



E-ISSN 2014-0843

opinión

Europa

241

JUNE
2014

NEW PRESIDENT AND A FRAGILE PROGRESS TOWARDS A CEASE-FIRE IN UKRAINE

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Six months after the beginning of the protests in Kiev's Maidan Square and three months after Viktor Yanukovich fled the country, Ukraine has a new democratically elected president. The Ukrainian crisis has entered a new stage, after the successful presidential elections on May the 25th put Petro Poroshenko in power with a strong victory in the first round (54,7% of the vote). While there have been no major breakthroughs in the efforts to stabilise the eastern separatist regions yet, some limited and fragile progress may now be taking place. In the week preceding official inauguration of the new president, a significant diplomatic offensive to defuse the crisis was deployed during president Obama's four-day visit to Europe. In his inaugural speech Petro Poroshenko, after an intensive week of meetings with American and European counterparts and his first brief encounter with Russian president Vladimir Putin, laid out a peace plan to stabilise the eastern regions and to preserve the unity of Ukraine. His plan includes an offer of amnesty for the separatist militants, early regional elections in the East and a decentralisation of power to the regional administrations. It remains to be seen however, how Russia will react to these latest developments and what kind of implications Moscow's response to the proposed solution of the crisis will have on the European security.

Any further escalation of the crisis in the separatist regions of Luhansk and Donetsk has a potential to exacerbate Russia's relations with the West. After Putin's decision to annex Crimea, the EU and US introduced targeted sanctions such as visa bans and asset freezes on a number of senior Russian officials and companies. The political sanctions included exclusion of Russia from the G8 forum and cancellation of the G8 meeting that was scheduled to take place this June in Sochi. Instead, the G7 leaders met this month in Brussels. In addition to the political isolation and the targeted economic sanctions, tensions between Russia and the NATO allies have also increased because of Russia's military presence near Ukraine's southeastern border and because of Russia's alleged involvement in the destabilisation of Ukraine's eastern regions. In April NATO suspended military and civilian cooperation with Russia (although the political dialogue within NATO-Russia Council continues at the Ambassadorial level over issues related to the Ukrainian crisis). Within the NATO military cooperation, the US temporarily increased their military presence in Poland and Baltic States.

During his recent visit to Europe, president Barack Obama pursued a three-pronged diplomatic effort to solve the Ukrainian crisis. First, Obama expressed strong support for the Ukrainian president-elect. Both leaders met in Warsaw on the occasion

of the 25th anniversary of the first partly free elections in Poland that led to the end of communism. Obama held his first face-to-face talks with Poroshenko and announced assistance for the Ukrainian military and economic cooperation. Second, the president of the United States reassured Central and Eastern European allies that NATO is ready to defend their borders in accordance with Article 5 of the NATO Treaty. He announced that the US would be spending a \$1 billion to boost its military presence in Eastern Europe. A third objective of Obama's visit to Europe was to put pressure on Vladimir Putin to officially recognise Petro Poroshenko as the legitimate head of the Ukrainian state and to help negotiate a cease-fire in the separatist regions. At the G7 meeting in Brussels on the 4th and 5th of June, Obama tried to convince the major EU players to keep the firm line against Russia on Ukraine and to keep open the option of a third round of sectorial sanctions in case Russia does not change its policy towards Ukraine.

The European leaders played their part in the diplomatic efforts to put pressure on Putin to restore direct talks between Ukraine and Russia. French president François Hollande invited both Vladimir Putin and Petro Poroshenko to take part in the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the Allied D-Day landings in Normandy in order to bring the two leaders together. A first conversation between Putin and Poroshenko in company of the German chancellor Angela Merkel has been read as a sign of Putin's unofficial recognition of Poroshenko as Ukraine's legitimate president. Apart from this symbolic but important step forward, Angela Merkel and British PM David Cameron both held bilateral talks with Vladimir Putin regarding the situation in Ukraine and calling on Russia to take its responsibility in stabilising the eastern region in the new post-election situation.

Although the challenges that the new Ukrainian president needs to face in order to bring Ukraine out of the current political and economic crisis are huge, Petro Poroshenko have appeared confident after taking office. One reason for his confidence may be the strong popular support he enjoys at home. Another reason may be the significant international support that the president-elect received during the week preceding his inauguration. On the 7th of June, Poroshenko delivered a forceful inaugural speech. He started by saying that he does not want war or revenge despite the sacrifice of the Ukrainian people. He also struck a conciliatory tone on eastern Ukraine, switching from Ukrainian to Russian while presenting a peace plan. He offered amnesty to the separatist fighters as well as safety corridors for Russian militants to leave the eastern regions. However, he also sent a clear signal to Russia about the integrity and unity of Ukraine.

For the time being, the pro-Russian separatist leaders rejected the peace plan proposed by Poroshenko. Intensive fighting continues in the eastern regions between the Ukrainian soldiers and separatist militants, most likely with the support of well-organised undercover Russian special forces. In the current situation it is very difficult to predict the real intentions of the Russian president. Moscow's position will certainly be crucial (even if Putin denies his role) for successfully negotiating a cease-fire and starting a political dialogue between Kiev and the Eastern regions. The short meeting between Putin and Poroshenko in France was a first promising step towards what will hopefully become a dialogue. The second step came straight after as the Russian ambassador, Mikhail Zurabov, returned to Kiev (after three months of absence) and attended the Poroshenko's inauguration ceremony. The ambassador's comments on Poroshenko's proposals were positive and it seems that Russia might be ready to start official talks with the new Ukrainian president. However, until a cease-fire is achieved or there is more certainty about Putin's willingness to help stop the bloodshed, the EU and US should continue to speak with one voice and keep a firm line on Russia.