The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

What the Return of Kremlin Ally Medvedchuk Means for the War in Ukraine

By Konstantin Skorkin

January 22, 2023

Irina Yakovleva / TASS

Viktor Medvedchuk, for a long time a leading pro-Russia figure in Ukrainian politics, had until now been lying low since he turned up in Russia last year. A personal friend of Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Ukrainian politician was detained trying to flee Ukraine last year, and was subsequently brought to Russia as part of a prisoner exchange. Now the publication of an article by Medvedchuk in the Russian newspaper Izvestia appears to herald his return to the public arena.

The concept for his comeback is clear: the Kremlin apparently still sees Medvedchuk as the leader of the pro-Russian political bloc in Ukraine, and is only prepared to discuss peace terms with him, not with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. It suggests that the

Kremlin is frantically looking for a way out of the dead end it has backed itself into in Ukraine.

Medvedchuk's publication echoes Putin's 2021 article on Ukrainian-Russian relations. It repeats the usual grievances against the West, reproaches the ungrateful Ukrainian public for selling out their Slavic brotherhood to the West, and reminds readers that the industrialized Donbas region had long fed the rest of the country.

On a practical level, the article calls for the establishment of some sort of center of emigration, a "government in exile," perhaps, that would speak on behalf of the Ukrainian "party of peace" supposedly driven out of the country by President Zelensky. "A political movement of those who did not give in, who did not renounce their convictions even while fearing death or prison, who do not want to see their country become the setting for a geopolitical shoot-out," as Medvedchuk pompously puts it.

Kyiv was ready for Medvedchuk's return. The Ukrainian government swiftly stripped him of his Ukrainian citizenship and mandate as a parliamentary deputy, and meted out the same fate to his closest business partner, Taras Kozak, and two more pro-Russian parliamentary deputies, so that they cannot claim to be representing Ukraine.

Shortly before the article was published, Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, said that Kozak was trying to build unofficial diplomatic bridges with Europe in order to lobby the pro-Kremlin agenda. Judging by the passage in Medvedchuk's article in which he writes that "no one has any time for the Ukrainian party of peace in Europe or the United States," if there was such a mission, it was clearly unsuccessful.

Related article: Putin Ally Medvedchuk, 55 Servicemen Freed in Swap With Ukraine

Until his surprise reappearance, Medvedchuk had seemed destined to slip quietly into the shadows: the assets he has accumulated in Russia would have allowed him to live comfortably. Yet it seems that in Putin's eyes, the former leader of the pro-Russian Opposition Platform—For Life party remains a key figure in Ukrainian politics. The determination with which the Kremlin continues to stake everything on his hopeless case is astounding. Even at the height of his party's success, Medvedchuk himself was never remotely popular in a single region of Ukraine: he always topped the polls of least popular politicians.

True, he enjoyed a reputation as a master of behind-the-scenes intrigue, but even in that respect, he was never particularly effective. His machinations led to internal squabbles rather than outright victories. For this reason, it is highly doubtful that Medvedchuk could ever become a unifying figure, even within pro-Russian political emigration circles.

It was Medvedchuk who brought about the collapse of the Opposition Bloc, which had sought to be the successor of the now defunct former ruling party, the pro-Russian Party of Regions. He used his ties with Moscow to get his rivals in the pro-Russian camp added to Russia's sanctions lists.

But by the beginning of 2022, his control over the party was slipping, and a more moderate wing had emerged under Yuriy Boyko and Serhiy Lyovochkin that was distancing itself from Medvedchuk's toxic figure. Right now, none of Medvedchuk's former associates who remain

in Ukraine would ever collaborate with him, since doing so would risk being charged with treason.

Russia has wanted to establish some kind of "Ukrainian government in exile" that would suit its needs as far back as 2015. But this latest attempt is unlikely to have much more success than previous efforts. At best, it may take on the role of a kind of recruitment center, enlisting people to go and work in the puppet administrations in Ukraine's occupied regions—though here, too, the Russian authorities increasingly prefer to rely on their own tried and tested officials.

It's not hard to see what's in it for Medvedchuk: his ambition and anger are too great for him to just roll over and accept defeat. Even the nebulous position of "president in exile," therefore, is preferable to political oblivion. But what does the Kremlin hope to achieve?

Related article: Zelensky Says Revoked Ukrainian Citizenship of Putin Ally

The idea of a puppet government would only be relevant and realistic if the Kremlin's blitzkrieg had succeeded and it had managed to take Kyiv. Once that failed, the Kremlin could still have gone down the path of trying to create a "parallel Ukraine" in the occupied territories, from Kherson to the Donbas. That would have made it possible to preserve the myth of the "allied forces," and would also have made it easier for domestic audiences to stomach the subsequent retreating: after all, it wouldn't have been Russia's territory, but that of a friendly state.

But Putin went all out. He didn't stop at annexing the Donbas, but also announced the annexation of partially occupied regions in southern Ukraine. That leaves no room for the Ukrainian "party of peace" that Medvedchuk intends to imitate, and means that any decorative figures that could be held up as "good, anti-fascist Ukrainians" have lost their purpose. Russia is no longer liberating a fraternal nation in the spirit of the Soviet "international duty"; it is putting back together its historical lands through an act of outright imperialism.

The latest resurrection of the old idea of a "good Ukraine," therefore, shows that Russia has gotten stuck in a political dead end. Zelensky's government stubbornly refuses to agree to Moscow's terms, and Western military assistance has helped the Ukrainian armed forces to inflict a series of painful defeats on Russian troops, including taking back territory that the Kremlin had prematurely declared part of Russia. Nor is there any sign of the divide within the Ukrainian elites and mass discontent with Zelensky that the Russians have been expecting since last February.

If no "party of peace" is emerging organically, Moscow appears prepared to create one artificially in order to hold peace talks with Medvedchuk instead of Zelensky: effectively, with itself. Many Russian hawks, however, hold Medvedchuk (among others) responsible for the failed blitzkrieg: after all, he apparently misinformed the Kremlin for years about the situation in Ukraine. The hawks were also livid that officers from the Azov battalion of the Ukrainian army were exchanged for Medvedchuk in the prisoner swap. Any initiatives with his involvement, therefore, will come under fierce criticism.

Still, Putin is remaining true to his strategy of launching several competing and incompatible political projects at the same time, and watching from outside the fray to see which will prove most successful. But there is also a more worrying subtext to Medvedchuk's resurrection: that of possible preparations for a massive new offensive Russia is reported to be planning. It may be that the Kremlin hopes to send in its newly minted peacemaker on the baggage train of that offensive.

This article was originally published *by The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.*

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/01/22/what-the-return-of-kremlin-ally-medvedchuk-means-for-the-war-in-ukraine-a80001