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Russia and Ukraine Fight, But Their People Seek Reconciliation

By Bloomberg

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Stanislav Krasilnikov / TASS

Ukraine is in the middle of a presidential election campaign in which its larger neighbor plays an outsize role.

The war with Russia-backed separatists, which has lasted five years and claimed 13,000 lives, weighs heavily on the race, as do fears of Moscow's interference. Three months ago, Ukraine's Central Electoral Commission shut down polls at its five Russian consulates—3 million Ukrainians live in Russia, so those wishing to vote must travel to Ukraine or consulates elsewhere.

Volodymyr Fesenko, of the Kiev-based Penta political research firm, said it was "a symbolic act that confirms a systemic conflict with Russia."

That kind of symbolism has been useful to President Petro Poroshenko, who after

placing second in the March 31 vote faces comedian Volodymyr Zelenskiy in a runoff scheduled for April 21. Though other candidates have made corruption under Poroshenko's watch a theme of their campaigns, he's emphasized Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ongoing fighting in eastern Ukraine.

But while the countries are locked in military conflict, with a long history of disdain and disagreement, the consulate issue illustrates just how intertwined these former members of the Soviet Union remain—economically, culturally and personally.

Indeed, a poll released last month shows Ukrainians are becoming less likely to look negatively upon their Russian counterparts. And the feeling, the survey indicates, might be mutual. (Russian-leaning candidates did better than expected in the March 31 vote.)

Despite Russia's attack on Ukrainian vessels in the Kerch Strait and its imprisonment of two dozen Ukrainian sailors and scores of others, attitudes among people on both sides seem to be thawing, according to the poll. Conducted in February, the survey by the Levada Centre in Moscow and the Kiev Institute of Sociology included 1,600 people in Russia and 2,042 in Ukraine.

Some 77 percent of Ukrainians said they have a positive attitude toward Russians, while 82 percent of Russians felt similarly disposed toward Ukrainians. As far as their feelings toward Russia as a whole, some 57 percent of Ukrainians said they felt favorably, up from 30 percent in May 2015.

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Feelings toward governments were a different matter. Ukrainians remain very negative about Vladimir Putin—69 percent view the Russian president and his government as bad or very bad, while 85 percent of Russians expressed a negative attitude about Poroshenko's administration, according to the poll.

On an economic level, five years of shooting and bombardment haven't changed Russia's status as Ukraine's top trading partner by nation. And while flights are banned, buses and trains leave Ukraine for Moscow every day. Many Ukrainians still have business in Russia (Zelenskiy owned Russian companies, as did Poroshenko).

Back in 2011, a poll conducted by the Kiev-based Research & Branding Group said 49 percent of Ukrainians claimed to have relatives in Russia.

Interviews with Ukrainians living there now reveal a mix of emotions when it comes to how the election—and the fighting—will end.

Valery Fyodorov is from Horlivka, a mining town in eastern Ukraine. Now a cab driver in Moscow, the 33-year-old said he's an ardent supporter of Russian intervention in his native country, but hopes that after the election Ukraine and Russia will make peace.

Fyodorov said he separated from his first wife because she supported Ukraine in the war. After she fled the occupied region of eastern Ukraine with their child, he married a former

classmate who, like him, sides with Russia. His new wife, Kateryna Fyodorova, joined him in the conflict zone in 2014. They now have a child of their own.

At the time, Fyodorov said he was earning only $125 a month working in a coal mine. He eventually found a job at a pipeline project in the Russian city of Yaroslavl, where he said his income increased 10-fold. By last summer, Fyodorov moved his family to Moscow, where he now drives a Yandex Taxi, the Russian equivalent of Uber. His Kia Solaris sports the flag of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic on the windscreen. He doesn't support either candidate in Ukraine's election.

"Of course everyone back home would be relieved if Russia incorporated us like Crimea, but even I understand that this would be illegal," Fyodorov said. He favors the eventual reintegration of the occupied east into Ukraine—but with amnesty for separatist fighters.

Oleksiy Sobolev, 37, also hails from eastern Ukraine, but his story couldn't be more different. In 1999 he moved to Kiev, where he set up a video production agency. Sobolev said he enthusiastically joined the 2014 revolution, bringing supplies to the tent camp that grew in the capital's main square. Afterward, he and his wife, Anna, a Russian, left for New York, but soon they were forced to relocate again—to Russia, where their ailing parents now live.

Sobolev said he feels guilty about living in Russia and called Ukraine's decision to shut down polling stations reasonable. "Just like I wouldn't argue with people who accuse me of earning money in a country that has attacked mine, I also think that my country shouldn't take into account votes cast in the aggressor country," he said. He supports Poroshenko, who he considers "a lesser evil."

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While Sobolev has qualms about living in Russia, Ukrainian book editor Natalia Solomadina, 49, does not. She moved there from Kharkiv in 2010—citing better pay and the chance for her daughter, a budding violinist, to enroll in a prestigious Russian music school.

Solomadina worked for a Russian publishing house in Ukraine until her company offered her a job in Moscow. The new role came with a fourfold salary increase, she said, though the cost of living in Moscow is significantly higher than in Kharkiv. A few years later, she took a job with an art publisher, which included travel to international book fairs.

Her parents remain in Ukraine, living on a monthly pension of $100, she said. While her mother is chronically ill, Solomadina said she can help them more by staying in Moscow, where she makes enough money to send some home. To do so, however, requires giving cash to friends traveling to Kharkiv, since Ukraine banned wire transfers from Russia.

Solomadina said she recently became a Russian citizen, but it took years of navigating the bureaucracy to do it. When she had only visitor status, she was required to renew her permit every three months, which meant collecting documents and taking an HIV test. With every application, she would have to line up at 4 a.m., with no guarantee of making it to the front. Becoming a citizen was no less byzantine. Since applying in Moscow was considered a lost cause, she traveled to Maloyaroslavets, a town 130 kilometers away, to process her papers. She

would travel there over and over again, refiling her documents after officials rejected her for what she said were minor mistakes.

Solomadina said she still supports Ukraine and attends almost every anti-Putin rally in Moscow with her daughter, both wearing ribbons painted in Ukraine's national colors. Like Fyodorov, she hopes for peace but isn't betting on it. "My daughter is moving to Prague soon," Solomadina said, "so I know my escape route."

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