

Ukraine's Poroshenko Shuns Europe and Russia in Favor of Maidan

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko speaks to the media in Kiev.

In a country torn between Russia and western Europe, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's decision to resume an offensive against pro-Moscow rebels has carefully ignored both neighbors to show an ear acutely tuned to Ukrainian domestic politics.

Telephone diplomacy involving the leaders of Germany, France and Russia, as well as Ukraine, has dwelt on extending a truce that could help ease tensions between Moscow and the West.

But in the end, in calling off a patchy 10-day ceasefire a week ago, Poroshenko may have been as influenced by more radical views within Ukraine. They are summed up in the voice of a young man who made his name in the street protests that toppled his predecessor and who is now fighting in the east.

"I would advise you, Mister President, to listen less to Europe or to Russia, but pay attention to the Ukrainian people," wrote Volodymyr Parasyuk, 26, who became the toast of Kiev in February with an impassioned speech on Independence Square — the Maidan — telling president Viktor Yanukovich to get out of town.

"We will go to the end, as we did on the Maidan. We have enough resources and enough will to build our own thriving government and dance neither for Europe nor Russia," Parasyuk wrote on his Facebook page, which also carries photographs from eastern Ukraine, where he is now fighting pro-Russian rebels.

Parasyuk's belligerent view may well gain more traction after Saturday's notable rebel defeat in which Kiev's forces recaptured the separatist stronghold of Slovyansk and hoisted the Ukrainian flag in place of the Russian one.

Six weeks after he was elected, and facing a slew of problems that range from the revolt to Ukraine's economic feasibility, Poroshenko may have decided it is more prudent to show he is listening to popular political support and the voice of the gritty "Euro-Maidan" revolution that put him in office.

In the short term, that may mean sitting out the diplomatic dance with the European Union, which many Ukrainians accuse of failing to live up to promises of support and hesitating to punish Russia with new sanctions over its role in their country.

"We've already seen more than once that European partners don't always adequately appraise the situation in our country in time. To act in the interests of other countries, and not pay attention to the mood of one's own citizens would be dangerous," said Kiev-based political analyst Volodymyr Fesenko.

For now, the 48-year-old confectionery magnate may have done enough to prove to Ukrainians that he will be no Yanukovich, who spent his last months in office playing the EU and Russia off against each other in the hope of gaining larger aid deals and ignoring the massive protests against him on his own doorstep.

"Tactical Not Strategic"

Yet if Poroshenko is putting pressure on both Russia and the European Union by advocating publicly for the continued military offensive against rebels, in the wings he might still be preparing for the possibility of a resumption of the ceasefire.

Unlike the EU, which is especially anxious to ease tensions with Moscow, the U.S. has put less emphasis on calling a ceasefire and even defended the military drive against the rebels, saying Poroshenko has a right to defend his country.

All the same, he promised U.S. Vice President Joe Biden on Thursday that the truce could be renewed if he had assurances the rebels would hold to it, that they would free hostages and that Ukraine would be able to control its border with Russia.

As one Western diplomat put it, Poroshenko's decision not to extend the ceasefire last week may be "tactical not strategic".

Far from turning a deaf ear to western Europe, Poroshenko, who signed a landmark free trade agreement with Brussels last month, is likely to continue to probe diplomacy with both the West and Moscow for lasting solutions to the crisis in the east.

On Friday, he told EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton of a plan for new ceasefire talks on Saturday among a "contact group" involving envoys from Kiev, Moscow and the rebels.

Yet he had already appointed a tough-talking new defense minister the day before whose troops then routed the rebels in Slovyansk, dramatically shifting the calculus of the ceasefire debate. Diplomats assume the planned talks did not take place and Poroshenko on Sunday made clear the offensive would go on.

Voice of the Maidan

Poroshenko, who has served in governments of various shades for the past decade, does not have a strong base in a parliament elected two years ago. Despite his own landslide victory in May, the revolutionary mood of the country that ousted Yanukovych means he still needs to be closely tuned in to opinion at home.

In central Kiev, many protest tents have been removed around Independence Square but they still stand on the Maidan itself as a reminder of the power ordinary Ukrainians wielded after Yanukovych broke a pledge to integrate more closely with the EU.

A week ago the square turned into the stage for one of the biggest protests since Poroshenko took office, when a few thousand people rallied to urge him to end the ceasefire with the eastern rebels. On Monday, June 30, he duly did.

"I want us to put up a fiercer fight in the east and kill the terrorists that have invaded our lands. This is a war, and every second lost costs the life of one of our patriots," said Viktor Kamenev, 66, a former soldier, walking through the barricades in central Kiev this past week.

"This is not a civil war, this is Putin's intervention against eastern Ukraine," he said, voicing a widespread view that Russian President Vladimir Putin wants to grab more ex-Soviet territory for Russia after annexing Ukraine's Crimea in March.

"No one in their right mind would want to get stuck in a diplomatic quagmire with Putin," said Kamenev, dismissing efforts by the Kremlin to play a role as defender of the Russian-speaking population of eastern Ukraine.

The bloody street protests after Yanukovych chose to tighten ties with Moscow showed many Ukrainians would rather fight than make a deal with the Kremlin leader who has become the object of popular hatred even among those who play down domestic divisions between eastern Ukrainians and the Ukrainian-speaking west.

Likewise, many of those who took to the streets against Yanukovych in February have joined the armed forces, lending some of the Maidan's political power to the long neglected military and the newly formed National Guard.

A second Western diplomat said it was Poroshenko's meeting with his hawkish security council on June 30 that drove home to him the need to call off the 10-day-old ceasefire, seen

widely to be have been giving rebels a chance to rearm and regroup.

Poroshenko had extended a week-long ceasefire, called on June 20, at the urging of the West and Russia, for 72 hours when it expired on Friday, June 27. But by June 30 the foreign ministry said 27 Ukrainians had been killed during the truce, increasing pressure on the president to go on the offensive.

In the end it may have simply come down to common sense for Poroshenko, who saw little sign of compromise from the rebels: "He looked at the four points that the EU said there should be progress on and saw little progress and that's why he didn't extend," said the first Western diplomat.

After the success of the offensive in taking Slovyansk, Poroshenko shows no sign of negotiating another truce. He took triumphantly to Twitter on Sunday: "My order is now in effect — tighten the ring around the terrorists," he wrote. "Continue the operation to liberate Donetsk and Luhansk regions."

See also:

[Ukrainian Rebels Lose 2 Strongholds, Move to Donetsk](#)

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