Putin Will Likely Punish Kyiv for Not Holding Elections in Russian-controlled Eastern Ukraine

November 30, 2020

By George Barros with Joseph Kyle

Key Takeaway: Ukraine conducted countrywide local elections for the first time since 2015 on October 25, 2020. Zelensky’s Servant of the People (SoP) Party’s performed poorly—in part due to reinvigorated Kremlin military, diplomatic, and informational pressure campaigns targeting Zelensky. The Kremlin intensified these campaigns in fall 2020 after Zelensky rejected holding local elections in Russian-controlled eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin will likely exploit SoP’s poor electoral performance to impair Zelensky’s reelection campaign in 2024. Zelensky is more vulnerable to Russian pressure and subversion following the October 25 elections. Ukraine backslid on a key anticorruption reform, a development that could undermine Ukraine’s efforts to become a liberal democracy and join Western structures. Kremlin pressure is likely compelling Ukraine to disengage from positions close to the frontline in Donbas. The Kremlin may escalate its military pressure campaign against Ukraine in the winter of 2020–2021.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky resisted intensified Russian pressure to hold regular Ukrainian elections in Russian-controlled eastern Ukraine in October. The Kremlin tried to coerce Ukraine to include occupied Donbas in Ukraine’s nationwide local elections on October 25, 2020. Kyiv’s inclusion of Russian-controlled Donbas in Ukrainian elections would have undermined Ukraine’s sovereignty, legitimized Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine, and increased Kremlin control over Kyiv’s decision making.

Russian President Vladimir Putin punished Zelensky for refusing to conduct elections in Russian-controlled Donbas. The Kremlin conducted a coordinated pressure campaign against Ukraine before the elections to impair Zelensky’s Servant of the People (SoP) party’s electoral performance by intensifying ongoing Russian military, diplomatic, and information campaigns.

The Kremlin increased military and diplomatic pressure against Ukraine in late summer 2020—after Zelensky took Donbas elections off the table.1 Ukraine’s parliament passed a resolution on July 15, 2020, against holding elections in occupied Donbas.2 The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs resumed accusing Ukraine of undermining the ceasefire in Donbas in August.3 A Kremlin-controlled proxy in Donbas accused Ukraine of undermining the ceasefire on September 5 and killed a Ukrainian soldier on September 6—the first Ukrainian serviceman combat death since July 21.4 The Kremlin’s proxies backtracked on a prisoner exchange on September 14 by making it conditional on Donbas participating in October elections.5 Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov canceled his participation in agreed-upon peace talks in September.6

The Kremlin’s recent pattern of behavior is consistent with the Kremlin’s history of using peace talks, prisoner exchanges, and strategic de-escalation and escalation in its pressure campaigns to force key Ukrainian political concessions.7 The Kremlin still seeks local elections in Donbas, possibly as soon as March 2021.8

The Kremlin used an information operation exploiting COVID-19 to increase support for Ukraine’s pro-Russian opposition party in the run-up to the elections. Ukraine’s principal pro-Russian politician—Viktor Medvedchuk, a key Putin ally in Ukraine—linked the election of the pro-Russian opposition party with quick access to a viable COVID-19 vaccine.9 Putin met Medvedchuk on October 6 and claimed that Kyiv’s current leadership is undermining the possibility of the Kremlin distributing the Russian COVID-19 vaccine in Ukraine.10 Medvedchuk also used his media holdings in Ukraine before the fall 2020 elections during fall to promote disinformation claiming EU vaccine tests for Ukrainian citizens could be unsafe.11
The Kremlin intensified information operations aimed at degrading support for Zelensky and his SoP Party. Medvedchuk reinvigorated efforts to accuse Zelensky of failing to end the war in Donbas, one of Zelensky’s key 2019 election promises, in fall 2020. Kremlin and pro-Russian Ukrainian media exploited the optics of the deteriorating ceasefire in Donbas and the canceled prisoner swap to enhance these efforts. These campaigns—along with Zelensky’s own scandals and reform backsliding—likely suppressed Ukrainian turnout, which dropped significantly since the last local elections in 2015.

This shift in tone marks a significant change in the way the Kremlin initially framed Zelensky. These observed information tactics and attack patterns targeting the incumbent political force in Ukraine’s 2020 local elections are consistent with previous Kremlin influence campaigns in Ukraine. The Kremlin initially helped elect Zelensky by attacking then-incumbent President Petro Poroshenko while framing Zelensky’s candidacy with reserved optimism during the spring 2019 Ukrainian presidential election, for example.

**SoP performed poorly in the October 25, 2020, local elections.** Mayoral and local legislatures positions were up for reelection for the first time since 2015. SoP received approximately 17.6 percent of the national vote and did not win any major mayoral positions. This is a significant decrease in SoP’s performance compared to its performance in 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections, and a major blow to Zelensky’s image as a popular leader. Zelensky won 73.22 percent of the national vote in the April 2019 Ukrainian presidential election. His SoP party won 43.16 percent of the national vote and 57.77 percent of single-member districts in July 2019 snap parliamentary elections—an unprecedented supermajority. SoP technically gained regional council seats in the October 2020 elections from a baseline of zero seats, since SoP did not exist in 2015, but the dramatic drop in vote percentages made those apparent gains a defeat in reality.

### April 2019 Ukrainian Presidential Election Results
(Second Round at the Oblast Level )

![Map of Ukraine showing election results](image)

*Above: Zelensky performed extremely well in Ukraine’s April 2019 presidential election. His party performed poorly in October 2020 local elections relative to this baseline.*
Below: These two maps illustrate the performance decrease SoP suffered since its 2019 debut and the increased marginalization of explicitly pro-Western reformist parties that came to power after the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution.

**Assessed Political Orientations of Ukrainian Regional Councils (Oblasna Rada) in 2015**

- Pro-Western affiliated party majority in 2015
- Pro-Russian opposition party majority in 2015
- Regional strongman party majority in 2015
- No regional council elections due to Russian military intervention
- Occupied Donbas in October 2015

**Assessed Political Orientations of Ukrainian Regional Councils (Oblasna Rada) in 2020**

- Pro-Western affiliated party majority in 2020
- New Regional party in majority (assessed likely pro-Western)
- Likely oligarchic interest-dominated party majority
- Regional strongman party majority in 2020
- No regional council elections due to Russian military intervention
- Occupied Donbas in October 2020

Map by George Barros and Joseph Klyc
Institute for the Study of War ©2020
Zelensky is likely more vulnerable to Russian pressure and subversion following the October 25 elections. The Kremlin has likely gained leverage and flexibility to intensify political pressure and subversion campaigns now that the local elections are effectively over. More overt Russian subversion efforts would have likely undermined Kreml efforts to promote pro-Russian political forces in the run-up to the elections, although the explicitly pro-Russia For Life party performed poorly regardless. The Kremlin no longer faces this constraint in the short-term. The Kremlin likely seeks to use the new political status quo to further marginalize more explicitly pro-Western reformist parties that came to power after the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution.

Ukraine backslide on a major anticorruption reform after the elections. Ukraine’s supreme court equivalent effectively eliminated the country’s electronic declaration system for monitoring government officials’ assets—a major anticorruption reform necessary for Ukraine’s continued cooperation with the International Monetary Fund and European Union (EU)—on October 27, 2020. This development advances Putin’s campaign to undermine Ukraine’s efforts to reform to join Western structures, such as the EU and NATO. Russian influence in Ukraine likely played a role in subverting this key reform. Zelensky seeks to overturn the court’s decision, but it is a major Kremlin victory that this backsliding occurred in the first place.

Forecast:

The Kremlin may escalate its military pressure campaign in Donbas during the winter of 2020 and into early 2021. Ukraine is preparing to withdraw more forces from portions of the Donbas frontline as part of the Kremlin’s preferred peace process. The Kremlin’s proxies in Donbas abused a similar November 2019 Ukrainian withdrawal by conducting a false-flag attack in the disengagement zone in January 2020. Ukrainian military intelligence reported numerous indicators of Russian escalation in Donbas on October 27. The Kremlin likely has increased flexibility to intensify the war in Donbas now that it maximized its gains in local elections.

The Kremlin will likely exploit SoP’s poor performance to impair Zelensky’s reelection in 2024. The Kremlin will likely exploit the optics of Zelensky’s poor electoral performance to amply impressions that SoP’s overall influence is decreasing. The Kremlin will likely amply this narrative to pressure Zelensky for concessions and make his reelection as difficult as possible, similarly to how Kremlin information operations targeted former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko’s reelection campaign in 2019. The Kremlin’s intensified information campaign against Zelensky will likely coincide with escalating Russian economic, military, and diplomatic pressure campaigns against Ukraine.

The Kremlin will likely attempt to co-opt Ukraine’s regional strongmen. Ukraine’s decentralization reforms have helped incumbent regional strongmen perform well in local elections. The Kremlin will likely attempt to co-opt regional strongmen—such as Odesa’s and Kharkiv’s mayors—as part of the Kremlin’s larger subversion efforts in Ukraine.

---