

Pro-Russian protesters in eastern Ukraine demand Crimean-style referendum

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Tensions between the Western-backed interim government in Kiev and the eastern parts of Ukraine with close economic and linguistic ties to Russia are escalating, posing the threat not only of civil war in Ukraine, but of military conflict between the imperialist powers and Russia.

Yesterday, pro-Russian protesters in eastern Ukraine's industrial city of Donetsk set up a "people's council" and announced the creation of a "republic of Donetsk."

Three weeks after Crimea voted to secede from Ukraine, the council in Donetsk similarly called for a May 11 referendum on joining Russia and asked Russia to deploy "peacekeepers" to secure it. A statement of the council read: "Without support it will be hard for us to stand against the junta in Kiev... We are addressing Russian President Putin because we can only entrust our security to Russia."

The announcement followed the occupation of local administration buildings in Donetsk, Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city, and the eastern city of Luhansk by anti-government protesters on Sunday. Pictures and videos of the protests showed demonstrators setting up barricades and piling up tires and barbed wire, just as pro-Western protesters did in Kiev against former president Viktor Yanukovich before he was ousted in a Western-orchestrated and fascist-led putsch on February 22.

The imperialist powers' installation of a far-right, anti-Russian government in Kiev, which quickly moved to eliminate Russian as an official language and impose IMF austerity measures on the working class, is producing an ever more volatile and explosive situation.

In Kharkiv, clashes erupted between anti-government activists and police forces that tried to recapture the

administration building. Anti-government protesters violently dispersed a demonstration of Kiev government supporters.

In Luhansk, demonstrators seized a weapons depot. The Ukrainian news agency UNIAN reported that nine people, including law enforcement officers, were injured in the attack.

The fatal shooting of a Ukrainian military officer in Crimea has further fueled tensions between the interim government in Kiev and Russia. The officer was shot in a dispute with Russian soldiers late Sunday night, according to a spokesman for the Ukrainian Defense Ministry.

The mounting tensions in eastern Ukraine testify to the recklessness of the imperialist powers, which are risking not only open civil war in Ukraine, but war with Russia itself in pursuit of their economic and geopolitical goals. The protests against the Kiev regime by pro-Russian forces in sections of Ukraine that were Yanukovich's political base are the result of the Western powers' decision to illegally oust his regime, utilizing as their shock troops ultra-nationalist and fascist forces.

The regime installed by Washington and its European allies includes ministers from the fascistic Svoboda party. It has agreed to impose International Monetary Fund dictated energy price increases that will devastate eastern Ukraine's industries and workers.

The Ukrainian regime and its imperialist backers are blaming the anti-government protests in eastern Ukraine on Russia and seizing on them to further escalate tensions. On Monday, Ukrainian interim President Oleksander Turchinov threatened to use "anti-terrorism" measures to suppress the protests, which he denounced as a Russian conspiracy. "Yesterday the second stage of a special Russian operation began, the

aim of which is to destabilize the situation in the state, overthrow the Ukrainian authorities, disrupt the election and tear our country apart,” he said.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk accused Russia of carrying out a plan “to destabilize the situation, a plan to ensure that foreign troops could cross the border and capture the territory of the country.” At a government meeting, he declared: “There is a script being written in the Russian Federation, for which there is only one purpose: the dismemberment and destruction of Ukraine and the transformation of Ukraine into the territory of slavery under the dictates of Russia.”

The ultimate goal of the imperialist powers is not only to take over Ukraine, but to dismember Russia itself. They are intensifying their provocations, threats and sanctions in an attempt to undermine the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin. For its part, the Kremlin, well aware of widespread social discontent in the Russian population, fears it could be targeted for a similar regime-change operation to that which brought down Yanukovych.

Speaking at a meeting of Russia’s Federal Security Service on Monday, Putin said that Russia was on the alert against outside agitators seeking to create ethnic strife. “We must make a clear distinction between civilized opposition to the authorities and serving foreign interests to the detriment of our own country,” he said, “We will not accept a situation such as happened in Ukraine, when in many cases it was through non-governmental organizations that the nationalist and neo-Nazi groups and militants, who became the shock troops in the anti-constitutional coup d’état, received funding from abroad.”

Washington and the European powers are seizing on the protests in Eastern Ukraine to step up their war threats against Russia. Commenting on the protests in Donetsk, Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt wrote on Twitter: “Sunday pattern that pro-Russian thugs try to stir up trouble in eastern Ukraine. Heavily supported by Kremlin propaganda machine.”

Czech President Milos Zeman went further, calling for a NATO intervention in Ukraine should Russia try to move into eastern Ukraine. “The moment Russia decides to widen its territorial expansion to the eastern part of Ukraine, that is where the fun ends,” Zeman told Czech public radio. “There I would plead not only for

the strictest EU sanctions, but even for military readiness of the North Atlantic Alliance, like, for example, NATO forces entering Ukrainian territory.”

Washington warned Russia against trying to annex more Ukrainian territory “overtly or covertly” and accused pro-Russian demonstrators of being paid by Moscow. “There is strong evidence suggesting some of these demonstrators were paid and were not local residents,” White House press secretary Jay Carney said on Monday. “We’re concerned about several escalatory moves in Ukraine over the weekend, and we see those as a result of increased Russian pressure on Ukraine.”

Daniel Baer, the US ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, claimed that Russia had amassed tens of thousands of troops near the border with Ukraine “not in their normal peacetime positions or garrisons.” Baer demanded that the Russian government takes steps to “de-escalate” the situation.

These statements are staggeringly hypocritical. What Carney and Baer are accusing the Kremlin of doing—intervening to politically manipulate protests in Ukraine—is precisely what the Western powers boast of having done. European Union and American officials joined anti-Yanukovych demonstrators on Kiev’s Independence Square and met with leaders of the neo-fascist Svoboda party. The Obama administration and its European allies have, according to US Undersecretary of State for Europe and Eurasia Victoria Nuland, spent some \$5 billion to promote pro-Western regime-change in Ukraine since the 1990s.



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