

Putin Ally to Ukraine's Probable New Leader: Do Deal and Get Territory Back

By [Reuters](#)

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Arina Lebedeva / TASS

Ukraine's new president could regain control over the separatist-controlled east of his country within months and get cheap gas and major investment from Russia if he repairs ties with Moscow, the Kremlin's closest ally in Ukraine said.

Viktor Medvedchuk, a prominent figure in Ukraine's Russia-leaning opposition, outlined the prospect in an interview before a presidential election runoff in Ukraine on Sunday which polls show political novice Volodymyr Zelenskiy should easily win.

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He said the Kremlin was keen to know more about Zelenskiy, a 41-year-old Russian-speaking TV comedian who has no political experience, to understand if he is someone it could do a deal

with, something it failed to do with incumbent Petro Poroshenko who polls show will be soundly defeated by Zelenskiy.

"They don't have any expectations in Moscow," he said. "They want to see what happens afterward, who will be in his (Zelenskiy's) entourage, and what he will do and with whom."

A Ukrainian citizen, Medvedchuk does not represent Russia, but his words carry weight due to his close friendship with President Vladimir Putin and track record as a go-between between the two nations.

Medvedchuk said he had known Putin for 19 years, that the Russian leader is godfather to his daughter, and that he had held talks with Putin in Moscow as recently as two weeks ago.

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The Kremlin has made clear it will be glad to see the back of Poroshenko but has not commented on Zelenskiy, saying only that it is watching candidates' statements closely and hopes any new president can implement a peace deal on Donbass, eastern Ukraine, which has been under separatist control since 2014.

When asked about Medvedchuk's advice for Ukraine's new president on Friday, Dmitry Peskov, a spokesman for Putin, said he greatly respected Medvedchuk, calling him "very active" and "important" when it came to his humanitarian work as an intermediary between Moscow and Kiev.

Peskov, who confirmed Medvedchuk's recent meeting with Putin, said Ukraine didn't need to strike a specific deal with Putin or Moscow, but did need take steps to build mutually beneficial relations with Russia.

When asked what expectations the Kremlin had of Zelenskiy, Peskov said: "We would always like to hope for the best. Of course we want to hope that the person who is elected Ukraine's president will not be from the party of war. And we want to hope that this person will take a different perspective on relations between Ukraine and Russia."

Testing the waters

Medvedchuk, who said he had only met Zelenskiy once "eight or nine years ago" and had no contacts with him, appears to be testing the waters on Moscow's behalf.

Medvedchuk has brokered prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine and held talks in Moscow last month with Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev about gas prices.

At that meeting, he said he and an ally secured a pledge of a 25 percent discount for Russian gas if Kiev agreed to resume direct gas purchases from energy giant Gazprom instead of via European countries as it has done since the end of 2015.

Russia's main focus is returning separatist-held Donbass to Kiev on its own terms. This could help Moscow win some relief from sanctions imposed by the European Union over its 2014 annexation of Crimea and its backing for the pro-Russian Donbass uprising.

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Poroshenko, Ukrainian president for the last five years, balked at what he saw as the unfavorable terms of the so far unimplemented Minsk peace deal agreed at a 2015 summit with Russia, France and Germany. That called for Donbass to be given a special status and for an amnesty for separatist fighters among other things.

So far, Zelenskiy has said he wants peace in the east and to breathe new life into stalled talks. But he has also said he does not want to implement parts of the Minsk deal either, that Putin should be regarded as "an enemy," and that an information war may be needed to try to win the hearts and minds of people living in Donbass.

For now, said Medvedchuk, Zelenskiy was on the wrong policy track. But he said there was hope he might alter his stance once elected.

"Maybe he'll come round to the idea that for the sake of peace you need to do this," said Medvedchuk. "Nobody is talking about having to make concessions or give something back. We're talking about the need to return people and territory."

Putin might be willing to release 24 captured Ukrainian sailors as a goodwill gesture, Medvedchuk said, adding that billions of dollars of Russian money would flow into Ukraine's economy if economic ties between the two neighbours, which have been disrupted by sanctions, were restored.

"We're not saying that we have to kiss or hug each other again. We're talking about restoring pragmatic economic relations," he said, adding that Ukraine had lost \$20 billion a year in exports to Russia because of Kiev turning its back on Moscow after Russia's actions in 2014.

Need to talk

Medvedchuk's pitch to patch up ties with Moscow is unpalatable for many Ukrainians who view Russia as a strategic enemy, particularly in the Ukrainian-speaking west of the country.

But it has support in the Russian-speaking south-east and is designed to appeal to those weary of a 5-year-old war estimated by the United Nations to have killed over 13,000 people.

If pro-Russian separatists handed Donbass back to Ukrainian government control, some EU countries have suggested they would be ready to lift sanctions on Russia, though other countries only favor sanctions relief if Moscow returns Crimea as well.

An agreement on how to implement a peace deal over eastern Ukraine could be reached "within several months" and implemented on the ground within "six to eight months," said Medvedchuk, saying any talks on the matter should be between Kiev, Moscow and the two pro-Russian separatist breakaway territories.

"We could do it all within a few months. We need to sit down and talk. It (the detail in the Minsk accord) has already been spelled out. We just need to determine the order of doing things."

Medvedchuk said he would advise Zelenskiy on the subject if asked and that his party, "Opposition Platform - For Life," which is second in the polls, would potentially be ready to cooperate with Zelenskiy in parliament after elections in October on a case-by-case basis.

Zelenskiy has indicated he would not want to form a coalition with Medvedchuk's party and has not said if he would be ready to work together on an ad hoc basis.

Cold economic logic now dictated the need for a rapprochement with Moscow, said Medvedchuk.

"If we don't do it and continue with this anti-Russian policy and hysteria our economic life will deteriorate further."

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