

Reuters – 21.03.2019

Natalia Zinets

President's re-election pitch resonates in heartland of Ukraine's revolution

Крок переобрання президента знаходить відгук у серці української революції

На кладовищі в західній Україні високий сивочолий чоловік запалює свічки і цілує надгробок свого 35-річного брата Тараса, смерть якого, за його словами, змінила його думку про те, хто повинен перемогти на президентських виборах в цьому місяці. Тарас, волонтер-медик, був убитий в 2015 році, рятуючи поранених солдатів під Дебальцевому під час п'ятирічного конфлікту на сході України уряду з бунтівниками, підтримуваними Кремлем, сказав його брат Ігор Кончевіч. Він помер за вільну і незалежну Україну, про що їх діди могли тільки мріяти за радянських часів, сказав він, і президент Петро Порошенко - найкращий кандидат, щоб утримати її на цьому шляху, хоча він і не закінчив війну, як він обіцяв. «У 2014 році я не голосував за нього», - сказав Ігор, дерматолог, племінник і племінниця якого тепер без батька. «Тепер (я буду) з однієї причини: він проукраїнський, Росія його не підтримує». Така підтримка може допомогти Порошенку пробитися до другого туру і потенційно виграти другий термін. Це говорить про те, що в західній Україні підтримка Порошенка залишається відносно стійкою завдяки його опозиції Росії, підтримки армії, церкви і більш тісних зв'язків з Європою і Сполученими Штатами.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-election-west/presidents-re-election-pitch-resonates-in-heartland-of-ukraines-revolution-idUSKCN1R20HW>

At a cemetery in western Ukraine, a tall, gray-haired man lights candles and kisses the gravestone of his 35-year-old brother Taras, whose death, he said, changed his mind about who should win this month's presidential election.

Taras, a medical volunteer, was killed in 2015 rescuing wounded soldiers near Debaltseve during the government's five-year-old conflict in eastern Ukraine against Kremlin-backed rebels, his brother Ihor Konchevych said.

He died for a free and independent Ukraine, something their grandfathers could only dream of in the Soviet era, he said, and President Petro Poroshenko is the best candidate to keep it on that path, even though he has not ended the war as he promised.

"In 2014, I did not vote for him," said Ihor, a dermatologist whose teenage nephew and niece are now fatherless. "Now (I will) for one reason: he is pro-Ukraine, Russia does not support him."

Such support could help Poroshenko, who has consistently trailed in opinion polls, scrape into the second round and potentially win a second term.

It suggests that at least in western Ukraine, where Poroshenko's polling remains relatively robust, his opposition to Russia and championing of the army, the church and closer ties with Europe and the United States is getting through.

It also suggests some people are willing to swallow whatever disappointment they might feel about his failure to end the war, lift living standards or thoroughly tackle corruption, because they see him as better than the alternatives.

At stake in the election is the leadership of a country on the front line of the West's confrontation with Russia, five years after the Maidan street protests ousted Poroshenko's Russia-friendly predecessor Viktor Yanukovich and the Russian annexation of Crimea.

It is a country still fighting a conflict in the eastern Donbass region that has killed 13,000 people despite a notional ceasefire, a shrunken state propped up by Western aid and sanctions against Moscow.

The election has boiled down to a three-horse race between the confectionary magnate Poroshenko, comic actor Volodymyr Zelenskiy and former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, with Poroshenko second and Zelenskiy extending his lead thanks to his fresh face and strong anti-corruption message.

HEARTLAND OF MAIDAN

It is perhaps not surprising that Poroshenko's pro-Western messages resonate in Lviv, a picturesque city of cobblestone streets and central European charm that was under the Austrian empire until the First World War and is geographically closer to European Union countries than to Kiev.

The region was a driving force behind successive revolutions, including the 2014 protests in Maidan: according to Reuters' calculations, around 50 of the more than 100 protesters killed during the Maidan protests were from the west, 19 of them from the Lviv region alone.

The city is heavily Ukrainian-speaking compared to the Russian-speaking eastern regions. A survey by pollster SOCIS suggests voters in the west care more about the war and less about, for example, rising utility tariffs than the average Ukrainian.

The brother of Lesya Senyk, a 51-year-old kindergarten director, was one of those killed on Maidan, a protest sparked by Yanukovich's decision to renege on signing a political and trade agreement with the EU after pressure from Moscow.

Her brother's sacrifice, she said, means Ukraine has become a proper state with a stronger army and aspirations to join the European Union.

Senyk did not vote for Poroshenko in 2014 but she will now. "I do not know who else could have saved the state in those difficult times, after the Maidan and during the war," she said. "Maybe he's not perfect. But we are not saints."