The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Why Is the Kremlin Insisting on Ukraine Holding Elections?

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September 15, 2025



A composite of Presidents Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky. **Gavriil Grigorov and Nhac Nguyenn / various sources / AFP**

The Kremlin has been signaling that Russia will not sign a peace agreement with Ukraine while President Volodymyr Zelensky, whom it considers to be an illegitimate ruler, remains in power. Russian officials want to see Kyiv hold presidential elections.

Not, of course, because they are believers in the democratic process, but because they think that a vote could trigger a political and social crisis in Ukraine. After all, Russian President Vladimir Putin's understanding of democracy is so warped that he sees it only as a source of instability.

The issue of a meeting between Putin and Zelensky has been one of the biggest stumbling blocks in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine peace negotiations mediated by the United States. Both Zelensky and U.S. President Donald Trump are keen for a meeting to take place. But the

Kremlin is desperately trying to remain non-committal. Putin does not want to refuse Trump outright, so he keeps imposing additional conditions that must be met for an encounter to take place — for example, that it must be in Moscow — and stalling for time.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov recently said that even if there were to be a presidential summit, it would be impossible for Putin to sign any legal documents because Zelensky is an illegitimate leader. That the Kremlin has chosen to take this approach reveals a lot about how Putin sees the world.

Claims by Russian officials about Zelensky's supposed illegitimacy began in earnest after Zelensky's presidential term limit formally expired last year. Under Ukrainian law, however, Zelensky remains the legitimate leader of his country. Martial law (which was imposed at the beginning of the full-scale invasion and remains in place) forbids any elections from being held in wartime, and the Ukrainian constitution states that a president continues to rule until his successor is elected.

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However, the erstwhile legalist Putin is apparently not satisfied by any of these arguments. The Kremlin continues to insist that Ukraine must first choose a legitimate president, and only then can there be a proper peace deal.

The roots of this stubbornness lie in the nature of Russian autocracy. In an autocratic system, everything depends on the one ruler: politics, public opinion, and even the existence of the state itself. Accordingly, the Russian leadership projects this vision of how things work onto other countries, including Ukraine. It believes that if Zelensky were replaced, Ukraine might even cease its military resistance.

Putin rules Russia with the help of political managers, and he well understands their ability to influence elections and manipulate public opinion. This, in turn, means the Kremlin sees free and fair elections not only as highly unpredictable, but also as a time of vulnerability that can be exploited by internal and external enemies. The opposition demonstrations that broke out in Russia after widespread fraud in the 2011 parliamentary elections only entrenched Putin's views on this topic.

For many years, Putin has opined about "Western efforts" to interfere in Russian elections. At the same time, though, election interference is something close to Putin's own heart, with Moscow regularly supporting friendly political forces in "unfriendly" democratic countries in the hope that they might win power, or at the very least destabilize the country via protests and political crises.

However, it's unclear who the Kremlin could back if presidential elections in Ukraine were to take place. One candidate could be Putin's old crony, Viktor Medvedchuk, who was released from Ukrainian prison in 2022 in exchange for a group of Ukrainian prisoners of war. He now lives in Russia, supports the Other Ukraine movement, retains a team of political managers, and publishes articles about Ukraine's future.

There is also former Ukrainian prime minister Mykola Azarov, who fled to Russia in 2014 and

now holds forth about "creating a movement to unify all those who want Ukraine to have a normal trajectory of development." And then there is former president Viktor Yanukovych, another fugitive from the 2014 Euromaidan revolution. Yanukovych spoke publicly for the first time in three years on Sept. 1, when he supported claims made by Putin at a recent meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation that the war in Ukraine started as a result of a coup in 2014 and attempts by the West to get Kyiv to join NATO.

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It is difficult to judge whether or not the Kremlin actually believes any of these men could be a political success in today's Ukraine. But the reality on the ground is unambiguous: they could not. There is only one figure who could be considered pro-Russian included in Ukrainian surveys about possible presidential elections: parliamentary deputy Yuriy Boyko, who was energy minister and deputy prime minister under Yanukovych — and he polls at about 1.5%.

Given the lack of support for any pro-Russian politicians in Ukraine, it would be a more sensible tactic for the Kremlin to try to destabilize the country more generally. A myth of unity under one ruler is a key part of the Putinist system, and the authoritarian worldview dictates that competitive elections undermine this unity. The Kremlin likely believes that Ukrainian elections could weaken support both for the war and for Ukraine's current rulers within certain important social groups — for example, the military.

The Kremlin might also be calculating that some Ukrainian regions, which it still thinks of as pro-Russian (primarily the Kharkiv and Odesa regions), would dispute the outcome of elections. Russia's leadership remembers only too well how a Ukrainian political crisis in 2014 handed it the opportunity to annex Crimea and back a rebel movement in eastern Ukraine. But Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 showed just how radically things had changed. The Kremlin's hopes that Ukrainians would welcome the Russian army proved to have been a grave miscalculation.

After three-and-a-half years of brutal fighting, there is even less basis to believe there is any significant pro-Russian sentiment in Ukrainian society. Polling suggests Zelensky's main electoral rival would be Valery Zaluzhny, the former commander of the Ukrainian armed forces: hardly someone who can be suspected of harboring any pro-Russian sympathies.

Nevertheless, the Russian leadership has gotten used to trusting its own convictions over the facts on the ground — however clear those facts might appear to others. For this reason, the Kremlin continues to believe that presidential elections could weaken Ukraine from within and will keep insisting that a vote takes place as soon as possible.

This article was adapted from the original published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

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s-a90528