

Putin Endorses Ukraine Elections, Calls to Postpone Referendum

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President Vladimir Putin shakes hands with Swiss President and Foreign Minister Didier Burkhalter at the Kremlin Wednesday after talks on the crisis in Ukraine.

President Vladimir Putin appeared to play a wildcard on Wednesday after crucial negotiations with chairman of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, calling for a postponement of the scheduled May 11 referendum on the succession of the Donetsk region from Ukraine.

The news left even pro-Russian separatists on the ground in eastern Ukraine baffled, with one cited by BuzzFeed journalist Mike Giglio on Twitter as saying, "It's difficult to comment. I'm confused."

Ukraine's Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk immediately expressed skepticism about the comments, calling them "hot air," Reuters reported.

Putin's comments made clear that Russia was softening its stance in the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, and the president also cautiously endorsed the upcoming presidential elections in the country set for May 25.

The two issues had been the main bones of contention between Russia and the West in preceding months. Putin also said that Russian troops had been recalled from the Ukrainian border and were currently stationed at their permanent bases.

"We have to do everything so that people in Ukraine's southeast will be confident that their rights, their lawful rights, after the presidential election on May 24 or 25, will be firmly guaranteed," Putin told a group of journalists in the Kremlin, hinting that Russia still supported the presidential election.

"The main issue is to make people in the southeast feel that they will not be deceived and abandoned again," he said.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said earlier on Tuesday that the referendum was "contrived and bogus" and promised new sanctions against Russia if the Kremlin went ahead and endorsed it.

"We flatly reject this illegal effort to further divide Ukraine," he said, Reuters reported. "This is really the Crimea playbook all over again, and no civilized nation is going to recognize the result of such a bogus effort."

Denis Pushilin, leader of the self-proclaimed Donetsk republic, told The Moscow Times on Wednesday night that the pro-Russian separatists there respected Putin's decision but could react only following a meeting of pro-Russian supporters scheduled for tomorrow.

"The referendum will definitely take place before the presidential election on May 25 no matter what. We do not want to legitimize the illegal government in Kiev," he said by phone from Donetsk.

Pavel Gubarev, another pro-Russian activist, was released from detention in Kiev in exchange for three members of the Ukrainian security service. Gubarev was one of the early initiators of the protest in Donetsk, but was detained by the SBU security service in March and transferred to the capital, Kiev.

Despite a lack of clarity on the referendum and Ukraine's future, Putin's statements were interpreted as a very positive signal by world markets, with major Russian and European indexes rallying on the news.

Putin's counterpart at Wednesday negotiations, OSCE chairman and president of the Swiss Confederation Didier Burkhalter, said that the organization was offering a four-step roadmap consisting of ceasefire, de-escalation, dialogue and elections. The roadmap will replace another round of Geneva talks that was mulled by parties before, he said.

"It is very important that President Putin has called to postpone the referendum in order to facilitate dialogue," he said.

The Ukrainian regime change in February, Russia's annexation of Crimea and separatist

unrest in Ukraine's east have sent tremors through East-West relations, with many saying the post-Cold War world order was under threat. The insurgence in the southeast has already led to multiple victims in the Donetsk region, with the recent clash in Odessa claiming more than 40 lives.

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