent laws, including the lifting of immunity from prosecution in line

with his pre-election promise: "You have two months. Vote for these important laws. Get all the medals for yourselves. Score some good points before an early election".

Unlike Servant of the People, Zelensky's own haphazard political creation named after his sitcom, however, most of the parliamentary parties failed to score with voters. In the sitcom, Zelensky plays a teacher who accidentally becomes president. More than half of Ukraine's population watched the show, which contributed to his name and face recognition at the start of his political career and helped propel his party to power.

Servant of the People won 254 seats in the 423-seat Verkhovna Rada, creating a single-party majority for the first time in Ukraine's history. Zelensky's party fared equally well in the proportional vote and the first-past-the-post constituencies, riding high on the strength of the brand and its leader's popularity. In those parts of the country controlled by the central government, slightly over half of Ukraine's parliamentary seats are elected in a nationwide vote for party lists, while slightly less than half (198) are elected by constituencies. Elections do not take place in the annexed Crimea or the occupied eastern territories in the Donbas region.

Four other parties crossed the 5 per cent threshold for seats in parliament: the pro-Russia Opposition Bloc-For Life won 44 seats, Poroshenko's European Solidarity won 27 seats, the veteran politician Yulia Tymoshenko's Fatherland party won 24 seats and the singer Vyacheslav Vakarchuk's Holos (Voice) party won 20 seats. The other 56 seats were taken by non-aligned members of parliament, some of whom represent other parties.



## Public funding for political parties

The 2019 elections were the first in which political parties were just as eager to cross the 2 per cent threshold as they were to cross the 5 per cent threshold needed to make it into the legislature. A new law on public funding for political parties, passed in 2015, guarantees public funding to any party that receives 2 per cent of the votes in national elections. Six smaller parties now qualify for public funding on top of those that made it into parliament: the populist 'Radical Party' led by Oleg Lyashko; 'Strength and Honor' led by the veteran politician and former defence minister, Anatoliy Hrytsenko; 'Ukrainian Strategy', led by the former prime minister Volodymyr Groysman; 'Shariy's Party', led by the controversial pro-Russia journalist, Anatoliy Shariy, and the right wing 'Svoboda' party.

According to the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption, the 11 political parties that qualify for public funding will receive uah 565.5 million in 2020 (around €20 million). The money will be shared out in proportion to electoral performance, with bonuses allocated for observing the 30 per cent quotas for adopting women candidates. Only two of the 11 parties qualify for such a bonus: European Solidarity and Holos.

Moreover, the five parliamentary parties also qualify for reimbursement of their campaign expenses of uah 1.88 billion (about €65 million). The law on public funding of political parties was designed to help strengthen parties as institutions but the monitoring of party expenses by independent watchdogs has shown that they spend the bulk of their funding on television advertising. For example, the six successful political parties in the 2015 election spent 22.5 per cent of their total budgets on television adverts in 2016–17 (uah 52 million or €1.8 million), the largest

expense of all categories. In comparison, parties spent 2 per cent less on funding regional branches. Spending on advertising spiked before the 2019 elections, but complete data is not yet available.

A massive 91 per cent of party budgets was subsidized by the taxpayer. The public funding of political parties has effectively become another way to distribute money to oligarch-owned media in Ukraine. These public subsidies are becoming increasingly unpopular. On July 23, a petition was registered on the presidential website calling for the practice to be abolished. It quickly received the 25,000 signatures required for consideration by parliament. On Aug. 30, President Zelensky suggested that public funding should only be available to those parties that crossed the 5 per cent threshold and submitted a bill to parliament to make this change.

## New government

Ukraine's parliament convened for its first session on August 29. It lasted 16 hours. Deputies voted on appointments to parliamentary committees and then appointed the government and key officials, such as the prosecutor general and the head of the State Security Service. A 35-year-old technocrat, Oleksiy Honcharuk, was appointed prime minister. Parliament then appointed 17 members of his Cabinet. Ukraine now has the youngest president in its history (41-years old), the youngest parliament (the average age is 41), the youngest prime minister (35) and the youngest cabinet in Europe (the average age is 39). Moreover, two cabinet members are in their 20s – the Education Minister, Anna Novosad (29), and the Deputy Prime Minister for Digitization, Mykhailo Fedorov (28).

Fedorov was responsible for the digital strategy during Zelensky's election



campaigns. His new office was created from scratch, and he has been made responsible for implementing the notion of a “state in a smartphone”, which entails moving all state services and transactions online, something that Zelensky actively promoted during his campaign. At the same time, several ministries were merged, creating a leaner cabinet of 18 members compared to its predecessor which had 21 serving ministers.

### **Reaction to the new cabinet**

Ukraine’s new cabinet is not just the youngest, it has also been dubbed by commentators the most liberal in Ukraine’s history. Nine of its members are alumni of Western universities, while the Minister for the Economy and Agriculture, Tymofiy Mylovanov, continues to work as a Professor of Economics at Pittsburgh University. According to Volodymyr Fesenko, a prominent political analyst, “it will be a cabinet of liberalizing reform”.

None of the ministers have any known connections with oligarchs, which makes for a welcome break from previous administrations. Several have strong reform credentials. Three have previously worked alongside Honcharuk at the Better Regulation Delivery Office (BRDO), an NGO created to assist reform. This NGO was set up in 2015 by Aivaras Abromavicius, a reputable former economic minister, to draft white and green papers on key reforms. Abromavicius himself was appointed head of UkrOboronProm, a notoriously corrupt state arms holding, and tasked with cleaning it up.

### **Economic agenda**

In his first address to parliament, Honcharuk announced that, “a new generation has been ushered to power”. He noted that the new government needed to speed up economic growth: “We need to grow, but

not to grow by 2–3 per cent [per year], but, at a minimum, by 5–7 per cent”. This is especially important to the 10 million Ukrainians who live below the poverty line.

Honcharuk announced new talks with the IMF, that the moratorium on land sales would be lifted, and that bank lending would be made more affordable to support economic growth. He said that mortgage rates should be around 12 per cent by 2020. Honcharuk also claimed that the independence of the National Bank remained the basis for macroeconomic stability.

Following the appointment of the new government, the Fitch ratings agency upgraded Ukraine’s credit rating from B- to B, with a positive outlook, and predicted a new programme with the IMF:

*Risks to the program stem from Ukraine’s weak track record in completing previous programs, potentially negative judicial rulings that lead to reform reversals, for example in relation to PrivatBank, execution risks after reforms are approved in parliament due to capacity constraints, and potential fragmentation of the President’s Rada representation in the event of policy differences over policy priorities or influence of still powerful vested interests.*

On September 30, the cabinet approved its new and ambitious programme, promising economic growth of 40 per cent over 5 years, the creation of 1 million jobs, reductions in the tax burden and red tape, and a better quality of life for all Ukrainians.

### **The odd one out**

Arsen Avakov is the only minister in the new cabinet whose appointment was heavily, and almost universally, criticized. He was reappointed Interior Minister, a job he had held for more than five years. David





Arakhamia, the leader of Servant of the People faction in parliament, told the media that the appointment was temporary, and that Avakov's performance would be reviewed in December. Avakov has been criticized for his failure to reform the police service, which by and large remains incompetent and corrupt, and unable to investigate high-profile murders and attacks on journalists and activists. He has also been accused by the Anti-Corruption Action Centre watchdog of obstructing justice during an investigation into his son's allegedly corrupt business dealings.

At 55, Avakov is the oldest of the ministers. Some analysts and media have speculated that Avakov's reappointment is an acknowledgement of his close relationship with Kolomoisky. The oligarch referred to Avakov in an interview as "the best and most professional minister of the past five years".

### **Transition**

Ukraine's transition between presidents and governments in 2019 showed the greatest degree of institutional and societal maturity yet. In his concession speech on April 21, Poroshenko offered to provide unlimited personal time and all his international contacts in support of the new president, the first such public offer of its kind: "Between the announcement of the election results and the inauguration I am prepared to spend any amount of time to help the new president to get to grips with the smallest issues. Moreover, I am prepared to pass on to him [details of] the whole network of international support for Ukraine".

Several ministries prepared "transition books" and passed them on to their successors. In one case, Oksana Markarova, who kept her job as the Finance Minister, posted on Facebook that she and her team

had "prepared ambitious goals for our successors, and are now taking on their implementation".

Several new government members were promoted from less senior positions in the same ministries, and received very warm and wholehearted public support from their predecessors. There were notable examples of this at the Education Ministry and in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration.

### **Public trust**

Around the time that parliament convened and the new government was being appointed, 100 days into his term of office, President Zelensky enjoyed an unprecedented approval rating: a huge 70 per cent. Some of his senior team members, the Speaker of the Parliament, Dmytro Razumkov, and the Head of the presidential office, Andriy Bohdan, also enjoyed a net positive rating, which meant that the number of citizens who trusted them was higher than the number who did not.

It is notable that no other political leader of a party elected to parliament enjoyed a positive approval rating. This level of public trust – combined with full control of and a majority in parliament and the ability to form a government without the need for a coalition – creates a unique opportunity either for President Zelensky and his political team to undertake swift and deep reform, or for an epic failure if the chance is wasted.

### **Zelensky's reform agenda**

An opinion poll conducted by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation on the eve of the parliamentary elections identified the most expected reforms as an anticorruption agenda (63%), health care reform (57%), pensions and social protection reform (52%), justice and law



enforcement reform (37%) and transparency reforms in the civil service (33%).

As soon as the new government and parliament were in place, Zelensky's team filed around 70 bills for parliamentary approval in the first few days. Some of these bills would never previously have had any chance of success. They sought to remove immunity from prosecution for members of parliament and the president, introduced changes to the criminal code that removed the one-year limit on the length of criminal investigations, which had allowed many corrupt officials to get off the hook through legal loopholes, and relaunched some key institutions such as the National Agency for Corruption Prevention and the High Qualification Commission, which appoints judges. There was also new tax legislation. Many of the bills were approved in the first month of the new parliament.

### **Risks and criticism**

Some of the new bills, such as the one on the abolition of immunity from criminal prosecution, were rubber-stamped by the president's parliamentary majority at dizzying speed. Such speed, as well as the quality of the legislation and a disregard for procedure and outside expertise, have been the most frequent criticisms of the legislative process. Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, a former deputy prime minister for European integration who currently leads a committee in parliament with the same agenda, warned that: "What we are witnessing today within the walls of the parliament is a path towards dictatorship and lawlessness". She also warned that parliament was becoming fully dependent on the president's office, which tarnishes the idea of parliamentarianism and endangers democracy, as democracy is

impossible without freedom of political activity.

Her fears have been echoed by multiple observers. Novoe Vremya, an independent news website, translated a leader in the *Economist* magazine that warned against the destruction of democracies in the name of populism in the style that Zelensky's team has displayed:

*Democracies are generally thought to die at the barrel of a gun, in coups and revolutions. These days, however, they are more likely to be strangled slowly in the name of the people. Take Hungary, where Fidesz, the ruling party, has used its parliamentary majority to capture regulators, dominate business, control the courts, buy the media and manipulate the rules for elections. As our briefing explains, the prime minister, Viktor Orban, does not have to break the law, because he can get parliament to change it instead.*

Some people are ringing alarm bells about the extreme – and increasing – concentration of power by Zelensky's team. Rostyslav Pavlenko, formerly a senior official in President Poroshenko's administration, claims that the new president's team is usurping power: "Ahead of us on the agenda is darkness and degradation". Iryna Gerashchenko, ex-deputy speaker of parliament, has said that "little green men are taking over parliament", lumping together in a single reference the military men in green fatigues who took over Crimea and Zelensky's campaign colour.

Some of the moves proposed by Zelensky, such as the September 10 proposal that parliament disband the Central Election Commission, the agency in charge of organizing elections, appear to be an exercise of arbitrary power. In his motion, Zelensky claimed that the commission had



“on multiple occasions displayed insufficient level-headedness and even political bias”. His accusation is based on the commission’s refusal to register 28 candidates during the parliamentary election. However, some of these candidates successfully challenged the decision in court. Zelensky’s decision came amid praise from domestic and international observers for the solid organization of the elections.

Some of the president’s initiatives to increase his powers are sweetened by small consolation prizes. For example, Zelensky wants to grant himself the right to appoint the head of the National Anticorruption Bureau but, at the same time, he has suggested giving the investigative agency independent powers to conduct secret surveillance, which it had been refused under President Poroshenko.

Another frequent criticism is that he makes deals with former officials who have been accused of corruption. Some of them had fled in 2014 after the Revolution of Dignity but have started to return to Ukraine since the beginning of the Zelensky presidency. Among these officials are Andriy Portnov, a former deputy head of President Viktor Yanukovich’s administration, who had been the subject of European sanctions until earlier in the year. Another recent returnee is Raisa Bogatyryova, a former health minister who is accused of multimillion-dollar corruption in the public procurement of drugs. She returned on August 28 and was detained at the airport, only to be released on bail by the courts the following day. Another official of the Yanukovich era, the former minister for revenue and taxes, Oleksandr Klymenko, who is accused of fraud and money-laundering, among other things, had his assets unfrozen by a local court in Kyiv on September 2.

### **Andriy Bohdan**

One of the most controversial senior figures in Zelensky’s trusted circle of advisers is his chief of staff, Andriy Bohdan. Bohdan spends much of his time accompanying the president, and images of him whispering in the president’s ear are so common that they have become a meme and were even joked about in *Kvartal 95*, the comedy show created by Zelensky.

The original criticism of Bohdan stems from the fact that he has had a close relationship with Kolomoisky in various capacities, beginning with an advisory role in 2014 during Kolomoisky’s tenure as Governor of Dnipropetrovsk region. Since his appointment as chief of staff, however, Bohdan has been at the centre of many controversies. On one occasion, he was spotted at the wedding in St Tropez of Andriy Dovbenko, a highly controversial lawyer who has been tied by investigative journalists to corruption schemes inside the Justice Ministry, although he has denied any wrongdoing. Bohdan’s visit to St Tropez caused much indignation among the public not only because of the implications of close connections between the two lawyers, but also because the trip happened around Independence Day when the nation – including all senior officials – was celebrating, but also mourning those who had lost their lives in recent years in the war with Russia. An estimated 13,000 people have died as a result of the war. Bohdan also raised many eyebrows when he told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty of the lack of regard and respect for journalists among Zelensky’s team: “We communicate with society without journalists”. This comment came on the back of a leak about Bohdan’s planned resignation, which turned out to be false. Bohdan was also the first official in the new cohort to sue journalists for libel for a report about his secret flights to see Kolomoisky in exile. He has also had a public



spat with the mayor of Kyiv, Vitaliy Klitschko. The latter accused Bohdan of distorting information related to his performance, as well as attempts to remove him from office.

## **Zelensky's biggest win to date**

Zelensky scored a major success with his electorate when he managed to negotiate a prisoner exchange with Russia on September 7: 35 Ukrainians were freed from Russian jails and exchanged for an equal number of people held in detention in Ukraine. Among the Ukrainians exchanged were some high-profile cases involving people who had spent many years in Russian jails. One notable example was Oleg Sentsov, a Crimean film director who had been convicted of terrorist offences on what many in Ukraine and among Western observers widely held to be trumped-up charges. Zelensky led the exchange negotiations and spoke to the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, about the matter twice on the telephone. He greeted the prisoners personally at the airport.

Although the nation cheered the dramatic return of its sons and cried while watching live streams of the highly charged homecoming, the prisoner exchange was not without major controversy. One of those returned to Russia was Volodymyr Tsemakh, a Ukrainian separatist who was a suspect in the downing in 2014 of Malaysian Airways flight MH17 from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, which led to the deaths of 298 people. On September 3, the Dutch chief prosecutor urged Ukraine not to transfer Tsemakh to Russia. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Stef Blok, called Ukraine's decision to hand over Tsemakh "deeply regrettable".





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