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Fake elections in Donbas

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On 11 November ‘elections’ were held in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics (DPR & LPR) to choose the leaders and the so-called people’s soviets (parliaments). According to the results published by the separatist authorities, 80.1% of those eligible to vote in the DPR did so, as did 77% in the LPR. The elections were won by the candidates currently serving as the acting heads of the republics and the political parties which they lead. In Donetsk Denis Pushilin won, apparently receiving 60.85% of the votes, while in Lugansk the winner was Leonid Pasechnik, with 68.3%. In the parliamentary elections, the Republic of Donetsk party won in the DPR (with a reported 72.5% of the votes), and the Peace in the Lugansk Area movement did so in the LPR (with 74.12%). The authorities in Kyiv have deemed the elections illegal and announced their intention to hold the organisers accountable. The conduct of the elections was also condemned by the European Union and the United States, which deemed them to be contrary to the agreements concluded in Minsk. The authorities in Moscow justified the need to hold the elections by saying that the new authorities in the republics needed a mandate to take key decisions concerning social and security matters.

Commentary

- As expected, the election results gave victory so far to the current leaders of the so-called Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics and to the political parties they run. Potential competitors for the posts of the republics’ leaders, including Aleksandr Khodakovsky, Pavel Gubaryev and Andrei Purgin, were excluded from the ballot (under pretexts of alleged violations of the electoral code, or by being forced to withdraw from standing). The voting was carried out without any supervision by international institutions, and in an atmosphere of intimidation of the local population. The data on the extremely high voter turnout in both republics is entirely unreliable, primarily because of the difficulty in determining the actual number of eligible voters and the small number of electoral commissions which could have actually processed so many voters. Moreover, other procedures for the organisation and conduct of the elections failed to meet democratic standards (unequal access of candidates to the media; the presence of armed individuals at the electoral commissions).
- The elections in the DPR and LPR were held primarily to obtain legitimacy for their leaders, closing the process of the transfer of power within the Moscow-supported para-states. Over the last year there have been changes in leadership in both republics. In

November 2017 a coup took place in the LPR, which resulted in Igor Plotnitsky's replacement by Leonid Pasechnik, while the DPR's leader Aleksandr Zakharchenko was killed in a bombing in Donetsk in August 2018. These changes were accompanied by a strengthening of Moscow's control over the republics: changes to the organisation of the separatists' armed forces (disbanding part of the troops, including the so-called Zakharchenko Guard) and increasing supervision of Russia's expenses to maintain the para-states.

- The vote was a violation of the Minsk agreements of 2015, which were intended to lead to a solution to the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine (they provide for the holding of elections under Ukrainian law). This ostentatious violation of the agreements will make it harder for Moscow to persuade the international community to treat the separatists as full participants in talks on the conflict in Donbas. The process of holding these elections, in a situation of strong opposition from the West, is also intended to demonstrate to the international community Moscow's determination and the immutability of its position, which primarily consists of pressing for Kyiv to unilaterally implement the political part of the Minsk agreements (especially the decentralisation of the Ukrainian state). At the same time, the vote puts pressure on Kiev on the eve of Ukraine's elections planned for 2019 (the presidential vote in March and the parliamentary vote in October). In this way, Moscow is seeking to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Ukraine's policy towards the Donbas.
- It is unlikely that the Kremlin will decide to change its strategy towards the Donbas conflict before the parliamentary elections in Ukraine, as it is counting on a more conciliatory policy from the new government in Kyiv. The Russian authorities believe that after the change in government there, it will be easier to persuade Ukraine to undertake direct negotiations with the new leaders of the para-states, who will be burdened with involvement in the armed combat in Donbas to a lesser extent than their predecessors.