



## Russia Conducts Pseudo-Referendums in Ukraine

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On 23-27 September, in the occupied territories of Ukraine, Russia held what it called referendums on annexation of the territory. The aim of these illegal referendums is to consolidate power in the occupied regions and to try to prevent Ukraine from reclaiming them. Russia is also sending a signal to the EU and NATO countries to refrain from military assistance to Ukraine under the threat of using nuclear weapons.

### **Under what circumstances did Russia organise the pseudo-referendums?**

The Russian authorities accelerated the organisation of the pseudo-referendums, announced for 4 November, due to the successful counter-offensive in the Kharkiv region carried out since early September, during which Ukraine's armed forces regained control of around 3,000 square kilometres. Russia's military defeats have challenged Vladimir Putin's domestic and international position, which was evident at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit on 14-15 September this year when Putin was neglected by other leaders. Faced with the prospect of further territorial losses in Ukraine, the Russian authorities decided to annex four oblasts (Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk, and Donetsk) and to announce partial mobilisation across Russia to strengthen the military and administrative forces in the occupied Ukrainian territories.

### **What was the course of the pseudo-referendums?**

The vote was held just a few days after it was announced (20 September) under conditions of censorship, an information blockade, propaganda, and intimidation of the population by Russian soldiers, with the results themselves predetermined at unrealistically high levels of support in favour of incorporating these territories into Russia. The Russian authorities had no reliable electoral lists and the referendum process was not subject to observation by independent institutions. In addition, the occupied territories had undergone significant depopulation as

a result of the ongoing hostilities. According to the data provided by Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk, some 1.2 million people remained in these areas and, depending on the locality, the population has decreased between 10% and 50% of the pre-Russian aggression numbers. The lack of credibility of the pseudo-referendums is also evidenced by the fact that voting was also possible at points on Russian territory (including Moscow), which facilitated falsification.

### **What has been the reaction of the Ukrainian authorities and the international community?**

The Ukrainian authorities emphasise that Russia's actions are unlawful and represent an exacerbation of the conflict. NATO has condemned the pseudo-referendums, with Alliance Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg calling it another escalation on Putin's part. The EU and the U.S. have announced that they will not recognise the results of the votes and are ready to introduce new sanctions against Russia because of them. The British government announced on 26 September a package of sanctions targeting the authors of the referendums—92 new individuals, including representatives of the Russian administration, members of a PR agency used by Russia, and the board members of several Russian banks. Non-recognition of the results was also announced by a number of other countries, including Russia's partners Kazakhstan, Serbia, and Turkey.

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## **What are the implications of the pseudo-referendums for Russia?**

Putin announced the convening of the Federal Assembly (the combined chambers of parliament) for 30 September, during which he is likely to announce the annexation of the new territories to the Russian Federation. This will be another evident violation of international law by Russia. With the vote and the annexation of new lands, Putin wants to mobilise Russian society by convincing it that the homeland itself is in danger. However, the referendums do not end the process of subjugating the occupied territories in Ukraine to Russia. The Russian authorities, which do not fully control the four oblasts within their administrative borders, will struggle with Ukrainian guerrillas, social resistance, and an advancing Ukrainian military counter-offensive. Russia will seek to use its newly mobilised forces to take control of further areas of Ukraine. According to a survey by the Levada Centre in which 45% of Russians supported the entry of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions into the Russian Federation, once mobilisation was announced, support for the war with Ukraine will decline, making it more difficult to conscript enough soldiers. Russians, particularly men, have begun to leave the country en masse (according to leaks from the Russian FSB, about

260,000 people have left since 21 September). The Russian authorities will have to suppress local tensions, including in Dagestan, arising from the forcible conscription of the population.

## **What could be the consequences of the pseudo-referendums for the war in Ukraine?**

Russian annexation of part of Ukrainian territory will have a propaganda significance, justifying further expansion in Ukraine. Russia claims the right to whole territories of the oblasts, not only those parts it actually controls militarily. The Russian Federation has already announced that it will treat the annexed territories as Russian and, in accordance with its military doctrine, has threatened to use nuclear weapons if they are attacked. Western countries are making it clear that if it does this, Russia will face a strong response from the U.S. and NATO countries. At the same time, Ukraine will not give in to Russian nuclear blackmail and will continue to seek to regain full control of all its territory. The announcement of non-recognition of the results by the international community, including Poland, means that the pseudo-referendums should in fact maintain international support for Ukraine.