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Russia on Zelenskiy's victory

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Moscow's official reaction to Volodymyr Zelenskiy's victory in the presidential elections in Ukraine has so far been restrained. The Kremlin has held back from offering official congratulations to the winner, and President Putin's spokesman Dmitri Peskov said that Moscow will assess the new president "after concrete steps [have been taken]". Meanwhile, Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev said that "there are opportunities for better cooperation with our country". Many key Russian politicians, however, have expressed satisfaction at the outcome of the elections. The chairman of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin said that the elections showed "the failure of Poroshenko's politics, and a rejection of his extremist positions against the Donbas and Luhansk". In contrast, the President of the Federation Council Valentina Matviyenko said that Moscow is ready for dialogue "with the president of Ukraine whom the nation chose". Most comments by lower-ranking Russian politicians focused on Poroshenko's poor result, emphasised the opportunity to normalise Russian-Ukrainian relations, and called the standards of the vote into question.

On the day of the vote (21 April), the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov gave an extensive interview on the Ukrainian election. He listed Moscow's expectations of the new president, starting with the need to confirm the Minsk agreements signed in 2015, which defined the terms for a ceasefire and the reintegration of the Donbas into Ukraine. Lavrov stressed that to resolve the conflict, Kyiv will have to hold direct negotiations with the puppet leaders of the separatist republics in the Donbas and give the breakaway region special status. He also referred to the alleged agreements on the decentralisation and federalisation of Ukraine. He expressed his expectation that the new government will respect the linguistic and cultural rights, views and values of Ukraine's Russian-speaking population.

Pro-Kremlin experts have stressed that the election results have opened up an opportunity to redefine Russian-Ukrainian relations. Together with the list of conditions Lavrov gave, they have added: Ukraine should take over the costs of maintaining the Donbas (the creation of an infrastructure to pay pensions and benefits on territories not controlled by Kyiv), and remove the barriers to trading and infrastructure connections (including the resumption of direct flights). Some commentators have emphasised that any normalisation of relations should be combined with the abolition of the sanctions Western countries have imposed on Russia.

Commentary

- Zelenskiy's win in the presidential elections in Ukraine was welcomed in Moscow. Russia recognises that the change of leader in Ukraine has opened up opportunities to force Kyiv to make some concessions, and in the long term, to help normalise Russia's relations with the West. Moscow's maximum aim is to impose its interpretation of the Minsk agreements on Kyiv, which will lead to the federalisation of Ukraine under conditions which will allow the Kremlin to steer the course of Ukrainian foreign policy and block its move towards the West.
- On the other hand, Moscow is aware of Zelenskiy's weaknesses resulting from his lack of experience and a political base, the inflated social expectations of what he can achieve, and the expected opposition to him from 'patriotic' circles. This could significantly reduce his room for manoeuvre, including in his relations with Moscow. If Kyiv does not make any concessions, Russia's interest will lie in stoking political divisions within Ukraine and weakening the country's image in the West. At the same time, Moscow will be waiting for the results from the key elections in Ukraine this autumn. The Kremlin hopes that pro-Russian forces will win significant representation in the Ukrainian parliament, which could influence Ukrainian politics and rebuild the grouping of pro-Russian parties.
- In the coming months, the Kremlin will try to take advantage of Zelenskiy's weak political position, together with his promise to bring a quick end to the Donbas war, to force him into making some concessions. To this end Moscow will use some 'carrots' on the one hand (such as offers to release Ukrainian prisoners, including the sailors captured last November; and to make compromises on the supply and transit of Russian energy resources), and 'sticks' on the other (including the threat to cut off supplies of oil and petroleum products, which is expected to come into force as of 1 June). Russia will also continue its propaganda to boost the position of the pro-Russian forces in Ukraine before the parliamentary elections.