

Ukraine Candidate Poroshenko Backs Putin's Call to Delay Referendum

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Ukrainian presidential candidate Petro Poroshenko (C) talks to the media after talks with Andreas Schockenhoff (3rd L) of the ruling Christian Democratic Union party in Berlin, Germany.

Ukraine's presidential front-runner Petro Poroshenko said he supported President Vladimir Putin's call to postpone a referendum in eastern Ukraine as pro-Moscow separatists in the region reported a ceasefire on Wednesday in the first fledgling signs of easing tensions.

Poroshenko, the leading candidate in the May 25 election, said Wednesday that he "welcomed with cautious optimism" Putin's appeal hours earlier to put off a referendum that had been planned in Donetsk and other eastern regions for May 11, Interfax reported.

Poroshenko also called for pro-Moscow separatists to put down their weapons to allow the government to halt a crackdown — dubbed a counter-terrorist operation by the Kiev government — against the militias.

"There is no alternative to the anti-terrorism operation today," he said at a press conference Wednesday, Interfax reported.

An unidentified spokesman for the separatist Donbass headquarters said late Wednesday that fighting in Donetsk and surrounding regions had ceased, Interfax reported. But he added that Ukrainian government troops and ultranationalist Right Sector militias were still in place in eastern towns, the report said.

"In Slovyansk, mortar gun fire has stopped. In Mariupol, after retaking City Hall, the situation is also calm. No fighting is going on in other cities of the Donetsk region either," the spokesman told Interfax.

The Mariupol City Hall briefly came under government control on Wednesday, but was re-seized by separatists after just a few hours.

Putin's statement, which marked a departure away from the Kremlin's previous line, appeared to have initially been received with distrust by Ukraine's administration and with apparent surprise by separatists.

Putin made the announcement when speaking in Moscow alongside Swiss president and chairman of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Didier Burkhalter, who is spearheading European efforts to negotiate a resolution to the ongoing conflict.

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