

Party of Ukraine's new president is on track for big electoral victory

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Zelenskiy, a former comedian, was elected president in a landslide in April, having cast himself as a political outsider to the country's corrupt ruling class. (AP)

Moscow: Ukraine's new president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, was on track Monday to become the country's first post-Soviet chief to enjoy an outright parliamentary majority – potentially a watershed moment for an untested leader who has vowed to take on endemic corruption.

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Speaking after exit poll data was released Sunday night, Zelenskiy, 41, said that the results put a huge responsibility on him to deliver on his promises, including an end to the 5-year-old war with Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine that has claimed more than 13,000 lives.

“We won't fail the Ukrainian people,” Zelenskiy said, speaking to supporters at his party's campaign headquarters. “Our main priorities, just as for any Ukrainian, I am sure, are ending the war, return of our hostages and victory over corruption.”

Zelenskiy, a former comedian, was elected president in a landslide in April, having cast himself as a political outsider to the country's corrupt ruling class. As soon as he took office, he called early parliamentary elections, hoping to use his momentum to win control of the parliament.

In many ways, his rise mirrors that of President Emmanuel Macron of France, another charismatic political novice who led a newly formed party – a coalition of disaffected veterans of the left, center and right, as well as newcomers – to victory over the political establishment. Macron was 39 when he won the presidency and his party took control of the National Assembly in 2017.

Since Ukraine became independent in 1991, its political life has been mired in infighting that has often paralyzed decision-making at important moments, like Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

For years, Ukrainian politicians favored by the Kremlin fought for supremacy with those who wanted closer ties to the West. But the balance has shifted in recent years, as continued hostility has hardened sentiment against Moscow, and Ukraine has lost control of some of its most ethnically Russian regions.

Of the five parties that appeared to have received enough votes Sunday to qualify for seats in Parliament, only one is considered friendly to Moscow. In Ukraine's electoral system, parliamentary seats are filled through a combination of voting for national party lists, and for candidates at the district level.

With more than 87% of ballots counted, Zelenskiy's party was far ahead in party list voting, with almost 43% of the

vote. The pro-Russia Opposition Platform, led by President Vladimir Putin's point man in Ukraine, Viktor Medvedchuk, was second with about 13% of the vote, and led the voting in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Candidates from the Servant of the People party were leading for 127 of the 199 seats being filled at the district level. Twenty-six districts were not contested because they are under Russian or separatist control.

Beyond political instability, Ukraine has also suffered from the informal rule of its richest tycoons, who control vast slices of the country's economy and exert disproportionate influence through their control of most media outlets.

Zelenskiy vowed to put an end to all that, but he has been scrutinized himself over his connections to one of Ukraine's most powerful oligarchs, Ihor Kolomoisky. Kolomoisky owns the television network that has been buying content from Zelenskiy's production company. Zelenskiy has denied that his business connections with Kolomoisky go any further than that.

The European Solidarity party, led by former President Petro Poroshenko, was in third place, followed by Batkivshchyna, the populist party of former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, and Golos, fronted by the rock star Sviatoslav Vakarchuk.

- NYT