

US, EU threaten retaliation as Crimea votes to join Russia

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US and the European Union (EU) officials threatened devastating sanctions and military escalation against Russia as initial exit polls in yesterday's referendum showed Crimea voting overwhelmingly to secede from Ukraine and join Russia.

With participation in the referendum at over 80 percent of Crimea's 1.5 million voters, 93 percent voted to join Russia. The remaining 7 percent selected the option of remaining as a region of Ukraine, but with broad local autonomy.

Tens of thousands of people celebrated the vote in the Crimean capital of Simferopol, jamming Lenin Square, and in Sevastopol, a city that hosts a key Russian naval base.

The Russian foreign ministry issued a statement Sunday quoting Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as telling US Secretary of State John Kerry in a phone call that "the results should be the starting point in determining the future of the peninsula." The ministry said later that Kerry and Lavrov agreed to continue working toward "an earliest possible launch of constitutional reform."

The US State Department issued its own version of the call, saying Kerry had reaffirmed that the US considered the referendum illegal and would not recognize the outcome. Kerry, a State Department official said, "raised strong concerns" about Russian military activity and "continuing provocations in eastern cities in Ukraine." He reiterated US demands that Russia immediately pull its forces back to their bases in Crimea and end its military exercises along Ukraine's southern and eastern borders.

The vote is a sharp rejection of the Western-backed regime in Kiev that took power in last month's putsch. The overturn was led by fascist forces, including the Right Sector militia and the Svoboda party. The new government alienated Crimea's majority-Russian-speaking population by moving to strip Russian of its status as an official language and by making incendiary threats, such as Right Sector leader Dmitry Yarosh's call to use force against Crimeans hostile to Kiev. Even US officials admitted that they expected Crimea to secede.

With unparalleled hypocrisy, Western officials backing an

unelected far-right regime in Kiev declared the referendum illegal and a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty. A White House statement said: "We reject the 'referendum' that took place today in the Crimean region of Ukraine." It called on other countries to "condemn such actions, to take concrete steps to impose costs, and to stand together in support of the Ukrainian people and Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty."

US legislators returning from talks in Kiev pressed for escalation against Russia. Senator Chris Murphy, Democrat of Connecticut, said: "If Russia really does decide to move beyond Crimea, it is going to be bloody and the fight may be long."

Calling for a "longer-term effort to build up the Ukrainian military," Murphy said: "If on Monday we announce, with the European Union, a set of crippling sanctions coming after not only individuals, but Russian business entities, I think that sends a strong message to [Russian President Vladimir] Putin ... I mean, there's no doubt that if you cut off Russian gas to Europe, it will hurt. There's no doubt that if you freeze Russian assets in places like Germany and Great Britain, it will hurt them."

Republican Senator John McCain called for a military build-up aimed at Russia. Recklessly dismissing Russia as "a gas station masquerading as a country," McCain called for broad confrontation: "Economic sanctions are important. Get some military assistance to Ukrainians, at least so they can defend themselves," he said. "Resume the missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic." He also called for Moldova and Georgia to get on "a path to membership in NATO."

The US and the EU are moving to provide military assistance to the Kiev regime, which last week set up a new 60,000-strong National Guard, including fascist paramilitaries, interior police and veterans of the armed services. The National Guard is being formed to supplement the country's divided armed forces. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Deschchytsha is traveling today to Brussels to discuss "military and technical cooperation" with NATO.

The EU denounced the referendum in a statement from European Council President Herman Van Rompuy and European Commission President José Manuel Barroso, which read: “The referendum is illegal and illegitimate, and its outcome will not be recognized.” The statement added that EU foreign affairs ministers would meet this morning to decide on “additional measures,” such as sanctions.

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said, “If Russia does not give in at the last minute, we will give an appropriate answer in the EU foreign ministers meeting ... We are in an incendiary situation.”

The Crimean referendum marks a further escalation of the most serious international crisis in Europe since the end of World War II. It comes after a week of rising speculation about whether the EU will impose sanctions on Russia—a move that threatens to bring EU-Russia trade to a halt, with devastating consequences for the world economy—and whether the crisis will provoke a major war in Europe.

On Saturday, Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution moved by the United States condemning the Crimean referendum. China abstained from the vote, calling for the formation of an “international coordinating mechanism” to explore a political settlement to the crisis.

Foreign Minister Titus Corlatean of Romania, which borders parts of western Ukraine where support for the Kiev regime is highest, warned yesterday that the Crimean vote for secession could “blow apart borders across Europe.”

The pro-Russian outcome in the Crimean referendum, while it deals a setback to the Kiev regime and to the imperialist powers that have aggressively stoked the conflict, offers no progressive perspective for defeating the imperialist-fascist offensive in Ukraine.

Crimea is one of Ukraine’s poorest regions. Life expectancy is only 67, four years less than the Ukrainian average, and per capita gross domestic product (GDP) is 19,000 hryvnia (\$US2,004), a third less than the Ukrainian national average. Following the vote, it still finds itself in the front lines of an escalating conflict between the Kiev regime’s NATO backers and the Kremlin.

There were widespread reports in Western media that large sections of Crimea’s ethnic Tatar population, historically more hostile to Russia, boycotted the referendum.

Over the weekend, Russian troops seized a natural gas distribution center near the village of Strilkove on a Ukrainian peninsula near Crimea. Crimean officials said the action followed a cut-off of gas supplies to parts of Crimea. The foreign ministry in Kiev responded by issuing a provocative statement, warning that “Ukraine reserves the right to use all necessary measures to stop the military invasion by Russia.”

The Crimean referendum’s backers in the Kremlin can

make no appeal for opposition to the imperialist intervention in Ukraine in the international working class. Broad majorities of workers in the United States and Europe oppose war, and there is deep hostility in the Ukrainian working class to the austerity measures the Kiev regime and the International Monetary Fund are working to impose. (See: [What the Western-backed regime is planning for Ukrainian workers](#))

The Putin regime—a gangster oligarchy that emerged from the restoration of capitalism in the USSR—is trying to defend its interests in the crisis purely by mobilizing Russian nationalist sentiment. This plays into the hands of the Western imperialist powers and the far-right Ukrainian nationalist forces, who are stepping up ethnic conflict within Ukraine itself.

Several people were killed in more pro-Russian regions of eastern Ukraine amid fighting between pro-Russian groups and far-right, pro-Kiev militias. In Donetsk, Svoboda member Dmytro Chernyavkyi was stabbed and killed after fighting broke out when pro-Russian forces took over facilities of the security services. They were demanding the release of a self-proclaimed governor of the Donbass region, Pavlo Goubarev, who has called for a referendum in Donbass on rejoining Russia.

A pro-Russian demonstrator and a bystander were killed, and five people, including a police officer, were wounded, after fighting erupted in Kharkiv between 30 members of the armed, far-right Patriots of Ukraine militia and pro-Russian forces.



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