The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Ukraine President-Elect Zelenskiy's Positions on Russia, Explained

April 22, 2019



Volodymyr Zelenskiy **Zuma / TASS**

Volodymyr Zelenskiy will be inaugurated as Ukraine's new president in about a month with questions still swirling about his true policy positions toward neighboring Russia.

A native Russian speaker with no political experience, Zelenskiy has been accused by critics of having adopted a soft stance toward Russian aggression — including the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Moscow's support for separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Related article: Ukraine's Election Result Pleases Both Russia's Opposition and the Kremlin

The politician has even been accused of accepting financing from the Kremlin and of being the preferred choice of Russian President Vladimir Putin — who had a rocky relationship with outgoing Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.

We looked back at Zelenskiy's interviews and public statements to see what the incoming

Ukrainian president's positions on Russia really are.

Zelenskiy's positions on Russia before his presidential run:

— Shortly after Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014, Zelenskiy said he was open to touring the Black Sea peninsula with his comedy troupe, but ruled out vacationing there "as long as there are armed people."

— In March 2014, he said: "I really want to address Mr. Putin. Dear Vladimir Vladimirovich! Do not allow even the hint of a military conflict to happen. Because Russia and Ukraine really are brotherly nations... If you want, I can beg you on my knees. But please, do not put our people on their knees."

— In August 2014, the politician sparked a Russian investigation after he performed for Ukrainian troops on the frontline in eastern Ukraine and donated 1 million hryvnia ($37,200) to their cause.

— While touring the frontline, he was accused by Russian media of making inflammatory statements. He said that his Russian colleagues were brainwashed and thanked Ukrainian soldiers for "defending us from all kinds of scum."

Campaign promises regarding Russia and foreign policy:

— Zelenskiy promised to bring home the 24 Ukrainian sailors who are under arrest in Russia after being captured in a naval incident near Crimea earlier this year. The candidate said that freeing the sailors would be his "number one task."

— The president-elect has stated that talks are unavoidable between Ukraine and Russia" because there's a "real war" between the countries. He also said that "there can't be any compromise on Ukraine's sovereignty and independence. We don't sell our people and we don't sell our territories."

— He has stated his support for finding alternative sources for oil imports other than Russia after Moscow banned exports to Ukraine last week.

– Zelenskiy promised to hold a referendum on Ukraine's accession to the European Union and NATO.

Positions on Crimea and Donbass:

— Zelenskiy said that he had a plan for a "powerful information war" to achieve a ceasefire in the Donbass. The plan includes launching pro-Ukrainian, Russian-language broadcasts in the region and worldwide.

— Zelenskiy ruled out granting special status to the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, whose Kiev-controlled parts went heavily in Zelenskiy's favor during Sunday's runoffs. He said there's "no point" in negotiating directly with the Moscow-backed rebels and endorsed deploying UN peacekeepers in the region.

— He has said that Crimea's return to Ukrainian control would only be possible under new

leadership in Russia. "The so-called 'referendum' cannot be considered as an act corresponding to the free will of Crimean residents."

Does Zelenskiy have financial interests in Russia?

— Claims appeared on a Ukrainian hacking group's website before the election runoffs earlier this month alleging that Zelenskiy's campaign had received financing on behalf of longtime Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov and Russian billionaire Konstantin Malofeev. Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) said last week that it was verifying the information as part of a criminal case.

— Faced with accusations that he visited Russia at the onset of the war in eastern Ukraine in April 2014, Zelenskiy admitted that he had been working on a Russian film project that wrapped up in early June of that year. Since then, he has repeatedly declined to travel to Russia for his film premieres and festivals.

— Zelenskiy's Kvartal 95 production company took a 30-percent hit after cutting off all ties and leaving the lucrative Russian market following the annexation of Crimea.

— The then-presidential candidate denied reports in January 2019 that he still owned three active Russian film and television production companies through an offshore scheme. Zelenskiy said he pulled out of his stake at one of the companies a week later.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/04/22/ukraine-president-elect-zelenskiys-positions-on-russia-explained-a65341