

Comedian Volodymyr Zelensky leads first round of Ukraine Presidential Elections

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With 95 percent of the ballots counted, comedian Volodymyr Zelensky emerged as the clear front-runner in first round of Ukraine's Presidential elections which took place on Sunday. According to Ukraine's Central Election Committee, Zelensky led the first round with 30.2 percent of the vote. Current president and "chocolate oligarch" Petro Poroshenko finished second with 15.9 percent, and former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko placed third with 13.4 percent of the ballots cast.

Approximately 63.4 percent of voters took part in the election. Zelensky and Poroshenko will now move to the run-off elections to be held on April 21.

The presidential election campaign took place under conditions of an extraordinary political and social crisis, with the Poroshenko regime whipping up an atmosphere of war hysteria. Before the official start of the election campaign, the Poroshenko regime provoked a confrontation with Russia in the Azov Sea and then used it as a pretext to declare martial law in several regions of the country.

In the weeks prior to the elections, far-right thugs from the Azov Battalion, which was elevated to a major role in Ukrainian politics through the coup in 2014 and is now associated with Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, violently attacked Poroshenko's office in Kiev, and forced the president to flee his own campaign event.

Zelensky won the most support in the central and southern regions of the country, while Poroshenko performed best in the western Ukraine, which is traditionally the stronghold of Ukrainian nationalism. Yuriy Boyko, candidate of the Opposition For Life Party led in the eastern regions of the country where ties with Russia are strongest, including in the separatist controlled Donetsk and Luhansk provinces.

It appears that the Poroshenko regime will accept the

results as Ukraine's Central Election Committee reported that "no systemic violations" had taken place. However, former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who finished third, has claimed that the exit polls were being manipulated. According to her campaign, Tymoshenko actually came in second and won 18.06 percent compared to just 14.74 for Poroshenko. Tymoshenko's staff promised to spread their projected results "faster" than the Central Election Committee.

It is unclear at this point whether Tymoshenko will call her supporters onto the streets to protest the results. Tymoshenko is regarded a close ally of Interior Minister Arsen Avakov. As head of the National Police and government militias, Avakov holds significant power within the country and has close ties to various far-right organizations. There has been speculation that Tymoshenko could use Avakov and his ties with right-wing forces such as the Azov-battalion related National Militia to dethrone Poroshenko if she did not make it to the second round.

The success of Zelensky was an overwhelming rebuke to the right-wing nationalist regime of Poroshenko, who was brought into power in the imperialist-backed, far-right coup in early 2014 and ran a thoroughly nationalistic and militaristic campaign on the slogans of "Army. Faith. Language." It is an initial, if distorted, expression of growing mass opposition to the imperialist-backed war by the Ukrainian armed forces in East Ukraine and their ongoing war preparations and provocations against Russia, as well as anger over the social catastrophe in the country.

In poll after poll, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians indicated that they were mainly concerned with jobs, wages, corruption and ending the war in Eastern Ukraine that has claimed the lives of at least 13,000 people.

Over the past years, significant sections of the population have seen their wages and living standards plummet as increasing sums of money were spent to continue the war against separatists in Eastern Ukraine. Ukraine is now Europe's poorest country, and the average Ukrainian earns about 350 dollars a month. Millions of Ukrainians have fled the country to work abroad. Ukraine is under IMF directed orders to slash social spending or risk default on billions of dollars in IMF loans.

Poroshenko's campaign was also rocked by a report revealing a high-level corruption scam related to military procurement. In November of 2018, a preliminary presidential poll reported that 50 percent of Ukrainians would refuse to vote for Poroshenko "under any circumstances."

Under these conditions, Zelensky was able to capitalize on popular discontent over corruption, as well as over Poroshenko's promotion of Ukrainian nationalism and escalation of the war, and by presenting himself as a candidate who, unlike Poroshenko and Tymoshenko, stood outside the "establishment".

Zelensky supported the coup in Kiev in February 2014, and has insisted on the "return" of Crimea and the eastern separatist provinces to Ukraine. In an attempt to appeal to widespread anti-war sentiments, however, he has also made overtures to Russian President Vladimir Putin, signaling that he would be willing to negotiate with Russia over ending the war, and calling for a ceasefire so that negotiations can resume between the two countries. Vladimir Putin for his part has rejected any possibility of negotiations with Ukraine should Poroshenko be re-elected.

However, while trying to appeal to the anti-war sentiments among broad sections of the working class, Zelensky has made clear that he is a supporter of the Ukraine joining both the EU and NATO, steps that would significantly escalate tensions with Russia.

Zelensky has also been purposefully vague on his economic plans other than promising to end corruption and enforce new laws on offshore bank accounts. Despite his campaign promises, should Zelensky be elected, he will continue the austerity measures dictated by the IMF to which the country now owes over \$12 billion.

Whatever his talk about opposing "corruption" and

not being a figure of the "establishment", Zelensky will defend the interests of the country's oligarchy and is prepared to continue its close alliance with US imperialism.

Zelensky is said to have been backed financially by the oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi and has admitted that he enjoys a "working" relationship with the billionaire. He reportedly also stated that he shared a "common mindset" with French President Emmanuel Macron, who is now mobilizing the army against Yellow Vest protesters.



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