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Moscow Unlikely to Ease Up on Ukraine After Vote, Experts Say

By Alexey Eremenko

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A voter showing off his passport as he gets ready to cast his ballot for the Ukrainian presidential election from a Moscow polling station on Sunday.

As Ukrainians cast their votes for a new president on Sunday, analysts said the election was unlikely to fully stabilize the situation in the strife-ridden nation — partly because it would be in Moscow's best interest to keep its smaller neighbor mired in conflict.

"Instability in Ukraine is a very handy tool for Russia, and I do not think Moscow will give it up," Maria Lipman of the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank told The Moscow Times.

Moscow's tentative acknowledgement of Sunday's snap presidential vote in Ukraine is a tactical move and not a shift toward long-term deescalation, analysts said ahead of Sunday's vote.

Last week, Russia shifted inland the troops it had previously amassed on its border with

Ukraine.

The move was partially confirmed by the Pentagon, unlike previous reports of a pullout.

President Vladimir Putin said Wednesday that the withdrawal was intended to create "favorable conditions for Ukraine's presidential vote," an apparent indication that Moscow wanted the elections to go smoothly.

He tapered his words, however, adding that "it will be very hard for us to work with people who come to power against the backdrop of a punitive operation in southeastern Ukraine."

On Friday, he said Russia was nevertheless ready to work with newly elected Ukrainian authorities.

Experts agreed that the Kremlin's softened policy was simply a reaction to the West's direct threat to ramp up economic sanctions if Russia disrupted the Ukrainian polls.

The Russian government will continue to stir up trouble in Ukraine in order to prevent the weakened country from turning to the West, analysts said.

Twenty-one candidates competed in the Ukrainian vote, but there are no pro-Russian candidates among the favorites.

Tycoon Petro Poroshenko, who backed the anti-Yanukovych Maidan protests, led the exit polls on Sunday. Ex-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, jailed by Yanukovych in 2011, trailed behind him.

Keep Them From the West

What exactly the Kremlin wants from Ukraine remains a matter of debate.

Many speculated in recent months that Russia — which annexed the pro-Moscow Crimea peninsula in March — would not stop there, but would go on to annex Ukraine's Russia-leaning Donetsk and Luhansk regions as well. Separatists in those regions have explicitly called for such a move, though Russia has downplayed their calls.

All the analysts interviewed for this story agreed that further territorial expansion is not on the Kremlin's agenda.

"The predominant sentiment now is that we got enough when we got Crimea," said Konstantin Zatulin, a former lawmaker and a pro-Kremlin expert on Ukraine at the Commonwealth of Independent States Institute in Moscow.

What Moscow really wants is to prevent Ukraine from entering the Western sphere of influence at all costs, said independent political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin.

This means the Kremlin needs leverage, and controlled instability is its best bet, Lipman said.

No serious affiliation with the European Union or NATO will be on the cards as long as Ukraine has a smoldering insurgency in its backyard, she said.

"Russia will keep the conflict simmering, ramping up the heat every time Kiev starts to wriggle," Oreshkin said.

No Sanctions, Please

It was well within Russia's power to disrupt the election in regions dominated by the insurgency, casting doubt on the vote's legitimacy, experts said.

Likewise, Russia has staunchly opposed the incumbent "Kiev junta," calling the country's acting government illegitimate and accusing it of fascism for getting support from Ukraine's ultra-right.

But top European and U.S. officials said hard-hitting sanctions could be imposed against entire sectors of the Russian economy if it meddled with the vote in its smaller neighbor.

The EU and U.S. have already imposed sanctions on a handful of top Russian officials and companies implicated in the Crimean takeover.

The sanctions' impact has so far been negligible, but limitations on the oil and gas industry could do massive damage to the Russian economy, which is already inching toward a recession.

"Russia backed down because the West explicitly said Moscow will be punished if the elections fall through, even if it harms Western countries' own interests," Oreshkin said.

The vote comes three months after ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych fled to Russia, driven out by a violent public uprising blamed on his heavy-handed policies, alleged graft and the eleventh-hour rejection in November of an EU affiliation deal in favor of a strategic alliance with Moscow.

The revolution has triggered unrest in the eastern part of the country, home to a predominantly Russian-speaking, pro-Kremlin population.

Russia has also annexed Crimea after it declared independence from Ukraine in a hasty referendum, and shown cautious support for a pro-Russian insurgency that has broken out in several cities of the eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

The election could also benefit Moscow, which would get a legitimate negotiating partner instead of the "Kiev junta," experts said.

"You could say Russia needs a legitimate president just so it has someone to pressure," Oreshkin said.

But while Russia may have allowed the vote to pass, it is under no obligation to recognize the election's winner, said Zatulin of the CIS Countries Institute.

"We will continue de facto contacts with official Kiev, but the jury is still out on de jure recognition," Zatulin said.

Contact the author at a.eremenko@imedia.ru

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