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Ukraine's New President Volodymyr Zelensky Should Focus On These Four Policy Priorities

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Over the weekend, Volodymyr Zelensky — a comedian best known for his leading role in the popular Ukrainian television series "Servant of the People" — decisively trounced the country's sitting president in the second round of national elections there to capture Ukraine's top political post.

The victory was a resounding vote of no confidence in Petro Poroshenko, the oligarch who had led Ukraine since its 2013-2014 "Maidan Revolution" — and on whose watch stagnation and drift had once again come to dominate national politics. But it also puts Ukraine at a major policy crossroads, because Zelensky's lack of political experience make him a novice on the national stage, and a cypher on the global one.

In the days ahead, as Ukraine's new leader and his nascent administration begin the arduous task of formulating their policy agenda, they would do well to focus on four priorities.

The first is reinforcing Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic trajectory. The "Maidan" was a watershed moment in Ukraine's political history, crystallizing a national consensus that pulled the country out of Russia's geopolitical orbit and reoriented it toward the United States and Europe.

Half-a-decade on, that sentiment still prevails. Polls carried out by Gallup in the run-up to the elections showcased widespread anti-Russian attitudes among Ukrainians, coupled with extensive support for Europe and its institutions. Zelensky can capitalize on these feelings by committing to anchor the country more deeply in the European Union and NATO — and by pledging to expand political, military and economic contacts even further with European nations and with the United States.

The second is providing reassurances to Washington. Zelensky's predecessor, Petro Poroshenko, promised the United States a great deal in terms of domestic reform in exchange for military aid and political support. And some progress on transparency and governmental accountability has indeed been made in the years since.

Make promises for transparency

Nevertheless, Ukraine's famously corrupt and unaccountable system has proven remarkably resistant to change, and the pace of reform has slowed significantly in recent years — much to the chagrin of American policymakers. One of Zelensky's top priorities, therefore, needs to be to dispel the resulting sense of "Ukraine fatigue" that now permeates official Washington. He can do so by making concrete, actionable promises about transparency and anti-corruption, and by laying out a proactive plan to stabilize Ukraine's economic ship of state, which remains rickety despite prior infusions of cash from foreign donors and the International Monetary Fund.

Third, Team Zelensky needs to re-focus on the threat posed by Russia. At the ballot box, Ukrainian voters resoundingly rejected the idea of a softer line toward the Kremlin, something that had been urged by some of the presidential candidates. That is hardly surprising; the view of Russia as an ongoing — and mortal — threat to both Ukrainian sovereignty and continental stability is broadly held across the country's political spectrum.

By contrast, such sentiments have receded over time in parts of Europe, with politicians in places like Germany now advocating the need to establish some sort of *modus vivendi* with Moscow, and pressuring Kyiv to do the same. Officials in Moscow, meanwhile, are clearly hoping that Zelensky's lack of experience will play to their advantage, improving Russia's position in the ongoing political, economic and military standoff between the two countries. In order for Ukraine's new president to prove the Kremlin wrong, he will need to clearly articulate to international audiences the ongoing threat Russia poses to his country — and convince policymakers in Europe that their best guarantee for preventing a repeat of Russian aggression is to reinforce Ukraine's military capabilities and strategic autonomy.

Remember: 'Personnel is policy'

Finally, Ukraine's new president needs to focus on staffing. It is a key tenet of politics that "personnel is policy," and this rule holds particularly true in Ukraine's case. Because of his inexperience, Zelensky's decisions about who he taps to handle the country's key portfolios — among them defense, international diplomacy and finance — could go a long way toward instilling confidence in foreign observers that Ukraine's new leadership is both competent and capable. If handled deftly, these appointments will also give Zelensky, a political outsider, much needed cachet with the entrenched power centers in the country's legislature, the Rada.

Notably, Zelensky's government-in-waiting has already begun moving in this direction. The president-elect's presumptive chief of staff, Ivan Bakanov, made a preliminary trip to Washington in mid-April for consultations with statesmen and Administration officials. This and other early steps should be followed by others that help reassure international audiences, and Ukrainians themselves, that Zelensky's hand on the political tiller will be a steady one.

But will it be? For the moment, at least, Ukrainian voters are prepared to believe that Zelensky is precisely what he has purported to be: a political change agent. It will be up to Ukraine's new leader to prove them right in the weeks ahead.

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