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Kremlin Says Russia Respects Poroshenko's Election

By Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber

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Only a handful of Russian political actors refused to endorse the election's result. Russian Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov told Rossia 24 on Monday that the recognition of the election's legitimacy was an “embarrassment.”

While President Vladimir Putin remained silent about the outcome of Ukraine's presidential election on Monday, several top Russian officials expressed Moscow's willingness to cooperate with the newly elected president, Petro Poroshenko, despite his pledge to fight pro-Russian separatists in the country's east.

Poroshenko received more than 53 percent of the votes after 77 percent of the ballots had been counted, according to Ukraine's Central Election Commission. Former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko trailed behind Poroshenko with 13.1 percent.

"The opportunity to establish a mutually respectful dialogue in light of these results — which, I repeat, Russia is ready to respect — should not be missed," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov

said, as RIA Novosti reported.

Lavrov also expressed hope that Ukraine would implement the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's roadmap to resolve the ongoing crisis in the country and that authorities would crackdown on far-right organizations.

Lavrov's statement marks a stark change in the response of Russian officials to the Ukrainian election.

Earlier this month, Lavrov said that the ongoing clashes in Ukraine's eastern regions jeopardized the capacity of the Ukrainian authorities to hold a free and fair election.

Other Russian political actors, including speaker of the State Duma Sergey Naryshkin, had also expressed their doubts about the legitimacy of the political exercise before acknowledging it as a positive development.

Naryshkin said in mid-May that the poll would not result in the establishment of a legitimate Ukrainian president, given the "punitive" conditions citizens faced in the country's east.

On Monday, however, Naryshkin told reporters that the Ukrainian presidential election represented a step toward re-establishing the country's legal framework.

Ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych also announced that he respected the outcome of yesterday's poll.

"Regardless of the region, the percentage of the population that came to vote and the choice that was made, I respect this choice, which was made at the toughest time for our homeland," Yanukovych said, ITAR-TASS reported.

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Despite Russia's recognition of Poroshenko's victory, Lavrov carefully tempered Russia's expectations toward the new Ukrainian leadership.

"We noted that in one of his first interviews, Poroshenko said that he would end the counterterrorist operation in eastern Ukraine," Lavrov said, as quoted by RIA Novosti reported. "Let us see how this actually happens."

Contrary to the Kremlin's expectations, Poroshenko said on Monday that he would intensify the counterterrorism operation in the country's east.

"I support its [the operation's] continuation, I demand that its format be changed," Poroshenko said, RIA Novosti reported. "It should be shorter, more efficient, and units should be better equipped. They should have better weapons, better ammunition."

Lavrov's reaction to Poroshenko's election echoed statements made by Putin last week at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum.

Putin told an audience of government officials and business leaders that Russia would "respect the choice of the Ukrainian people" in order to assuage tensions in the country, although he said the election itself would be an illegitimate political exercise. Putin also expressed the hope that the new Ukrainian leadership would cease its military operation against pro-Russian separatists.

Dmitry Peskov, Putin's press secretary, said on Monday that the president's statement about Russia's respect of the election's outcome remained valid.

The chief of Putin's presidential staff, Sergei Ivanov, also said the Kremlin was ready to respond to a Ukrainian lawsuit against Russia regarding the annexation of Crimea. Poroshenko has pledged to bring Russia to international courts over the loss of its peninsula.

The OSCE, which was invited by the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry to observe the election, reported that the presidential vote had been a "genuine election largely in line with international commitments and that respected fundamental freedoms" despite ongoing clashes in the eastern part of the country.

The organization nonetheless deplored intimidation and attacks on campaign offices, as well as allegations that political campaigns had been obstructed.

Dmitry Gudkov, an opposition State Duma deputy who observed Sunday's poll in Odessa as part of an independent initiative, concurred with the OSCE's assessment of the election.

"Very few irregularities were reported," Gudkov told The Moscow Times. "There were a few instances in which passport information on the electoral list had not been updated, but there were no major issues. The election was conducted in a peaceful and orderly manner, at least in the region were I was."

Gudkov said he hoped the election's high turnout and Poroshenko's landslide victory would lead the Kremlin to view Ukraine's incoming president as a legitimate political actor.

"Poroshenko received a high percentage of votes," Gudkov said. "I think this number will convince Russia to recognize the legitimacy of the result."

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