

Illegal elections in Donbas

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On 2 November the authorities of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics held elections for the parliaments and heads of these republics. According to available information, the turnout in the LPR was around 60%, and in the DPR around 75%. As expected, the elections were won by the present leaderships of the republics: Aleksandr Zakharchenko in Donetsk and Igor Plotnitsky in Lugansk. Despite fears, there were no provocations or terrorist acts during the voting, and the number of clashes with Ukrainian forces was slightly higher than in previous days. Ukraine declared the elections to be illegal; nor were they recognised by Western countries, the UN, NATO or the OSCE. In contrast, the Russian Foreign Ministry said that Russia respects the residents' wishes as manifested in their voting, and that the region's authorities had received a mandate to resolve the practical problems of restoring normal life.

Commentary

- The separatists' figures on the winners' support are probably close to the truth (the separatists' opponents did not participate in the vote), although the information on turnout is completely unreliable, mainly because it is impossible to determine the actual number of eligible voters residing in the separatist-controlled republics. Also, the other election procedures did not comply with generally accepted democratic standards.
- The elections will lead to the creation of superficially legal governing bodies in Donetsk and Lugansk which could be presented, especially by Russia, as a partner in international relations. The separatists and Moscow will also attempt in vain to present these elections as part of the Minsk agreements, although in fact they represent an annulment of those deals. These elections in fact constituted a repeat of the two republics' declaration of independence, even though the Minsk agreement assumed that Donbas was part of Ukraine.
- Kiev has responded by repealing the special status of the local authorities of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions, which also means the cancellation of the early local elections in the area which had been scheduled for 7 December. Kiev will try to renew its negotiations on the Donbas question, although at the same time it has promised to step up its preparations for defensive action.
- It seems quite likely that the separatists and Russian forces will resume combat operations on a larger scale. Moscow wants to put a stop to the clashes between

separatist formations, as this would allow them to re-engage in the fight against Ukrainian forces.

- The caution with which Russia expressed its acknowledgement of the election results (only a single restrained statement by the Foreign Ministry), probably stemmed from a desire to avoid further economic sanctions, and an intent to persuade the West and Kiev to recognise the DPR and LPR as partners in negotiations on the future shape and the international position of the Ukrainian state. Russia will also use the holding of elections to offer further support for the breakaway republics.

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