

EUROPE

# Ukraine Plan to End Conflict With Russia Meets Resistance

President Volodymyr Zelensky plans to withdraw Ukrainian forces and holding elections in territories controlled by Russian-backed separatists



Demonstrators rallied in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, some holding a sign that reads 'No to Capitulation,' to protest a plan by President Volodymyr Zelensky to resolve the country's conflict with Russia. PHOTO: PYOTR SIVKOV/TASS/ZUMA PRESS

*By Ann M. Simmons*

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KYIV, Ukraine—Thousands renewed protests against President Volodymyr Zelensky's plan to end a simmering conflict with Russia by withdrawing Ukrainian forces and holding elections in Ukrainian territories controlled by Russian-backed separatists.

In mass rallies across the country on Monday, including in Kyiv, demonstrators showed their displeasure with the plan for the country's eastern Donbas region, where a five-year war has killed some 13,000 people. The people, many of whom also participated in demonstrations earlier this month on the matter, fear their novice leader is being outwitted by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who they believe wants to steal part of their homeland.

"I think Mr. Putin is trying to trick Ukraine and conquer this country," said Serhiy Bevz, a far-right nationalist and a veteran of the Azov Battalion a Ukrainian National Guard regiment, who

attended Monday's rally in Kyiv. "I want President Zelensky to trust his Armed Forces more and [the fact] that they are able to defend this country."

The challenge to Mr. Zelensky comes as he finds himself embroiled in a U.S. political scandal, now at the heart of a Congressional impeachment inquiry into President Trump. The issue centers on whether Mr. Trump pressured Mr. Zelensky to look into the activities of the American president's political rival Joe Biden and his son Hunter Biden in Ukraine, according to a rough transcript released by the White House in September.

The Ukrainian president has denied that he was coerced and has been trying to divert the focus from his role in the U.S. political turmoil to issues most prominently on the mind of his countrymen, such as ending the conflict in the east.

For Russia, any decline of relations between Kyiv and its Western supporters offers Mr. Putin an opening to try to prevent Ukraine from further cozying up to the West. Forging a peace deal with Kyiv could serve to nudge Ukraine back into Russia's orbit, some Russian analysts say.

But many Ukrainians say they don't trust the Kremlin. They believe Moscow wants to reintegrate separatist regions that it controls in a region known as the Donbas, in a move to eventually dominate Ukraine.

"Before offering a peace plan you have to ask, 'what does Putin want?'" said Vitaly Portnikov, a Ukrainian journalist and independent commentator. "I know exactly what he wants. He wants Ukraine to be gone, and to create a Russian empire instead that would consist of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and maybe Kazakhstan."

On Oct. 1, Ukraine, Russia and the separatists agreed to hold local elections in the contested eastern region. If deemed to be fair by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Ukraine would grant "special status" to the region.

"The question is what kind of elections this will be," said Alexey Makarkin, vice president of the Center of Political Technologies, an independent think tank in Moscow. "Who will participate in the election? Will Ukrainian parties be able to?"

Also, giving the region special status would likely not sit well with many veterans and surviving victims of the conflict, "because from their point of view, the separatists will remain in the Donbas, and they will be able to influence the politics of Ukraine," Mr. Makarkin said.

Mr. Zelensky has said the elections should take place under Ukrainian law.

But there are already signs that the peace settlement is faltering. Days after Kyiv, Moscow and the separatists agreed to pull back heavy weaponry as one of the initial steps toward reaching a peace settlement, Mr. Putin accused his Ukrainian counterpart of lacking the “political will” to ensure this move.

“We’ve agreed on the pullback of the forces, but the current president [of Ukraine] still can’t ensure the pullback,” Mr. Putin said at an Oct. 11 summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States in Turkmenistan.

Delaying the withdrawal of Ukrainian troops is welcome news to many Zelensky critics.

In a Facebook post on Sunday, Mr. Zelensky expressed empathy with war veterans and volunteers in their concern over resolving the conflict.

“I understand your fear of further resolving the situation” in Donbas, he wrote. “You rightly do not want what you fought for to be in vain. I promise you as the president of Ukraine and the commander in chief of the Armed Forces that I will never allow this.”

On Monday, the Ukrainian president traveled to the Donetsk region in the Donbas to visit Ukrainian service members at the headquarters of Ukraine’s Combined Forces Operation.

He told the troops that Ukraine is an independent, sovereign, unitary state, and its military would defend these principles embodied in the country’s Constitution, according to the Ukrainian Interfax news agency.

“If someone does not agree with these words and wants to object, he will have to deal with you, our defenders,” he said.

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