

Ukraine's presidential election 2019

Ukrainians will be heading to the polls twice in 2019, five years after Ukrainians toppled the pro-Kremlin President Viktor Yanukovich, demanding a functioning democracy and an end to kleptocracy. On 31 March, Ukrainians will cast their ballot in the first round of the first presidential election since the Euromaidan revolution. In October, they will elect a new parliament. Amid Russia's ongoing hybrid war against Ukraine, the elections are a test case for the country's democracy, its unprecedented reform process and its European path.

Background: Ukraine's battle for democracy

In 2013, the decision by then-President, Viktor Yanukovich not to sign an [Association Agreement](#) with the European Union (EU) sparked major pro-European [protests](#) in Ukraine. In February 2014, the Ukrainian parliament voted to impeach Yanukovich, who fled Kyiv. Russia responded by annexing Crimea in March 2014, in [violation](#) of international law, and by launching an unprecedented [hybrid war](#) (adding economic pressure and [disinformation](#) attacks to its military aggression) against Ukraine. The [EU](#), the [United States of America](#) and other countries imposed [sanctions](#) on Russia, which retaliated with [counter-sanctions](#).

Ukraine: a test case for international law

The conflict in Ukraine signifies a struggle for respect for [international law](#), which Russia violated through its illegal annexation of the Crimean peninsula in March 2014 and its hybrid war against Ukraine. Ukraine is a priority country in the EU's [Eastern Partnership](#), and the EU continues to [support](#) Ukraine's democratic progress, with the main tool the [Association Agreement](#) (AA), and its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). The European Parliament played a key diplomatic role before and after the Euromaidan, and has led internal [reform and capacity-building](#) efforts for the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) of Ukraine. On 7 February 2019, the Rada [voted](#) to adopt constitutional amendments – proposed by President Petro Poroshenko – including the goal of EU integration and accession to NATO. Fifty per cent of respondents to a January 2019 [opinion poll](#) supported Ukraine's EU integration, and 46 % favoured NATO accession.

The political situation ahead of the presidential election

In the framework of the EU-Ukraine AA/DCFTA, Ukraine is undertaking unprecedented reforms. As public anger over widespread corruption was a key driver for change in 2013, the pressure on Kyiv from its citizens and from the EU to widen anti-corruption [reforms](#), in particular to set up a special anti-corruption court, is mounting. Simultaneously, the country is fighting a number of battles on other fronts. Despite the 2014 and 2015 Minsk agreements and ongoing negotiation efforts, the war in eastern Ukraine continues and has so far claimed around [12 800](#) lives, with over [1.5 million](#) displaced people. Russia's November 2018 attack and seizure of three Ukrainian naval vessels and 23 crew-members off the Crimean peninsula adds to the [security risks](#). Hundreds of international observers will monitor the March 2019 elections, including 850 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) [observers](#), as well as a mission from the [European Parliament](#). Ukraine's decision to block Russian citizens from taking part in the OSCE election observation mission has sparked [criticism](#) from OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

A diversity of candidates in a fractured political landscape

In Ukraine, the [president](#) has significant power over foreign and defence policies. He also holds some executive powers. The diversity of the [44](#) presidential candidates – an historic number – that were registered by the deadline of 9 February 2019 largely mirrors the political mood in the country. Independent polls paint a picture of a divided and undecided electorate in a country where personalities, rather than ideological platforms, dominate the debate. The chances of Russia-friendly [candidates](#) are seen as relatively low. Some 12 % of Ukraine's 44 million inhabitants are disenfranchised, including citizens in Crimea as well as Ukrainian citizens living in Russia, as there will be no polling stations open in Crimea or in Russia. The [intense campaign](#) expected will likely focus on economic and social issues as well as territorial integrity and peace efforts, corruption, and relations with the EU, NATO and Russia.

The main candidates

Recent opinion polls suggest that the following candidates could be among the top contenders for a potential second round on 21 April 2019, if no candidate receives an absolute majority in the first round.

The incumbent: Petro Poroshenko

A successful businessman, whose confectionery empire helped make him one of Ukraine's [wealthiest people](#), Poroshenko (53) was elected president in 2014. His slogan '[Army, Language, Faith](#)' captures the direction his presidency has taken: he successfully pushed for the adoption of a law to limit education in the country's ethnic minority languages (including Russian), sparking a diplomatic [dispute](#) with Hungary. He got US President Donald Trump's administration to supply lethal defensive [weapons](#) to Ukraine. Despite his [successful push](#) for an independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine, public support for him remains [low](#). However, he has an established electoral core and enjoys [support](#) from major oligarchs and their media.

The survivor: Yulia Tymoshenko

A veteran in Ukrainian politics, Yulia Tymoshenko (58) played a [prominent role](#) in the Orange Revolution in 2003 and served as the country's prime minister in 2005 and 2007-2010. She ran for president in 2010 and 2014. In 2011, under then-President Yanukovich, Tymoshenko was charged with abuse of power and sentenced to seven years in prison. She was [freed](#) in early 2014 after the Euromaidan revolution and in the wake of a [special mission](#) by the European Parliament, led by former Parliament President, Pat Cox, and former Polish President, Aleksander Kwaśniewski. Tymoshenko has support from her Fatherland Party, which left Ukraine's pro-European/-NATO government coalition in 2016. Often accused of using [populist](#) rhetoric, she promises to increase wages and lower household energy prices. Her party favours joining NATO and the EU, but her unclear messaging [reportedly](#) causes wariness in Brussels and Washington, DC.

The anti-establishment one-man-show: Volodymyr Zelenskiy

With increasing public distrust in establishment candidates, comedian Volodymyr Zelenskiy (41) appears to be the frontrunner. The appeal of Zelenskiy – star of the popular TV series 'Servant of the people', and the leader of a new party of the same name – is seen as a '[vote of no confidence](#)' in the establishment. Zelenskiy, whose policies seem rather unclear, announced his [decision](#) to run on '[1+1](#)', a popular TV channel that airs 'Servant of the people' and is owned by oligarch [Igor Kolomoisky](#), an opponent of Poroshenko.

The Russia-friendly candidate

Yuriy Boyko (60), a candidate for the 'For Life' party, [intends](#) to 'normalise Ukraine's relations with Russia' through a 'peaceful' strategy in the Donbas. He opposes government involvement in the church issue.

The retired army colonel

Anatoliy Hrytsenko (61) from the Civic Position party is a former career military officer who served as a defence minister in 2005-2007. He opposes concessions to Russia on Donbas and Crimea, runs on an anti-corruption and anti-oligarchy platform and could [struggle](#) to find political support in the Rada.

Russian disinformation campaigns against Ukraine. Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine includes disinformation attacks that are expected to increase in the run-up to the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections. Even though Moscow cannot get an obvious ally elected in March, it is expected to seek to undermine the legitimacy of the vote through unrest and disinformation campaigns. Clashes, cyber-attacks and other security-related developments, accompanied by disinformation campaigns, can also impact the debate. In a recent example of such campaigns, Russia's Azov Sea attack was preceded by false [claims](#) about Ukraine infecting the sea with cholera and that it had tried to transport a nuclear bomb to Crimea. In January 2019, Facebook [deleted](#) 364 pages and accounts linked to Russia's Sputnik news agency for waging disinformation campaigns against states in the Baltic, Central Asia, the southern Caucasus, and central and eastern Europe. FB's move can be seen as part of its efforts to fulfil the commitments of the Code of Practice that a number of online platforms and ad industry representatives signed in September 2018 to help secure the May 2019 European elections. Separately, FB removed 107 pages, groups and accounts, as well as 41 Instagram accounts from Russia. They were engaged in coordinated inauthentic campaigns against Ukraine, which 'shared characteristics' with activities by the Kremlin-linked Internet Research Agency in the 2018 US midterm elections. Following the EU foreign ministers' 18 February 2019 meeting, EU High Representative/Vice-President, Federica Mogherini, confirmed that there is political [consensus](#) on personal, targeted sanctions over the Azov Sea attack, with formal adoption of the legal acts to be finalised in the coming days.

