

The US and Europe Issue Further Threats over Self-rule Referenda in Eastern Ukraine

By [Chris Marsden](#)

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Pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine's two eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk have declared a victory for "self-rule" in referenda held yesterday. The votes took place in the face of condemnation by the regime in Kiev and its Western backers and an appeal for the referenda to be postponed by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The reign of terror unleashed by Kiev with the full support of Washington, Berlin and Brussels against anti-government protesters in the east continued on Sunday. Dozens of members of Kiev's National Guard, recruited largely from neo-Nazis aligned with the Right Sector and the Svoboda party, forcibly shut down voting in the town of Krasnoarmeisk and fired on a crowd outside the town hall, killing a number of unarmed civilians.

The referendum papers asked in both Ukrainian and Russian: "Do you support the act of state self-rule of the Donetsk People's Republic/Luhansk People's Republic?"

There were 3.2 million ballots printed, less than half the seven million people living in the two provinces. But long queues formed from the early hours, reportedly registering overwhelming support.

Denis Pushilin, co-leader of the Donetsk People's Republic, declared that "All (Kiev's) military troops on our territory after the official announcement of referendum results will be considered illegal and declared occupiers. It is necessary to form state bodies and military authorities as soon as possible."

On Saturday, the US State Department issued a statement calling the two referenda illegal and "an attempt to create further division and disorder." It said the United States would not recognise the results.

The statement accused "Kremlin-backed social media and news stations" of encouraging "residents of eastern Ukraine to vote tomorrow" and insisted that, "The focus of the international community must now be on supporting the Ukrainian government's consistent efforts to hold a presidential election on May 25."

The statement belligerently reiterated US threats against Moscow, declaring: "As President Obama and [German] Chancellor [Angela] Merkel stated on May 2, the Russian leadership must know that if it continues to destabilize eastern Ukraine and disrupt this month's presidential election, we will move quickly to impose greater costs on Russia."

The US stance was echoed by French President Francois Hollande and Merkel. After a meeting in Stralsund, Germany on Saturday, both warned, "We are ready to take further

sanctions against Russia.”

NATO issued a statement that it had seen no evidence of a Russian troop withdrawal and tweeted images purporting to show additional troops on the border.

The popular “yes” vote is due above all to the bloody events since the installation by a putsch of a government in Kiev made up of pro-Western oligarchs and fascists on February 22. Under the tutelage of the United States and its allies, and with their financial backing, the new government pledged itself to savage austerity, while whipping up anti-Russian sentiment in the country’s ethnically mixed population. It continued to mobilise and strengthen the far-right forces grouped around Svoboda and the Right Sector in a way that inevitably provoked a political backlash.

Russia’s annexation of Crimea, following March’s popular referendum vote in the peninsula that is home to Russia’s main Black Sea naval base at Sevastopol, encouraged similar pro-Russian movements elsewhere in the east. These have won increasing support in the face of the brutal repression meted out by Kiev’s armed forces and its paid fascist thugs.

On Friday, between 20 and 30 people were reportedly killed in a massacre using tanks, armoured personnel carriers and heavily armed troops against unarmed civilians in Mariupol. In a calculated provocation meant to justify and encourage further Western intervention in Ukraine, the attack was made on those celebrating Victory Day, marking the 69th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany by the Soviet Red Army.

That same day, the governor of Ukraine’s southern Kherson region, Yuri Odarchenko, told a Victory Day celebration that Hitler was a “liberator.” The Soviet “aggressors” tried to enslave Ukraine, he said, while Hitler “put forward a slogan of liberating people from the communist yoke, and liberating people from the tyrant Stalin.”

His pro-Nazi statement was met with mass booing and cries of “shame,” while a young woman seized his microphone and threw it to the ground.

Members of the National Guard evacuated police barracks in Mariupol Saturday morning, leaving behind at least three armoured personnel carriers, riot shields, helmets, gas masks and clothes. In Donetsk, a group of police laid down their weapons Friday evening when their camp came under attack by separatists—surrendering 70 automatic rifles and 16,000 cartridges.

The *Guardian* reported that a number of police officers “have left the force in recent weeks, uneasy about orders to take action against the separatist militias... The widespread belief among many local people is that the police have gone fully over to the side of the separatists, and the army had come in to carry out a punitive operation against the police.”

Washington’s dirty fingerprints are all over the atrocities committed by Kiev.

The Obama administration Friday granted the Kiev authorities \$1 billion in loan guarantees, effectively paying for the bloody military operation in eastern Ukraine. On Wednesday May 7, Ukraine received its first emergency rescue money from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), part of a two-year package providing \$17 billion of the \$27 billion in loans and guarantees pledged by the major powers.

None of this legitimises the efforts to steer and confine popular opposition to the Kiev regime and its paymasters in a Russian nationalist direction. The referendum initiative is being spearheaded by bourgeois forces, who want either a power-sharing arrangement with Kiev or for Russia to step in so as to guarantee their own continued right to exploit the Russian-speaking working class of the region.

The parties involved are nationalist formations emanating from the break-up of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which are in alliance with rival groups of Ukrainian oligarchs.

The man in charge of organising the referendum is Roman Lyagin, a former political consultant. The referendum, he stressed, means “that we are not happy with the events in our country and demand changes. We want to choose another path for this region.”

This “other path” will mean only the continuation of the brutal exploitation of the region’s working class and will raise the danger of a civil war between Russian and Ukrainian speakers. There has on no occasion been any attempt by the opposition leaders in the east to call for unified action by workers throughout Ukraine against the regime in Kiev.

Pushilin is typical of the forces involved. He worked in the 1990s for the infamous Russian Ponzi scheme MMM, which defrauded up to \$10 million from between 5,000 and 40,000 people. He is still a member of the political grouping MMM, born out of the Ponzi scheme, and is involved in the retail group “Solodke Zhittia” (Dolce Vita), which is close to Boris Kolesnikov, secretary of the Party of the Regions of deposed Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych.

He took over leadership following the arrest of Pavel Gubarev, who was released on Wednesday. Gubarev was previously a member of the pro-Moscow Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine and is now a member of the rightist pan-Slavic Russian National Unity paramilitary group.

All efforts to subordinate the working class to one or another section of oligarchs and their political stooges, including those that rule Russia, must be opposed. Instead, an urgent appeal must be made for a unified and independent struggle of the Ukrainian, Russian and international working class based on a socialist perspective against the predatory schemes of Washington, Berlin, London and Paris.

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