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Donetsk Separatists Claim 90% Support Independence in Referendum

By The Moscow Times

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A man casts a ballot at a polling station as he takes part in the referendum on the status of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, in Moscow.

Pro-Moscow rebels have declared a resounding victory in a referendum on self-rule for eastern Ukraine, with some saying that means independence and others saying it means an eventual union with Russia.

Organizers in the main region holding the makeshift vote on Sunday said nearly 90 percent had voted in favor of self rule.

Well before polls closed, one separatist leader said the region would form its own state bodies and military after the referendum, formalizing a split that began with the armed takeover of state buildings in a dozen eastern towns last month.

Another said the vote simply showed that the East wanted to decide its own fate, whether

in Ukraine, on its own, or as part of Russia.

"Eighty-nine percent, that's it," the head of the separatist electoral commission in Donetsk, Roman Lyagin, said by telephone when asked for the result of a vote that the pro-Western Ukrainian government in Kiev has condemned as illegal.

Sunday's vote went ahead despite a call by Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday to postpone it — a move that briefly raised hopes for an easing of tension. Western leaders have accused Putin of destabilizing Ukraine, a charge Moscow denies.

The European Union declared the referendum illegal and prepared to increase pressure on Russia on Monday by taking a first step towards extending sanctions to companies, as well as people, linked to Moscow's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region.

A festive atmosphere at makeshift polling stations in some areas belied the potentially grave implications of the event.

On the edge of Slovyansk, fighting broke out around a television tower, and the Ukrainian Defense Ministry said one serviceman was wounded. A man was later reported killed in a clash in the eastern town of Krasnoarmeisk, Interfax-Ukraine news agency reported, adding to a toll so far in the dozens but creeping higher by the day.

Ukraine's Interior Ministry called the eastern referendum a criminal farce, its ballot papers "soaked in blood". One official said two-thirds of the territory had not participated.

Ballot papers in the referendum in the regions of Donetsk, which has declared itself a "People's Republic," and the much smaller Luhansk, were printed without security provision, voter registration was patchy and there was confusion over what the vote was for. Separatists in Luhansk said only 5 percent had voted against.

One leading separatist said Ukrainian troops would be declared illegal occupiers once results of Sunday's referendum were announced.

"It is necessary to form state bodies and military authorities as soon as possible," Denis Pushilin, a leader of the self-styled Donetsk republic said, according to Interfax news agency.

Lyagin, head of the rebel central electoral commission in Donetsk, also took a strong position on the results.

"That can be considered the final and official result," he said, reporting exact figures of 89.07 percent for and 10.19 percent against. "We demand the right to self-determination, and we will get it."

He said the result meant Ukraine's May 25 presidential election would not take place in the Donetsk region.

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