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U.K. Sanctions Russian Officials Over 'Sham' Votes in Ukraine

By AFP

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An armed guard is seen outside Polling Station in the town of Genichesk, Kherson region. **Alexei Konovalov / TASS**

The U.K. on Friday announced new sanctions against almost a dozen senior Russian officials and the country's election commission over "sham" elections held in occupied Ukrainian territory this month and last year.

The move takes the number of individuals and entities sanctioned by Britain in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine nearly 20 months ago to more than 1,600.

London said it was targeting the 11 officials and electoral organization after they "all directly acted to undermine Ukraine and threaten its territorial integrity" in the condemned referendums and elections staged last October and earlier this month.

Russia's Central Election Commission (CEC), which organized them, and Natalya Budarina,

one of its most senior officials, were among those sanctioned, the U.K. added.

Andrei Aleksyenko, head of what Russia now claims as the Kherson regional administration, and Marina Zakharova, head of its election commission, were also penalized.

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All those targeted face foreign asset freezes and travel restrictions.

Moscow held what London calls "falsified and illegitimate sham referendums" last October in several seized Ukrainian regions, including Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk.

They then held further votes there and in Crimea — which Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014 — which ended on Sept. 10.

The Kremlin claims it won local backing to annex the four eastern and southern Ukrainian territories in the ballots last year, despite not having full military control over the regions.

It also says the United Russia party, which backs President Vladimir Putin, won this month's dubious elections.

The votes have been dismissed by Ukraine and its Western allies as sham contests, and Kyiv's forces are fighting to claw back the seized territory.

"Russia's sham elections are a transparent, futile attempt to legitimize its illegal control of sovereign Ukrainian territory," British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly said in a statement announcing the latest sanctions.

"You can't hold 'elections' in someone else's country," he said. "The U.K. will never recognize Russia's claims to Ukrainian territory — Crimea, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, Luhansk and Kherson are Ukraine."

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken also criticized the "sham elections" earlier this month, warning that "any individuals" involved in facilitating them "may be subject to sanctions and visa restrictions."

The European Union also told Russia this month that there would be "consequences" for those involved in staging the votes.

The bloc has already imposed 11 rounds of sanctions against Moscow since February 2022.

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