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By Alec Luhn

Poroshenko endorses referendum on federalisation of Ukraine

President concedes that ballot may be necessary for constitutional reform although he remains opposed to the concept

Порошенко підтримує проведення референдуму щодо федералізації України.

Президент визнає, що голосування може бути необхідним для конституційної реформи, хоча він, як і раніше, виступає проти такої концепції.

Український президент заявив, що підтримує проведення референдуму щодо устрою країни, якщо це буде необхідно. Нагадаємо, що однією з ключових вимог, що висунули повстанці на сході країни ще на початку конфлікту, було проведення конституційної реформи з метою федералізації України. Порошенко при цьому виступає різко проти ідеї федералізації, оскільки вважає, що це послабить країну і надасть можливість Росії впливати на внутрішню ситуацію ще більш жорстко. При цьому президент зауважив, що він має надію на те, що український народ виступить в своїй більшості за унітарну державу.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/06/poroshenko-endorses-referendum-on-federalisation-of-ukraine>



President Petro Poroshenko has endorsed a referendum on the federalisation of Ukraine, jumpstarting the reforms foreseen by the peace plan to end the conflict with Russia-backed rebels in the country's east.

"I'm ready to hold a referendum about the structure of the government, if you think it's necessary," Poroshenko told a commission which will oversee constitutional reform at its first session on Monday.

Federalisation was one of the key demands made by pro-Russia rebels at the start of the conflict last April as it would give largely Russian-speaking Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine a great degree of autonomy from the central government. But analysts and politicians in Kiev argue such a move would weaken the country and allow Moscow undue influence in its politics.

Poroshenko left no doubt where he stood on the issue, calling federalisation an "infection" that he hinted was being forced on the country by foreign powers, apparently referring to Russia.

"When Ukraine united, they came at us with aggression, with war, trying to establish federalisation with iron and blood. I won't let that happen; the Ukrainian people won't let that happen," he told the commission.

Poroshenko has said 90% of Ukrainians supported a unitary government.

The adoption of a new constitution by the end of 2015 is one of the stipulations of the Minsk peace plan brokered in February by the leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine. Decentralisation will be a key part of constitutional reform, but it remains unclear what form it will take.

Volodymyr Groysman, chairman of the constitutional reform commission, said planning for decentralisation would begin at the next meeting on 15 April, which would also discuss human rights and judicial reforms.

Vadim Karasyov, a political analyst from Kiev, said that, the idea of federalisation was unpopular and a referendum was likely to fail. Nonetheless, the constitutional reform process would meet France and Germany's demands that Ukraine give greater autonomy to eastern regions, he said.

"I think we will be talking about the decentralisation of Ukraine within a unitary government, and Donbass will be able to hope only for special status allowing local self-government according to Ukrainian law," he said, referring to a historical name for Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Poroshenko also said on Monday that Ukrainian would remain the only official state language, arguing that three-quarters of the population supported this. Greater official recognition of the Russian language has been a rebel demand. Last spring, Ukraine's parliament attempted to repeal a law that recognises Russian as a second official language in regions with significant Russian-speaking populations, but the acting president refused to sign the repeal.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's defence ministry announced that ultranationalist MP Dmytro Yarosh was to become an aide to military chief Viktor Muzhenko and that his Right Sector fighting group would be integrated into the armed forces.

The news was widely reported in Russia, where Yarosh has been criticised for his radical stances and anti-Russian statements. In February, Yarosh said in a post on Facebook that his forces would continue to fight the enemy despite the ceasefire agreed in Minsk as part of the peace plan. Rebels in eastern Ukraine have accused Right Sector of atrocities against Russian speakers.

Karasyov called the appointment honorary and said it was part of an ongoing campaign to put an end to the "private armies" that had sprung up over the past year to help the ill-prepared Ukrainian military put down the separatist conflict. Last month, Ihor Kolomoisky, who bankrolled pro-Kiev volunteer battalions in eastern Ukraine, was removed from his post of governor of Dnipropetrovsk.

"Ukraine doesn't need scandals and it doesn't really need Yarosh," Karasyov said. "This is an honourable capitulation for him and his big military goals. He will remain an MP and an aide but he won't significantly affect the policy of the defence department."

Anton Geraschenko, an advisor in the interior ministry, said Yarosh could keep working on military initiatives. "I see that he's bored in the [parliament], plus he's now been seriously wounded in battle, and I would love to create a volunteer defence union of Ukraine with Dmytro Yarosh like in the Estonian, Finnish and Swiss systems," he said.