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Expat Ukrainians Turn Out En Masse to Vote in New York

By Anna Dolgov

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Ukrainians living in the U.S. line up outside the consulate in New York to vote in presidential election.

NEW YORK — Ukrainians living in the northeastern U.S. lined up outside the consulate in New York to cast ballots in Sunday's presidential election, mirroring what seemed to be high voter turnouts at other overseas polling stations in a celebration of unity tinted by anti-Kremlin nationalism.

Many had traveled for hours, mostly from surrounding states such as Connecticut, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, roused by the call to vote that activists had put through on every medium — from social networks to Ukrainian Orthodox churches.

The election fell on the Memorial Day holiday weekend in the U.S. — when the country honors its fallen soldiers — and for those waiting in line outside the consulate, the day seemed to be a mixture of a somber remembrance and a picnic.

A guitar band strummed popular songs such as rock musician Taras Petrynenko's "Ukraina," and the crowd chanted: "Glory to Ukraine, Glory to heroes."

Activists offered lemonade — a small cup could be had for free — and borshch at $5 a pop. All proceeds were to help the Razom, or "Together," organization — a nonprofit Ukrainian-American human rights group, according to the refreshment vendors' sign.

The crowd, many dressed in traditional embroidered shirts or the blue-and-yellow colors of the Ukrainian flag, waved and made V-signs at double-decker tour buses that swarmed midtown Manhattan. Cars honked and cheered back.

"A turnout of this scale — abroad! I think this is the first time," a Ukrainian Election Commission member at the consulate, Irina Kozharska, told the Moscow Times in an interview. "I am very glad that so many people have come to vote. Yes, it was very difficult; yes, we had to work overnight, but my heart rejoices."

The consulate, which serves New York and surrounding states, has about 13,000 registered voters, but the exact turnout figure would not be available for another day, she said. Some of the hopeful voters — those who had failed to register by the May 19 deadline or whose passports had expired — had to be turned away despite having traveled quite the distance, she said.

As Ukrainians who had cast their ballots posed for pictures holding signs that read "We voted," anti-Kremlin sentiments also simmered among the crowd.

A woman with a Ukrainian flag draped over her shoulders, who only gave her first name as Marika, held a sign with an abbreviated — but easily decipherable — crude remark about Russian President Vladimir Putin, which could loosely be translated as a request to get lost.

"I came to vote for unity, I came to vote against Putin," she said.

Amid much blue and yellow, a black-and-red flag favored by the ultranationalist Right Sector group also occasionally waved above the crowd.

And unlike an ordinary day at the consulate, when a number of Ukrainians coming to renew their passport or attend to other official matters speak Russian with consular staff, the Ukrainian language dominated Sunday's gathering, spoken even by some who said they tend to use Russian in everyday speech.

An informal exit poll conducted by The Moscow Times indicated that the majority of Ukrainian voters in New York had cast their ballots in favor of Petro Poroshenko, the chocolate tycoon who scored a strong victory according to preliminary data on Monday.

As balloting moved across the times zones, the voting in New York followed what appeared to be a similarly high turnout at Ukrainian diplomatic missions in Europe and as far as Australia.

After casting their ballots, hundreds of Ukrainian voters in Australia rallied outside the Russian Embassy in Canberra to protest Moscow's annexation of Crimea and its meddling in eastern Ukraine, holding signs that read "Putin, get out of Ukraine" and "Stop Russian

aggressor," Australia's The Canberra Times reported.

In New York, Oleh Luchko, who works at the Ukrainian mission to the United Nations following his previous postings in London, Paris and Rome, said the voter turnout that filled the Manhattan sidewalk on Sunday was greater than any he had ever seen on an overseas diplomatic mission in the past.

"They say that a drop is tiny in the sea, but I think everyone has thought that they need to add their drop," Luchko said. "And everyone's eyes are shining, I have never seen anything like this before."

His wife, Nataliya, added that there was also a sense of pain below the energy and cheer.

"We love Ukraine, we live there and we want life there to be good," she said. But the annexation of Crimea and the violence that has ripped through the country is a "tragedy to me," she said.

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