

The View from Russia | 30 May 2014

Ukraine elects new president

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; *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* and *Novaya Gazeta* are privately owned newspapers that are generally regarded as pro-opposition; the *Moscow Times* is an English-language newspaper that provides a foreign perspective.

Ukraine's presidential elections held on 25 May resulted in a first-round victory for billionaire businessman and pro-European opposition candidate Petro Poroshenko, who received 56% of the vote. Although in the lead-up to the election Russia had stated that it would respect the results, RT initially claimed that Moscow was undecided as to whether or not to congratulate Poroshenko on his victory. However, subsequent reports from RT carried a softer tone and echoed the Kremlin's support for the outcome, with only a few mentions of complications in two Ukrainian regions where some voters were prevented from reaching polling stations by separatist militias. Instead of playing up these incidents in an attempt to detract from the election's legitimacy, RT reported that the election proves that Poroshenko enjoys the support of a majority of the Ukrainian population and even 'received the majority of votes in many predominantly Russian-speaking regions'. Both RT and *Novaya Gazeta* also announced that even deposed former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, who fled to Russia and has been in hiding there since he was ousted, unreservedly expressed his respect for Poroshenko's victory.

The *Moscow Times* sought to explain Moscow's amiable response to Ukraine's presidential election as 'a tactical move and not a shift toward long-term de-escalation'. The newspaper explained that 'the Kremlin's softened policy was simply a reaction to the West's direct threat to ramp up economic sanctions if Russia disrupted the Ukrainian polls'. The *Moscow Times* also predicted that Russia would continue to find ways to keep the conflict simmering, knowing that Ukraine will not be able to forge a serious affiliation with the European Union or NATO while it has a 'smouldering insurgency' in its backyard. This would achieve what experts say Moscow ultimately wants, which is to prevent Ukraine from entering the Western sphere of influence.



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While it may have been expected that RT might focus its election coverage on reports of voting fraud, falsification or any other events discrediting the legitimacy of the outcome, such reports were surprisingly lacking from the pro-Kremlin news source. It is interesting to note that such reports were featured more prominently by *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, which presented evidence from a prominent Russian news publicist who questioned the legitimacy of the vote due to low turnout. He claimed that less than half of the population actually cast ballots and accused Ukrainian journalists of showing footage of the high turnout of voters from the 11 May referendum on television and representing it as the 25 May presidential vote. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* neither confirmed nor refuted these allegations in its reporting.

Comment

In the weeks leading up to the election, Russian state-controlled media continually emphasised that, while Ukraine is a deeply-divided country, pro-Russian movements in its east were steadily gaining ground and would likely turn the country away from integration with Europe and back toward Moscow's orbit. This made it even more surprising that, once the election results were announced, Russia was quick to express its respect for the outcome. After all, Poroshenko's victory has severely undermined Russia's position that the majority of Ukrainians would naturally choose to align with Russia instead of the EU if given the choice.

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