

A VIRTUAL PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE



IN HIJACKED REALITY

**Ukraine: A virtual presidential candidate in hijacked reality**

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## The battle of “old” and “new”

On April 21, Ukrainians will go to the polls for the second round of Presidential elections that may dramatically alter Ukraine’s western course. This election represents a civilization choice which will have a direct impact on Ukraine’s sovereignty and independence. The two contenders are the incumbent president Petro Poroshenko, and the celebrity TV comedian Vladimir Zelensky.

In the West, the choice between opponents is presented as a simplistic dichotomy of “old” against “new”, where old is “bad” and new is the hope for “good”. This narrative does not rest on facts about either candidate, and fails to recognize the reality that the “new” in fact represents a growing pro-Russian and anti-reformist sentiment in Ukraine.

A heavy dose of reality should wake up people deceived by false narratives coming from vested political interests, oligarchic media, and most crucially, Russian propaganda.

A sober look at simple facts suggests that Zelensky is in many ways a “light” “pro-Russian” political project. His victory will invite many compromised political figures of the past back into Ukrainian politics, as well as open the doors for what many Ukrainians describe as “oligarchic revanche”.

## The man with a track record

President Poroshenko is a long-serving politician who owns a vast business empire. He supported Ukraine’s Euromaidan protest, and won the 2014 presidential elections after then president Yanukovich ran away from his post to Russia, with 54% of the vote.

Poroshenko has faced two major challenges during his presidency: defending Ukraine from Russia’s ongoing war on the country, and pursuing large scale pro-EU reforms. He has delivered rather meaningful achievements on both fronts. He led an effective resistance against Russia’s aggression which allowed the country to preserve its independence, and also drove a reform process that has very few precedents in modern world history.

Despite massive achievements, the assessment of his presidency is a hotly disputed matter. Due to highly contradictory expectations in Ukrainian society of what reforms would bring, as well as a shadow of distrust over some of Poroshenko’s actions, there is plenty of criticism of his track record.



One thing, however, is indisputable - his track record is well known.

This is not something one can say about his rival Zelensky who has no political experience, and no history of holding any public office.

## **“New face”**

Zelensky’s electoral campaign is best described as “virtual”. He demonstrably avoids real life interactions with voters and media. His campaign rides on the success of a TV show “Servant of the People” where Zelensky plays a common man who becomes president by chance, resolving the most complicated issues with the simplest of methods. In an (in)famous scene from his show, Zelensky’s character is shown killing all members of Ukrainian parliament with a machine gun as a quick fix to obstruction of reforms and political turmoil.

Zelensky’s campaign has created an image of him as a disruptive leader of a youth revolution. He is presented as a decisive man of action who has the political will to solve the problems of common people. The effectiveness of his solutions seems to lie on the premise of their “honesty” and on his willingness to address the problems directly. The “eagerness to learn” is presented as a compensator for Zelensky’s lack of knowledge and experience of public governance.

In Zelensky’s campaign, the line between the fictional character and real person is deliberately blurred not to undermine his populist messaging and to obscure his echoing of certain Kremlin propaganda talking points. Communication with voters is conducted primarily via short video clips released via social media, his comedy shows, and a few of his team representatives providing inconsistent comments to the media. Ukrainian media does not report what “Zelensky says”, but what “Zelensky’s team said”.

Zelensky’s campaign strategy is to hide the real person behind the virtual candidate from the people. His public appearances are severely restricted to avoid exposing his lack of communication skills and expertise on political matters which betray his unfitness for office. This strategy also helps Zelensky avoid all inconvenient accusations of impropriety. And there are many such allegations.

By steering clear of making explicit statements about policy, Zelensky’s team has managed to wrap his agenda in a shroud of ambiguity that is appealing to very diverse, and often incompatible, electoral groups.

Even Zelensky’s team of advisors was cautiously revealed just two days before elections to save him from damaging criticism. His team is clearly a bad “facade” for powerful actors behind him. It is a mixed bag of people from his personal entourage, officials from the government of



runaway president Yanukovich, and several inexperienced outsiders, some of whom have very questionable competencies. Zelensky's team is a great illustration of how hollow the narrative of "new faces" is.

Supporters describe Zelensky as a charming anti-establishment candidate with a reformist and inclusive agenda. They treat his lack of experience in public office as an asset, not a liability. For them, his inexperience means that he is not entwined in the dirty corrupt connections of the old political elite. To shield Zelensky from criticism, they present him as "unknown", and hence exempt from critical scrutiny, because "no one can really know what he is going to do".

But in his first public appearance in front of voters during the election campaign at the April 19 presidential debate, Zelensky's positions and values on a number of critical issues were laid bare. Notably, while struggling to speak Ukrainian, he repeated Kremlin talking points that Poroshenko had "failed to stop the war", that "rebels" - not Russian occupation forces as recognized by Ukrainian legislation - were fighting in Donbas, and that he was not Poroshenko's opponent, but his "verdict". He also attacked reformist Health Minister Ulana Suprun's widely lauded health care and medical education reforms.

The myth of a "reformist" candidate melted away as he spoke. Zelensky's own words betrayed him.

Zelensky's western lobbyists promote him as a "hope for reform" who is supported by reform-minded Ukrainians. A picture Zelensky's own words undermine.

The proliferation of this perception in the West is best reflected in a rather odd statement made by Deputy Chairman of the Christian Democrats in German parliament, Johann David Wadehul, on Ukraine's first round of elections. The representative of the German Christian Democrats explained Zelensky's electoral support by the "disappointment" with the reform process pursued by the incumbent President Petro Poroshenko. Mr. Wadehul also believes that Zelensky represents those who "demand a more determined fight against corruption and the influence of oligarchs."

Hard facts tell us a very different story which shatter the popular mythical image of Zelensky as a new liberal face supported by Ukraine's youth who will fight corruption, free from oligarchic influence.

Fiction is fun, but facts are better.



## Reality Check

The result of the first round of the Ukrainian presidential elections is probably best compared to Brexit. In Ukraine's case, it is a vote for an exit from reality.

Zelensky's electoral base is also the same as the electoral base for Brexit. According to [social data](#), the big cities, more educated, and wealthier people voted for Poroshenko. Small towns, less educated, and poorer people voted for Zelensky.

Zelensky's political campaign is also best compared to the anti-EU campaign. His campaign is not based on values or rational arguments - it is all about riding the wave of prevailing emotional sentiments.

Zelensky's voters are not unified by any specific values, but by perceptions.

His campaign has managed to harvest the dissatisfaction sentiment and disapproval for Ukraine's post-Maidan governments. But contrary to popular myth, this disapproval does not fall neatly under one overarching umbrella of "dissatisfaction with the pace and lack of reforms" and the "failure to fight corruption". There are many different reasons for the sentiment of discontent, though few actually have anything to do with the pace and quality of reforms (this is addressed below in Part 2 under "Distorted Reality").

An examination of data reveals who Zelensky's supporters really are, and what values they support.

### The "young" rebellion

According to the publicly available data of Ukraine's national exit polls, in [2019](#), only 40% of young people between the ages 18-29 came to vote, and out of them, 57% voted for Zelensky. By contrast, in [2014](#) post-Maidan elections, the number of young people who voted was 44%, and Poroshenko received 51.2% of the young vote. In the [2004](#) Orange elections, the number of young people who came to vote stood at 71%, and Viktor Yushchenko received 57.5% of the youth vote. In fact, the 2019 elections marked a historic low for the youth turnout.

This should dispel the myth about the rebellion of "young" against "old".

## **“Liberal reform supporters”**

According to a [study](#) by the Ukrainian Razumkov Centre think tank, as many as 41% of Zelensky supporters want more government control over the economy while just 47% trust a free competitive market. By stark contrast, 62% of Poroshenko supporters believe in liberal economy, and just 29% believe in the expansion of the government’s role in regulating markets. Zelensky supporters also support more national protectionism in economic policy. A drastically larger number of Zelensky’s supporters want to see the expansion of state-owned enterprises, including the re-nationalization of enterprises that have been privatized over the years, as part of Ukraine’s reform process.

The attitudes towards Ukraine’s health reform, driven by American-born reformer, Ulana Suprun, are even more illustrative. A whopping 53% of Zelensky supporters want to undo the progressive reforms that modernize Ukraine’s health care system and rid it of corruption. Only 28% of Poroshenko supporters disagree with the reform of health care.

Only 36% of Zelensky supporters support the very positive reform of Ukraine’s educational system which modernizes the education process and makes it more compatible with leading Western standards. By contrast, 59% of Poroshenko supporters back the reform, with only 15% opposing it.

These numbers should crush the myth about Zelensky representing “pro-reform” voters in Ukraine.

Ukraine observers who do not understand national politics but who claimed that Zelensky symbolizes demand for “more reform” should finally realize that what we are witnessing in Ukraine is in fact the backlash against liberal pro-EU reforms.

## **“Pro-Western”**

Zelensky’s lobbyists are lulling us into thinking that Zelensky will keep Ukraine on the pro-Western trajectory, but there are more than enough reasons to doubt them.

Anti-western sentiments do not just run through Zelensky’s TV show, they also prevail among his supporters. According to the same study by the Razumkov centre, only 22% of Zelensky supporters want Ukraine to continue cooperation with the International Monetary Fund. This percentage stands at 45% with Poroshenko supporters.



As many as 35% of Zelensky supporters want Ukraine to become a non-aligned country, while 56% support integration with EU and NATO. By very stark contrast, 85% of Poroshenko supporters support EU and NATO integration, with only 12% preferring the non-aligned status.

It has to be mentioned that EU membership is not included in Zelensky's political program. On the issue of NATO membership, his program speaks about a national referendum, which is one of the political causes supported by pro-Russian forces in Ukraine. More worryingly, the latest statement by Zelensky's team downplayed the need for NATO integration even further.

Western Zelensky supporters should be reminded of the foreign policy pursued by ex-president Yanukovich. When he came to power, he promised to preserve the pro-EU political course of reforms but to make Ukraine's policy "pragmatic". We know how it all came crashing down in flames of tires on Maidan.

### ***"Anti-corruption crusade"***

After numerous facts have been revealed about Zelensky connections to the Ukrainian oligarch Kolomoisky, the integrity of people touting him as an anti-corruption fighter should be seriously questioned. At this time, such a claim sounds more like a bad joke.

There are indeed big expectations in Ukrainian society to see high profile corruption cases see justice in the courts. But the fact is that post-Maidan governments in Ukraine made huge progress in cleaning up the country.

Under Poroshenko, Ukraine has introduced unprecedented institutional reform to tackle corruption: the measures of "super transparency" that do not function in any other country in the world have been introduced to control the assets of government officials; brand new institutions fighting corruption were created with the help and even direct involvement of Western backers.

Naturally, people want to see instant justice done, but justice in any country moves slowly. In Ukraine, where judicial vacancies stand at a disruptively high 40% as a result of cleaning the system, it is especially true. Yet very few care about the details.

Pretending that a candidate who is backed by one of the most dangerous oligarchs in Ukraine will bravely push forward anti-corruption effort is self-delusion.



## **“Inclusive agenda”**

Many Ukraine observers tend to ignore that Zelensky’s campaign is run on the narratives that are appealing to the pro-Russian electorate that not so long ago supported the runaway president Yanukovich. Zelensky has become the new “our guy” for them.

By downplaying patriotism and dismissing the revival of Ukrainian language and identity as something that should not be part of government policy, Zelensky’s team has successfully captured the pro-Russian vote. Ukrainians patriots concerned with Ukraine’s national identity do not form part of Zelensky’s support base.

Zelensky’s campaign statements already indicate that he plans to diminish the role of Ukrainian cultural identity in public policy, which is one of the key expectations in Moscow. The majority of Russians refuse to relinquish their colonial attitudes towards Ukrainians, and Putin has more than once publicly denied the Ukrainian identity as a distinct nation. It should not be forgotten that the promotion of Russian cultural identity in Ukraine by ex-president Yanukovich was one of the important drivers of the protest against his government.

It should also not be ignored that Zelensky’s “humour” includes a healthy dose of overt homophobia and racism. Neither racism nor homophobia have any place in an “inclusive” liberal democracy. Quite the contrary. In fact, what Zelensky’s humour and comedy success with Russian oligarchs tells us that he is intolerant, with social values in alignment not with the EU, but with Putin’s Russia.

## ***“Putin lost in the Ukraine elections”***

Many Ukraine observers entirely ignore that the pro-Russian electorate did not disappear after Euromaidan. The majority of Russian sympathizers don’t feel comfortable with explicit support for Moscow at a time of war, but their support for a number of policies betrays that sympathy. Most of those who fall into this category cannot be persuaded by even the most spectacular, liberal, pro-Western reforms. Consider that in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, pro-EU reformists failed to win their hearts because their sympathies are based on identity.

The support for Russia never went away, and in fact, due to the successful inroads of Russian propaganda in Ukraine - a part of Russia’s arsenal of tools of war - it quietly grew.

According to a [March 2019 analytical report](#) by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), despite undeniable evidence that Moscow is waging an unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine, there has been a decrease in the number of people who believe Russia is

responsible for starting the war on Ukraine from an already low 52% of the population in 2018, to a mere 48.5%. At the same time, the percentage of people who blame Ukraine for the war has risen to 16.6% from 15%. The percentage of Ukrainians who believe that Ukrainian patriots are being persecuted in the Russian occupied territories has dropped from 43% to 38%, while the percentage of people who believe Russian speakers are being prosecuted in Ukraine has grown substantially, from 10% to 15.5%.

These trends are another clear marker of the success of Russian propaganda, as there is nothing in reality to substantiate this shift in opinion. In fact, there is a massive volume of reported cases about the prosecution of Ukrainians by Russian occupation authorities in occupied Ukraine, but not a single reported case of Russian speakers facing any trouble or difficulties in Ukraine for speaking Russian.

Zelensky's campaign exploits these growing sentiments, devoid of any grounding in reality, driven by Russian propaganda.

Zelensky also campaigns on the premise that Kyiv can unilaterally "stop the war" which it did not start. His use of the language of "stopping" the war - an indisputable marker of Kremlin propaganda - betrays his intentional targeting of the electorate brainwashed by Moscow's disinformation. The Kremlin regularly speaks of how the current Ukrainian government "does not want to stop the war" as though it is in Ukraine's control to do so. It is exclusively within Russia's power to stop waging war on Ukraine - Moscow started the war, and Moscow chooses to continue it. Ukrainian patriots understand that the only way Ukraine can "stop the war" is by capitulating to Russia, giving up sovereignty, independence, and ceding territory, something patriots are unwilling to do.

Furthermore, Zelensky's "dealmaking" approach to Russia's war has allowed him to gather support from the electorate across the country that shares the sentiment of "war fatigue". According to the KIIS poll mentioned above, as many as 30% of his supporters want the war to be ended at any cost, which implies that they are willing to accept even capitulation on terms favourable to Russia.

Zelensky is in many ways a "light" "pro-Russian" political project. His tilting towards the pro-Russian electorate promises a more turbulent future for Ukraine.

### ***"Anti-establishment***

Zelensky's campaign is based on the confrontation of the "people" and "elites". Most of his supporters are united by distrust for the government - a postcolonial trait of a damaged



Ukrainian society which has suffered genocide and generations of oppression under the Soviet Union.

Casting Zelensky as a fighter of the existing power structure in society is nonsensical - he has no political experience and is new to the political scene.

Not only is he backed by the media group of Ihor Kolomoisky (one of the most notorious oligarchs who has influenced Ukrainian politics for decades), but behind the facade of “new faces” Zelensky is also surrounded by many compromised political figures of the past.

A U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) filing made public on April 17 revealed that Zelensky’s senior economic advisor (who is not on his official team) is Oleh Dubyna, the former head of the Ukrainian energy company Naftogaz. Dubyna is infamous for signing the 2009 gas contracts with Russia - negotiated by then Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and President Vladimir Putin - that were extremely detrimental to Ukraine. Zelensky’s team also includes other political actors who were, in some capacity, affiliated with the government of runaway president Yanukovich or his allies: Oleksandr Danylyuk, Andriy Bohdan, Ruslan Ryaboshapka, and Dmytro Razumkov. What is even more troubling is the very powerful people who stand behind them.

On top of that, Zelensky doesn’t represent any ideological agenda opposing conventional policies. In fact, much of what his political program says has been already implemented by the post-Maidan governments. A number of Zelensky’s statements about implementing desired policies that are supposedly not yet in existence sound truly comical because the government has been implementing exactly these same policies.

## Distorted Reality

These facts should shed light on how distorted the public image of Zelensky is.

We should question how this came to be. We should also ask why, after proving his commitment to reforms, and with social polls clearly demonstrating that his supporters are exactly the people who support reforms, the media portrays Poroshenko and his supporters as the opposite of what they represent.

We should acknowledge that what is happening in Ukraine is not the drive for “more reforms” but the “revanche” of the populist, pro-Russian agenda, compromised by oligarchic influence.

So how was Ukraine’s reality hijacked? The answer is complex and manifold.

### The illusion of mass support for liberal reforms

The root of many distortions was the misconception about a massive demand in Ukraine for reforms. The sacrifices of the Euromaidan protesters made it easy to buy into that claim. However, the largely ignored reality is much harsher and quite dismal.

A number of influential political parties have driven serious opposition to reforms. Their success was resoundingly clear in the first round of presidential elections with over 35% of Ukrainians supporting explicitly anti-reformist political actors.

A [social poll](#) by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) released earlier this week about the expectations of the soon to be elected President also shows a very bleak picture of support for reforms in Ukraine.

The biggest demand is to lower utility and energy fees, with 39.1% of Ukrainians supporting decreased fees. 18.4% of Ukrainians demand that public officials are paid less.

Energy reform which resulted in establishing market prices for gas, and the reform of public governance which resulted in higher salaries for state officials, were strongly backed by Western supporters of Ukraine.

The disapproval of critical reforms should provide a great deal of insight into what happened in Ukraine over the last five years.

## Toxic information environment

Back in 2017, we warned that irresponsible criticism of Ukraine's reforms by Ukrainian media, civil society, and western backers, as well as the insistence of the immediate (rather than gradual) implementation of painful reforms would undermine the reformist government, opening the window of opportunity for populists to exploit. We also cautioned that Ukraine's greatest existential threat was Russia's war, and that it should be recognized and treated as such.

Sadly, social polls about support for political parties show that our concerns were well-founded, and that support for populism has indeed grown in Ukraine.

In KIIS' most recent [social poll](#), support for populist parties has clearly increased. The poll shows "Servant of the People", Zelensky's political party (which is a virtual political project and does not exist in reality), has 25.9% support; the populist, overtly pro-Russian party "For Life" has 15.7% support; and Poroshenko's "Solidarity" party comes in third, with 13.9% support.

Until recently, the impressive achievements of Ukraine's post-Maidan governments were virtually unacknowledged and largely undermined. Western friends and partners only started to vocalize more recognition of the achievements of the government when it became clear that the reputation of a reformist government was unduly damaged, and that the threat of a shady populist government gaining power as a result was very real.

But, for the bulk of the last five years, Ukraine's western friends opted for "sandwiching" Ukraine's government, a strategy of exerting pressure on the government by civil society from within Ukraine and Western actors from outside. Ukraine's government has been slammed non-stop for five years for the "slow" pace of reforms and for constantly "failing" to meet impossible expectations.

The 2019 presidential election campaign has unveiled that many Western critics of the Ukrainian government in fact pursued vested political agendas all along - a number of vocal government critics have now used the fictional "reality" they crafted over the years to support Zelensky.

This resulted in a very toxic media environment both abroad and in Ukraine which erased any positive social effect of reforms, replacing it with anger and disappointment. The reformist government has been pushing through painful reforms that the West backed, but still got punished by the resentment of people who trusted their TV's more than their own experiences.

However, the biggest damage came from the Russian propaganda narratives that have been validated and echoed by the biased political actors within Ukraine and abroad. While the West



supported reforms in Ukraine, Moscow just kept pouring gasoline on the fire of anger and discontent to discredit them.

### ***Russian propaganda interference***

While Western observers have been writing about how “pro-Russian candidates cannot win Ukraine elections”, and how “Ukraine has definitively turned westward”, Kremlin propaganda and disinformation campaigns have been consuming the country. They played an immense role in steering political narratives in Ukraine.

In many ways, the current backdrop of information context is a big success of the Russian propaganda machine. Several Ukrainian presidential candidates whose campaigns echoed Russian propaganda have made those narratives part of the mainstream debate.

Zelensky’s campaign greatly benefited from this, and exploited the narratives of Russian propaganda to tap into social groups not just in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, but also in Central and Western Ukraine. Some of the most damaging narratives echoed by Zelensky’s campaign include: “divisive nationalist government in Kyiv”, “corrupt Poroshenko regime”, “Kyiv is waging war on Donbas”, “Ukraine abandoned residents of Donbas”, and “anyone but Poroshenko”.

### ***Real life of the virtual candidate***

Zelensky is often described as “unknown”, but anyone willing to honestly analyze the available facts can easily put together a rather complete portrait.

Vladimir Zelensky is entirely unqualified for the job of president of Ukraine. His lobbyists like to mention his degree in law, but his degree is from the obscure Kryvyi Rih Economic Institute with a highly questionable academic reputation, and Zelensky was focused on pursuing his comedy career while studying there. Being enrolled in an institution of poor academic repute and focusing on his comedy career rather than on his studies are the likely reasons why he never practiced law after finishing - he was likely not qualified to do so.

Zelensky’s lack of understanding of policies is clearly shown by a notable absence from public speaking or debating. His positions are expressed by the members of his campaign team to provide a cover for his incompetence.

Zelensky is a “man of the people” as long as no one checks his assets declaration. Once checked, it becomes clear he is an immensely wealthy person with extremely limited exposure to the real life of Ukrainians.

Zelensky spent many years of his life living in Moscow. A large chunk of his entertainment business is done in Russia and targets Russian market. He entertained Russian political and business moguls with private shows. His everyday language of communication is Russian. Even the fictional character he plays as President of Ukraine speaks Russian.

Throughout his career, he performed numerous comedy sketches mocking Ukrainian culture and identity. In 2014, after Russia started the military component of its war on Ukraine, Zelensky made a public comment about Ukrainians and Russians as “brotherly people”, a soviet propaganda cliché designed to undermine Ukraine’s claim to nationhood. Later that same year, Zelensky [criticized](#) the government’s decision to ban Russians, including artists, who publicly support Russian aggression against Ukraine from entering the country.

This reveals a great deal about how divisive his cultural policies might be in Ukraine, a country which has been trying to recover from centuries of force Russification under czarist Russia, and then Soviet rule.

## *Oligarchs*

Zelensky’s connection to Ihor Kolomoisky, a powerful oligarch who lost much of his influence over the country’s politics due to Poroshenko’s deoligarchization efforts, is the oligarchic connection most covered by the media. But Zelensky enjoys the support of a number of Ukrainian oligarchs. He is openly backed by Serhiy Taruta and Vadim Rabinovich, and it is speculated that [other oligarchs](#), like Serhiy Liovochkin, Pavlo Fuks, Valeriy Horoshkovsky, and Dmytro Firtash are providing their support in the shadows.

Given the connections of these various oligarchs, it would not be wild speculation that a number of other Russia-affiliated oligarchs interested in getting rid of Poroshenko might quietly provide their support too. With the amount of support behind Zelensky, it is growingly increasingly difficult not to suspect that Zelensky represents an “oligarchic coup” against President Poroshenko. Indeed, speculations are growing, particularly since oligarchs represent the group that lost the most in post-Maidan Ukraine.

Zelensky denies any associations with oligarchs. But the evidence of support from Ukraine’s billionaire oligarch Kolomoisky is too overwhelming to simply trust Zelensky’s word.

Investigative journalists have unearthed a mountain of [other](#) evidence connecting Zelensky to Kolomoisky. Zelensky’s campaign is heavily promoted by popular media outlets owned by

Kolomoisky. For years, Zelensky did business with Kolomoisky's owned 1+1 TV channel. Nevertheless, both Zelensky and Kolomoisky [deny](#) they have any relationship beyond common business interests in TV production.

In March 2015, Poroshenko sacked Kolomoisky from the post of regional governor over Kolomoisky's role in an incident where armed men raided the headquarters of Ukraine's Ukrnafta energy company, seen as Kolomoisky's attempt to preserve his operational control over the cash flow of the majority state-owned company. It is widely believed that from then on, Kolomoisky wanted to exact revenge upon Poroshenko.

A few months after being removed from the post, business partners of Kolomoisky's founded the political party "Ukrop", which he later joined himself. Later that year, Zelensky's TV show "Servant of the people" - which heavily promoted the narrative of "everything is wrong in Ukraine" - was released.

Interestingly, the virtual political party "Servant of the People" was legally founded around the time when Ukraine instigated legal proceedings to the tune of billions in international courts against Kolomoisky to recover funds he allegedly embezzled from his Pryvatbank before it was nationalized by the government.

Kolomoisky is currently locked in into over 150 legal proceedings against Ukraine about his claims over Pryvatbank. Many observers speculate that Kolomoisky hopes to receive generous compensation for his stake in Pryvatbank, or even regain control over it, with Zelensky's help.

It is clear now that the TV show was a vehicle for a long political campaign for Zelensky.

### ***Offshore businesses and hidden assets***

Zelensky's 2017 asset declaration revealed that he and his wife are the end beneficiaries of a number of offshore companies in Cyprus, Belize, and the British Virgin Islands. This fact raises legitimate concerns that the legal structure of Zelensky's companies set up in those tax havens could be used for tax avoidance and possibly tax evasion purposes. Journalists found that Zelensky owns an undeclared [mansion](#) in Italian resort town, Forte dei Marmi, which is a [popular destination for extraordinarily wealthy Russians](#). This makes the suspicions of tax evasion even more credible.

Zelensky denied owning a villa in Italy, yet confirmed his ownership stakes in offshore entities, and reassured that he [transferred the control of his stakes](#). He ignored the demands of Ukrainian civil society groups to release his 2018 income declaration that could provide more insight into the veracity of some of the accusations against him.



## *Connections to the Yanukovich regime*

Several key members of Zelensky's [team](#), like Oleksandr Danylyuk, and [Andriy Bohdan](#), worked in the government of the runaway pro-Russian president Yanukovich, who was recently found guilty of high treason in Ukraine. Some others, like [Dmytro Razumkov](#), were associated with Yanukovich's political party and his political allies.

Investigative journalists also revealed highly suspicious sources of funding of Zelensky's campaign that might be connected to an influential figure in the Yanukovich government, [Andriy Portnov](#), who fled to Moscow in the aftermath of the Euromaidan revolution. This [key player of the Yanukovich regime](#) has, for a very long time, been seen as a front for Putin's man in Ukraine, Viktor Medvechuk.

In March 2014, Portnov was placed on the European Union sanctions list for his alleged role in the misappropriation of Ukrainian State funds by members of the Yanukovich regime, however he legally challenged that decision, and a year later, the EU's General Court lifted sanctions against him. Nevertheless Portnov remains on Canada's sanctions list where he recently failed to win a similar case. In 2018 [media reported](#) that Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) initiated criminal investigation into Portnov on suspicion of treason related to his alleged complicity in Russia's annexation of Crimea. The accusations stemmed from the secret recordings of the phone conversations of Putin's advisor Sergey Glazyev's that were submitted as evidence by the SBU in the high treason case against former president Yanukovich. Portnov has filed a [defamation lawsuit](#) against the SBU. (We could not find any further relevant information on this matter.)

For a short time in 2018, Portnov obtained management control over one of the influential pro-Russian media outlets in Ukraine, NewsOne TV channel. He explained this move by the desire to provide exposure to the 2019 presidential candidates who he believed are censored on the Ukrainian media. Interestingly, Portnov also said that Poroshenko's successor must sit at a table with the Russians and "negotiate" a way out of the "conflict with Russia", which is one of the main lines of Zelensky's campaign.

NewsOne TV channel is known for being a forum for Yanukovich allies and sympathizers, and for its fierce criticism of Poroshenko. In 2018, Ukraine's parliament voted a [resolution](#) calling on the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine to introduce sanctions against the owners of NewsOne for spreading propaganda and acting in the interests of the aggressor state Russia. Consequently, President Poroshenko [recommended](#) that the SBU conduct an investigation into the accusations against this media outlet.

## Draft dodging

Ukraine's Ministry of Defense released information about Zelensky's war time draft dodging in 2014 and 2015, which could potentially lead to a criminal investigation against him.

Zelensky never served in the army, even when his country called upon him to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Avoiding this call to duty casts a dark shadow of doubt over Zelensky's patriotism and commitment to Ukraine and his fitness to be Ukraine's commander in chief.

His campaign called the released documents a "political attack". Zelensky himself didn't offer any explanations.

## *Collusion with Russia*

In addition to concerns about oligarchic connections, there are also accusations of collusion with and support from Russia. Considering the strength of some of the accusations, and how strongly Zelensky's campaign echoes Kremlin propaganda, these allegations call for answers.

Investigative journalists [brought to light](#) that Zelensky maintained business interests in three companies doing business in Russia while Moscow was waging its now half-decade long war on Ukraine. The movie produced by one of his companies even received Russian state funding. After initially lying about not doing any business in Russia since 2014, Zelensky was forced to concede that he indeed was a beneficiary of the three companies that did business in Russia after 2014. To downplay the scandal, Zelensky announced that he [transferred the control of his stake](#) in their parent company in Cyprus to one of his partners.

One of the key members of Zelensky's team - who happens to be Kolomoisky's personal lawyer - has reportedly visited Moscow on several occasion since the beginning of Russia's war on Ukraine.

Bellingcat's investigator Christo Grozev found a "political technology proposal" in a [hacked trove of documents](#) from the headquarters of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia in 2014, with a description of a political campaign very reminiscent of Zelensky's. The hacked document describes an anti-establishment candidate called "Buratino" (Russian for Pinocchio) to be planted as a "comedy candidate" in Ukraine's elections: a non-oligarch, "man of the people" who would be allowed to say "what politicians don't". The key objective of such a campaign was said to drive the anger of the voters at the government.

Giving validity to the veracity of the existence of such a plan, Ukraine's Open Source Intelligence project, Myrotvorets, released an [email hack](#) which purports to prove illegal



financing of Zelensky's electoral campaign by Russian intelligence controlled sources. The SBU is reportedly investigating these allegations.

It cannot be overlooked how much endorsement Zelensky has been also receiving from Kremlin-allied political actors in Russia and Russia-occupied Ukrainian territory.

Most recently, shortly after the April 19 presidential debate, Olga Skabeeva, a popular tv host on Russia's state-owned TV channel, Russia-1, praised Zelensky for calling Russian occupation forces "LNR and DNR rebels" in the debate. Moscow was clearly very pleased that Zelensky undermined a long-standing official position of the Ukrainian government, and undoubtedly anticipates he will continue to do this in the capacity as president.

Despite a very dark shadow over the real person Zelensky, his virtual presidential candidate remains upbeat, funny, positive, and optimistic. And why shouldn't he? A [recent study](#) by the Ukrainian Media Institute shows that 77.8% of negative commentary in all Ukrainian media (most of which is owned by oligarchs) is about Poroshenko. Only 22.3% is about Zelensky.

This imbalanced coverage helps maintain the image of Zelensky as a cheerful, charming, and unblemished character. It also tells us about how compromising facts are prevented from reaching a mass audience. It seems not a stretch to assume that a campaign to keep voters in the dark about the real Vladimir Zelensky is underway.

## Fight for reality

In just five years, while fighting Russia militarily and defending its very existence, Ukraine has undergone major transformations. But this presidential election is not about reforms. The truth about reforms was lost to manipulations.

A responsible public debate of rational arguments was displaced by political technologies exploiting populist emotional sentiments.

Ukrainians are choosing in big numbers to escape the reality of the country struggling to defend against Russian aggression while conducting painful transformations. They were lured by magical thinking and promises of simple fixes that would make everyone's lives better overnight.

If Ukraine is driven off course by Zelensky as president, no one should be surprised. The writing is on the wall.

Without returning to reality and facing the true challenges, Ukraine is doomed to return to its vicious circle of “revolution – progress – revanche”.

Ukraine's example is also a lesson to Western nations about responsible support for democratic liberal transformations abroad. Undermining the reformist governments by demanding the impossible might end in disaster.

It is also a story about the profound impact Russian propaganda has on social reality in other countries. We can expect more “Pinocchio” celebrity anti-establishment political projects popping out around the world and offering voters cartoonish worlds where a superhero of the people can immediately deliver whatever citizens imagine they want. It will be quickly discovered that fighting virtual political superheroes is much harder than fighting real life villains.

Be warned.