

US, Russia trade threats of nuclear war as referendums in East Ukraine end

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The voting period for the referendums in the four Russian-occupied regions in eastern and southeastern Ukraine — Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Lugansk and Donetsk — ended Tuesday night, as US and Russian officials escalated threats of nuclear war. The Kremlin has declared that all four regions have voted in favor of joining the Russian Federation.

On Tuesday, former Russian president and deputy head of the Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, threatened that Russia could deploy nuclear weapons to defend its territories, including those it now lays claim to in East Ukraine, insisting that these threats were “certainly not a bluff.”

Medvedev thus reiterated warnings made by Russian President Vladimir Putin, when he announced the partial mobilization of 300,000 reservists in the wake of Russia’s military debacle in the Kharkiv region. After outlining the scale of the imperialist aggression Russia was confronting, and the aims of the imperialist powers to break up and “destroy” Russia, Putin threatened that the Kremlin is prepared to resort to nuclear weapons, stating, “this is not a bluff.”

Medvedev expressed the hope that the prospect of “nuclear apocalypse” would deter NATO from further escalating the war against Russia in Ukraine, which the imperialist powers provoked and prepared for over many years. But these hopes are as bankrupt as they are delusional.

Far from backing off, Washington and NATO have insisted that they will “never recognize” the territories in East Ukraine as part of Russia. NATO general secretary Jens Stoltenberg tweeted on Tuesday that he had assured Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky of NATO’s “unwavering support for Ukraine’s sovereignty.” He insisted that the “sham referenda” had “no legitimacy,” “These lands are Ukraine.”

An adviser to Zelensky, Mykhailo Podolyak, responded to Medvedev by insisting, “We will continue to de-occupy our territory regardless [of the threat of nuclear strikes].”

In what the *World Socialist Web Site* has accurately

described as nuclear brinkmanship, Western officials have responded to the open danger of nuclear war with a combination of callous dismissals and threats that are aimed to further fuel the dangerous escalation with Russia. In an interview with CBS’ “60 minutes” aired on Sunday night, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken threatened Russia with “horrific consequences” should it deploy nuclear weapons in Ukraine.

Blinken said, “It’s very important that Moscow hear from us and know from us that the consequences would be horrific, and we’ve made that very clear.” He added that using nuclear weapons “would have catastrophic effects for, of course, the country using them, but for many others as well.”

The escalating threats of nuclear war came as it was confirmed that three explosions at the two German-Russian gas pipelines Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 took place in the night from Sunday to Monday. The explosions resulted in massive leaks of gas into the Baltic Sea. While the majority shares for both pipelines belongs to Russia’s state-owned company Gazprom, the German companies Wintershall, and Uniper, the French Engie, as well as the Austrian OMV and the British Shell all helped build the pipelines.

In an extraordinarily provocative move, Radosław Sikorski, a Polish member of the European Parliament and former foreign minister of Poland, effectively suggested that the US was behind the explosions. After tweeting an image of the underwater explosion, writing, “Thank you, USA,” Sikorski retweeted a clip with US President Joe Biden from February 7, in which Biden threatened “If Russia invades...then there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it.”

As the war tensions between Russia and NATO are reaching fever pitch, Russian society has been thrown into turmoil by the mobilization of 300,000 reservists. While falling short of the demands for full mobilization and the proclamation of martial law, the partial mobilization is upending the lives of millions of people over night. It is a

desperate effort to turn the tide in a war that is believed to have claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Russian soldiers, and has left the remaining troops with low morale.

While Putin promised that only men with combat experience would be drafted, many reports suggest that elderly men, as well as disabled people and countless young men without any combat experience are being drafted. In the face of massive criticism, including from pro-Putin figures, the Kremlin has now admitted that “mistakes” had been made when draft notices were sent out, pledging that these would be “corrected.”

Service in the Russian army has long been widely feared in the population, as it is associated—even in peace times—with widespread and violent physical, emotional and psychological abuse of draftees, as well as abhorrent social conditions facing the soldiers. Families that in any way could afford to do so have traditionally sought to buy out their sons from military service. However, the partial mobilization order also affects those who had earlier been able to buy themselves out. Those resisting and avoiding the draft will face draconian prison sentences.

A large section of the middle class has responded to the partial mobilization with a frantic effort to flee the country. As soon as Putin announced the partial mobilization, flights to Turkey and Georgia, two of the few countries where Russians can still travel without restrictions, were booked out. For the past week, traffic jams stretching many miles and lasting 24 to 48 hours, have formed at virtually all border checkpoints to Finland, Georgia, Kazakhstan and other neighboring countries. Over 100,000 have fled to Kazakhstan alone.

There have also been reported attacks on recruitment centers, with a 25-year-old shooting and critically wounding a draft officer, apparently out of anger about the drafting of his friend.

The Western media has cheered on those trying to flee the draft. The *New York Times* and other outlets that are associated with the US military and intelligence apparatus, and have promoted and justified every criminal war waged by the imperialist powers over the past decades, have also promoted the protests against the mobilization that were called by the pro-NATO liberal opposition and have been dominated by layers of the middle class.

Significant protests against mobilization have also erupted in Dagestan, a deeply impoverished and predominantly Muslim region in the North Caucasus. These protests, which have also been cheered on widely by the pro-imperialist press, appear to have an ethnic overtone in a region where resentment over the Kremlin’s reactionary policies has long been exploited by separatist tendencies and the imperialist powers for the most reactionary purposes. Dagestan directly

borders Chechnya, where the Kremlin has waged two extremely bloody wars between 1994 and 2009. Reports also suggest that a disproportionate number of men have been drafted from Dagestan to the war since February.

The Kremlin has cracked down on all of these protests with mass arrests.

While the misnamed “liberal opposition” holds its protests under the fraudulent banner “no to war,” far from being “anti-war” it in fact speaks for sections of the oligarchy, the upper-middle class and the state apparatus that advocate a direct line-up behind the imperialist powers as they are preparing a carve-up of Russia, which would inevitably entail a series of wars and civil wars.

Ultimately, the social forces behind the liberal opposition are, no less than the Putin regime itself, the reactionary outgrowth of the Stalinist destruction of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism. Their opposition to the Kremlin and its war in Ukraine comes from the right, not from the left. Whatever their bitter conflicts over foreign policy, all factions of the oligarchy are united in their deep hostility to the working class and a fear of the emergence of a socialist anti-war movement in the Russian and international working class.

The vast majority of the Russian population has neither the financial means to flee nor a place to go. Battered by Western economic warfare, which has laid waste to entire sections of industry such as auto, Russian workers are now facing the horrific and immediate prospect of mass slaughter not only in Ukraine but also in Russia itself.

A genuine anti-war movement can only develop in firm opposition to the oligarchic and middle-class forces of the liberal opposition and the imperialist powers. It must appeal to the workers of Ukraine and the imperialist countries, and especially the American working class, for an internationally unified struggle against imperialism and the entire capitalist system. Such a socialist anti-war movement must, above all, be based on the lessons of the October revolution and of the struggle of the Trotskyist movement against the nationalist betrayal of the revolution by Stalinism. This requires a determined and urgent fight to build sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Russia and Ukraine.



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