

Separatist Leader Zakharchenko Calls for New Referendum in Donetsk

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Alexander Zakharchenko

A leader of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic has proposed holding a new referendum on the region's status in an apparent bid for stronger support from Moscow after Russian President Vladimir Putin outlined a peace settlement that referred to the rebel-held regions of the Donbass as part of Ukraine.

Nearly a year after a May 2014 referendum held in the Donetsk on establishing self-rule in the region, separatist leader Alexander Zakharchenko, said "we are ready to hold that referendum again," pro-separatist Donetsk News Agency reported.

In the referendum, whose results were not recognized by any country, residents were asked if they supported "self-rule" in Donetsk. It was unclear, however, whether this meant independence or broad autonomy within Ukraine.

Zakharchenko suggested that his proposal was prompted by Putin's comments during his

televised call-in marathon earlier in the day.

While Putin's four-hour show dealt mostly with economic issues, the Russian president tackled a few questions about the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The topic was popular among callers who submitted their questions in advance, with many asking whether Moscow would recognize the breakaway states in the Donbass, according to the Kremlin website.

“There is only one solution,” Putin said. “It lies in the fulfillment of the Minsk agreements, a constitutional reform, and the resolution of the economic problems facing the whole country and the Donbass in particular.” Putin added, however, that the residents of the region should have the final say on what their relationship with authorities in Kiev will be.

Separatist leaders, however, see the situation differently.

“Nobody wants to come back to Ukraine under any pretext,” Zakharchenko told Bloomberg news agency earlier this week. “I can’t even imagine this happening. Fundamental disagreements between us and Kiev are not disappearing. In fact they become stronger every day.”

Following Putin's call-in show, Zakharchenko insisted that the independence bid had the backing of the Russian president, according to Donetsk News Agency interview.

“Russian President Vladimir Putin today during his hotline has once again emphasized that there is no alternative to a political settlement in the Donbass,” Zakharchenko was quoted as saying. “He emphasized that inhabitants of the Donbass should be granted the right to decide who they want to live with, and on what conditions.”

Shortly before the separatist referendum last May, Putin issued a surprise appeal for insurgents to delay their vote to create conditions for negotiations with Kiev and find a political solution in the region where violence had just begun to simmer.

But separatists defied Putin's appeal by going ahead with the referendum.

Under the Minsk agreement, signed in February, Ukraine is to gradually retake control over the rebel regions in Donetsk and Luhansk, although the Kiev government would be obliged to grant the regions a special status that would allow them greater autonomy.

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