



**CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE**  
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# **Ukrainian Elections 2019: Potential Implications for Relations with Russia**

by Andrew Rasiulis  
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# POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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**2**019 is a pivotal year for Ukrainian democracy with respect to its future political course of action, particularly in terms of its relationship with Russia. Ukrainians will vote for their president on March 31. With 39 candidates on the ballot, it is most likely that, due to the requirement for the winner to achieve 50 per cent plus one, there will be a second-round runoff election on April 21 between the first two candidates. This will be the first of two, arguably equally important, elections.

On Oct. 27, Ukrainians will return to the polls to elect members to the Verkhovna Rada (parliament). Under the Ukrainian constitution, the president and the Rada share responsibilities on the key levers of power. The resulting political composition of the Rada will therefore be the second important act in the Ukrainian election process which will determine the country's political course.

### **Russian and Ukrainian Interests**

The violent conflict between Ukraine and Russia erupted in early 2014. As is well known, then-president Viktor Yanukovich decided to reject a draft association agreement with the EU, preferring a favourable bailout loan from Russia, with the attendant move towards stronger relations with Russia. This caused a violent uproar from Western-leaning Ukrainian nationalists, leading to a near civil war situation on the Maidan Square in Kyiv. The upshot was that Yanukovich fled to Russia and the most eastern and pro-Russian oblasts of the Donbass region rebelled against those pro-Western politicians who garnered the Rada's support. Russia moved militarily to annex Crimea and secure its Black Sea naval base in Sevastopol, in the event Ukraine sought to join NATO.

Russian military, economic and political support for the Ukrainian rebels led to the establishment of two breakaway proto-states within the Donbass, known as the Luhansk People's Republic and the Donetsk People's Republic. Germany and France brokered a ceasefire agreement known as Minsk 2 in February 2015 – Minsk 1 was aborted – between Ukraine, Russia and the Donbass rebels. While the line of demarcation has held, frequent exchanges of fire continue between Ukrainian and rebel forces. Implementation of the political terms of Minsk 2 have proven elusive thus far. Essentially, the Ukrainian government has been politically unable to implement the requisite decentralization laws pertaining to the Donbass, including Russian-language rights. Russia, in turn, has refused to allow Ukraine to re-establish control over its border with Russia along the Donbass region.

Russian interests in the outcome of the Ukrainian elections suggest they would welcome the implementation of the Minsk 2 process. Implementation of Minsk would likely satisfy a key Russian objective which is *de facto* Ukrainian neutrality between the West (i.e., the EU and NATO) and Russia. Minsk does not cover Crimea, and for Russia, Crimea's status is non-negotiable, as it is considered to be integral to Russia proper.



For Ukraine, a number of potential options are at stake in the elections. There is now general consensus that war with Russia and the Donbass rebels is not a practical option. Implementation of Minsk, or some other form of negotiated settlement with Russia, remains under consideration by certain factions of the Ukrainian body politic.

Other more remote options mentioned among far right nationalist elements include the proposal for Ukraine within an Intermarium union. This option rejects negotiation with Russia, and moves toward EU/NATO membership. The vision is for a *de facto* neutral Ukraine in some form of political alignment with Poland, the Baltic states and Belarus. Essentially, this is reflective of the embodiment of the old Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth from the Baltic to the Black seas. A variation of this option is a western Ukraine seeking EU/NATO membership.

The mainline option for Ukraine is to continue the current stalemate status quo vis-a-vis Russia. Under this scenario, Ukraine would abide by the general ceasefire provisions of Minsk 2 but not move forward on the political provisions for settlement, which would face significant opposition among the nationalist elements within Ukraine. Rather, Ukraine would continue to pursue the intent to join the EU and NATO.

The Rada strengthened this mainline option on Feb. 7, 2019 when it passed an amendment to the Ukrainian constitution abandoning the provision for non-alignment with military alliances (essentially, neutrality) in place of a stated intent to accede to the EU and NATO. This was by a significant majority of 334 to 17 and illustrated a marked shift of the political critical mass of the Rada away from the policy of *de facto* neutrality advocated in the 1990s under then-president Leonid Kuchma.

This amendment followed on the heels of Ukraine's decision on Dec. 10, 2018 to abrogate the Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Partnership with Russia, starting April 1, 2019. In addition, on Feb. 7, 2019 Ukraine banned Russian electoral monitors under the auspices of the OSCE from overseeing the presidential election.

### **How the Top Candidates Stack Up**

The varied polls show Volodymyr Zelinskiy leading the pack of 39 candidates. The 41-year-old Zelinskiy represents a younger generation of Ukrainian politicians. Zelinskiy is a professional actor who plays a fictional Ukrainian president in a comedy TV show entitled "Servant of the People". He declared his candidacy for president at the end of 2018, named his party Servant of the People and leaped to the front of the polls, where he has managed to hang on despite his lack of political experience.

He has been very vague on policies and uses social media to almost crowd-source his political platform. With regard to relations with Russia, Zelinskiy has stated he is open to negotiations, but not at the expense of Ukraine's sovereignty or territory. He has also invited the United States and United Kingdom to join negotiations along with Germany and France, the original brokers of



the Minsk process. His political detractors point to the fact that he is supported by the powerful Ukrainian oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky and hence beholden to corrupt politics, despite being a new political actor.

Vying for second place are the incumbent, President Petro Poroshenko, and former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko. Poroshenko's policy with regards to Russia is well known and represents the current status quo option. Poroshenko took a political hit at the end of February when Ukrainian journalists exposed a defence procurement scandal involving the first deputy of the National Security Council, Oleh Hladkovsky. Poroshenko subsequently dismissed him.

Tymoshenko is a very well-known political player. She came on the scene with great prominence during the first Maidan revolt, known as the Orange Revolution, in 2004. Tymoshenko served two terms as prime minister and later spent time in prison on charges of corruption. She negotiated a gas treaty with Russia and has experience in dealing with Russian President Vladimir Putin. On relations with Russia, Tymoshenko has spoken in vague terms of seeking a peaceful settlement.

### **The Bottom Line**

The candidate who will become the next president of Ukraine will be known by April 21. Focus will then shift directly to the Rada election on Oct. 27. Relations with Russia in the meantime are expected to remain status quo, although the uncertainty of varied pressures from political actors should not be dismissed. These pressures will likely become more prominent in the lead-up to the Rada elections when the players on Ukraine's political chessboard make their final moves.

## ► About the Author

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**Andrew Rasiulis** completed his undergraduate study in Political Science/History at the University of Toronto in 1978 and received his Master of Arts from the Norman Patterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, in Strategic Studies in 1979. In 1979 Mr. Rasiulis was appointed a commissioned officer in the Canadian Forces Primary Reserve (Governor General's Foot Guards).

He joined the Department of National Defence in 1979 as an analyst with the Directorate of Strategic Analysis, specializing in strategic politico-military issues pertaining to conventional forces. These issues included emerging concepts of conventional defence strategies for Western Europe, as well as the Canadian Government's efforts in the area of conventional arms control. In 1987, Mr. Rasiulis was promoted to Section Head, within the Directorate of Nuclear and Arms Control Policy, responsible for conventional arms control policy. He was also the Department of National Defence representative on NATO's High Level Task Force for conventional arms control from its inception in 1986 to 1989.

In June 1989 Mr. Rasiulis was posted as a Defence Advisor to the Canadian Delegation for Conventional Arms Control Talks in Vienna. Upon completion of his tour Mr. Rasiulis returned to National Defence Headquarters in April 1992 as Section Head responsible for policy on Central and Eastern Europe, including the Department's Military Training and Assistance Program (MTAP) with Central and Eastern Europe. In May 1996, Mr. Rasiulis was also assigned the responsibility of Programme Manager for the entire MTAP. He was subsequently designated as Director, Military Training Assistance Programme (and Eastern European Policy) in 1998.

Reflecting the growth of responsibility within the area of defence diplomacy, Mr. Rasiulis was re-designated Director Military Training and Cooperation in 2009. His responsibilities included the development of the policy for defence training cooperation with developing countries world wide, as well as overseeing its operational implementation.

Mr. Rasiulis' MA thesis, *On the Utility of War in the Nuclear Age*, developed a theory on limited conventional war. It was subsequently published as a Wellesley Paper in 1981 by the Canadian Institute for International Affairs and the Canadian Institute for Strategic Studies. He has also published numerous articles on conventional strategy, arms control and international military training cooperation.

Mr Rasiulis is retired from the Public Service and is now a freelance consultant with Andrew Rasiulis Associates Inc.

## ► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

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