

Russia in Review: Kremlin Escalates in Ukraine While Playing Peacemaker
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Key Takeaway: The Kremlin increased military and international pressure on Ukraine in May 2020 after efforts to establish direct talks between Ukraine and Kremlin-controlled proxies stalled. Kremlin information operations are framing Ukraine as having two options: legitimize the Kremlin's proxies through negotiations or admit Ukraine is impeding the peace process. Both options in this Kremlin-contrived dichotomy advance the Kremlin's objectives and absolve the Kremlin of responsibility as a belligerent in the war in Donbas. The Kremlin is continuing to consolidate control over its proxies in occupied Donbas while posturing internationally as a neutral arbiter aiming for peace. The Kremlin will likely intensify its pressure on Ukraine to conduct local elections in occupied Donbas in October 2020.

The Kremlin is ramping up pressure on the Ukrainian government after Moscow's recent failure to force direct talks between Ukraine and Kremlin proxies. The Kremlin is trying to force Ukraine to formalize the Advisory Council – a Kremlin-favorable initiative to facilitate direct talks between Ukraine and the Kremlin's proxies. The Ukrainian government initially agreed to the Advisory Council in March but later paused the initiative, largely due to backlash from Ukrainian civil society and logistical complications from the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

The Kremlin is exploiting the trap it set with Ukraine-proxy talks to pressure Ukraine into a contrived lose-lose scenario.

- **The Kremlin is presenting Ukraine with a false dichotomy of either legitimizing the Kremlin's proxies through direct negotiations or publicly undermining Ukraine's commitment to the ongoing peace process.** The Kremlin-controlled self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) issued an ultimatum to Ukraine on May 16 stating Ukraine must either begin a direct dialogue with the DNR or admit Ukraine is not committed to the Minsk agreements – the core of the ongoing peace process.² Both options would advance the Kremlin's objectives. Direct Ukrainian negotiations with the Kremlin's proxies legitimize these proxies and, by extension, Russia's aggression in Ukraine. The appearance of Ukraine abandoning the Minsk agreements would reinforce Kremlin narratives that Ukraine is spoiling the peace process and could present a justification for the Kremlin to escalate the war. The Kremlin's framing that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky must either legitimize the Kremlin's intervention in Ukraine or admit Ukraine is an obstacle to peace, distorts reality, and absolves the Kremlin of responsibility for starting the war.

The Kremlin backed its proxies' ultimatum with additional military pressure. The DNR and Luhansk People's Republics (LNR) mobilized their forces to full combat readiness on May 19.³ The DNR called for dialogue with Ukraine but stated it cannot remain peaceful without Ukraine's reciprocation, while the LNR threatened offensive action to move the front line.⁴ Ukraine's Defense Ministry reported Kremlin proxy forces again attacked the Zolote disengagement point on May 27.⁵

- **The Kremlin has intensified its efforts to leverage European states against Ukraine, while framing Ukraine as a spoiler in peace talks.** Dmitry Kozak, the Kremlin's policy head on Ukraine, met an aide of German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin on May 13 to restart Ukrainian peace talks.⁶ No Ukrainian representatives were present at the meeting. In a May 19 call with German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov called on Germany to demand Ukraine implement agreements reached during the December 2019 peace talks, despite Russia's failure to implement its side of the agreements.⁷ French and German readouts from the April 30 Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) meeting, like those of the

Kremlin, did not mention any Russian responsibility for the stalled peace process.⁸ European acceptance of Kremlin narratives and pressure on Ukraine to meet Russian demands will limit Ukrainian freedom of action.

The Kremlin also continues to frame Zelensky as spoiling the peace process – a campaign that began in September 2019 and that ISW has tracked in detail.⁹ Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs again accused Zelensky of failing to deliver on peace promises on May 20.¹⁰ Lavrov accused Ukraine of ceasefire violations and denied ceasefire violations from the Kremlin's proxies on April 30.¹¹

The Kremlin's efforts to establish Ukrainian talks with the proxies are slowly progressing. Public backlash likely compelled Zelensky to take a stronger stance; Zelensky refused to allow Russian citizens to represent occupied Donbas in the Advisory Council.¹² Zelensky also reiterated that local elections in Donbas will only take place if Ukraine regains control over its border with Russia.

Zelensky, however, continues to defend the idea of the Advisory Council as a part of his plan to end the war.¹³ His administration is proposing various ways to accommodate occupied Donbas' participation in peace talks. Zelensky's chief of staff said on May 4 that Ukraine is ready to talk to members of Donbas' "civil society" who exclusively hold Ukrainian citizenship, never participated in military operations against Ukraine, and have clean criminal records.¹⁴ Ukraine's delegation head to the TCG, Oleksiy Reznikov, said on May 18 that "legitimate" representatives from Donbas could theoretically include city and regional officials from Donbas elected in 2010, the last local elections to occur in Donbas before Russian occupation.¹⁵ These criteria, however, still leave room for the Kremlin to insert its agents under the umbrella of "civil society representatives."

The Kremlin will likely continue facing setbacks in its effort to establish legitimacy-granting negotiations between its proxies and the Ukrainian government. Several thousand Ukrainian protesters gathered in Kyiv to protest Zelensky's concessions to the Kremlin on May 24.¹⁶ The most-recent TCG calls on May 14 and May 27 did not produce Kremlin-favorable results.¹⁷ The Kremlin likely deliberately arrived late to the May 27 TCG meeting and said the DNR and LNR will not decrease their full combat readiness until Ukraine deescalates, reinforcing the Kremlin's false claims about Ukraine stalling the process.¹⁸

The Kremlin continues to integrate and consolidate external control over its proxies in Donbas while pressuring Ukraine to negotiate with them as independent actors and shaping conditions to integrate them back into Ukraine.

- **The Kremlin continues to issue Donbas residents Russian citizenship while setting conditions for them to remain in Ukraine.** The Russian State Duma passed a bill in the first reading to allow applicants for Russian citizenship to preserve their foreign citizenship on April 14.¹⁹ The Duma passed a bill in the first reading exempting DNR and LNR residents from paying a fee when receiving expedited Russian citizenship on April 17.²⁰ The Kremlin will likely pass these bills into law in the near future. The Kremlin is increasing the number of Russian citizens in Donbas to ensure the Kremlin's long-term influence in Donbas, especially as the Kremlin sets conditions for local elections in Donbas.
- **The Kremlin is consolidating management of critical infrastructure in Donbas.** The DNR and LNR announced their intent to create a unified electrical grid called "Donbas Energy" on May 4.²¹ The unified grid will use powerplants in the DNR powered by LNR coal.²² The Kremlin consolidated control over the LNR and DNR's railway systems in 2019.²³ The Kremlin will continue to consolidate management of the proxies' infrastructure, linking the proxies to each other and to Russian structures, even as it attempts to falsely frame the proxies as independent entities in an "intra-Ukrainian" conflict.
- **The Kremlin continues to reinforce its proxies' military capabilities while posturing for peace.** Ukraine's Defense Ministry reported the Kremlin used preparations for May 9 Victory Day celebrations as cover to provide additional Russian command staff, combat-readiness training, and heavy weapons to the DNR and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR).²⁴

Forecasting and implications. The Kremlin will likely intensify its shaping operations to pressure Ukraine to compel direct Ukrainian talks and hold local elections in occupied Donbas during Ukraine's upcoming October 2020 local elections.²⁵ Zelensky is unlikely to hold elections in occupied Donbas in October 2020 despite intensified Kremlin pressure to do so. The Kremlin will likely amplify information operations portraying Zelensky as an obstacle to peace in Donbas when he refuses to grant the Kremlin's proxies local elections. The Kremlin will likely similarly malign Zelensky if he continues to refuse direct Ukrainian talks with the Kremlin's proxies. Holding elections in Donbas on the Kremlin's terms - without granting Ukraine control of its border - would allow Putin to gain a permanent lever of influence over Ukraine's politics. The Kremlin will likely continue to use similar false dichotomy traps against world leaders in several international conflicts. The West should not allow the Kremlin to manipulate Ukraine into a Kremlin-brokered peace agreement that amounts to a Ukrainian surrender and removes restraints on Putin's ambitions globally.

¹ Nataliya Bugayova, Mason Clark, and George Barros, "Russia in Review: Putin Accelerates Ukraine Campaign Amid Converging Crises," Institute for the Study of War, March 24, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russia-review-putin-accelerates-ukraine-campaign-amid-converging-crises> ; George Barros, Nataliya Bugayova, Mason Clark, "Russia in Review: Kremlin Misdirection Continues Amid COVID and Peace Processes," Institute for the Study of War, April 29, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russia-review-kremlin-misdirection-continues-amid-covid-and-peace-processes>.

² ["The DNR Gave Kyiv an Ultimatum,"] Lenta, May 16, 2020, <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/05/16/dnr/>.

³ ["Russian Hybrid Forces Threaten "Combat Readiness" in Donbas: What is Happening?"] Radio Svoboda, May 29, 2020, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/30622502.html> ; Roman Zakharov, ["In the DNR there is Increased Combat Readiness Because of the Deterioration of the Situation in Donbas,"] TV Zvezda, May 20, 2020, https://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/202005201221-wmSg0.html ; Alexander Gusarov ["LNR Brought Armed Forces to Full Combat Readiness,"] Rossiskaya Gazeta, May 20, 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/05/20/lnr-privela-vooruzhennye-sily-v-polnuiu-boegotovnost.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ukrainian Joint Forces Operation post, May 27, 2020, ["Evening Report on the Situation in the Area of the Joint Forces Operation as of 1700 on May 27, 2020,"]

<https://www.facebook.com/pressifo.news/photos/a.364697644022858/864027044089913/?type=3&theater> ; George Barros with Nataliya Bugayova, "Russia in Review: The Kremlin's Fake De-escalation in Donbas," Institute for the Study of War, February 24, 2020, <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/02/russia-in-review-kremlins-fake-de.html>.

⁶ "Ukraine Was Aware of Kozak's Visit to Berlin in Advance, Will Know How It Passed – Kuleba," Interfax Ukraine, May 14, 2020, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/662173.html> ; "Kozak Told the Details of the Talks in Berlin," RIA Novosti, May 13, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200513/1571398488.html>.

⁷ ["On a Telephone Conversation between Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov and Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs of Germany H. Maas,"] Russian Foreign Ministry, May 19, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4133311.

⁸ "The Guns Must Fall Silent' – Foreign Ministers Hold Virtual Normandy-Format Meeting on Ukraine," German Federal Foreign Office, April 30, 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/laenderinformationen/ukraine-node/supportukraine/normandy-format-meeting-ukraine/2338380> ; "Ukraine – Statement by Jean-Yves le Drian – Video conference of Foreign Ministers in the Normandy Format (30 Apr. 2020)," French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, April 30, 2020, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/ukraine/news/article/statement-by-jean-yves-le-drian-video-conference-of-foreign-ministers-in-the>.

⁹ Nataliya Bugayova, Mason Clark, and George Barros, "Russia in Review: Putin Accelerates Ukraine Campaign Amid Converging Crises," Institute for the Study of War, March 24, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russia-review-putin-accelerates-ukraine-campaign-amid-converging-crises>.

¹⁰ ["Russian MFA Information and Press Department Commentary Regarding the Anniversary of the Inauguration of the President of Ukraine V.A. Zelensky,"] Russian Foreign Ministry, May 20, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4133577.

¹¹ George Barros with Nataliya Bugayova, "Russia in Review: The Kremlin's Fake De-escalation in Donbas," Institute for the Study of War, February 24, 2020, <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/02/russia-in-review-kremlins-fake-de.html>; ["Speech and Answers to Media Questions by Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov During a Press Conference Following the Video Conference of the Normandy Format Foreign Ministers, Moscow, April 30, 2020,"] Russian Foreign Ministry, April 30, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/4109746.

¹² ["Zelensky On People from Donbas in the Advisory Council: Only citizens of Ukraine,"] Liga News, May 20, 2020,

<https://news.liga.net/politics/news/zelenskiy-o-sostave-konsultativnogo-soveta-v-minske-tolko-grajdane-ukrainy>.

¹³ ["Petition to the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Oleksandrovych Zelensky with a Demand to Immediately Revoke the Signatures of the Representative of Ukraine and the Approval of the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine under the Minutes of the Tripartite Contact Group Meeting Held in Minsk on March 11, 2020,"] President of Ukraine, March 16, 2020, <https://petition.president.gov.ua/petition/88960> ; Olga Rudenko, "Highlights from Zelensky's Press Conference on His First Year in Office," Kyiv Post, May 20, 2020, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/highlights-from-zelenskys-press-conference-on-his-first-year-in-office.html?cn-reloaded=1>.

¹⁴ Atlantic Council, "Pandemic, reform, war, and peace: The view from Ukraine's White House," YouTube, May 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gn-rCRcKcWQ>.

¹⁵ ["Kyiv Selected for the Contract Group Meeting its Own Donbas 'Representatives,'" TASS, May 26, 2020, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/8571823> ; ["Reznikov: Representatives of Donbas in the TCG Should Have Public Legitimacy,"] RBK Ukraine, May 18, 2020, <https://www.rbcl.ua/rus/news/reznikov-predstaviteli-donbassa-tkg-dolzny-1589792191.html>.

¹⁶ Volodymyr Petrov, "Demonstrators in Kyiv Protest Zelensky, Resist 'Capitulation' to Russia," Kyiv Post, May 24, 2020, <https://www.kyivpost.com/multimedia/photo/demonstrators-in-kyiv-protest-zelensky-resist-capitulation-to-russia-photos>; ["Protest Rally on Maidan Because of Zelensky's Policy,"] Ukrainska Pravda, May 24, 2020, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2020/05/24/7252956/>.

¹⁷ ["Kyiv's Delegation Refused to Discuss Ceasefire in Donbas,"] RIA Novosti, May 27, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200527/1572088156.html>.

¹⁸ ["Kyiv's Delegation Refused to Discuss Ceasefire in Donbas,"] RIA Novosti, May 27, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200527/1572088156.html> ; ["Russia is Delaying the Start of the TCG Meeting- media"] Espresso, May 27, 2020, https://espreso.tv/news/2020/05/27/rosiya_galmuye_pochatok_zasidannya_v_tkg_zmi.

¹⁹ ["The State Duma Introduces the Ability to Maintain Foreign Citizenship Upon Receiving Russian Citizenship,"] TASS, April 14, 2020, <https://tass.ru/politika/8240117>.

²⁰ ["The State Duma Exempted Residents of the DNR and LNR from Fee Upon Receiving Russian Citizenship,"] TASS, April 17, 2020, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/8268559>.

²¹ ["The LNR and DNR Will Create an Energy Concern 'Donbas Energy,'"] Komsomolskaya Pravda, May 5, 2020, <https://www.donetsk.kp.ru/online/news/3860737>

²² Ibid.

²³ The singular administrator operates to optimize rail transportation between the LNR and the DNR and has monthly working meetings. Nataliya Bugayova, "Russia in Review: Putin Advances in Ukraine and Its Neighboring States," The Institute for the Study of War, October 15, 2019, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2019/10/russia-in-review-putin-advances-in.html> ; ["Fighters from 'DNR' and 'LNR' Created a New Cross Border Concern,"] Lenta, August 8, 2019, <https://lenta.ua/boeviki-iz-dnr-i-lnr-sozdali-novyy-transgranichnyy-kontsern-20873/>; ["'DNR' and 'LNR' Combined the Railways in the Concern 'Railways of Donbass,'"] Antikor, August 19, 2019, https://antikor.com.ua/articles/320311-dnr_i_lnr_objedinili_heleznye_dorogi_v_kontsern_heleznye_dorogi_donbassa.

²⁴ The Kremlin reportedly send the LNR and DNR more than 10 tanks, eight armored fighting vehicles, up to 30 vehicles loaded with small arms ammunition and grenade launchers, and heavy artillery ammunition. ["Daily Summary of the Press Service of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine on the Situation in the Area of the Joint Forces Operation,"] Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, May 12, 2020, <https://www.mil.gov.ua/news/2020/05/12/shhodenne-zvedennya-pressluzhbi-minoboroni-ukraini-shhodo-obstanovki-v-rajoni-provedennya/> ; ["Daily Summary of the Press Service of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine on the Situation in the Area of the Joint Forces Operation,"] Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, May 19, 2020 <https://www.mil.gov.ua/news/2020/05/19/shhodenne-zvedennya-pressluzhbi-minoboroni-ukraini-shhodo-obstanovki-v-rajoni-provedennya-operaczii-obednanih-sil/>

²⁵ ["Lavrov Declared the Unwillingness of Ukraine to discuss the Donbas Special Status,"] RIA Novosti, May April 25, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200425/1570566688.html>.