

US, Europe issue new threats after elections in Ukraine's separatist regions

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Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and Western leaders have denounced elections held Sunday in the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). The elections delivered victories to the pro-Russian leaderships at the helm of the separatist regions in Ukraine's southeast. Washington, Germany and the European Union promptly declared the elections illegitimate.

Aleksandr Zakharchenko and Igor Plotnitsky, who had been serving, respectively, as the self-appointed prime ministers of the DPR and LPR following a leadership change in the rebel forces in August, won the poll with 79 percent and 64 percent of the total ballots cast. Parliamentary blocs allied to these leaders also had substantial victories in an election that expressed widespread popular hatred of the Kiev regime and its brutal assault on the population in these regions.

Having proclaimed the elections a "farce" on Sunday, Ukraine's president called a high-level meeting of security and defense chiefs on Monday in order to "reexamine the situation" in the country's separatist southeast. Ukraine's security service declared the vote a "power grab."

Kiev is signaling its readiness to renew its military offensive against the region on the grounds that the November 2 vote violated the fragile peace deal signed with the separatists in September.

Approximately 4,000 people have already been killed in the civil war and over half a million turned into refugees. The Donbass' infrastructure has been severely damaged by the fighting, and utilities cut off or severely curtailed for much of the remaining population.

Residents have not received pensions from the central government, and wage arrears are widespread. The truce agreement itself has been repeatedly violated, with repeated attacks on civilian centers and small-scale conflicts between rebel and Ukrainian army forces.

According to the Russian news service ITAR-TASS, in addition to announcing plans to annul the law granting limited autonomy to the Donbass, Poroshenko is calling on the International Monetary Fund to support its efforts to

reestablish control over the region and proposing to turn it into a free-trade zone.

Poroshenko's denunciations and threats have been echoed by the Western powers. In the days leading up to the Sunday vote, German Chancellor Angela Merkel insisted the elections in the DPR and LPR were invalid. Her office has since criticized Russia's decision to "respect" the vote outcome, describing it as "incomprehensible." Berlin is now saying it has ruled out any possibility of canceling anti-Russian sanctions implemented in retaliation for Moscow's support for the separatists.

The United States and the European Union are also refusing to acknowledge the elections, with EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini referring to them as "illegal and illegitimate."

On Monday, the US State Department described Sunday's vote in the DPR and LPR as a "sham." Making clear that it is prepared to use the vote to provoke a new confrontation with the Kremlin, the State Department threatened, "Should Moscow continue to ignore the commitments that it made [honoring Ukraine's electoral law] and continue its destabilizing and dangerous actions, the costs to Russia will rise."

The threats against Russia come on the heels of news that Poland, a NATO member, intends a major military realignment in the coming period, shifting thousands of troops to its eastern border. "The geopolitical situation has changed. We have the biggest crisis of security since the Cold War and we must draw conclusions from that," Polish Defense Minister Tomasz Siemoniak told the Associated Press in late October.

The US and European denunciations of the elections in the DPR and LPR as illegitimate and illegal are completely hypocritical. The Western powers choose which elections to recognize and which to reject simply based on their imperialist interests.

The US- and German-backed far-right putsch that drove the elected president, Viktor Yanukovych, from power last February was hailed as a victory for democracy. Last

month's parliamentary vote in Ukraine was presented as another democratic triumph, even though it brought to power a combination of nationalists and neo-Nazis committed to the use of violence to implement deeply unpopular austerity measures demanded by the West.

Based on their own strategic calculations, Germany and the United States have at varying times recognized the "legitimacy" of any number of breakaway regions, including Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Kosovo, to name a few, resulting in bloody civil wars that claimed the lives of tens of thousands of people.

The vote conducted Sunday in Ukraine's southeast is no less legitimate than that carried out the week before in the country's parliamentary elections, in which turnout was just over 52 percent, a decline from all previous parliamentary votes. In areas of the country where the population is known to be deeply hostile to Kiev, participation was as low as 30 percent, with the majority of those casting ballots choosing the Opposition Bloc.

The Central Election Commission of the LPR claims a voter turnout of approximately 60 percent. Due to long lines at polling stations, it kept the polls open for an additional two hours. News reports carried even in the Western press were forced to admit signs of widespread popular participation, including large crowds at polling stations.

Local residents interviewed by the press did not express great enthusiasm for the DPR or LPR rebel leaders, as much as outrage over the violence unleashed on them by Kiev. A report in the *Guardian* described a "huge crowd at School No 13, one of three polling stations to open in the town [of Ilovaysk]," where "residents said they were voting for a 'peaceful future.'"

"Valentina, a 61-year-old market trader in Ilovaysk, said she had spent 23 days cowering in a cellar with several dozen others, and had been threatened by Ukrainian volunteer battalions who tried to use her and others as human shields and stole mobile phones and other property," the story noted.

Human Rights Watch recently published a detailed investigation accusing the Ukrainian military of using banned cluster munitions in its assault on the southeast.

In the DPR, local officials report that over a million voters took part out of a total eligible population of three million. Turnout rates are difficult to assess, however, due to the refugee crisis and the fact that many technically eligible voters live in areas currently under the control of the Ukrainian army. Online balloting was an option for these people, although it is unclear how many took advantage of it. Voting stations were also set up in the nearby Russian provinces of Rostov, Voronezh and Belgorod to accommodate refugees in these areas.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which traditionally monitors elections, refused to send representatives to southeastern Ukraine to observe the vote. A patchwork of right-wing and pseudo-left forces from Europe and the US served as election observers and reported no major voting irregularities. These individuals, including members of political parties and governments in Greece, France, Serbia and elsewhere, have been denounced in the press as "fake" election monitors and declared by the Kiev regime to be "persona non grata" in the country. They have been placed on a "blacklist."

According to officials from the DPR and LPR, DPR victor Aleksandr Zakharchenko won the premiership with over 765,000 votes, while the LPR's Plotnitsky secured 445,000 votes. Their competitors trailed significantly behind. Aleksandr Kofman, deputy chairman of the Parliament of Novorossiya, the political body uniting the DPR and LPR, won just 10 percent of the vote in his contest with Zakharchenko. In the LPR, second place went to trade union federation head Oleg Akimov, who garnered 15.5 percent of the ballots cast.

The political blocs associated with the current rebel leaders also won handily in the parliamentary races. Donetsk Republic won over 662,750 votes in the DPR. The Peace of the Luhansk party outpolled its rivals, the Luhansk Economic Union and the People's Union, winning just shy of 70 percent of the vote.

According to news reports, five political parties were disqualified from participating in the elections on technical grounds, including the Communist Party. However, elsewhere it has been reported that a recently formed Communist Party in the region supported the election of Zakharchenko.

To the extent that the pro-Russian separatists in control of the DPR and LPR have popular support, they have gained it on the basis of promises of social improvements and the implementation of welfare programs. A mixture of Russian nationalists, monarchists and right-wing conservatives with ties to various layers of the ruling elite in Moscow, they trade in nostalgia for the Soviet past in an effort to prop up their fledgling regime.



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