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Guest post: will the Willy Wonka of eastern Europe win Ukraine's elections?

Guest writer May 22 11:30 Comment



By Taras Kuzio of the University of Alberta

Ukraine is set to hold its sixth presidential election on Sunday with chocolate magnate Petro Poroshenko riding high ahead of his two rivals: Yulia Tymoshenko, a former prime minister and a political prisoner under the recently deposed regime; and Serhiy Tihipko, a defector from the regime's ruling Party of Regions. In presidential elections held four years ago Tymoshenko and Tihipko came second and third, respectively.

Tymoshenko not surprisingly dismissed Poroshenko's call for her to drop out of the election and rally behind him to end the race in one round. Tymoshenko is trailing Poroshenko but opinion polls in the past have constantly under-estimated her support.

More surprising is Poroshenko's high popularity. His is not a new face; he held a cabinet position under prime minister Nikolai Azarov before remaking himself as a supporter of the Euromaidan protesters. Azarov is one of more than 30 officials from the government of deposed president Viktor Yanukovich to be criminally charged and now sought by Ukrainian and western law enforcement agencies.

As a businessman, Poroshenko's loyalties have been to his business empire, which has grown under each of Ukraine's last three presidents. With business and politics closely tied, pragmatists such as Poroshenko always seek to be on good terms with the authorities.



He first entered parliament in 1998 in the Social Democratic party headed by Viktor Medvedchuk, widely viewed as the most pro-Russian politician in Ukraine. (President Vladimir Putin and Svetlana, wife of Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's prime minister, are godparents to Medvedchuk's daughter Daryna.)

Poroshenko's loyalty to then-president Leonid Kuchma was portrayed in one of the hundreds of hours of conversation taped in the president's office by rogue guard Mykola Melnychenko. Poroshenko told Kuchma in 2000: "You know that I am yours. Whatever you say Leonid Danylovych, I am a member of your team and will undertake any of your orders!"

That year, Poroshenko became a founding member of the Party of Regions launched under the patronage of then Donetsk governor Yanukovich. Another founding member was the eccentric Leonid Chernovetsky (known as 'Cosmo') who later became mayor of Kiev and whose supporters are working in Poroshenko's election campaign.

After losing a leadership vote to Azarov of the Party of Regions, Poroshenko shifted his allegiances to Viktor Yushchenko, with whom he maintained an alliance while not closing avenues to his former Party of Regions allies. During the Orange Revolution Poroshenko brought Azarov on to the Maidan.

In 2005, as secretary of the National Security Council, Poroshenko first fell out with then-prime minister Timoshenko. Her radical anti-oligarch sentiments reflected widespread public views in the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan, posing a threat to the big business with which Poroshenko has always been allied. Yushchenko's political force, Our Ukraine, was perennially split between those who agreed with Timoshenko's anti-elite sentiments and pragmatists such as Poroshenko who sought a grand coalition with the Party of Regions, which he was centre stage in negotiating during 2006 and 2007.

In the 2010 elections those divisions came to the fore when Yushchenko, Poroshenko and other Our Ukraine pragmatists called on Ukrainians to vote against both Yanukovich and Timoshenko. As only 'Orange' voters heeded the call, this helped to elect Yanukovich.

Oligarchs and the 'gas lobby' have supported opposition alternatives to Timoshenko – Arseniy Yatseniuk (currently prime minister) and Vitaliy Klitschko's Ukrainian Alliance for Democratic Reforms. Poroshenko's alliance with Klitschko is a natural one of those willing to work with the gas lobby, former officials of the Yanukovich regime and former Kiev mayor Chernovetsky.

The Euromaidan was a mass uprising against many aspects of Yanukovich's misrule but a central focus was massive abuse of office and corruption. Poroshenko's high level of support is therefore especially surprising as he widely associated in the public eye with the 'gas lobby', representing a sector of the Ukrainian and Eurasian economies that has attracted more allegations of corruption than any other.

If Poroshenko does become Ukraine's next president he will face a multitude of crises: the country's economic and financial bankruptcy, high expectations from the Euromaidan, the need to tackle abuse of office by unaccountable elites, separating business and politics and radical reforms required by recently signed EU and IMF agreements. That is without mentioning the Russian occupation of the Crimea and Russian-backed violent separatism in the Donbas.

Could Poroshenko pull a Willy Wonka and succeed where his former ally Yushchenko failed? Maybe, but only if he changes the habits of a lifetime.

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