



## Ukraine's Glass is Half-Full—Giving Up on it Would Be a Terrible Mistake

*By Nicolas Bouchet*

As Ukraine goes to the polls on Sunday to elect its president for the second time since the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, some in Europe and the United States appear to be ready to give up on the country. This would be a grave mistake at a critical juncture for Ukraine. It has made more headway than pessimists claim in addressing its many serious challenges and Western help has been crucial in this. Turning away now from Ukraine would be a sure way to bring about the unraveling of the progress made so far.

Coverage of the election campaign in the Western media suggests that many of the hopes of transforming the country after this show of people power have been dashed. Meanwhile, the Russia-fueled conflict in the Donbas shows no sign of resolution. Against this backdrop, there is a risk that the rest of Europe and the United States, which have invested heavily in helping the post-revolution political and economic reforms in Ukraine, become disenchanted.

According to the polls, Ukraine's presidential contest boils down to a three-player contest between the incumbent Petro Poroshenko, who is accused of not delivering on his reform promises and is tainted by corruption scandals; the controversial former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who comes with a lot of baggage after a long career in Ukraine's murky politics and is making populist promises that would undercut the reforms carried out; and TV comedian Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a blank slate on which voters can project their frustrations and whose connections to the oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky raise eyebrows. As the competition stiffens between the three to make the two-candidate second-round runoff, the campaign has gotten nastier.

### The Comeback of “Ukraine Fatigue”?

There is no doubt that transforming Ukraine into a functioning democracy and modern economy free of corruption and state capture by oligarchs, is proving far more difficult than some perhaps expected in the early post-revolution excitement. “Ukraine fatigue,” never far under the surface, is making a comeback in the West, with gloomy views of the country sliding back from the progress made by surfing the

initial wave of post-Euromaidan enthusiasm and energy. However, Ukraine's transatlantic partners should see the situation as a glass half-full.

For one thing, European and U.S. policymakers and observers should remember what exactly the people of Ukraine are trying to leave behind. This is a country with very little history of independent statehood that was devastated by Stalin's policies and World War II. It was shaped politically and economically by decades of totalitarian communist rule and run



by mostly crooks or worse since its independence in 1991. In the past 15 years, it has experienced two revolutions and had one part of its territory illegally annexed and another at war as a result of Russian aggression for five years now. With such a record, Ukraine could easily have been a violent failed state in the making—a Somalia on the Black Sea. And yet, it is managing to struggle through, making some real progress in shedding these heavy legacies.

## An Unexpected Transatlantic Success Story

The other thing that the leaders in Washington, Brussels, and European capitals need reminding of, or perhaps even need to be made aware of, is that the support of their governments to Ukraine is one of the reasons the country's glass is half-full. The progress that Ukraine has made is in great part due to a civil society that went through a transformative experience with the revolution it spearheaded, and that has had some success bringing that spirit into politics and government since, despite growing obstacles more recently. And, as my colleagues and I have found in a new report, [the European Union and the United States have done surprisingly well in](#)

[working together to support democratic reforms in Ukraine](#), and especially in backing the development of a vital civic sector. Contrary to the negative narratives about the country and about the idea of democracy promotion in general, what has been happening in Ukraine since 2014 is, in fact, a good example of external support backing citizens as they make progress.

This is no small achievement at a time when, with regard to Ukraine and globally, there is less American and European optimism than in decades about the future democracy and even more so about the ability to support it from the outside. What is more, in a time when there are fears that Europe and the United States are drifting apart, it is by working well together that they have been able to have an impact on the ground in Ukraine.

Thus, let us remember that for all its problems, Ukraine is not doing badly for a country that has faced so many major obstacles and that the rest of Europe and the United States together have done a good job there since 2014. They need to stay engaged and build on what they have achieved in the country in the last five years by supporting reforms and the civic actors that are pushing for these. It may not be easy, but there is good reason to fight off Ukraine fatigue.

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## About the Author

Nicolas Bouchet is a fellow and senior editor based in Berlin. From 2014 until 2016, Nick was a TAPIR research fellow with the GMF Europe Program, based in GMF's Berlin office and then in the Washington office. He conducts research on the challenges and prospects for United States and the EU in democracy promotion in post-Soviet countries (especially those of the EU's Eastern Partnership), and on relations between the United States, the EU, and Russia.

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