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# Russia's position on Ukraine's elections

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The elections in Ukraine are currently the focus of interest among the political elite and media in Russia. Moscow hopes that the elections for president and parliament in Ukraine (the latter scheduled for this autumn) will open up opportunities for it to carry out some of its plans. To make this more likely, Moscow is trying to deepen the political polarisation in Ukraine by openly constructing a positive narrative about Volodymyr Zelenskiy, who is currently the favourite to win the presidential elections, and trying to boost the standing of Ukraine's pro-Russian politicians before the parliamentary elections.

## Tactical pause before the elections

From Russia's perspective, the presidential elections in Ukraine are of fundamental importance because they represent the start of an election cycle; after the presidentials, parliamentary elections will be held in autumn, followed by local elections in 2020. This cycle will determine the shape of Ukraine's political system over the coming years. From the Kremlin's point of view, a change of government in Kyiv could open up new opportunities in its relations with Ukraine. During the presidency of Petro Poroshenko, who has strong support in parliament, he has been highly critical of Russia and has strongly distanced himself from the pro-Russian forces; the Kremlin's attempts to carry out its plans for Ukraine have also been blocked. After five years of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Moscow has very few instruments left to influence either public sentiment or the election results in Ukraine. The Kremlin has realised that the Ukrainian public is largely negatively disposed towards Russia, and so during the pre-election period the Russian media's aggressive campaign against the Ukrainian government was fairly limited. Moscow has adopted a wait-and-see attitude in the hope that Ukraine's position on key issues will change after the election.

However, in the period immediately before the first round, the subject of Ukraine began to appear more frequently in the Russian media and politicians' statements, and the first round's results brought a definitive end to this period of calm. The most important TV news programmes have ridiculed the electoral process in Ukraine, undermining its legitimacy and democratic nature, and attacked the incumbent president. Columnists and commentators have interpreted the election results as a sign that the Ukrainian public is tired of the confrontation with Russia and wants to normalise relations with Moscow. The Russian propaganda machine has publicised a draft statement from the Duma on non-recognition of the Ukrainian elections. Russia has also loudly criticised legislation planned by Kyiv which would prohibit Russians from participating in election observation missions.

After Zelenskiy's success in the first round, a positive narrative about him began to predominate in the major media. Some politicians have spoken favourably about the Russian-speaking entertainment programmes produced by Zelenskiy's company, such as the cabaret show *Kvartal-95* and the TV series *Servant of the People* (in which he plays the lead role), which are also popular in Russia. They have emphasised that Zelenskiy speaks Russian and has resisted attempts to divide Ukrainians into good and bad citizens (meaning Ukrainian-speakers and Russian-speakers). The Russian media has promoted those of his campaign promises which would benefit Russian interests if they came about; these include his declaration that the conflict with Russia could be ended through a personal meeting between himself and Putin, some of his more sceptical statements about NATO and the EU, and his criticism of the current government's plans to prioritise the Ukrainian language.

**The Russian strategy**

The positive media coverage for Zelenskiy is intended to create a climate for possible political talks. This is demonstrated by a statement from the Kremlin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov on 9 April; referring to Zelenskiy's words, he declared that "President Putin has been open to dialogue from the very start". However Peskov also repeated the Russian demand that Kyiv should formally recognise the puppet leaders of the separatist parastates in the Donbas which Moscow supports. This shows that the Kremlin is still trying to pursue its strategy of forcing Ukraine to formally reintegrate the occupied part of the Donbas and bring about the federalisation of the country. Moscow believes that in the long term this will bring Ukraine permanently into the Russian sphere of influence, allow Russia to gain control of its policies, and prevent it from moving closer to the West.

To achieve its objectives, the Kremlin is trying to weaken the government and cause political instability in Ukraine. Moscow calculates that openly supporting Zelenskiy could deepen the divisions in Ukrainian society. It also hopes that if Zelenskiy wins, the pro-Russian faction in the Ukrainian parliament will become more important because he himself will have no major political base among the deputies. Russia assumes that a president without any strong parliamentary support will have to seek agreement from deputies from different parties, and so it is working to rebuild the pro-Russian faction in Ukraine. Russia's actions in this matter were most clearly signalled by a meeting held in Moscow on 22 March between the Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev & Gazprom's CEO Aleksei Miller, and the Ukrainian politicians Viktor Medvedchuk & Yuri Boyko. The leaders of the pro-Russian faction were 'anointed' in this way before the parliamentary elections in Ukraine scheduled for the autumn. The Kremlin hopes that the Opposition Platform/For Life party which Boyko and Medvedchuk lead will gain enough seats in parliament to wield some influence over Ukrainian policy.

In order to show the Ukrainian public that the economic costs of an assertive policy towards Russia may be very high, on 18 April (three days before the second round of the presidential elections) PM Medvedev announced that the Russian government had decided to limit the exports of oil and petroleum-derived products to Ukraine as of 1 June 2019. The ban on importing a range of Ukrainian goods (mainly engineering, light-industry and metalworking products) will also be extended. According to Medvedev's statement, oil and petroleum-derived products (including LPG) from Russia will be exported on the basis of special

licenses. Russia aims to weaken President Poroshenko by showing Ukrainian society just how dependent on Russian raw materials it still is (around 40% of diesel oil and LPG are imported from Russia). At the same time, Russia's threat to plunge Ukraine into a fuel crisis will give it more tools to put pressure on whoever wins the presidential elections. Meanwhile, the licenses to export oil and petroleum-derived products will probably be a convenient instrument for Moscow to support those oligarchs in Ukraine who cooperate with the Kremlin; the move will also allow the companies close to Viktor Medvedchuk and Serhiy Kurchenko to retain their influence in the Ukrainian energy sector.

**Outlook**

Regardless of who wins the presidential elections in Ukraine, Russia is likely to continue its current policy – avoiding political concessions in negotiations, and keeping the armed conflict in the Donbas at a relatively low intensity – until the parliamentary elections are held later this year, hoping that they will bring new opportunities. Moscow might also make some symbolic gestures of goodwill (such as exchanging prisoners of war), as well as some further moves designed to show the costs of conflict with Russia (such as further economic sanctions). In the near term, however, it is still unlikely that relations between Kyiv and Moscow will be normalised on Russian conditions, because the Ukrainian government has to take the public mood into account; despite their exhaustion at the conflict, the Ukrainian people are clearly opposed to making any concessions to the Russian Federation.