

Can Volodymyr Zelensky Bring Peace to Eastern Ukraine?

Volodymyr Zelensky made a campaign promise to establish peace in eastern Ukraine. Whether that happens is up for debate.

Valery Engel

Six years ago, a political crisis in Ukraine turned into an armed confrontation. Separatists came to power in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine, declared their unwillingness to forge closer ties with the European Union and proclaimed the independence of these territories. In April 2014, the new Ukrainian government could have resolved this crisis by simply compromising, which would have meant declaring Russian as the official language of these rebellious regions and leaving them part of the local taxes.

But the government in Kyiv — first represented by the parliament leader Olexander Turchynov and then by the newly elected President Petro Poroshenko — preferred a different solution. An ongoing civil war soon broke out, in which Russia supports the Russian-speaking population of the separatist regions. Ukraine accuses Russia of military and financial support for the separatists. Russia rejects these allegations and does not consider itself a party to the conflict. Meanwhile, in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, people continue to die.

Zelensky's Promise

Unlike his predecessor, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, during his election campaign in 2019, promised to put an end to the war. Despite opposition from armed nationalist groups, he has managed to separate fighting forces in several regional sectors. In [December 2019](#), he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Paris, which brought new hope for peace to the region.

It is understood that Zelensky is eager to reach an agreement to put an end to hostilities. At the Munich Security Conference on February 14, he [announced his intention](#) to complete the process of reintegration for Donbas this year. To do so, he wants to hold local elections in the fall of 2020 in accordance with the Ukrainian Constitution.

To achieve this goal, Zelensky made the following two statements in Munich. First, he wants to completely separate the fighting forces in the east of the country. Second, he aims to withdraw military equipment from the demarcation line in eastern Ukraine. As he put it, this fundamentally new approach will help to reduce the risk of shelling from both sides. He added that local elections are impossible without control over the border between the Ukrainian Donbas region, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other.

Given that the separatists fear the closing of the border with Russia, Zelensky made a truly revolutionary proposal. He agreed to joint control of this section of the border with representatives of the separatist Donetsk (DPR) and Luhansk (LPR) people's republics in eastern

Ukraine, as well as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Yet while he ruled out the [possibility of holding direct dialogue](#) with the official leaders of the self-proclaimed republics in Donbas — which Russia seeks from Ukraine — it is rather a tribute to nationalists who are against making any concessions to the separatists and believe there is only one way to peace: by force.

At the end of 2019, a series of protests led by nationalists took place in Kyiv against any cooperation with the leadership of the unrecognized DPR and LPR. Their position was expressed by Yuri Gurenko, the head of the Kyiv branch of the ultra-nationalist organization Right Sector. “If Ukrainian control is established over this (separatist-held) territory, then we can talk about elections, not just the border but the whole territory,” he [said](#). “Elections held by terrorist groups can’t be legitimate.”

Given that the nationalists disrupted the complete separation of forces in eastern Ukraine in October 2019, Zelensky knows he needs to be careful when making statements about peace. Indeed, Ukrainian nationalist groups have not been fringe movements for a long time. These groups form the basis of the state ideology in Ukraine. The reincarnation of the ideology of integral nationalism, as well as the glorification of Ukrainian nationalist leader Stepan Bandera and veterans of the SS Galicia division — who fought with the Nazis against the Soviet Union in World War II — began with the radical right in the 1990s.

Combat Units

In addition, since 2014, almost all the nationalists have created the combat units. Many of these units have joined the ranks of the armed forces and the Ministry of Internal Affairs as volunteer battalions. In July that year, for example, the Right Sector formed the so-called [Volunteer Ukrainian Corps](#) (DUC-PS). The DUC-PS participated in military operations in the Donetsk region against armed groups of the DPR. The combat units of the DUC-PS were under the operational command of the anti-terrorist operation (ATO), interacting with neighboring units of the Ukrainian Armed Forces (AFU).

The DUC-PS withdrew from the frontline in April 2015, but that did not change anything. It is still an official armed group that de facto submits only to the political leadership of the Right Sector. Moreover, at the end of that year, the leader of the Right Sector, Dmitry Yarosh, created a new corps of the [Ukrainian Volunteer Army](#), which actively participated in hostilities until recently.

But the DUC-PS and Yarosh’s corps are not the only two armed units of the radical right in Ukraine. There are [dozens of such battalions](#) that are formal subordinates of either the Ministry of Defense or the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The most famous among them are the Azov and Donbas battalions but, in reality, there are much more.

There are also so-called independent volunteer units of Ukrainian nationalists who do not answer to anyone. As of August 2016, there were up to 5,000 armed fighters in their ranks. In addition to the DUC-PS, there are the OUN Battalion — or the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists — three Islamic organizations and others. Most of these groups are financed by

Ukrainian oligarchs, who, by 2016, led the conversation about the [transformation of volunteer groups into private armies](#). This factor remains a serious argument in the formation of Ukrainian politics, especially in the fight against separatists and Russia.

Many of these groups work with the younger generation, recruiting not only ideological supporters but also ordinary militants. In 2015, the Right Sector's DUC-PS [recruited teenagers](#). Today, its training camps are not empty. They actively interact with nationalist and even pro-Nazi ATO veterans, primarily in western Ukraine.

Clearly, without solving the problem of the influence of the radical right in Ukrainian politics, Zelensky is unlikely to be able to achieve a peaceful settlement in the Donbas region. All of his decisions, in this sense, will be sabotaged by nationalists who are ready to use any means of pressure — from protests in Kyiv to armed battalions that have experience in military operations.

In October 2019, Ukrainian authorities were [not able to complete the withdrawal of troops](#) from the demarcation line that separates the warring factions. The reason was that nationalist battalions took up positions there instead of the assigned units of the Ukrainian armed forces. They also refused to comply with the order of the supreme commander to withdraw. Since being elected in April 2019, Zelensky has simply not tried his luck and has not had direct confrontation with neo-Nazis, given the mass protests organized by them in Kyiv in October 2019.

However, the question is whether there have been any change in the attitude of officials toward these groups since Zelensky was elected. Indeed, has the new president done anything to reduce the political and ideological influence of these movements? The answer is still no. The future outlook does not look good either.

Issuing Grants

Since Zelensky came to power, the policy of moral and material support of nationalists by the state has not changed and, in fact, has only intensified. In late January 2020, the Ministry of Culture reallocated almost half of all funds originally set for youth NGOs [to nationalist organizations](#) instead. Of the 20 million Ukrainian hryvnias (\$744,000), they received 8 million hryvnias (\$297,000). Among these organizations are the Educational Assembly and National Center for Human Rights, associated with the ultra-right group C-14; the National Youth Congress, the Young People's Movement; and the youth wing of the neo-Nazi Freedom Party, Falcon of Freedom, among others.

In December 2019, the exact same situation developed with the distribution of [state grants](#) by the Ministry of Youth and Sports [to national-patriotic education](#). The radical right received 9 million hryvnias. According to the State Competition Commission, grants were provided for the [implementation of projects aimed](#) at "the formation of value guidelines and the establishment of a national-patriotic consciousness of children and youth, the popularization of the national spiritual and cultural heritage, and the raising of the level of knowledge about outstanding personalities of Ukraine."

The lion's share of the winning projects concerns the glorification of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). The UPA is well known for its ties with the Nazis and participating in the extermination of Jews and Poles in World War II. It is also known for individuals such as Simeon Petlyura, the organizer of the Jewish pogroms during the civil war of 1918-20; Stepan Bandera, the leader of Ukrainian nationalists who collaborated with Adolf Hitler; and Roman Shukhevych, the commander-in-chief of the UPA, the Wehrmacht Hauptmann and deputy commander of the Nachtigal special forces Wehrmacht battalion.

Several projects were won by the national scout organization Plast, which is associated with nationalists from the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists-Ukrainian Insurgent Army (OUN-UPA). It is worth noting that Bandera and Shukhevych were once part of this organization. The money from the grants will go to the organization of [military-patriotic camps for youth](#).

One of the most expensive projects will be the festival of "Ukrainian spirit," known as Banderstat. It will be hosted by the NGO of the same name and will receive 420 thousand hryvnias from the Ministry of Youth and Sports. The organizers have not yet announced the list of musicians who will perform at the festival on August 7-9 in Lutsk, but they say the event will be "patriotic and ideological." An [important leitmotif of Banderstat](#) and the main slogan of the organization is to remember "your story and [be] worthy of creating a new one." UPA veterans visit the event every year, and "rebel and liberation battles" are reenacted. There is no doubt what Banderstat will be promoting this year.

The Union of Ukrainian Youth, which claims to uphold "[the restoration of historical justice, rehabilitation in the minds of the people ... the names of Petlyura, Bandera and Shukhevych, the struggle of the OUN and the UPA](#)" — as was written in the grant application — also won several state grants. In particular, a grant of 95 thousand hryvnias was provided to the mobile camp Zagrava, which says participants will have "[an exciting journey through the historical sites of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army](#)."

The Ukrainian Reserve Army — created in 2014 — will receive 310 thousand hryvnias for the Unizh Forge, a sports and "patriotic" camp designated for children of combatants. Another 230 thousand hryvnias will be sent to the Wings Youth Foundation, which has proposed the Rebel Nights project. This initiative was implemented last year in the Rivne region. Young people were involved in restoring and cleaning the graves of UPA soldiers.

Patriotic Education

According to Eduard Dolinsky, the director of the Jewish Ukrainian Committee (JUC), in January 2020, the Verkhovna Rada Committee on Youth and Sports [held hearings](#) in parliament on the topic titled, "How to form a national identity and educate Ukrainians nationally and patriotically." The hearings led to 10 pages of recommendations that were sent to all government agencies. The document states that national-patriotic education is of strategic importance for the future of Ukraine and, therefore, it is necessary to create a state agency for this purpose and allocate money for television programs. In particular, these would focus on

the OUN-UPA, in order “to determine that the presence of harmful information products in the information space that lead to the degradation of the society.”

The document emphasizes that in Ukrainian schools, before the lesson of patriotic education, it is necessary to sing the UPA anthem, which was recently adopted as a theme of the new Ukrainian army. It states that when children are resting at youth camps, they should be provided with national education activities, taken to more national art events and that libraries should be filled with national-patriotic literature. The document focuses on the word "national." So, instead of patriotic, it is national-patriotic, and instead of artistic events, it is national-artistic. This practice was widely practiced by integral nationalists of Bandera in the 1940s and 1950s.

The policy of glorification of Ukrainian collaborators from the Second World War has not changed under Zelensky. In February 2020, according to Dolinsky, a [memorial plaque to Yuri Polyansky](#), the burgomaster of Lviv during the Nazi occupation, was officially opened in Lviv in western Ukraine. Under Polyansky, Jewish pogroms and the destruction of Polish intellectuals took place, while a Judenrat and auxiliary police were created..

On February 8, the [VII Bandera Readings took place](#) in the Hall of Columns of the Kyiv City Hall. Participants examined the global challenges of transhumanism, discussed the “great personality of Stepan Bandera” and looked at whether Ukrainian nationalism can withstand the artificial intelligence.

In that same month, authorities in Lviv [presented a jubilee stamp](#) in honor of the late war criminal Vasyl Levkovich, in what would have been his 100th birthday.. Levkovich was the commandant of the Ukrainian auxiliary police of the town Dubno, the organizer of Jewish pogroms, and the executioner of 5,000 Dubna and Rivne Jews and thousands of Poles. The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, already with a new head, Anton Drobovich — who was appointed by President Zelensky — published an article about the so-called “hero” on his Facebook page and on the institute's website. However, in December 2019, the Verkhovna Rada, where 70% of the seats are controlled by the Servant of the People, a pro-presidential party, adopted a resolution honoring Levkovich.

Zelensky Can't Move

All of this suggests that President Zelensky is either afraid to oppose the radical right in Ukraine, or he has become a hostage to the system that has been formed in Ukraine over the past six years. As such, he is politically paralyzed and cannot effectively confront the far right when it comes to negotiating peace for the Donbas region. If this is the case, then he will not fulfill his election promise and will likely see a fall in his popularity ratings.

It is intriguing that the Ukrainian leader has publicly set the deadlines for local elections — October 2020 — and his next steps in this direction. In any case, over the next few months, we will either see a clash between the president and the radical right or the Ukrainians will freeze the Minsk protocol, which aims to put an end to the war in eastern Ukraine.

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