

Kremlin Intensifies War in Donbas to Undermine Ukrainian Government in Elections

Featuring George Barros



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The recent local elections in Ukraine were an important political battleground in Putin's contest to restore Kremlin-friendly rule and annex territory in that country, the objective behind his 2014 invasion of Ukraine. The Kremlin's costly military operations failed to achieve their desired political outcome, resulting instead in a protracted war between Ukrainian armed forces and Russian proxies occupying eastern Ukraine and sophisticated political and information warfare aimed at shaping Kyiv's government. The Kremlin recently sought to manipulate local elections in Ukraine to legitimize Russian proxies in Donbas, the territory they occupy in eastern Ukraine, and include its electorate within Ukraine itself. On this episode of Overwatch, ISW Russia Team member George Barros discusses the outcome of Ukraine's recent elections; the Kremlin's techniques to attempt to influence Ukrainian elections; and the integration of military, political, and information operations in Russia's hybrid war against its neighbor.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War. I'm Jacob Taylor. Ukraine conducted local elections in late October, its first local elections since 2015. These elections occurred under a veil of heavy Russian interference and pressure. I'm joined today by George Barros, a member of ISW's Russia team, who will explain these election's significance for Ukraine and the Kremlin. George, thanks for being here today.

George Barros:

Thanks for having me, Jacob.

Jacob:

So, let's start just with the basics. What happened during these elections?

George:

Ukrainian mayoral and local legislature positions were up for re-election for the first time since 2015. Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, Servant of the People party, performed pretty poorly. The currently available election results and exit polling indicate that, this party's performance has suffered a significant decrease relative to its 2019 baseline. That's when outsider Zelensky came in as a dark horse and swept the country. Zelensky in the April 2019 presidential elections, overcame Ukraine's historical political regionalism by winning a majority in basically the whole country, and his Servant of the People party went on to win an unprecedented supermajority in the Ukrainian Parliament snap elections in July 2019.

This extremely strong baseline is the yardstick from which Zelensky's perceived and real political support in Ukraine emulates. The Servant of the People's poor performance in these October 2020 elections indicate that the party's days as a actual and perceived political juggernaut are over.

Jacob:

So, do we know why President Zelensky's party performed so poorly in these elections?

George:

Servant of the People performed badly in part due to re-invigorated Kremlin military, diplomatic and informational pressure campaigns targeting Zelensky in the run-up and during the elections. The Kremlin initially actually deescalated its military, diplomatic and informational pressure campaigns against Ukraine in summer 2020. The Kremlin essentially decreased pressure on Zelensky in the hope that he would conduct local elections in Russian-controlled Donbass in Eastern Ukraine in October. In mid-July, the Ukrainian government took the possibility of conducting elections in Donbass off the table, and shortly thereafter, almost like clockwork, the Kremlin switched gears and escalated its campaigns.

I'd like to talk about a few examples in concrete terms, how the Kremlin did this. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs resumed accusing Ukraine of undermining their comprehensive July 2020 ceasefire in August. The Donetsk People's Republic, which is a Kremlin-controlled proxy in Donbass, accused Ukraine of undermining the ceasefire on September 5th and killed a Ukrainian soldier on September 6th. This was a significant event because this was the first Ukrainian servicemen combat death since July. The Kremlin's proxies then backtracked on a prisoner exchange in mid-September and made it conditional on Ukraine conducting elections in Donbass.

Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, canceled his participation in an agreed-upon peace talk with Ukraine in September as well. This pattern of behavior is consistent with the Kremlin's history of using peace talks, prisoner exchanges, and deescalation and escalation at strategically important intervals as carrots and sticks in its pressure campaigns to force key Ukrainian political concessions.

Jacob:

Why does Putin want Ukraine to conduct local elections in Donbass? Why does that matter to him?

George:

Thank you for asking that question, Jacob. It's really important to understanding why the Kremlin is involved in Ukraine at all. The Kremlin's main objective is to regain control over Ukraine's political decision-making. That's why the Kremlin intervened in Donbass. Putin wants Ukraine to conduct local elections in Russian-occupied Donbass for three main reasons. First, Ukrainian elections in Russian-occupied Donbass would further Russian efforts to reintegrate Russian-controlled Donbass into Ukraine as a Russian-controlled Trojan horse.

Second, it would legitimize Russia's military intervention into Ukraine, and this could potentially launch the irreversible process of undermining Ukraine's sovereignty. Third, it would open a path to remove constraints on Putin's global ambitions, that being namely a European Union and other Western economic sanctions against the Putin regime. I want to add that, just because Ukraine did not conduct local elections in Donbass in October, doesn't mean that the Kremlin won't pressure Ukraine for it in the future. Ukraine is reportedly considering conducting local elections in Donbass in March 2021, for example.

Jacob:

Now, I know this is a bigger issue, and I don't want to get too far from these elections in Ukraine, but why is the Kremlin interested, fundamentally, in Ukraine? What does it gain by taking control of the Ukrainian decision-making process?

George:

The reason the Kremlin intervened into Ukraine in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass, is really because Putin wants to control Ukraine's political decision-making. And the reason why is because the Russian Federation under President Vladimir Putin is a revisionistic power that seeks to undo the results of the post-Cold War order. Putin perceives that Ukraine is part of the Russian Federation's greater sphere of influence and Putin seeks to undermine Ukraine's efforts to assert its sovereignty and independence and align itself with the West.

Jacob:

Got it. So, the Kremlin did not achieve its desired goals in Ukraine for these elections. Does that mean that we can assess that Russian influence in Ukraine is decreasing?

George:

Not necessarily. Unfortunately, Ukraine backslid on a major anti-corruption reform after the elections. Ukraine's

Supreme Court equivalent effectively eliminated the country's electronic declaration system for monitoring government officials' assets, a major anti-corruption reform necessary for Ukraine's continued cooperation with the IMF and the EU. This development advances Putin's campaign to undermine Ukraine's efforts to join Western structures, such as the EU and NATO. Zelensky seeks to overturn the court's decision, but this is a major Kremlin victory that this backsliding occurred in the first place.

This unfortunate development also indicates that reform progress in Ukraine is not guaranteed. Now, just because the Kremlin may not have succeeded in some areas, doesn't mean that it can't in others. The West and Ukrainian reformers must always remain vigilant across all fronts for these marginal gains the Kremlin seeks to make without other people paying attention.

Jacob:

Russian election meddling is not a new topic and has come up in several countries and in a range of styles, techniques that they've used. In the case of Ukraine, did the Kremlin attempt to influence Ukrainian voters, specifically in these elections, or was it purely pressure like in a military sense or on Zelensky directly?

George:

Yeah, the Kremlin absolutely did attempt to influence Ukrainian voters in this election. And, like you said, Kremlin election interference is tailored to different countries and their local regional dynamics. In Ukraine, the Kremlin intensified information operations aimed at degrading support for Zelensky and his Servant of the People party. So, Ukraine's principal pro-Russian politician, a man named Viktor Medvedchuk, he's actually a key Putin ally in Ukraine, launched a reinvigorated campaign to accuse Zelensky of failing to end the war in Donbass. Ending the war in Donbass and bringing peace to the region is actually a very important issue for Zelensky, because it's one of his key 2019 electoral promises.

And basically, the Kremlin and pro-Russian Ukrainian media exploited the optics of the kinetic events in Donbass, the deteriorating ceasefire, the canceled prisoner swap and the non-occurrence of that peace talk, in order to enhance these efforts. The Kremlin's use of operations, kinetic operations, to support an information operation is actually a key defining feature of Russian hybrid warfare, a topic that my colleague Mason Clark covers in depth in his new paper.

Jacob:

So did these Kremlin efforts work? Were they able to degrade support for the SOP party? The Servant of the People party? I know we've already said the party didn't do well in the elections, but was that a direct result of the Kremlin's effort to undermine them?

George:

Methodologically, it's difficult to assess the effectiveness of these efforts, however, they likely were effective. I'll talk a little bit more about the information operations. So, for example, the Kremlin demonstrated a lot of flexibility to exploit relevant items into its information ops. The Kremlin used the current COVID-19 pandemic to increase support for Ukraine's pro-Russian opposition party in the run-up to the elections. So Medvedchuk actually linked the pro-Russian party with quick access to a viable COVID-19 vaccine. Putin met with Medvedchuk on October 6th and discussed how Kyiv's current leadership is undermining the possibility of Russia distributing the Russian COVID vaccine in Ukraine.

Medvedchuk also used several of his media holdings to promote disinformation claiming that EU vaccine tests for Ukrainian citizens could be unsafe. All of these different information campaigns dovetailed into one another and likely influenced the perceptions on Ukrainian voters. And that's evident primarily in the fact that turn out this

year for Ukraine's local elections was very low. It was only 37%. This is a 10% decrease from the last local elections in 2015.

The narrative about Zelensky failing to deliver on his election promises is also succeeding. Now, this is not to say that Russian efforts were not the only thing that degraded Zelensky's Servant of the People's performance. Servant of the People has been plagued by its own scandals and other issues, independent of Russian interference, that has eroded Servant of the People's overall image as a committed reformation force.

Jacob:

So what is your forecast for Ukraine at the moment? And what should listeners be watching for in news coverage or just events in general that might occur in Ukraine?

George:

I'll provide two forecasts, a short-term forecast and a long-term forecast. In the short-term, the Kremlin may escalate its military pressure campaign in Donbass during the winter of 2020-2021. Ukrainian military intelligence reported indicators of Russian escalation in Donbass on October 27, the camouflaging of new positions, things of that nature. Ukraine is currently preparing to withdraw more of its forces from positions on the frontline in Donbass as part of the Kremlin's preferred peace process.

Now, this in particular is concerning, because the Kremlin's proxies in Donbass abused a similar November 2019 Ukrainian withdrawal by conducting a false flag attack in the disengagement zone just a couple months later in January 2020. The Kremlin likely has increased flexibility to intensify the war in Donbass now that the Kremlin has maximized its gains in local elections. The Kremlin also historically tends to escalate the war in Ukraine during the winter.

Now, for the long-term forecast, the Kremlin will likely exploit Servant of the People's poor performance to impair Zelensky's reelection in 2024. Putin likely will seek to create the impression that Zelensky is a failed, an ineffective leader, as part of Russia's larger effort to make Zelensky's reelection as difficult as possible. We've seen this before. I assess that Putin will likely try to do this very similarly to how Kremlin information operations targeted former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's re-election campaign in 2019. And I assess that Russian economic, military and diplomatic pressure campaigns against Ukraine will likely intensify and support this information operation. Another long-term risk that Ukraine faces is that the Kremlin will likely attempt to exploit the growing prevalence of the regional strongman in Ukraine. Ukraine's de-centralization reforms have helped incumbent regional strongmen perform in local elections. The Kremlin will likely attempt to co-opt these regional strongmen, such as corrupt mayors in Odesa and Kharkiv, as part of the Kremlin's larger subversion efforts in Ukraine.

Jacob:

George Barros, thank you for being here today and sharing your expertise with us.

George:

Thank you, Jacob. Always a pleasure.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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