

NATO, Kiev escalate threats after eastern Ukraine referendums

Alex Lantier
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Western officials denounced Russia and pro-Russian protesters in eastern Ukraine after referendums were overwhelmingly passed in Donetsk and Luhansk provinces calling for federalization of Ukraine's government and greater autonomy for eastern Ukraine from the US puppet regime in Kiev.

The vote was a stinging repudiation of the government installed in a Western-backed putsch in February. The referendums passed with 89 percent support in Donetsk and 96 percent in Luhansk. Voter participation was 74 percent and 75 percent, respectively.

US, European, and Kiev regime officials attacked the vote as illegal, ignoring with monumental hypocrisy the fact that the Kiev regime is itself the product of an extra-legal putsch led by fascist thugs from the Right Sector militia and is widely opposed by the Ukrainian people. A poll last week found that 59 percent of the Ukrainian population has a negative opinion of the Kiev regime. This percentage rises to 67 percent in the largely Russian-speaking east.

The acting president, Oleksandr Turchynov, denounced the referendums, declaring with typical venom, “This propaganda farce won't have any legal consequences, except for criminal charges for its organizers.”

Swiss President Didier Burkhalter, who currently chairs the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), called them “incompatible with the Ukrainian Constitution and therefore illegal.”

In Washington, White House spokesman Jay Carney said the “so-called” referendums were “a transparent attempt to create disorder... We do not recognize the results.”

Such invocations of law and constitutional process by the putschist regime in Kiev and its Western backers are steeped in cynicism. Is there any doubt that, if the roles were reversed, and the right-wing, pro-Western forces had succeeded in organizing a referendum to separate parts of

the country from a Russian-backed regime, the White House and the EU would be applauding it as a great advance for democracy and self-rule?

Instead, the Ukrainian armed forces and the NATO powers are escalating their threats against Russia and pro-Russian forces in Ukraine. The Kiev regime stepped up its offensive to crush pro-Russian self-defense militias across eastern Ukraine and retake control of the region—moving Ukraine even closer to civil war and a possible military clash between the NATO-backed regime and Russia.

The terrible risks posed by a possible military escalation were underscored by the decision of the US Strategic Command, the US military branch tasked with waging nuclear war, to hold large-scale Global Lightning 14 exercises this week. The command issued a statement late Sunday announcing that 10 B-52 bombers and six B-2 stealth bombers would participate in the exercise. The statement declared, bizarrely, that “the timing of the exercise is unrelated to real-world events.”

Press comments suggested that the “real-world events” to which the US Strategic Command was referring were last week's large-scale nuclear exercises in Russia, which were held from the standpoint of seeking to repel a nuclear attack on Russia. The holding of the US exercise, however, is obviously related to the “real-world” crisis in Ukraine.

Yesterday, Kiev regime forces bombarded the village of Andreevka, near Slavyansk in eastern Ukraine. The government used howitzers and heavy mortars, together with attack helicopters, pro-Russian militias reported. They could not provide casualty figures, but reported that many houses and cars were on fire or had been destroyed.

The escalating crackdown came amid multiple reports that US Blackwater mercenaries are helping to coordinate the Kiev regime's assault on eastern Ukraine. (See: “Blackwater mercenaries direct Kiev regime's crackdown in Ukraine”)

The European Union (EU) also announced further economic sanctions, targeting two Crimean companies and 13 Russian and Ukrainian individuals, including the prosecutor-general of Crimea. In a sign of the EU's reluctance to rapidly cut off its energy and trade ties with Russia, however, Paris announced that it would go ahead with a €1.2 billion contract to provide Mistral-class helicopter carrier warships to the Russian Navy.

The reaction of the Western powers makes clear that the referendums will not end the imperialist onslaught in Ukraine. The new Donetsk and Luhansk authorities have benefited from broad popular opposition to the Kiev regime, rooted in the working class. However, their political appeal to Russian nationalism offers no basis for mobilizing opposition in the working class throughout Ukraine and in the NATO countries themselves to the escalating imperialist intervention and the resulting danger of war.

Working with the Kremlin and eastern Ukraine's capitalist oligarchs, the "People's Republics" in Donetsk and Luhansk must ultimately cut a deal with the Kiev regime and its NATO backers or escalate a conflict that threatens to provoke global war.

Yesterday, leaders of the Donetsk People's Republic announced they would form their own army and said they expected Kiev regime forces to leave the region. Denis Pushilin, the co-chair of the self-proclaimed republic, said that if the violence escalated further he might appeal for the deployment of peacekeeping forces, apparently from Russia. "We will try to cope with it on our own. We don't want this confrontation to increase," he said. "If the situation deteriorates, we reserve the right to ask for a peacekeeping contingent."

Officials in both Donetsk and Luhansk sent requests to Moscow for the incorporation of their regions into Russia. "Based on the will of the people and the restoration of a historic justice, we ask the Russian Federation to consider the absorption of the Donetsk People's Republic into the Russian Federation," Pushilin said at a press conference yesterday in Donetsk.

The Kremlin maintained its cautious position on the eastern Ukraine referendum, however, taking no action to incorporate the breakaway regions into Russia. Last week, Russian President Vladimir Putin requested that the separatist referendums be indefinitely postponed.

On Monday, the Kremlin issued a statement declaring that it "respects the will of the population of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions." It called for dialogue between the new authorities in the east and the Kiev regime.

Multi-billionaire Ukrainian oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, a key backer of the pro-Russian government of President Viktor Yanukovich that was overthrown in the February putsch, has large-scale investments in eastern Ukraine's heavy industry. On Monday, he also came out against incorporation into Russia.

"I am strongly convinced that Donbass [the Donetsk basin region] can be happy only in a united Ukraine," Akhmetov said. "I am for a strong Donbass in a strong Ukraine."

The imperialist powers are seeking to reestablish through diplomacy as much of the Kiev regime's influence as can be salvaged in the east. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier is traveling to Ukraine today to promote a "national dialogue" between Kiev and the authorities in Donetsk and Luhansk.

Joerg Froebig of the German Marshall Fund think tank claimed that the trip of Steinmeier, who is a leading member of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), reflected the "cautious approach" of Berlin. "The SPD rank-and-file always had this 'special relationship' with Russia," he added.

In fact, Berlin has worked closely with Washington throughout the Ukraine crisis, backing various right-wing Ukrainian parties that toppled Yanukovich and installed the current regime. While it adopts a somewhat different tone than Washington's saber-rattling, the "dialogue" proposed by Steinmeier is a continuation of the policy of using a far-right, pro-EU regime in Kiev to weaken Russia and extend German influence over former Soviet republics and former Eastern European allies of the old USSR.



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