

Incoming Ukrainian president moves to dissolve parliament

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During his inaugural speech Monday, the newly elected Ukrainian president, comedian Volodymyr Zelensky, called for the dissolution of the parliament, the Verkhovna Rada. He announced plans for new elections for July 21, which were originally scheduled for October. Zelensky also proposed major changes to electoral laws.

The new president's effort to sack the Ukrainian parliament is an authoritarian move aimed at settling political scores with opponents within Ukraine's oligarchy. Snap elections would allow him to quickly consolidate power and take advantage of his overwhelming defeat of former President Petro Poroshenko.

Zelensky's newly created Servant of the People Party, which currently has no members in the widely unpopular Verkhovna Rada, is leading parliamentary opinion polls with support of around 40 percent.

It is unclear whether Zelensky has the constitutional authority to dissolve parliament. He is supported by leading political forces in the country, with some politicians allied with former presidents Petro Poroshenko and Yulia Tymoshenko declaring they backed the move. Ukraine's far right groups, Svoboda and the Azov-Battalion affiliated National Corps—which receive financing from Zelensky-allied billionaire oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky—assembled and lit flares in front of the Parliament building to demand that the body accede to the new president.

However, on Wednesday, Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada, far-right politician Andriy Parubiy, declared Zelensky's move illegal and said he would lead a challenge to it in the constitutional court. Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman, whose resignation Zelensky has demanded, also opposes the dissolution of the Verkhovna Rada. He announced plans to form his

own party to take part in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Since defeating the widely-despised Poroshenko by 73 percent to 24 percent of the vote last month, it has become clear Zelensky's victory is a changing of the guard among the super wealthy oligarchy that has ruled Ukraine since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

During his inaugural address, the new president—who is closely tied to oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky—ousted the Poroshenko-allied defense minister, head of the state security service and inspector general. Zelensky did not demand the resignation of Arsen Avakov, the head of Ukraine's Interior Ministry, who is supported by Kolomoisky and has links to groups affiliated with Ukraine's far-right Azov Battalion.

Earlier in May, Kolomoisky called for Avakov's continued presence in a Zelensky administration stating, "I believe this has been the most successful and professional government minister over the past five years. And the least scandalous one, practically not scandalous at all."

During Avakov's time in office Ukraine has experienced a wave of far-right attacks on minorities and journalists, such as the burning of a Roma encampment in Kiev and the acid attack murder of journalist Kateryna Handziuk in Kherson. Perpetrators have rarely been brought to justice by the country's police, which Avakov heads, and suspects are often released without serious investigation.

With Zelensky's election, oligarchs who had fallen out with Poroshenko and fled the country, have been given the green light to return to Ukraine and cash in on the change in leadership in Kiev.

Kolomoisky is an example. After initially supporting Poroshenko, known as the "chocolate king" for his

control over the sweets industry, he became locked in a dispute with the Ukrainian government over the embezzlement of \$5 billion from the country's PrivatBank. Kolomoisky fled to Israel, but maintained control over Ukraine's 1+1 television station, which prominently featured Zelensky's comedies. A court case just prior to Zelensky's election went in Kolomoisky's favor, and he has recently returned to the country to retake control of his vast business empire.

Gas oligarch and parliament member Oleksandr Onyshchenko, who traded corruption accusations with Poroshenko in 2016 and later fled the country, also backed Zelensky and has announced plans to return to Ukraine.

Former Georgian President and CIA-stooge Mikheil Saakashvili has asked Zelensky to return his Ukrainian citizenship, which was revoked by Poroshenko after he served as a government official in Odessa and then fell out of the regime's favor.

Reports have surfaced suggesting Zelensky may name former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko to the premiership. Tymoshenko, who earned the nickname "gas princess" after getting rich in the energy industry in the early 2000s, has called for a "scorched earth" policy against Ukraine's predominately Russian-speaking eastern regions. She is an ardent supporter of the country's ascension to NATO.

Interior Minister Arsen Avakov has also been rumored to be a possible candidate for prime minister.

Despite Zelensky's Jewish background and identity as a Russian-speaker, he has not shied away from decking himself out in the wares of Ukrainian nationalism, sporting a traditional Ukrainian necklace and grasping a royal-like scepter during his inaugural speech.

Zelensky concluded his remarks with the slogan "Glory to Ukraine," which was first used by Ukraine's far-right OUN and UPA military forces that carried out war crimes against Jews during World War II, with the backing of Nazi Germany.

In an interview prior to his election, Zelensky stated that he accepted fascist Stepan Bandera as "hero of Ukraine" for certain regions of the country.

Zelensky will continue implementing the brutal austerity policies imposed on Ukraine by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). A meeting is

scheduled between the new government and the agency next week.

IMF investigators have been in Kiev recently to determine whether the country is on the "correct path" to receive another \$1.3 billion in funds. Under the current \$3.9 billion IMF agreement signed in December 2018, Ukraine must significantly raise what it charges the population for gas. Initial price hikes left several Ukrainian cities effectively without heat this past winter.



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