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Ukraine's new President Poroshenko leads old team

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The newly elected president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, has been sworn into office. During his campaign he promised "a new life" for the country. His team, however, consists largely of Yushchenko-era officials.



At the age of 48, Petro Poroshenko is the youngest of the five presidents who have held office in Ukraine since 1991. He is the first head of state born into a generation of Ukrainians who grew up in the Soviet Union but made their careers in an independent Ukraine. Unlike his predecessors, he speaks fluent English; he is also significantly richer, with an estimated wealth of more than a billion dollars.

Poroshenko will take office on Saturday (07.06.2014), two weeks after his victory in the presidential election.

The businessman owes his political rise to the popular movement that fought against corruption and pushed for Ukraine to strengthen its relations with the West. Last winter hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians protested on Kyiv's Maidan Square, demanding new faces in politics. Poroshenko was among the speakers on the stage, and he was listening carefully to the crowd's demands.

During his election campaign he promised Ukrainians "a new life" of prosperity - free of corruption. Apart from his promise to take back the Crimean peninsula from the Russians who annexed it, his election platform contained

Proximity to the leadership

The owner of several successful candy factories, Poroshenko's political career began in 1998 when he entered the Ukrainian parliament as a representative of the United Social Democratic Party of Ukraine. Critics called the party a "club of oligarchs" because its leaders were rich businessmen. Poroshenko was also a founder member of the Party of Regions that was swept away by the Maidan movement.

Like other oligarchs in Ukraine, Poroshenko has always aimed to stay close to the country's leadership. He served the government in a number of positions, including as head of the Security Council and minister of foreign affairs under the pro-Western president Viktor Yushchenko, but never stayed in one office for very long. He also worked with Yushchenko's successor, the pro-Russian head of state Viktor Yanukovich, and for several months he was his minister of trade and economic development.

While Maidan protesters called for a political changing of the guard politics, Poroshenko's presidency seems to herald the return of Yushchenko's team - starting with the new president himself.

Poroshenko was more supportive of Yushchenko than nearly any other prominent business leader, before and especially during the 2004 Orange Revolution. The two are also close friends, and Yushchenko is godfather to Poroshenko's twin daughters.

Yushchenko's legacy

However, as Yushchenko is now very unpopular, Poroshenko avoided drawing attention to his friendship with the former president during the campaign. But a close look at his team quickly shows that Poroshenko has surrounded himself with officials from the Yushchenko era.

For example, Poroshenko's election campaign was planned by Ihor Hryniv. The 53-year-old member of parliament and former director of the Kyiv Institute for Strategic Studies was once Yushchenko's adviser. He later represented his party "Nasha Ukraina" (Our Ukraine) in parliament.

The 43-year-old foreign policy expert and diplomat Valeri Chaly was also part of Yushchenko's team. During Poroshenko's election campaign Chaly was in charge of foreign policy issues. The 60-year-old Roman Svarych is also back in politics: Yushchenko's former justice minister now consults with Poroshenko on legal issues.

Elsewhere in the country the picture is the same. Viktor Baloha, for example, was the head of Yushchenko's secretariat during his presidency. He headed Poroshenko's election campaign in the western Ukrainian province of Transcarpathia.

No parliamentary party



Poroshenko and Klitschko formed an alliance during the presidential vote

As president, Poroshenko will have less power than his ousted predecessor. The Ukrainian parliament passed an amendment to this effect in February. The true center of power is now the parliament and the cabinet it elects. Poroshenko has already announced that he will work with

the current interim prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk of the "Batkivshchina" (Fatherland) party. Fatherland's chairman is the former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

Poroshenko will also be relying on the recently elected mayor of Kyiv, the boxing champion Vitali Klitschko and his UDAR (Democratic Alliance for Reform) party. The two had already formed an alliance before the election. Klitschko has a strong parliamentary party and while Poroshenko founded a party of his own party, "Solidarnist" (Solidarity) in 2001, it more or less exists only on paper.

But Solidarity has seen recent growth thanks to Poroshenko's newfound popularity. Opinion polls show it leads the field with around 17 percent. Poroshenko has said he wants parliamentary elections to be held this year, and hopes that his party will emerge as the winner of the ballot.

Yuri Stetz and Yuri Lutsenko should be able to help him with that. Stetz, 38, headed Poroshenko's television channel, Channel 5, for more than 10 years. In the summer of 2013 Stetz, a member of parliament, was elected chairman of the Solidarity Party. Lutsenko, 49, was Yushchenko's minister of the interior, was imprisoned under Yanukovych, and campaigned on behalf of Poroshenko. Both are experienced politicians - not exactly the new faces he was calling for just a few months ago.