

Crisis-ridden Kremlin pushes through new law on wartime mobilization, prepares referendums in East Ukraine

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Ten days after the Russian army suffered a major military debacle in northeastern Ukraine, with troops fleeing from about a tenth of the territory Russia had occupied, there are signs that the Kremlin is preparing for a significant escalation of the conflict.

In a live-streamed session on Tuesday, the overwhelming majority of the Russian parliament (Duma) approved a new bill in both the second and third readings that will introduce, for the first time, the terms “mobilization”, “martial law” and “war time” into the Russian criminal code.

Based on the bill, under conditions of martial law, Russians in reserve will now be subject to criminal prosecution if they avoid or desert military service. For civilians, the bill adds a new, aggravating circumstance to any crime that is committed “in the period of mobilization or under conditions of martial law, [and] in times of war.”

Moreover, the bill significantly increases the prison sentences for soldiers who voluntarily give themselves up as prisoners of war—they will be punished with between 3 and 10 years in prison—and for looting during war time, which will be punished with up to 15 years in prison. Soldiers in combat who fail to follow orders of their military commanders will face between 2 and 3 years in prison. The failure to fulfill state orders for defense production, as well as the violation of state contracts, will be punished with up to 10 years in prison.

The bill was first introduced on Monday, September 19, by a coalition of deputies from the ruling United Russia Party, the far-right Liberal Democratic Party, the “New People” party, as well as the two main loyal opposition parties Just Russia and the Stalinist Communist Party of the Russian Federation.

The Russian Federal Council will be voting on the bill on Wednesday, September 21, and then it will go on to President Vladimir Putin to be signed into law, a process that could be completed within a matter of days.

The bill has been interpreted by Russian commentators as

a sign that the Kremlin is preparing the proclamation of martial law and a mobilization. Dmitry Zhuravlev, a political expert who used to work in Putin’s first presidential administration, said that the bill indicates that “a mobilization will be proclaimed in the very near future. And the fact that the deputies adopted the amendments immediately both in the second and third reading of the bill indicates that they are in a hurry.”

A mobilization can only be proclaimed by the Russian president and it can be imposed on either the entire or only parts of the country.

Since the invasion of Ukraine in February, the Kremlin has insisted before the Russian public that what was taking place was not a war, but a “special military mobilization.” The term “war” is banned from the media and public discussion about what has ever more openly and directly become a war between NATO and Russia, fought out on Ukrainian soil. Only a small fraction of the Russian army has been deployed to Ukraine and the Kremlin has stressed throughout that all those fighting are there voluntarily.

However, in the wake of the collapse of Russian defenses in Ukraine’s northeast, bitter conflicts erupted within the oligarchy last week. While pro-US liberal politicians in Petersburg launched a petition to impeach Putin on grounds of “national treason,” leading pro-Kremlin politicians like the arch-Stalinist and head of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation Gennady Zyuganov called for a mobilization and a public acknowledgement that a war is, in fact, taking place. In response, the Kremlin insisted that a general mobilization is not even a subject of discussion in the government.

Yet since then, the Russian media has been filled with articles about what a general mobilization would entail. Several regional governors have also expressed support for a proposal by Ramzan Kadyrov, the regional head of the North Caucasus, to implement a “self-mobilization.”

In another indication that Moscow is preparing for a

significant expansion of the conflict, shortly after the news about the bill broke, the Kremlin announced that it will hold referendums about joining the Russian Federation in the occupied Lugansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions in eastern and southeastern Ukraine between September 23 and 27.

The referendums are no doubt, in part, an effort to consolidate whatever military gains the Kremlin has made since February and to bolster the faltering morale of Russian troops.

On his Telegram channel, former president and deputy head of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev said that the referendums will turn these regions into part of Russian territory. Should they then still be attacked, the Russian army would reserve the right to deploy nuclear weapons.

Clearly, the bankrupt calculation of the Kremlin oligarchy is that this could deter the imperialist proxy-war army in Ukraine from attacking. But there is little question that it will be seized upon by Western imperialism and its stooges in the Ukrainian oligarchy and military to further escalate the war.

Already, both the US and Kiev immediately denounced the holding of the referendums, calling them “sham referendums.” Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmitry Kubela insisted that “Ukraine has every right to liberate its territories and will keep liberating them whatever Russia has to say.”

The latest moves by the Kremlin are, above all, signs of a profound political crisis not only of the Putin regime but the entire Russian ruling class. In a stark indication of the disorientation prevailing in the Kremlin, an address to the nation by Putin on the referendums was suddenly announced late Tuesday night Moscow time and then just as suddenly postponed until early Wednesday morning.

The crisis of the Russian oligarchy, like the war itself, is ultimately the product of the disastrous dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy, out of which the ruling oligarchy arose. All of its factions, while torn by bitter disputes over foreign policy, are ultimately dependent on imperialism and fear nothing more than a movement within the working class.

The Kremlin’s reactionary invasion of Ukraine was itself a desperate attempt by the Putin regime to force the imperialist powers to the negotiating table. This attempt has backfired catastrophically. The entire strategy of “national defense” upon which the Kremlin has based this war has been blown to pieces by the incredibly aggressive escalation and direct intervention into the war by all the imperialist powers.

In his first public acknowledgement that the war was not going as planned at all, in response to a rebuke over the war by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Putin stressed last

week, “We will do our best to stop this as soon as possible.” He added that it was “unfortunately, the opposing side, the leadership of Ukraine” that was determined to “achieve its goals by military means” and was opposed to negotiations.

But the main force behind Kiev and the main opponent of Russia in this conflict is, of course, NATO. The offensive in the northeast was proposed and directly prepared by NATO. The Ukrainian troops carrying it out had been armed, trained and directed by Washington. The offensive was aimed at provoking precisely the kind of expansion of the war that is now underway. In the words of the *Financial Times*, it “put the Kremlin on the ropes, and forces choices the Russian president has tried to avoid since the invasion began.”

The strategy of the imperialist powers is to do everything they can to expand and escalate the war in order to bring about the fall of the Putin regime and, indeed, the disintegration of Russia itself. It is a strategy that is mind-boggling in its recklessness, and directly risks a full-blown world war, fought with nuclear weapons.

The events of the past two weeks have made abundantly clear that the Putin regime and the various oligarchic and nationalist forces upon which it rests have absolutely no progressive response to this danger. Driven into a corner by imperialism, the main concern of the Russian oligarchs is not the threat of nuclear annihilation, but the prospect of social revolution. They see their main enemy not in imperialism but in the working class.

The international working class is, indeed, the only social force that can bring an end to this catastrophic war. It must wage its struggle on a revolutionary, socialist and internationalist basis, and in opposition to imperialism and all capitalist governments, including in Russia and Ukraine.



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