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## Volodymyr Zelensky's Sweeping Victories: Is Ukraine's Turn Toward the West Definite?

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### Introduction

For more than half a decade Ukraine has been one of epicenters on the map of geopolitical crises in the world and consequently drawn a lot of international attention worldwide. Ever since it gained its independence from the crumbling Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine was a sort of buffer zone between the West and East, between the United States and European allies on the one hand, and the Russian Federation on the other. With the change of political elites and their political preferences, the orientation

of the country also changed. Ukraine has been dominated by Russia as the Russian Empire penetrated deep toward the Black Sea in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the position of inferiority towards Moscow was also the case in the USSR. The first upheaval dubbed the Orange Revolution in 2004, brought to power Viktor Yushchenko, who tried to conduct reforms and bring Ukraine closer to the West, but the effect of his Presidency were ephemeral. President Viktor Yanukovich turned Ukraine's sight toward

Russia again, but also kept the process of EU association alive before suddenly deciding not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU just days before the planned signing ceremony on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2013. This Yanukovich's abrupt turn from EU in favor of stronger ties with Russia triggered the wave of massive public demonstrations which later become known as the Euromaidan and subsequently the Ukrainian revolution in February 2014. The Euromaidan Revolution toppled Yanukovich and the new pro-Western government was formed. Russia soon reacted to the change of tide in Ukraine by annexing the Crimean peninsula in March and soon the armed conflict between the pro-Western government in Kiev and Russia backed rebels in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts broke out. Ever since the spring of 2014, Ukraine has been engulfed in a brutal conflict in the east of the country that is hampering its efforts to reform and get closer to the EU. Nonetheless, Ukrainian leadership is under the new President Volodymyr Zelensky is striving to forge stronger links with the West and the EU.

### **Ukraine's shift towards the West**

Following the Euromaidan revolution and the unfolding outbreak of hostilities with Russia, the Ukrainian political elite shifted their sight toward the West and sought to pan out stronger ties with the US, the EU and NATO. In May 2014 the first post-Euromaidan presidential election

was held and installed the billionaire candidate Petro Poroshenko to power after a sweeping victory in which he garnered almost 55% of the votes. Poroshenko took office at the critical moment for Ukraine, as in May referendums in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, disputed by the government in Kiev, were held, with majority of voters opting for self-rule. In the meantime, a full scale war broke out between the pro-Russian rebels and Ukrainian forces. Immediately after his inauguration new President Poroshenko, as Ukrainian Supreme Commander in Chief, had to get involved in combat. He took over the Ukrainian military which was lacking equipment and adequate training, as well facing rebels supported by the secondly military power in the world. The new president surprisingly managed to regroup Ukrainian forces which conducted counter offensives and regained control of a large swath of territory that had perilously been controlled by the rebels. Poroshenko managed to rebuild the Ukrainian Army and to curb the expansion of the rebel-controlled territory which lead to the formation of the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine, Minsk Protocol and subsequent ceasefire in Ukraine. Although the ceasefire has not been fully implemented to date, the intensity of large scale military operations seen in spring and summer of 2014 was to a large extent not seen ever since, and President Poroshenko could dedicate more attention to reform process and to pursue pro-Western ambitions of Ukraine.

### *The ratification of Ukraine–European Union Association Agreement was a major success for the pro-European forces in Ukraine and Poroshenko personally.*

After the signing ceremony of the Ukraine–European Union Association Agreement was stalled in November 2013, the Agreement was finally reached at an EU summit held in Brussels in March 2014. Poroshenko signed the economic part of the Agreement three months later. Following the ratification process in all EU member states, the Agreement came into effect in September 2017. The ratification of Ukraine–European Union Association Agreement was a major success for the pro-European forces in Ukraine and Poroshenko personally as it finally brought a formalized relation between the two parties by establishing economic and political association between the EU and Ukraine. Stalling the signing of the Agreement provoked the toppling and ousting of Yanukovich and the Euromaidan Revolution. The change that Ukraine wanted to bring by inking this Agreement was to create a closer link with the EU and the West.

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In order to distance Ukraine more from Russia, Poroshenko also sought to sever ties with the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow (ROC), as a large part of the Ukrainian population pertains to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), which is a branch of the ROC. Uniting the UOC-MP, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate (UOC-KP) and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) at the Unification Council in December 2018 in Kiev, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) was installed. Ukrainian Orthodox Church was granted the tomos of autocephaly by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in January 2019 and its canonical territory covers Ukraine. The OCU is partially recognized in the Orthodox Cristian world and its creation is condemned as schism in Russia by Russian officials and the Russian Orthodox Church, and it's a clear sign of Ukrainian political and church elite's will to create a national and cultural identity independent of Moscow.

### **The rise of Volodymyr Zelensky and the American involvement**

Dissatisfaction with Poroshenko's feckless attempts to curb the wide spread corruption and the ongoing hostilities in the east of the country have propelled Volodymyr Zelensky to power. Prior to his political engagement, Zelensky had a career as an actor and media

personality. The production company he created, Kvartal 95, produced “Servant of the People”, a TV series in which Zelensky had a leading role of the President of Ukraine. A political party bearing the same name as the TV show was formed in March 2018 by Zelensky and his team from the production company. He announced he was going to run for Ukrainian President in December 2018. Nonetheless, even before the public announcement, opinion polls had been indicating he was going to be one of the frontrunners as his TV show was extremely popular in Ukraine.

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The first round of the presidential election was held in March and in the second round in April 2019 Zelensky swiftly defeated Poroshenko with over 73% of the vote. Just three months later his party (Servant of the People) was also highly successful, winning 43% of the popular vote and 248 seats in the 450 seats of Verkhovna Rada, which now has the single party majority for the first time in modern history. Zelensky’s landslide victories on presidential and general elections are partly due to his charisma, but more to the conviction of the Ukrainian voters that he would bring on the so needed reforms,

tackle the omnipresent corruption, and bring Ukraine closer to the West. In spite of him being a new face on the political scene untainted with corruption scandals, Zelensky has for a long time, like all Ukrainian presidents before him, kept close ties with business oligarchs. This was the case in particular with one of the country’s most prominent and richest persons, Ihor Kolomoyskyi, who actively supported the Ukrainian troops in the fight against pro-Russian separatists in 2014.

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Just months after assuming the presidential office, Zelensky found himself encroached at a core of a scandal that once again put Ukraine on the headlines of major media outlets worldwide and fomented the biggest political earthquake on Capitol Hill in years. A summary of a phone call conversation between Zelensky and US President Donald Trump that took place in July was released by the White House in September after a complaint of whistleblower was made public. The whistleblower claimed that Trump had put pressure on Zelensky to investigate Joe Biden’s son Hunter Biden. Joe Biden served as US Vice President at the time of the Euromaidan Revolution and the War in Donbass that

followed. Together with the former Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs at the US Department of State Victoria Nuland, Joe Biden played a crucial role in supporting the pro-Western forces in Ukraine during and after the Euromaidan Revolution. In the aftermath of the Euromaidan Revolution, the biggest natural gas producer in Ukraine, Burisma, hired Vice President's son and then in April 2014 Hunter Biden joined the board of the Ukrainian company. This enticed Trump to ask Zelensky on the phone to investigate the Bidens at the time when a presidential order to freeze nearly 400 million dollars in US military help to Ukraine was issued. This all lead to a formal impeachment inquiry against Trump initiated by the House of Representatives of the US Congress on grounds that the president used US aid for a foreign country and put pressure on Zelensky to harm Joe Biden's odds to win the Democratic Party presidential primaries. Joe Biden is currently campaigning to become a Democratic nominee for the US President in the presidential election next year. The ongoing impeachment inquiry on Capitol Hill and the deep rift dividing the Republicans and the Democrats, clearly indicates how entangled Ukrainian and American interests are, and the importance of Ukraine in US foreign policy. With Zelensky's overt inclination for the West the Ukrainian foreign policy orientation is set to look toward Washington and US patronage.

## **Ukraine in the center of European politics**

European leaders have not been able to define a common position toward Ukraine ever since it gained its independence in 1991. The West supported Viktor Yushchenko's Orange Revolution in 2004 and 2005, but the EU did not seize the opportunity to bring Ukraine closer to Europe. The division among European leaders on Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic ambitions was particularly evident during the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008 when Georgia's and Ukraine's bid to join the NATO Membership Action Plan was blocked by France and Germany. Most of the new EU member states, supported by the US, are in favor of clear Euro-Atlantic perspective for Ukraine, and on the other side are Western European members who want to consolidate the EU. With the crisis in the EU fueled by ongoing Brexit, European Neighborhood and Enlargement Policies are not among EU's priorities. Further to this, the new European initiative which underpins the importance of EU's Common Security and Defense Policy and its autonomy *vis-a-vis* NATO and the US, seeks a more appealing approach to Ukraine's rival Russia. While the Russian annexation of Crimea and subsequent meddling in the war in eastern Ukraine provoked unanimous European condemnation and introduction of sanctions to Russia, there is no common position how to approach Russia in regards to Ukrainian crisis.

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In order to avoid transit of natural gas through Ukrainian pipeline transmitting system, Russia has decided to build a new pipeline Nord Stream 2 which will bring gas from the Russian Federation directly over the seabed of the Baltic to Germany. The construction of NS2 which is nearing its completion has sparked an outcry in Ukraine who will lose millions of euros in gas transit tariffs. The NS2 project led by the Russian energy giant Gazprom includes a consortium comprised of Austrian, Dutch, French and German companies. On the other hand, European countries that oppose the project, primarily Poland and the Baltic states, claim that this project will strengthen the Russian leverage in Europe and weaken Ukraine facing Russia backed rebels. On top of this, both the US Senate and the House of Representatives agreed in December on a defense bill that would allow the US administration to impose sanctions on companies involved in the NS2 project. European energy security also indicates how divided EU members states are on position toward Russia and Ukraine and how divided the EU and the US are on eastern European affairs.

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Division of European countries on the issue of stronger collaboration between NATO and Ukraine is even more evident. In October, Hungary vetoed NATO's joint statement on Ukraine blocking 50 million euros in assistance to Ukraine's border infrastructure development. As Hungary claims, Ukraine is depriving the rights of Hungarian Trans-Carpathian minority after the country in 2017 adopted the law "On Ensuring the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language."

## **Conclusion**

The Euromaidan Revolution and the unfolding war in Donbass were a turning point in Ukrainian history. The support of the Russian Federation to the separatists in the east of the country and the annexation of Crimea turned Ukraine away from its eastern neighbor after centuries of Russian domination. Both President Poroshenko and Zelensky used the momentum of pro-European and pro-Western

sentiment among Ukrainian population to boost their popularity and gain support during their election campaigns. The creation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and adoption of new language law that will emancipate Ukrainian language in face of opposition posed by the widely spread Russian language, will serve as a boon for Ukrainian national identity. However, while cutting off ties with Russia, Ukraine is not able to cut a clear path through to the EU. The EU is facing a deep institutional crisis and seeks to reinvent itself and redefine its *raison d'être* and functioning model. Europe has also not been so divided for decades on how to view its own role in the world and relations with other major global players, including the US, China and Ukraine's rival Russia. The US will keep supporting Ukraine, as well as other eastern European countries like Poland and Romania, in order to curb Russian influence in Europe. But in order to build a European society

in Ukraine, that is based on fundamental liberal-democratic standards and rules, the EU needs to develop a more coherent and structured approach to the issues at stake and provide sustainable assistance to country's endeavor to undertake reforms. Without this, it seems that the country might be left embroiled with its tycoon oligarchies, flourishing corruption and unresolved conflict in the east.

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