

2019 Parliamentary Election

Watch them: Candidates for top jobs in government

By Oksana Grytsenko. Published July 26 at 11:48 am




 Oleksiy Honcharuk, President Volodymyr Zelensky's deputy chief of staff, speaks during Zelensky's visit to Dnipro, a city 500 kilometers south of Kyiv, on July 12, 2019. Honcharuk is among the candidates for the job of prime minister.

Photo by [president.gov.ua](https://www.president.gov.ua)

As Ukraine counted ballots following the July 21 parliamentary elections, President Volodymyr Zelensky and his closest advisors were

[BACK TO TOP](#) ^

assessing candidates for the country's top jobs.

The recruitment process started about a year ago, when Zelensky still was an actor on the Kvartal 95 comedy show. He hadn't even announced that he was running for president yet.

"They approached experts, civil society people, journalists," said Balazs Jarabik, a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who followed the process. "Many people refused because nobody took them seriously. Now they regret it."

Today, Zelensky is president and he has just won an unprecedented one-party majority in parliament. His Servant of the People party received 254 out of 424 seats in the Verkhovna Rada, with 99 percent of the vote counted. To pass laws or approve nominations, they need only 226 votes. Zelensky also has strong approval ratings across the nation.

But Zelensky's political future and the future of the country largely depends on whom he will appoint to the top positions in government and law enforcement. As he recently admitted in a video he recorded while driving his Tesla car, he can trust to no one but his "tight inner circle" because "everybody lies."

Zelensky will likely give the main positions to people personally loyal to him, experts say. The question, however, is whether he has enough candidates that fit that description.

[BACK TO TOP](#) ^

“There’s a small pool to choose from,” said Volodymyr Fesenko, head of the Penta political think tank.

Fesenko said Andriy Bohdan, Zelensky’s chief of staff, who is shadowing the president during almost all his public events, is largely in charge of the ongoing recruitment.

But Jarabik believes Bohdan is just one member of the selection team, which also includes several people from Kvartal 95.

Most of the names of candidates for top posts will be publicly known in late August or early September, when the new parliament starts working, Dmytro Razumkov, head of Zelensky’s party said in a recent interview with the RBK news site.

But some candidates’ names are already surfacing.

Prosecutor general

Ruslan Riaboshapka, deputy head of the Zelensky’s office responsible for anti-corruption policy and legal reform, has a high chance of becoming the new prosecutor general. On July 23, Zelensky named him as a candidate for the post, calling him a “top-notch specialist.”

In an interview with the Kyiv Post on July 23, Riaboshapka confirmed that he had received Zelensky’s offer to take this post back in April and had accepted it.

BACK TO TOP ^

Riaboshapka, 42, has been well acquainted with Bohdan since 2007. They worked together in the Justice Ministry during the times of President Viktor Yushchenko and later in the government's anti-corruption bureau under President Viktor Yanukovich, the corrupt Russian-backed leader ousted by the 2014 EuroMaidan Revolution.

Another prosecutor general candidate named by some media is Vitaly Kasko, a former deputy prosecutor general. But Kasko told the Kyiv Post that he did not know anything about his possible nomination.

Prime minister

The likely candidates for future prime minister are Oleksiy Honcharuk, another deputy head of Zelensky's office, and Vladyslav Rashkovan, deputy head of Ukraine's office of the International Monetary Fund. This is backed by the sources of Kyiv Post and the Ukrainian media.

They both fit the criteria that Zelensky established on July 21, when he told journalists the new prime minister should be "a new face, an expert in economics."

Fesenko said that Honcharuk, 35, was brought to the presidential office by Bohdan and is believed to be his person. Both Bohdan and Honcharuk traveled with Zelensky in his recent tour of Ukraine's regions.

In his interview with RBK, Razumkov called Honcharuk “professional,” but neither confirmed nor denied that he could become the new prime minister.

Rashkovan, 41, worked at the National Bank of Ukraine in 2014–2016 and is responsible for reforming the banking sector. Timothy Ash, a London-based political commentator, calls him an “innovative, multidimensional strategic thinker.” Rashkovan is believed to be closer to rockstar politician Svyatoslav Vakarchuk, Ash and Fesenko said.

Although it is not necessary for Zelensky, his party may form a coalition with Vakarchuk’s Voice party. According to Fesenko, that “would be positively received by Ukrainian society and the West.”

Though Bohdan was also mentioned in the media as a potential head of the new government, Fesenko says this is less likely.

“In this case, he would lose his exclusive influence on Zelensky. And this could be a problem for him,” Fesenko said.

Interior minister

In the times of Zelensky’s predecessor, ex-President Petro Poroshenko, Arsen Avakov, the country’s top cop, was sometimes dubbed the second most powerful official in Ukraine.

During the presidential campaign in spring,

[BACK TO TOP](#) ^

Avakov publicly distanced himself from Poroshenko and the police uncovered and stopped a number of the election violations alleged to have been in Poroshenko's favor. Zelensky never publicly criticized Avakov, although he hasn't been holding back criticism against many other top officials.

This behavior — along with Zelensky's recent remarks that some Poroshenko-era ministers might keep their jobs — brought speculation that Avakov could stay in his post. A series of media reports from outlets owned by oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky, Zelensky's former business partner, added to this rumor.

But the experts say it's unlikely. When Zelensky announced the snap parliamentary elections on May 20, Avakov's People's Front faction in the Verkhovna Rada challenged his move. Avakov took his party's side in that dispute.

For this reason, his relations with Zelensky's team are not perfect. Moreover, Avakov remains too influential.

"Neither Zelensky, nor Bohdan wants to keep Avakov as a center of influence in the political system," Fesenko said.

"I would be surprised if he (Avakov) keeps his post," Jarabik added.

Defense, foreign affairs

The foreign and defense ministers are two of

[BACK TO TOP](#) ^

the most important positions for a country at war that is actively trying to integrate with the European Union and NATO.

For now, both these posts are still held by Poroshenko's ministers. Zelensky wanted to fire Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin in mid-July, but failed. The parliament refused to vote for his dismissal. With the new and friendly parliament, it won't be an issue for Zelensky.

Vadym Prystaiko, 49, whom Zelensky wanted to nominate instead of Klimkin, will likely head the foreign affairs ministry. Still, the testing ground for him will be Zelensky's upcoming visit to the United States.

"If this visit takes place in August, Prystaiko will become the minister," Fesenko said.

Defense Minister Stepan Poltorak also unlikely to stay at his post. Both Fesenko and Jarabik say Poltorak is seen in Zelensky's office as a person loyal to Poroshenko.

But who will replace him remains a major question. Zelensky offered the post to Former Defense Minister Anatoliy Grytsenko back in April, but he refused it. "I doubt he will get this offer again," Fesenko said.

Finance and energy

On July 24, Andriy Gerus, Zelensky's representative in the Cabinet of Ministers, said that Finance Minister Oksana Markarova could

[BACK TO TOP](#) ^

keep her position in the new government.

“She’s a professional minister,” he said.

Gerus, 37, a prominent energy expert, has also been named by several sources as a potential energy minister.

Asked by the Kyiv Post if he may end up in the next government, Gerus said: “Let’s not run ahead of events. We’ll see.”

Fesenko said Oleh Dubyna, the former chairman of state-owned natural gas company Naftogaz, is another potential candidate for the energy minister. “Not many people know this, but he knows Zelensky and is close to his team,” Fesenko said.

In 1999–2001, when Zelensky and his Kvartal 95 were developing their comedy show in Kryviy Rih, Dubyna headed the largest local factory, Kryvorizhstal, which later became ArcelorMittal Kryviy Rih.

Dubyna, 60, became well-known for helping resolve the gas crisis with Russia in the winter of 2008–2009 together with ex-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko — something that has proven controversial to this day.

But he hardly fits the criteria of “new faces” that Zelensky actively promotes.

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[BACK TO TOP](#) ^