

Threats Aim to Derail Ukraine's Presidential Vote

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Electoral commission members prepare for the presidential election in the Ukrainian city of Krasnoarmeisk.

The 38-year-old mother of two insisted on meeting in a nondescript courtyard on the outskirts of Ukraine's eastern city of Donetsk. Once there, she sat down and burst into tears.

"Please do not mention my last name," she begged. "I, my family, we have received death threats. They told us they know all our names."

The woman is not a mafia turncoat or a government whistleblower but a Ukrainian schoolteacher named Antonina. She is among thousands of teachers appointed to local election boards in Ukraine now unwittingly thrust onto the front lines of a brutal confrontation that risks tipping the country into civil war.

Ukraine is holding a presidential election Sunday but it has become downright dangerous for many in the east to be associated with the vote, since the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk declared independence last week. Ukrainian police and election officials accused

pro-Russian gunmen there of seizing election commission offices and threatening members in an effort to derail the presidential vote.

The struggling interim government in Kiev has been counting on the presidential election to install a leader who would be seen as a legitimate successor to Viktor Yanukovich, who fled to Russia in February after months of street protests. But the long-anticipated election may not be considered legitimate by Russia or Ukrainians themselves if people in a large part of the country are unable or unwilling to cast their ballots.

Nearly 15 percent of Ukraine's population lives on territory now largely controlled by pro-Russian militias.

"No one is going to vote because no one wants to get a bullet in their forehead," said 68-year-old Donetsk resident Dmytro Zarubo. "We have been threatened with this."

On Monday, President Vladimir Putin ordered troops deployed near Ukraine to return to their home bases and praised the launch of a dialogue between the Ukrainian government and its opponents. He has called Ukraine's presidential election "a step in the right direction" but if Russia is counseling the separatists to allow the vote to go forward, there is no evidence of that on the ground. Other senior Russian officials have signaled the vote would be considered illegitimate because Ukrainian troops are still fighting some eastern separatists.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which has sent observers to monitor Ukraine's presidential election, says there has been no significant campaigning in the Donetsk or Luhansk regions or in the neighboring Kharkiv region, where separatist sentiments are also strong.

Ukraine election officials say armed men have occupied election commission offices in the east.

"Members of the district commissions have been calling the police saying they have to resign because they have received death threats," said Andriy Mahera, deputy chairman of the Ukrainian Election Commission.

When asked about the threats, Denis Pushilin, a leader of the Donetsk People's Republic, made it clear that his forces would not let Sunday's vote take place.

"The May 25 election is an election for the president of a neighboring state," Pushilin told The Associated Press. "People are still working to hold the election but we are putting an end to this with civilized means."

Outside the Donetsk regional government building, now in the hands of the separatists, armed pro-Russian activist Viktor Yermoshin explained how the presidential election will be stopped.

"We will block the polling stations, bring in our own people and tell people the truth," he said. "We have got our own country now and our leaders."

Ukrainian officials, however, insist they will hold the presidential election regardless and will consider it legitimate even if voting in some eastern areas is derailed. Acting Prime Minister

Arseniy Yatsenyuk pledged tightened security measures Monday to help guard the polling stations.

"Any attempts by terrorists in Donetsk and Luhansk to derail the Ukrainian presidential election are doomed to fail," Yatsenyuk said.

Mahera, the election official, said preparations for the presidential vote are on track everywhere except for Donetsk and Luhansk, where election officials have provided the Central Election Commission with only 26 percent and 16 percent of the voter rolls, respectively. Election officials cannot access the premises where the voter rolls are kept because they have been seized by pro-Russian separatists, he said.

Ukraine's Interior Ministry has reported daily violence related to the election.

In the Luhansk regional capital, eight armed men stormed a district council building Thursday evening. They seized voter rolls, other documents and computers and beat up the sole policeman guarding the building, the ministry said.

Outside the city of Luhansk, unknown men abducted members of the district election commission representing the leading presidential candidate, chocolate billionaire Petro Poroshenko.

Antonina, the school teacher from Donetsk, said her commission was meeting in a secret place when 10 militants with automatic weapons stormed in, accusing them of violating the laws of the independent Donetsk People's Republic. Someone had tipped off the gunmen, she said.

"We decided not to risk our lives and handed them our legal stamps, all the documents, voter rolls, keys. And we left the building," she said.

She had been appointed to the local board by the chairman of the more senior election board, all tied in some way to the central government in Kiev.

Before speaking with AP, she demanded the reporter turn off his cellphone for fear their conversation could be surreptitiously recorded.

"I am really scared for my children," she said. "No one is going to the polls with the risk of being killed — neither commission members nor voters."

Sam Greene, director of the King's Russia Institute at King's College, London, said Moscow has not made up its mind yet whether to recognize the election.

"They will make a situational decision, based on whatever they think best suits their purposes on or after May 25," Greene said. "Until then, they will keep their options open."

The Kiev-appointed Donetsk governor, Serhiy Taruta, sounded cautiously optimistic about the presidential election, telling journalists that all the district commissions have convened and are preparing the voter rolls.

"We are doing our best for the vote to happen," he said, but also — in a clear reference

to Russia — blamed "the interference of a third party" for the heightened tensions.

It will be impossible to derail the entire vote in Donetsk and Luhansk, according to Kiev-based political analyst Vadim Karasyov, who said some areas in the both regions appear to be insurgent-free.

But even if Moscow recognizes the vote, the legitimacy of the new president will be "nominal" in the eyes of many Ukrainians, Karasyov said, as the residents of some towns have genuinely rebelled against Kiev.

"The situation in eastern Ukraine has gone too far," he said. "Even if the turnout there is high, it will be difficult [for the winner] to gain full legitimacy."

In Donetsk, the center of the anti-Kiev uprising, it is business as usual. But just 50 kilometers away, pro-Russian gunmen fight Ukrainian forces almost daily.

"I am scared of going to the polls," said Natalya Sinchenko, a 43-year-old saleswoman.

"What kind of elections are we talking about if there are gunshots and explosions all around?"

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