Presidential campaign officially begins in Ukraine

Jason Melanovski
28 January 2019

Ukraine's presidential election campaign officially kicked off on December 31. The election season began in the wake of almost two months of martial law in several regions of Ukraine, declared by Ukrainian President Pedro Poroshenko after a US-backed provocation by the Ukrainian navy against Russia in the Azov Sea.

Thirteen candidates have officially registered thus far to run in the election, which will be held on March 31.

Early polling suggests that due to universal disillusionment with the country's political figures, no single candidate will win outright in the first round of the election. If no candidate garners 50 percent of the vote on March 31, the winner will not be determined until a second round runoff is held in May between the top two candidates.

Even those who are leading the polls—incumbent president Poroshenko and two-time former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko—are widely hated and despised by the population.

Tymoshenko continues to be the frontrunner in polls, leading by 16-20 percent. She was officially nominated this week at the congress of her Fatherland Party, where she unveiled her campaign slogan, "I believe in Ukraine." Former Georgian president and American stooge Mikheil Saakashvili and former NATO secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen both appeared in videos expressing their support for Tymoshenko prior to her appearance at the congress.

In a highly staged and choreographed performance, Tymoshenko promised to raise salaries to the level in neighboring Poland, end the civil war that has claimed over 10,000 lives and finally push the country into NATO and the European Union.

Tymoshenko's advantage among Ukrainian voters is primarily due to her constant criticisms of the bumbling and despised Poroshenko regime. She has also hypocritically positioned herself as a vocal opponent of the country's subservience to various International Monetary Fund agreements, which she has labelled "economic genocide," while at the same time promoting the country's accession to NATO and the EU. As she well knows, complete subservience to IMF dictates would be a prerequisite for the Ukraine joining either organization.

Notwithstanding her early lead, a Tymoshenko victory is far from guaranteed. A recent poll indicated that 26 percent of the country highly dislikes Tymoshenko, greater than the share of people who actively like her. Due to her previous business interests in Russia and her populist criticisms of the IMF, Tymoshenko is also viewed with suspicion in Western capitals and recently toured Washington DC to placate Ukraine's imperialist backers.

The current president, Petro Poroshenko, generally polls second or third behind Tymoshenko, with 10-13 percent support. Brought to power in a US- and EU-backed coup by the far-right in February 2014, Poroshenko is associated with the rapid deterioration of living standards and the ongoing war in eastern Ukraine. His campaign has relied on the whipping up of extreme militarism and nationalism, religious separatism and fear-mongering about Russian aggression.

A centerpiece of his campaign is the creation of a new Ukrainian Orthodox Church as separate from the Moscow Patriarchate, which historically oversaw the Ukrainian Church. Poroshenko has shamelessly backed the newly created church as a matter vital to the survival of the Ukrainian state and the country's "identity." In doing so, he has set the stage for a potentially violent religious conflict between the two churches over property, parioshners and funds.

Comedian Volodymyr Zelenskiy has been polling third or even second to Tymoshenko. A highly popular entertainment figure on both Ukrainian and Russian

© World Socialist Web Site

television, Zelenskiy, who has never held political office, has portrayed himself as a pragmatic "anti-politician" who uses humor to criticize the country's political elite.

Despite his supposed outsider status as a political "rebel," a Zelenskiy presidency would simply be the continuation of rule by the country's super-rich oligarchic elite, just from a different section of the oligarchy, which finds itself in opposition to Poroshenko over business dealings. Zelenskiy was a vocal supporter of the Maidan and the Ukrainian military intervention in the East.

He enjoys close ties with Ukrainian oligarch and 1+1 television channel owner Ihor Kolomoisky. Kolomoisky has been in an ongoing dispute with Kiev over the embezzlement of $5 billion from Ukraine's PrivatBank, which Kolomoisky previously owned. He is now living in Israel and views the upcoming elections as his chance to return to Ukraine and his business empire once a new regime is in power.

Zelenskiy recently encountered his first PR campaign crisis when it was revealed that he still owned shares in the Russian film company Green Films, despite previously stating that he had cut his Russian business ties after the annexation of Crimea by Russia. Subsequently, he announced that he would be divesting himself of his shares in the company.

Zelenskiy's candidacy is also expected to face potentially violent opposition from Ukraine's vocal far-right nationalist parties and groups due to his Jewish background and previous jokes on TV lampooning Ukrainian nationalism.

A crowded group of candidates trails Tymoshenko, Poroshenko and Zelenskiy, including former defense minister Anatoliy Hrytsenko, far-right Radical Party Leader Oleh Lyashko, L'viv Mayor Andriy Sadovyi and Opposition Bloc leader Yuriy Boyko. Boyko is the only candidate in favor of better relations with Russia, but he is unlikely to make it out of the first round, as his party's base of support lies in separatist eastern Ukraine.

Whatever the outcome in March, none of the pro-imperialist and oligarchic candidates will seek to address the social and political crisis dominating the life of the Ukrainian working class.

According to a recent poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), 9.3 percent of voters don't even plan to go to the polls on election day and another 4.7 percent plan to cast no-confidence votes to protest the elections.

A separate poll by the International Republican Institute found that over 70 percent of participants believe the country is heading in the wrong direction and more people actively dislike the leading presidential candidates than support them.

Data from a January poll of Ukrainians suggested that the most pressing issues on their minds were not the elections, but rather the never-ending war in the Donbas and the country's pitifully low wages.

Another recent poll released just prior to the New Year found that 35 percent of Ukrainians would like to work abroad, a portion far greater than those favoring any single politician. Almost one million Ukrainians are living on the brink of starvation, and recent months have seen a series of protests and strikes by the impoverished working class.

The election is being closely followed by Western imperialist powers such as the United States and Canada, which have already begun warning about "Russian meddling" in the electoral process.

At a conference on Ukraine organized by Ukrainian oligarch Viktor Pinchuk as part of the World Economic Forum in Davos, President Poroshenko spoke to an assembled crowd of imperialist functionaries and claimed that "For Russia, this election is a final chance to get its revenge." Poroshenko's claims about Russian meddling are being used to set the stage for his regime to cry foul over Russian interference if he loses in March.

Former United States Secretary of State John Kerry and Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland were also present for Poroshenko's speech and voiced support for stamping out Russian "influence" in Ukraine's election, while planning their own intervention in another country's election—that of Venezuela. According to Freeland, "By working with Ukraine on helping Ukraine to have a free and fair election, we're helping ourselves."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site