

Putin and Poroshenko Square Up

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June 09, 2014



Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko applauding alongside Vladimir Putin during a commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings.

President Vladimir Putin has not shied away from expressing his preferences about the future of Ukraine, suggesting the country should refrain from federalization and joining Western political and military alliances in order to give more power to the Russian-speaking regions of eastern Ukraine and normalize relations with Russia.

These hopes appear to have been quickly dispelled last week following inconclusive meetings with Western leaders in Normandy and a strongly worded inaugural address by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, in which he rejected the Kremlin's informal conditions for stabilizing relations with Kiev.

Poroshenko said on Saturday that Ukraine will not compromise on "Crimea, [the country's] European choice and state structure," expressing resistance on issues of importance to Moscow.

"Yesterday, in the course of our meeting in Normandy, I told President Putin, 'Crimea is Ukrainian soil. Period!'" Poroshenko added.

Putin also came away empty-handed from his exchanges with U.S. President Barack Obama, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Francois Hollande on Friday, having received no reassurances that Russia's informal demands would be considered.

Meanwhile on Monday, Ukrainian security forces and pro-Russian separatists exchanged fire in the eastern Ukrainian city of Sloviansk, which has been at the heart of confrontations in the region. Russian media outlets reported that two civilians were killed on Monday morning by Ukrainian military strikes.

While Russian officials continue to vehemently deny involvement in the clashes in eastern Ukraine, Russian state-run television has unleashed a vilifying campaign against Poroshenko on its news and analytical programs.

Russia's state-owned Channel One featured a physiognomist and psychologist on its Sunday broadcast who claimed Poroshenko's facial expressions suggested he "becomes different when speaking with U.S. President Barack Obama" and that he is "selective, capricious and calculating." A news report published on the channel's website on Sunday said that "everyone knows Poroshenko is cynically lying."

The views expressed on Russia's state-owned television networks have seemingly taken hold of the population.

A poll published by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center on Monday found that 43 percent of Russians think Poroshenko represents the interests of the U.S. and the European Union. The survey, based on the opinions of a representative sample of 1,600 adults across 42 Russian regions, showed that one in every five Russians believes the new Ukrainian leader represents the interests of "fascists, nationalists and banderites." A mere 6 percent said Poroshenko represented the interests of western and central Ukraine.

Despite the launch of consultations between Kiev, Moscow and the OSCE on Sunday, Russian and Ukrainian political analysts remain skeptical that tensions between Russia and Ukraine can be de-escalated given the current political climate.

"One can only hope that all of Putin's meeting with Western leaders and Poroshenko will lead to de-escalation," Dmitry Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, told The Moscow Times on Monday. "But I am not certain this will happen, at least not right away. Clashes in eastern Ukraine need to cease and dialogue needs to be intensified for there to be true de-escalation."

The idea that the election of Poroshenko, who is known for his relatively mild rhetoric toward Moscow and who entertains close business ties with Russia, could serve as a catalyst for the de-escalation of tensions in Russo-Ukrainian relations had been floating in Russian political circles prior to his inauguration.

As explained by Volodymyr Fesenko, director of the Kiev-based Penta Center for Applied

Political Studies, Poroshenko has a lot riding on successful relations with Russia — even if it remains unclear how that success might come about.

"Poroshenko is an experienced politician," Fesenko said. "He understands that a long standoff in the country's east will create problems for him. He has an interest in ensuring that relations are stabilized. Now it just remains to be seen on which condition this will happen."

Pro-Kremlin analyst Alexei Mukhin, who serves as the general director of the Center for Political Information in Moscow, said that relations between Russia and Ukraine would be normalized when Poroshenko "forms a government that represents Ukrainian — and not U.S. — interests," showcasing Russia's claim that Western governments had propped up the new Ukrainian president.

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Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/06/09/putin-and-poroshenko-square-up-a36322>