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Russia Wins Silent Victory Against Ukraine With Dutch 'No' Vote

By Eva Hartog

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Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte casts his vote for the consultative referendum on the association between Ukraine and the European Union, in the Hague, the Netherlands, April 6, 2016.

The Netherlands on Thursday awoke to a post-election hangover dominated by questions over how to interpret the results of a plebiscite in which an overwhelming majority of voters opposed a trade deal between the EU and Ukraine that for years has been a source of conflict with Moscow.

The number of "No" voters exceeded those who voted "Yes" by almost two-to-one, with 61.1 percent voting against and 38.1 percent voting in favor of the EU's association agreement with Ukraine in Wednesday's vote, according to preliminary data by the ANP Dutch news agency.

Although the referendum carries an advisory character, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte has said that the indisputable success of the "No" camp means the Netherlands will not automatically ratify the agreement, pending talks in Dutch Parliament and a possible

renegotiation of the deal in Brussels — a lengthy process that could play into Russia's hands, analysts told The Moscow Times.

Keeping Cool

Moscow on Thursday seemed keen to refrain from openly celebrating the result, following months of reports in the Dutch media that Russia had played a role in forcing the vote and that a victory for the "No" camp would signal support for President Vladimir Putin.

The Netherlands' relations with Russia have been on edge ever since passenger plane MH17 was downed over pro-Russian separatist territory in eastern Ukraine in July 2014, killing 298 people — two-thirds of whom were Dutch.

When asked to comment on the referendum's results, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told The Moscow Times that the referendum was "the Netherlands' internal affair."

Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov similarly told the TASS news agency that the vote was "absolutely the internal affair of the Netherlands." But, he added, "[the results] show the attitude of Dutch citizens toward a specific document. The Dutch have questions and they're signaling their distrust," he said.

The Kremlin has traditionally obstructed neighboring Ukraine's turn towards the European Union, successfully pressuring ex-Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych into rejecting a trade deal with the bloc in late 2013. The move triggered widespread protest on Kiev's Maidan Square and eventually led to Yanukovych's ouster. His successor Petro Poroshenko later put his signature to the agreement.

Sergei Utkin, a foreign policy expert at the Russian Academy of Sciences, said the vote is unlikely to reverse the implementation of the trade deal with Ukraine, which has already been ratified by all other EU members states.

"It will be complicated to present the referendum's outcome as posing a challenge to the economic deal on free trade [with Ukraine]," he said. "That is the combined decision of all EU states." He added the Dutch might succeed in adding a clause to the agreement stipulating that the deal is not a stepping stone towards full EU membership for Ukraine — one of the "No" camp's main arguments against the accord.

Utkin said the referendum's outcome was "an alarming signal," and could be used by other Eurosceptic movements in EU member states to force their own plebiscites, with the possible outcome of weakening Brussels' position at the negotiating table at a time of EU sanctions against Russia over its role in the Ukraine crisis and annexation of Crimea.

"The more internal disagreement and pressure there is within the European Union, the more comfortable it is for Russia, because it can play on it to its own advantage," he said.

Disappointment

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in a video on the presidential website has accused the organizers of the referendum of having staged "an attack on the unity of Europe, an attack on

the spread of European values" and pledged Ukraine would not "turn back from the path of Euro-integration."

The Netherlands' Eurosceptic citizen's platform GeenPeil last autumn made use of a newly enacted law to force a vote on the trade deal, which it argued exemplified the EU's expansionist policy and lack of democratic accountability.

But others argue the vote is as much about the Dutch population's skepticism toward Brussels, as toward post-Maidan Ukraine and Poroshenko himself.

"The Dutch referendum is an indication of the attitude of Europeans towards the Ukrainian political system," Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said Thursday on Twitter.

Ahead of the vote, on Sunday, Poroshenko was named in the "Panama Papers" revelations as having failed to declare several offshore companies allegedly connected to his confectionery company Roshen.

Such reports of continued corruption and political infighting are negatively shaping European populations' view of Ukraine, says Vladimir Bruter, an analyst with the International Institute of Humanitarian and Political Studies think tank.

"The vote says that Europeans don't want to integrate with Ukraine. That they don't consider it to be a country close to them," he says. Bruter said the outcome could serve as a wake-up call.

"If someone encounters a misfortune, they should get themselves together and focus. Ukraine has to try to change itself from within," he said. "The role of Europe should not be to tell Ukraine that it should chase after Europe so that it will be allowed in [the EU] tomorrow, but that it should try to shape its own political course," he said.

To Vote or Not to Vote

Voter turnout for Wednesday's referendum barely scraped past the official 30-percent-threshold necessary to make the result legally binding. It is believed a sizable segment of Dutch "Yes" voters stayed away from the ballot box in a strategic attempt to keep the turnout low and invalidate the vote.

The Netherlands' have held only one other referendum, a government-organized vote on a European Constitution in 2005 in which a large majority, 61.5 percent, voted against such a document. In that case, the turnout was almost twice as high as in Wednesday's vote, at 63 percent.

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