Comedian Volodymyr Zelensky leading in Ukrainian presidential polls

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Some three weeks ahead of the first round of the Ukrainian presidential elections on March 31, the most recent polling of voters in Ukraine reveals that actor-comedian Volodymyr Zelensky is now leading a crowded field of 44 presidential candidates.

According to the Rating polling agency, 25.1 percent of potential voters support Zelensky. The second place is almost evenly split between current President Petro Poroshenko and former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko who both received support from just over 16 percent of those polled.

As none of the candidates are expected to garner an outright majority to win the first round, a second runoff round between the top two candidates will almost certainly be held in May.

Reflecting widespread disillusionment with the country's official politics, 31.9 percent of respondents said they did not plan to participate in the elections at all.

Prior to his entrance into politics, leading candidate Volodymyr Zelensky had worked his way through a series of Ukrainian popular television shows to become one of the country's most famous media figures, hosting his own programs and producing shows and movies for viewing in both Ukraine and Russia. Foreshadowing his current political campaign, in 2015 Zelensky appeared in a TV series called "Servant of the People" in which he portrayed a high school history teacher who unexpectedly becomes president of Ukraine after a viral video spreads showing him criticizing corruption in the country.

That a popular entertainment figure such as Zelensky has become the frontrunner, is indicative of the advanced political and social crisis in the country. The political establishment, which is associated with both Poroshenko and the former prime minister Tymoshenko, is widely hated and discredited.

Several polls have shown that there are more people who dislike and would refuse to vote for the next two closest candidates, Poroshenko and Tymoshenko, than people who actually support them and would be willing to vote for them.

Zelensky has been able to garner support for his criticism of Poroshenko's promotion of far-right nationalism and an overt war drive against Russia, as well as by tapping into widespread social discontent by exposing corruption.

Zelensky is a native Russian speaker and generally speaks and performs in Russian. His comedy regularly lampoons the obvious corruption of the country's ruling class and criticizes the exclusionist, violent and reactionary nature of Ukrainian nationalism. He has previously spoken out against the country's banning of Russian language media and has called for language rights to be protected in traditionally Russian-speaking areas of the country, such as in eastern Ukraine.

Zelensky has also ridiculed Poroshenko's campaign slogan of "Army, Language, Faith" as really meaning "To steal from the army, to selectively split people by language, so that there will be no faith in you." He has gone further in acknowledging the truth about the imperialist-backed 2014 far-right coup that removed President Viktor Yanukovych when stating that Poroshenko "came to power through blood."

In stark contrast to Poroshenko's full backing of the bloody five-year-long war in the Donbass, Zelensky's campaign has called for a cease-fire and negotiations while maintaining that both the Donbass and Crimea should be returned to Ukraine. He also announced that he was willing to engage in direct negotiations with Russian President Vladimir Putin over East Ukraine.

However, despite his social and political demagogy,

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Zelensky is running as a candidate of a section of the Ukrainian oligarchy.

While Zelensky is now demagogically criticizing Poroshenko from the left, he previously supported both the Western-backed Maidan and the war in the Donbass. He has said little about his plans for the country's devastated economy that would differentiate him from other candidates and speaks in purposefully vague terms regarding his actual political agenda. Ukraine is currently the poorest country in Europe and the working class is being subjected to various IMF-enforced austerity measures.

Exposing his real political orientation toward sharp attacks on the working class, according to *Bloomberg*, Zelensky has cited French President Emmanuel Macron and Brazilian far-right president Jair Bolsonaro as role models for his politics.

Zelensky enjoys what he calls a close "working" relationship with billionaire Ukrainian oligarch and former head of Ukraine's PrivatBank Ihor Kolomoyskyi. Zelensky's shows appear on Kolomoyskyi's 1+1 television and he made his campaign announcement on the same channel.

Kolomoyskyi also enjoys close ties with another presidential candidate and former prime minister, Tymoshenko, and many Ukrainians speculated that Zelensky's entrance in the race was just a ploy to tear away support from Poroshenko and ensure a Tymoshenko win.

While both Zelensky and Kolomoyskyi have denied that they have any quid pro quo agreement in the elections, a member of Petro Poroshenko's political party revealed on Monday that Kolomoyskyi's PrivatBank previously transferred $41 million to bank accounts of a film production studio belonging to Zelensky.

Kolomoyskyi was later accused of stealing $5 billion from PrivatBank and fled the country. He is now living in Israel after coming into conflict with the Poroshenko regime. It is widely speculated that Kolomoyskyi is backing both Tymoshenko and Zelensky to be able to return to Ukraine and regain control over his vast business empire.

Especially because of Zelensky's declared stance on the war in East Ukraine and on Russia, the possibility of his winning the election is viewed with a great deal of nervousness and suspicion by the imperialist powers and has already triggered discussions about a renewed intensification of direct imperialist intervention in the country to prevent any reorientation of Ukrainian foreign policy that would run counter to the immediate interests of imperialism.

The Washington-based think tank Atlantic Council , which has earlier made a case for a Tymoshenko presidency, warned that a Zelensky presidency would be a "disaster for Ukraine." It noted menacingly that, in the case of a deadlocked and fragmented legislature coming out of the parliamentary elections in the fall, "another Euromaidan Revolution" would become "perfectly possible, perhaps even within a few months of Zelensky's election. This time, however, it would likely be violent from the start, as Ukraine's population has an unusually large supply of privately owned guns and Ukraine's army would almost certainly side with protesters against the comedian-in-chief."

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