

 Print

Serving the People: Will Ukraine's Political Culture Change? HURI Experts Weigh In

Political science TCUP



Just after his election in April, President Volodymyr Zelensky called for snap parliamentary elections, which were previously set to take place in October 2019. Instead, voters brought his party, Servant of the People (Sluha Narodu), into parliament with unprecedented numbers. What will Zelensky do with this consolidated power?



Given the new parliament's lack of experience and many Ukrainians' negative perception of political culture, Zelensky and his party have a long road ahead. I asked HURI fellows and affiliates for their thoughts and questions about what might happen next. What does the makeup of the new government mean for Ukraine? What should we make of Zelensky's relationship with oligarchs? After creating a social media-savvy and youthful image, how is Zelensky treating the press? Will he be able to come through on people's demands for cheaper gas and other utilities?

By Emily Channell-Justice, TCUP Director. TCUP — the Temerty Contemporary Ukraine Program — is a new initiative at HURI that focuses on matters related to today's Ukraine.



Valentyn Ogirenko (Reuters)

Ever since comedian-turned-politician Volodymyr Zelensky was **favored to win** Ukraine's 2019 presidential election, questions about his policies and his power to change political culture have been at the forefront of discussions about his future. Just after his election in April, Zelensky called for snap parliamentary elections, which were previously set to take place in October 2019. Instead, voters brought his party, Servant of the People (Sluha Narodu), into parliament with unprecedented numbers: the party won 254 of 450 seats (only 424 of which are currently active; the 26 seats representing Crimea and the Donbas remain vacant), the first time a party has won an outright majority since Ukraine's independence in 1991. What will Zelensky do with this **consolidated power**?

Given the new parliament's **lack of experience** and many Ukrainians' **negative perception of political culture**, Zelensky and his party have a long road ahead. I asked a few HURI fellows and affiliates for their thoughts and questions about what might happen next. What does the makeup of the new government mean for Ukraine? What should we make of Zelensky's relationship with oligarchs? After creating a social media-savvy and youthful image, how is Zelensky treating the press? Will he be able to come through on people's demands for cheaper gas and other utilities?

Olga Burlyuk: *Political "no-names" replace "old names"*



The snap parliamentary elections in Ukraine prompt more questions than they provide answers. Naturally, both good and bad can be seen in the election process and its results. The process was good in that it constituted an(other) instance of a democratic and peaceful rotation of parliamentarians in Ukraine. It was bad in that the turnout was at a record low, with less than 50% of Ukrainians showing up to cast their vote, and that some of the "old good-bad practices" (such as, for example, **fake candidates** with **identical names** used to divert the voters and distort the results) have still been reported in various districts. **The results** are good in that an unprecedented 80.4% of the elected are

new representatives in Parliament, with two brand-new parties gaining representation: “**Sluha Narodu**” (Servant of the People) of Ukraine’s recently elected President Volodymyr Zelensky and “**Holos**” (Voice) of the rockstar-turned-politician **Sviatoslav Vakarchuk**. There is also an increased share of women-MPs (20.8% compared to just 12% in the previous Parliament) and a younger cohort of parliamentarians (the average age is 41, while the oldest and the youngest MPs are 55 years apart).

For decades, Ukrainians complained about the same old politicians, “professional parliamentarians,” monopolizing the Parliament and pleaded for a renewal (and rejuvenation) of faces as a necessary first step to wipe out the Soviet and the post-Soviet elites. It looks like they finally got what they were asking for. The results are worrying, however, in that this will be Ukraine’s first ever one-party majority parliament: “Sluha Narodu” won 254 out of 450 total seats, turning the map of Ukraine “green”. While this may result in a more streamlined legislative process in the short-run, it may also undermine the system of checks and balances and have **negative effects in the long-run**. Moreover, the qualifications of many of the first-time elected MPs are dubious at best, with a **long list of celebrities**, sportsmen, photographers following the suit of the president-comedian. This raises a question of whether the renewal of the Parliament might have been a **bit too drastic**. “No-names” have come to replace “old names.” Some say this is a recipe for disaster, others say this is a recipe for success. We will soon see which one it is.



Olga Burlyuk is an FWO Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for EU Studies, Ghent University (Belgium), and was a Visiting Scholar at HURI in 2019. Her research interests are situated at the intersection of EU/European studies (with a focus on external policies of the European Union) and Ukrainian studies (with a focus on Ukraine’s socio-political transformation). She recently published an edited book on Civil Society in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine (2018, *Ibidem-Press/CUP*, with Dr. Natalia Shapovalova) and a special issue on Unintended Consequences of EU External Action (2019, *The International Spectator*, with Dr. Gergana Noutcheva). Her publications have appeared

in, among others, the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *East European Politics and Societies*, *East European Politics*, *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal* and edited volumes published with *Routledge*, *Palgrave* and *Ibidem-Press*.

Paul D'Anieri: *Energy reform necessary to tackle corruption*





The most important result of the election is that a single political party now holds the presidency and a majority in the Ukrainian parliament. As many observers point out, this provides a clarity of political accountability that Ukraine has rarely seen. Others worry that this concentration of power might pave the path toward authoritarianism.

It is also worth noting that the Opposition Platform/For Life alliance received only 13 percent of the PR vote. While this was enough to finish second, it represents a dramatic collapse in the power of pro-Russian forces based in the Donbas. One cause of this collapse was the popularity of Sluha Narodu. A second cause is that Russian control of Crimea and much of the Donbas has dramatically diminished the number of voters in the areas where the Party of Regions was strongest. The regional balance of power in Ukraine **has been altered**, possibly permanently.

Zelensky's majority means he may need to rely less heavily on the kinds of positive and negative inducements that his predecessors have needed to control the parliament. However, the practice of vote selling in the Rada is so deeply entrenched that we should not expect it to disappear. An important question going forward is how effectively Sluha Narodu can maintain party discipline, especially among those elected in single-member districts.

A much bigger question, given the vagueness of Zelensky's platform, is what he might do with this power. Optimists have pointed out that an opportunity now exists to tackle corruption resolutely, and Zelensky has spoken of his determination to do so. While unified political is necessary for a robust anti-corruption campaign, there will remain at least three barriers to success.

First, those who benefit from corruption will strive to prevent the laws they find most threatening and to find ways around those that they cannot stop. Zelensky and his party are backed by oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky, so whether Ukraine is getting rid of oligarchic influence, or just shifting which oligarchs dominate, is an open question. While oligarchs like Rinat Akhmetov do not have clear representation in the new parliament, one must expect that they will use their vast wealth to remedy that situation.

Second, the people who have been brought into power will likely seek at least some of the benefits that power has always brought in Ukraine. Oligarchs looking for influence will likely find officials willing to cash in. Will Zelensky be willing to prosecute his political allies when they break the law?

Third, some of the most important measures to tackle corruption will actually be unpopular among voters. The energy sector is almost certainly the largest source of ill-gained wealth in Ukraine. Without significant reform, billions of dollars' worth of rent-seeking opportunities will continue to corrode Ukrainian politics. However, **energy reform** will necessarily entail reducing subsidies to retail consumers. Many Ukrainians, already struggling economically, will resist reduction of these subsidies, and this will threaten Zelensky's popularity. If one wants to gauge how serious Zelensky is about tackling corruption, the energy sector is the most important thing to watch.

While Zelensky has talked about finding a compromise to halt the war in Donbas, and many Ukrainians are hungry for an end to fighting, it is hard to see how the conflict can be ended on terms that are acceptable to Ukraine. That would require concessions by Russia, and it is hard to see either why Russia would make such concessions or how Ukraine can increase the pressure on Russia to do so.

In sum, the election results open new opportunities for political change in Ukraine, but the forces that have obstructed change will continue to operate.



Paul D'Anieri is a Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of California, Riverside. In 2017, he held the Shklar Fellowship at HURI. His book *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War* will be published by Cambridge University Press in early 2020. His earlier books include *The Contest for Social Mobilization in Ukraine* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), *Understanding Ukrainian Politics: Power, Politics, and Institutional Design* (M.E. Sharpe, 2007), and *Economic Interdependence in Ukrainian Russian-Relations* (SUNY, 1999). He is also author of a textbook, *International Politics: Power and Purpose in Global Affairs*,

currently in its fourth edition.

Marta Dyczok: *Media image belies lack of substance*



Will Ukrainians see the changes they so overwhelmingly voted for in the 2019 elections? The short answer is we don't really know, and the prospects seem very uncertain. Those who are now in power are presenting a very effective media image of change. But a closer look reveals a worrying lack of substance, real openness and serious questions about the backers of the new political force.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy's team constructed a very appealing media image of the possibility of real change and effectively sold it to the public in a highly innovative way. Well before the election cycle, back in 2015, a TV series was launched in which Zelenskyy played an honest, ordinary man who gets elected president and introduces radical changes that make Ukraine a prosperous, modern European state. The show was called 'Servant of the People', which in and of itself is a political message. It aired on the popular TV Channel 1+1, owned by one of Ukraine's richest men, Ihor

Kolomoisky, who was by then at odds with President Poroshenko. Shortly afterwards a political party called 'Servant of the People' was created. At midnight on 31 December 2018 Zelensky appeared on Channel 1+1, wearing a white shirt but no jacket, smiled, announced that he would be running for president, and wished everyone a happy new year. The actor-businessman went on to sweep the presidential election and cleverly used that momentum to win a majority in parliament.

Once in power Zelensky continued to turn on the charm and cultivate the image of an honest, ordinary man leading a new team of reformers. He has chosen some young people who are new to formal political positions. His 32-year-old female press secretary Yulia Mendel fits the team's image perfectly. The former freelance journalist wrote for some very prestigious media, including the New York Times, but some of her work came under scrutiny for errors and [allegations against US politician Joe Biden](#). And she didn't know that Toronto is not the capital of Canada.

Many of the people around Zelensky are not new, and in fact are closely connected to various economic power groups that many call 'oligarchic clans.' His chief of staff Andriy Bohdan is a long-time lawyer of Kolomoisky. The CEO of Kolomoisky's media empire Aleksandr Tkachenko was elected to parliament as one of his deputies and started making steps to take control of Kyiv's City Council.

The country's main media outlets, as well as the rest of the economy, continue to be in the hands of the same large economic actors as before. And they continue to jostle for power amongst themselves. That is where change is needed. The Zelensky team is talking about the need to finally privatize land banking reform. These issues affect ordinary Ukrainians but are first and foremost interests of corporate leaders. It remains to be seen how the Ze team will handle these issues and whose interests they will represent.

Perhaps the most worrying is that Zelensky and his team are projecting an image of openness while in reality releasing very little information to the public. Photos of the president dismissing regional officials for allegations of wrongdoing or relaxing at the beach with his colleagues are very popular. This is in sharp contrast to the way that Zelensky does not make himself available to journalists to answer live questions, or how his team denies things until they get caught. For example, they said they hadn't hired lobbyists in Washington, DC until the Signal Group Consulting, LLC [published their invoice](#) for Servant of the People.

Many Ukrainians seem caught up in the new style of politics, the messaging, and are not paying attention to, or are not interested in learning about, what is really going on.



Marta Dyczok is Associate Professor at the Departments of History and Political Science, Western University; Fellow at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs; and Adjunct Professor at the National University of the Kyiv Mohyla Academy. She was a Shklar Fellow at HURI in 2011. She has published five books, including *Ukraine's Euromaidan: Broadcasting through Information Wars* with Hromadske Radio (2016), *Ukraine Twenty Years After Independence: Assessments, Perspectives, Challenges* (co-edited with Giovanna Brogi, 2015), and *Media, Democracy and Freedom: The Post-Communist Experience* (co-edited with Oxana Gaman-Golutvina, 2009), as well as articles in various journals including *The Russian Journal of Communication* (2014) and *Demokratyzatsiya* (2014), and regularly provides media commentary. Her doctorate is from Oxford University and she researches mass media, memory, migration, and history.

Margarita Balmaceda: *Success of pro-Russian opposition party should not be taken lightly*



My overall impressions of the elections are positive, but with some reservations. As with the presidential elections this spring, it is impressive to see such an overwhelming statement of popular dissatisfaction with the parties and politicians which, five years after the Revolution of Dignity, were not able to guarantee a decisive move away from the corrupt politics which have dominated Ukrainian politics since independence. As a short-term message, the election results speak loud and clear. At the same time, I am concerned about the medium-term impact of these elections. Several aspects of this victory call for concern in the medium term.

First, a protest vote is not the same as a well-crafted reform plan. A continuation of some of the key anti-corruption reforms –in particular reforms in the public procurements system – is sorely needed. The “Servant of the People” party will have a significant majority, making it possible, at least in a first period before likely defections and reshufflings start to take place, to pass key legislation with much more ease than former president Poroshenko was able to. However, it is not clear that this parliament has a clear plan for such reforms.

Second, I am worried about the populist aspects of the new majority. Undoubtedly, such populist aspects, in particular the protest against the declining standard of living, may get in the way of a clear, proactive policy course in the long term. One case in point comes from the energy sector: rapidly increased natural gas and electricity prices created a wave of popular dissatisfaction and helped mobilize the “Servant of the People” electorate. Yet, unfortunately, no real reform of the Ukrainian energy system – long a magnet for corruption – is possible without significant price increases ensuring that domestic prices will be in line with international ones. Legislation that would lower household prices (by increasing subsidies, for example) may be politically expedient in the short term but highly problematic in the medium

and long term. In the long term, only a move to economically justified prices can support the development of a resilient energy system that also fully conforms with EU standards. In a much shorter time perspective, let us remember that Ukraine's contract with Gazprom expires at the end of 2019 and needs to be renegotiated as soon as possible. In the past, the desire to access and guarantee lower energy prices has been a major factor promoting corruption-prone half solutions to Ukraine's energy needs. This should not be allowed to happen this time.

Third, while well-known oligarchic groups elected a smaller number of deputies than has been the case in the past parliamentary elections, there are also worrisome developments. First, the victory of the pro-Russian "Opposition Platform – For Life" party in Donetsk and Luhansk regions should not be taken lightly. In particular, some of those elected through this party list have highly problematic backgrounds. The party's president and number one person on its list, Yuri Boiko, is best known for his alleged participation in large-scale natural gas deals through corrupt companies during his tenure as Minister of Energy during the Yanukovych presidency. Serhiy Lovochkyn, another well-known participant in the natural gas deals and head of the Presidential Administration under Yanukovych, also made it to Parliament through this list. The impact of such players – well known not only for their ties to corruption but also for their pro-Kremlin positions – in the new Rada cannot be discounted.



Margarita M. Balmaceda is Professor of Diplomacy and International Relations at Seton Hall University and a HURI Associate. She is a former Eugene and Daymel Shklar Research Fellow and Ukrainian Studies Fund Fellow at HURI (Fall 2009). Her research focuses on Ukrainian and post-Soviet political economy "from below." She is the author of, among others, *The Politics of Energy Dependency: Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania Between Domestic Oligarchs and Russian Pressure* (U. of Toronto Press, 2013), and *Energy Dependency, Politics and Corruption in the Former Soviet Union* (Routledge, 2008). Her current book project, "*Chains of Value, Chains of Power: Russian Energy, Value Chains and the Remaking of Social Relations from Vladivostok to Brussels,*" analyzes the role of Ukraine in the economic, technical and political value chains bringing oil, natural gas, and coal from Siberia to the European Union.