

The View from Russia | 15 May 2014

Eastern Ukraine regions hold referendum on autonomy

The View from Russia is a fortnightly series in which Open Briefing's Russia researcher, **Erin Decker**, examines news coverage from four major Russian sources: RT is a television network and news website funded by the Russian government; the *Moscow Times* is an English-language newspaper that provides a foreign perspective; *Kommersant* is an independent daily newspaper; *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* is a privately-owned newspaper that is generally regarded as pro-opposition.

Referendums were held on 11 May in the eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Lugansk in which the overwhelming majority voted in favour of self-rule. Thus far, Russia's response has been limited to expressing its respect for the will of the people of Donetsk and Lugansk and for the outcome of the vote. The reaction has been tepid compared to Russia's response to the separatist vote held in Crimea last month, after which it acted quickly to annex the peninsula.

Kommersant included the most direct statements from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which were phrased to highlight Kiev's diminishing control over its regions. It used strong words to urge Kiev to open a dialogue with Donetsk and Lugansk: 'We are awaiting real action from those in power in Kiev, not general declarations of intentions, and for it to call immediate, effective meetings with representatives from Ukraine's southern and eastern regions which would lead to stabilisation of the situation in the country. Unfortunately, the regime in Kiev is, as usual, demonstrating criminal unpreparedness for a dialogue with their people.'

Nezavisimaya Gazeta focussed more on the fact that Russian President Vladimir Putin had told the republics to postpone these referendums, which was interpreted by some as a signal that Russia wanted more discussions to take place before such a vote. Ukraine's acting prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, did not react positively to Putin's calls to postpone the referendum, nor to his request that Kiev 'immediately cease all counterinsurgency operations in the country's southeast'. Putin's comments, which at first blush may seem fairly neutral and diplomatic, also served to place blame on Kiev for the lack of a dialogue with the separatist regions and Russia, as well as to highlight Kiev's decreasing control of its regions. An article in *Nezavisimaya* carried some harsh words from Yatsenyuk's response, which were not featured in the other publications examined: 'Russia is asking us to postpone some referendum on the 11th, but someone should inform the Russian president that Ukraine has not planned any sort of referendum for the 11th. However, if the terrorists and separatists supporting Russia have received an order to postpone whatever was not planned, then those are their internal squabbles.'



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the civil society intelligence agency

Open Briefing
27 Old Gloucester Street
Bloomsbury
London WC1N 3AX

t 020 7193 9805
info@openbriefing.org
www.openbriefing.org

The *Moscow Times* at first gave the benefit of the doubt to Russia's measured reaction: 'The cautious stance...appeared to show Russia favouring a negotiated solution to what has become the worst crisis between Russia and the West since the Cold War.' However, the newspaper later ran another article that included thoughts from Russia experts who believed that Moscow's lack of a reaction may be part of a larger strategy. Dmitry Trenin, director of Moscow's Carnegie Centre, a foreign policy think tank, said: 'The Kremlin wants to create a force in the country's east that will first and foremost represent the Russian identity and which will become part of the Ukrainian elite, where it would balance its Western-oriented representatives.' The *Moscow Times* also spoke with Fyodor Lukyanov, head of Russia's Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, a think tank with close ties to the foreign ministry, who agreed that Russia's measured response was part of a larger soft power strategy with regard to Ukraine rather than an indication of it turning toward neutrality: 'These referendums are a tool used both in Moscow and eastern Ukraine to demonstrate that there are people there who are legitimately driving the agenda and are being supported by a big chunk of the population...In Russia, this process is perceived as a way to establish a legitimate political structure in Ukraine's east, which new authorities in Kiev will not be able to ignore.'

Comment

Much like Russia itself, **RT** has had surprisingly little to say about the referendum thus far, which perhaps is an even greater indication of how much its reporting is based on toeing the Kremlin's line. RT had carried much more coverage of the Crimea referendum and of major events in the Ukraine crisis in general than it has of the Donetsk and Lugansk referendums. RT and *Kommersant* both seemed to take Moscow's measured commentary on the referendums at face value, interpreting it as an indication that Russia was turning more towards the role of neutral mediator in the Ukraine crisis and simply calling for more dialogue between Kiev and its separatist regions, rather than rallying around the outcomes of the votes and seeking to immediately annex the breakaway territories as it did following the Crimea referendum. However, the *Moscow Times* and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* looked beyond the surface of Russia's tepid response to suggest that it may be part of an overall strategy that the Kremlin is implementing with regard to the Ukraine crisis. Russia's annexation of Crimea resulted in the international community condemning its land grab and implementing sanctions; perhaps to avoid a similar response and further escalation of tensions with the West, the Kremlin is taking a new, subtler, approach.

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