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In Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy must tread carefully or may end up facing another Maidan uprising

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Stefan Wolff, University of Birmingham, Tatyana Malyarenko, National University Odesa Law Academy

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It's been six years since the start of the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine, which led to the [ousting](#) of then-President Viktor Yanukovich. By the time his successor Petro Poroshenko [was elected](#) in May 2014, the domestic political scene in Ukraine and the geopolitical dynamics in the contested EU-Russia neighbourhood surrounding it had fundamentally [altered](#).

Today, the country's new president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who [replaced](#) Poroshenko in April 2019, is now facing a series of domestic and foreign policy challenges reminiscent, though not identical, to the events that preceded the 2013 Euromaidan.

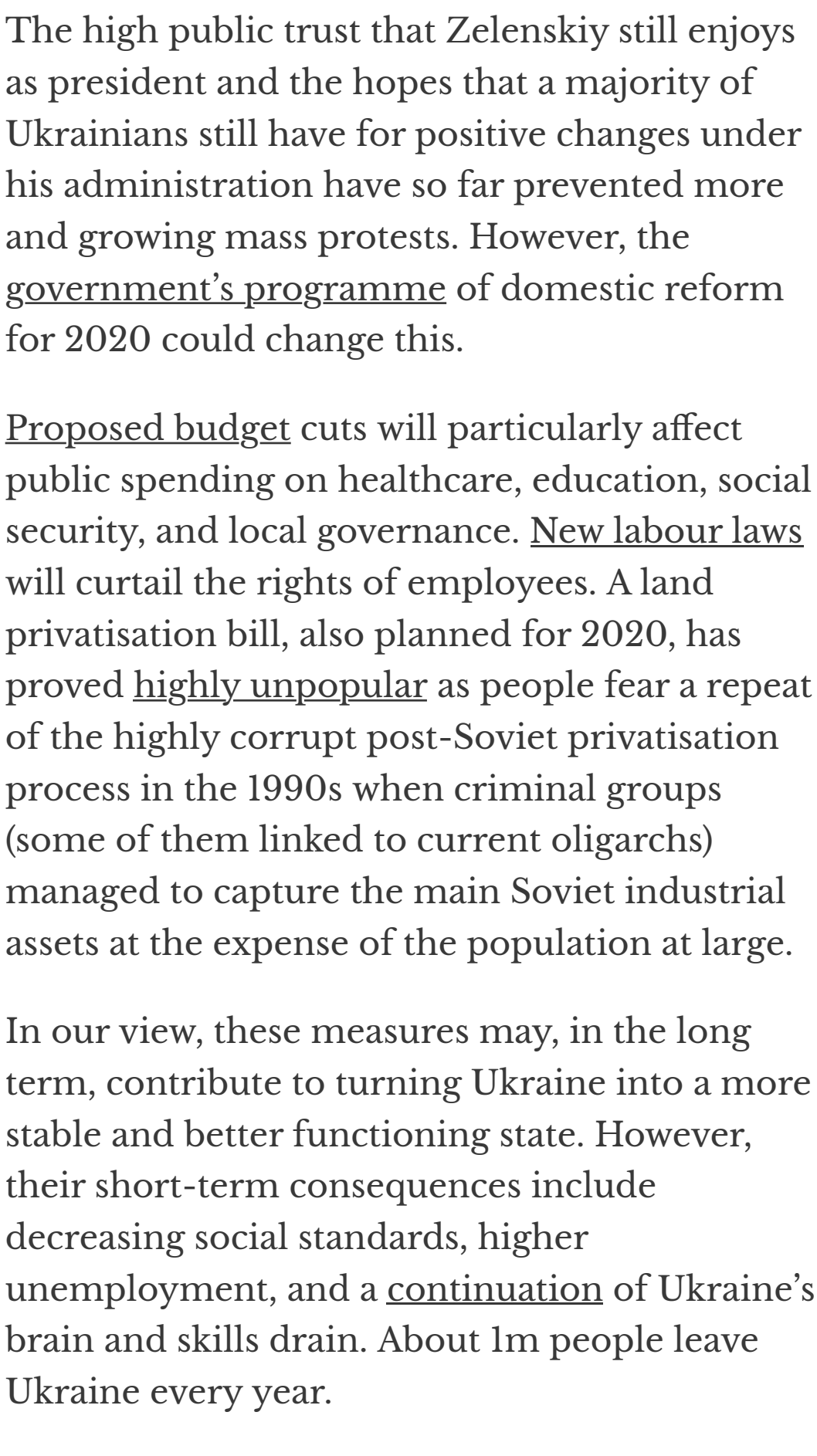
Presidential and parliamentary elections in Ukraine in April and July 2019 created a political situation in Ukraine with an unprecedented concentration of political power. Zelenskyy and his Servant of the People party have a majority in the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's parliament, and so complete control over [the appointment of the government](#). The president also [separately appointed](#) the prosecutor general, the minister of foreign affairs and the minister of defence.

This unique situation gave Zelenskyy and his team the opportunity to kick-start an ambitious programme of policy and law-making in both domestic and foreign affairs. But rather than sustaining popular enthusiasm for his new approach to politics, the so-called turbo-regime of rapid policy and legislative change has already had a sobering effect on the Ukrainian public and triggered the first public protests against Zelenskyy.

Foreign policy controversy

Zelenskyy's decision in early October to [accept talks](#) with Russia on the future of eastern Ukraine [resulted in an outcry](#) from a relatively small but very vocal minority of Ukrainians opposed to any deal-making with Russia. The protests were relatively short-lived, but prospects for a negotiated end to the war in the eastern Donbas region became [more remote](#) in light of this domestic opposition.

Ukraine, Russia, and the separatists [also disagreed](#) over who needed to fulfil which preconditions for negotiations, when and in what sequence.



A 'no to capitulation' rally in Kyiv by those opposed to talks with Russia over the future of eastern Ukraine. Sergey Dolzhenko/EPA

Since then, Zelenskyy has reiterated his commitment to achieving a deal, visiting the disengagement zone and [ordering](#) those war veterans who actively oppose the agreed withdrawal to disarm. In another sign of progress, government and rebel forces [have also started](#) withdrawing from the village of Petrivske. If this direction of travel continues, a meeting of Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany in the so-called Normandy format of negotiations [could](#) be back on the agenda and Donbas could be set for elections. However, a [recent survey](#) in the east indicates a deep divide remains on what people want for the region's future.

[Opinion polls](#) from September show that 23% of Ukrainians support military confrontation in eastern Ukraine, up from 17% a few months previously. As the prospects of reintegration increase under Zelenskyy's administration, so does domestic opposition to it.

The supporters for war with Russia are ex-president Poroshenko and two parliamentary factions, European Solidarity and Voice, whose supporters are predominantly located in western Ukraine. Crucially, however, they can also rely on right-wing paramilitary groups composed of veterans from the hottest phase of the war in Donbas in 2014-5.

The initial motivation of these veterans to protest may have been what they saw as Zelenskyy's [alleged surrender](#) by entering into direct talks with Russia. Zelenskyy has directly confronted them now by ordering them to withdraw from the disengagement zone, but their opposition to the president's plans [continues](#).

Domestic dissatisfaction

What might prove particularly dangerous for Zelenskyy is a possible convergence of so far distinct political camps that oppose different policies of the new government. If the veterans who are at odds with Zelenskyy over his foreign policy choices were to join forces with those who oppose him over a number of controversial domestic policies, the potential for destabilisation would significantly increase.

The high public trust that Zelenskyy still enjoys as president and the hopes that a majority of Ukrainians still have for positive changes under his administration have so far prevented more and growing mass protests. However, the [government's programme](#) of domestic reform for 2020 could change this.

[Proposed budget](#) cuts will particularly affect public spending on healthcare, education, social security, and local governance. [New labour laws](#) will curtail the rights of employees. A land privatisation bill, also planned for 2020, has proved [highly unpopular](#) as people fear a repeat of the highly corrupt post-Soviet privatisation process in the 1990s when criminal groups (some of them linked to current oligarchs) managed to capture the main Soviet industrial assets at the expense of the population at large.

In our view, these measures may, in the long term, contribute to turning Ukraine into a more stable and better functioning state. However, their short-term consequences include decreasing social standards, higher unemployment, and a [continuation](#) of Ukraine's brain and skills drain. About 1m people leave Ukraine every year.

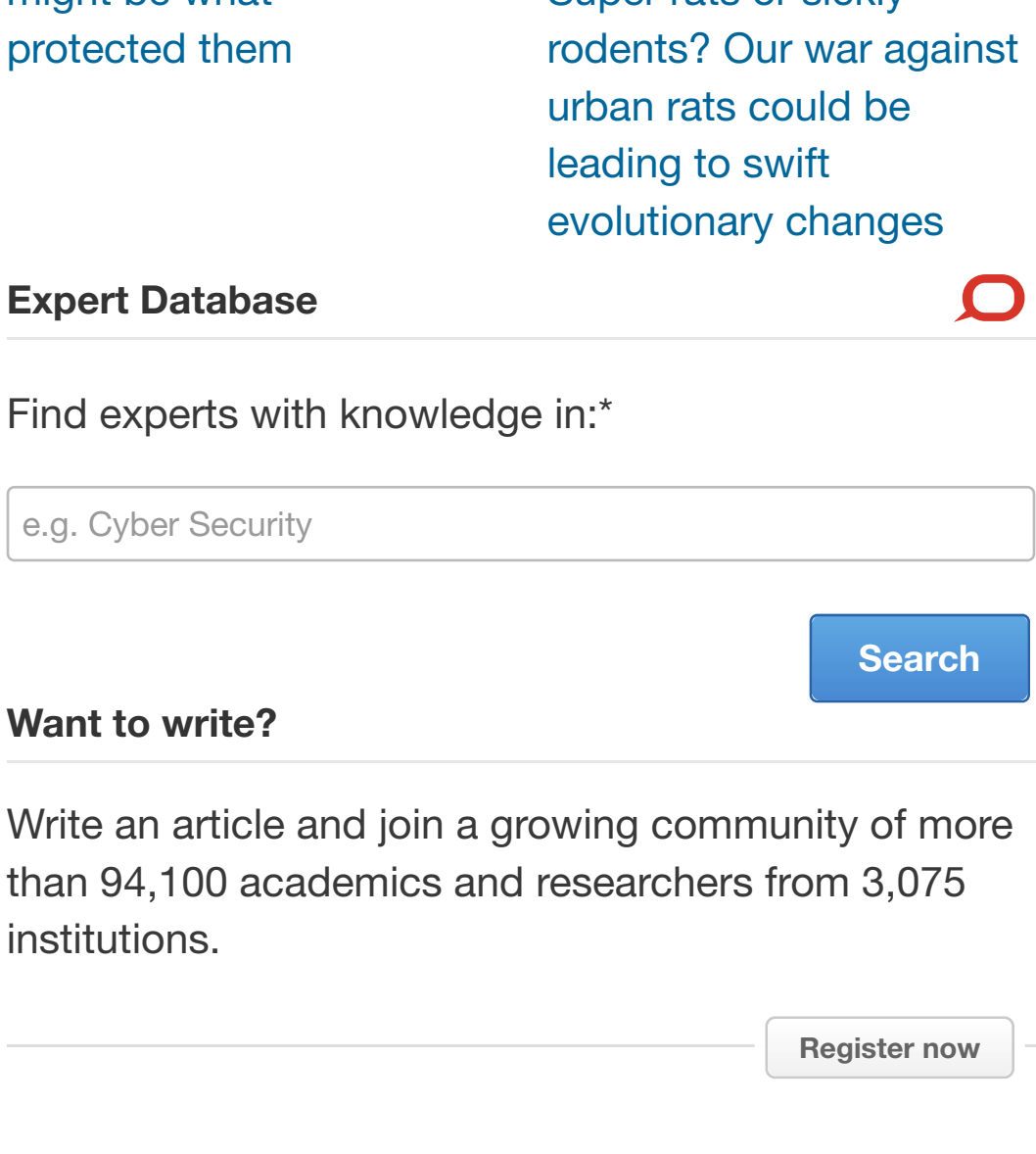
At the same time, "de-oligarchisation" is proceeding slowly. The [return](#) from self-imposed exile of Igor Kolomoyskiy, Zelenskyy's principal backer in the presidential campaign, has intensified oligarchic turf wars, pitting Kolomoyskiy against another businessman Rinat Akhmetov, and his increasing power base in the east. This [power struggle](#) further contributes to continuing instability in Ukraine and decreases the near-term prospects of the political clean up and economic recovery that Zelenskyy had promised.

A deteriorating socio-economic situation and lack of visible and tangible progress on "de-oligarchisation" will not only affect already radicalised veterans but could also galvanise a much larger cross-section of Ukraine's population into yet another mass protest movement.

Geopolitical reset?

Ukraine's continuing domestic instability is, in part, driven by the larger geopolitical game of [competitive influence seeking](#) between Russia and the West in the contested post-Soviet neighbourhood.

By [being drawn](#) into the domestic politics of the US and the ongoing impeachment [inquiry](#) of [Donald Trump](#), Zelenskyy has exposed Ukraine's vulnerability to external pressure, including from its Western partners. Add to this Trump's personal antipathy to Ukraine (allegedly [describing](#) it as a "corrupt country full of terrible people") and the willingness of European leaders [to reset](#) relations with Russia, and Ukraine's room for manoeuvre appears even more diminished.



Euromaidan protests in Kyiv, November 2013. Evgeny Feldman via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA

If Kyiv does resist negotiations with Russia over Donbas this will play well domestically, but it could further strain relations with Ukraine's main backers in the West on whose support it continues [to depend](#) heavily, including for the implementation of much-needed domestic reforms.

For the time being, Zelenskyy still enjoys very high levels of public support of around 70% of respondents in [one survey](#) published in early October. Worryingly, however, only 42% of these respondents trust his government and 47% trust his parliamentary faction.

Zelenskyy's own approval ratings also dropped from their previous high of around 80% by 10% in early September after [he secured](#) a prisoner exchange with Russia. This indicates that political capital may be ebbing away from the reform project with which he is identified because [popular expectations](#) of fast and painless change cannot be met by Ukraine's new political class.

Unless Zelenskyy and his Western partners spend the president's remaining political capital well, a new wave of protests, like those which [drove](#) the Maidan Revolution, may yet be possible. If that happens, there will only be one winner from Ukraine's continuing instability: Russia.

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