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VOLODYMYR ZELENSKIY'S FIRST 100 DAYS IN POWER

RUSSIA REMAINS THE PRIMARY CHALLENGE FOR UKRAINE'S NEW PRESIDENT

It is hard to predict whether the new Ukrainian leader will be able to act as a domestic reformer. It is, however, clear that relations with Russia will be more problematic than he originally thought.

Showman Volodymyr Zelenskiy was triumphantly elected Ukraine's new president on April 21 and inaugurated on May 20, 2019. August 27 will mark his first 100 days in office.

Two-thirds of this period fell during the parliamentary election campaign. Zelenskiy pushed for early elections, some three months ahead of schedule, in anticipation that the wave of his own popular support would also bring success to his political party – “Servant of the People”.

The calculus was correct. For the first time in Ukraine's history, the president's party enjoys a comfortable absolute majority in parliament with 254 out of 424 seats. Zelenskiy does not need to put a coalition together to have his chosen prime minister voted in. Four

other parties can either join the winner or oppose his course, but they cannot block the parliamentary decisions, and for this reason are a lot less influential. This consolidation of power in the hands of the pro-presidential forces looks revolutionary by Ukraine's standards.

Opinions, however, differ as to whether Zelenskiy will opt for substantial reforms, sorely needed in the country with its weak economy and massive corruption. Optimists argue that since it was the protest against the old system that brought Zelenskiy to power, he cannot ignore popular demand for change in general and for an effective fight against corruption in particular. Furthermore, because of that same concentration of power, Zelenskiy

will have no excuse in the eyes of the people if he does not deliver on his promise. The appointment of Oleksandr Danyliuk, a reformist-minded former Finance Minister, who was ousted from the previous administration, to the key position of Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council is a good sign in this context.

The sceptics, nevertheless, have arguments as well, pointing out that the president or his team have not unveiled any specific reform plans. This may reflect reluctance. Zelenskiy's support stems in part from populist rhetoric and rests on people's unspecified “hopes for the better”, and hence disclosing details could cost him support.

Criminal investigations implicating figures of the “old regime”,

including former president Petro Poroshenko, were launched, but it is too early to predict the successful prosecution of those involved in corruption schemes. Professionalism has not been a strong feature of Ukraine's law enforcement and judiciary thus far, and this shortcoming cannot be compensated for by political will, even if it exists.

Ukraine's oligarchic system with its financial resources and media empires will no doubt resist. It survived the Orange revolution of 2004, withstood the authoritarian policies of Viktor Yanukovich, and was not even shaken after 2014. The relationship between Volodymyr Zelenskiy and his old partner, business mogul Ihor Kolomoyskiy, will be a key test for the former. Thus far, there has been reason enough for concern. Kolomoyskiy, who was at loggerheads with Poroshenko and lived abroad, returned to Ukraine immediately after Zelenskiy's victory. Kolomoyskiy's corporate lawyer, Andrei Bogdan, was appointed the head of the presidential administration.

In other words, the jury is out regarding the direction of Ukraine's further domestic development. There is much more clarity, unfortunately, when it comes to the country's foreign policy situation.

Relations with Russia are not getting any better. The Kremlin refused to congratulate Zelenskiy on his victory in the elections. Ukrainian sailors detained in Russia since the incident in the Azov Sea in November 2018 were not released, which is a sign of readiness not to treat the new leader any differently from his predecessor. Immediately after Zelenskiy's election, Russia started to grant citizenship to the residents of separatist entities in Donbas. In July, it extended the right to apply to all residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. By August, 13,000 passports had duly been issued.

Meanwhile, the Donbas conflict has escalated. Yet another agreed ceasefire was violated. On August 6, four Ukrainian soldiers were killed and the death toll continued to rise in the days that followed. Zelenskiy had to face the reality: "stopping the fire [ourselves]", as he suggested during the campaign, and inviting the US and Great Britain to formally join the peace talks, was not going to be the solution. As of now, the Kremlin continues to insist on the special status of break-away "republics" and shows no interest in any high-level encounters to discuss the conflict.

Although garnering less attention, the economic situation is

also becoming more complicated. From June, new restrictions were introduced by Moscow on exports of oil and other energy products to Ukraine. No progress has been made in negotiating the continuation of the Russian gas transit through Ukraine after January 1, 2020. But what is most threatening is the risk of losing Russian gas deliveries altogether after the Turkstream and Nord Stream 2 pipelines become operational. This is when the circle will close, as from that moment on it will be possible for Russia to engage in a large-scale conflict on Ukraine's territory without physically jeopardizing its gas exports to Europe.

It is apparent that Russia will remain President Zelenskiy's primary challenge. An uncompromising stance would work against him among a part of his own electorate as well as the approximately 20% of people who voted for pro-Russian parties in the parliamentary elections, while the readiness for concessions would be viewed by Moscow as an invitation to demand more.