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After new sanctions on Russia, Ukraine moves closer to civil war

By Barry Grey

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In the wake of new sanctions against Russia imposed by Washington and its G7 allies in Europe, Canada and Japan, the rebellion in eastern Ukraine against the US puppet government in Kiev has spread, plunging the country closer to civil war and increasing the danger of a military confrontation between the Western powers and Moscow.

On Monday, the day the US outlined stepped-up penalties targeting Russian officials, oligarchs close to President Vladimir Putin and companies linked to Putin's inner circle, pro-Russian militants captured the city council building and police station in Konstantinovka and demanded a referendum on autonomy from the regime in Kiev.

The same day, a demonstration by pro-regime Ukrainian nationalists in Donetsk was broken up by anti-government protesters, sending 14 people to the hospital. Later in the day, Gennady Kernes, the mayor of Kharkiv, was shot in the back by an unknown assailant. He was moved to an Israeli hospital, where he remains in critical condition.

The Ukrainian Defense Ministry announced that one Ukrainian soldier was killed by an explosion in the Donetsk region and another wounded.

On Tuesday, a crowd of people numbering between 1,000 and “thousands,” according to various reports, stormed the regional government building in Luhansk, an industrial city of nearly 500,000 residents situated 25 kilometers west of the Russian border. Activists proclaimed the “People’s Republic of Luhansk” and announced plans to hold a referendum on autonomy on May 11, the same day the neighboring “People’s Republic of Donetsk” plans to hold its own referendum.

Militants then took over the Luhansk regional prosecutor’s office and the regional television center, and some 20 gunmen opened fire with automatic rifles on the local police headquarters, demanding the police surrender their weapons.

Also on Tuesday, protesters raised the flag of the Donetsk People’s Republic in five more towns and villages. The two regions, Luhansk and Donetsk, make up the bulk of Ukraine’s heavily populated industrial base in the Donbass coalfield.

The responsibility for the civil conflict in Ukraine and arguably the greatest crisis in Europe since the end of World War II rest overwhelmingly with the United States and its imperialist allies in Europe, beginning with Germany. In announcing the new sanctions Monday, the Obama administration formally accused Russia of violating the four-party agreement reached April 17 in Geneva to defuse the crisis over Ukraine.

This charge only underscores the hypocrisy of the official Western propaganda on Ukraine prior to and since the February 22 coup that toppled the pro-Russian government of President Viktor Yanukovich and installed an ultra-nationalist regime pledged to join the European Union and impose IMF-dictated austerity measures on the Ukrainian working class. The putsch was led by the US-backed neo-Nazi paramilitary Right Sector and the fascist Svoboda party, whose representatives now occupy prominent positions in the Kiev government.

Washington knew that the installation of a rabidly anti-Russian government in Ukraine, a former Soviet Republic and current home to Moscow’s main naval base with access to the Mediterranean Sea, would provoke a response from Russia. That has taken the form of support for a separatist rebellion in Crimea and incorporation of the peninsula into the Russian Federation.

The Geneva meeting came after a failed attempt by the Ukrainian military to smash the protests and occupations in the east, following a secret visit to Kiev by CIA Director John Brennan. That the US signed the agreement in bad faith was quickly demonstrated by the visit of Vice President Joseph Biden to Kiev and a second military attack on eastern Ukraine protesters that followed within hours of his departure. That attack killed eight people.

According to a statement released Monday by the Russian Foreign Ministry, the Kiev government has deployed 11,000 troops in southeastern Ukraine, plus 160 tanks, 230 armored personnel carriers, at least 150 artillery systems and “a large number of planes.”

At the same time, the US and NATO have launched an unprecedented deployment of military forces to former Soviet Republics and Warsaw Pact nations, bringing western military forces right up to Russia’s western borders.

The only voices of dissent from within the political and media establishment to the administration’s incendiary policy are those attacking Obama for not taking a more confrontational line. The *Washington Post* ran an editorial Tuesday dismissing the sanctions announced Monday with the headline “More half-measures.”

A number of Republican politicians are demanding that the administration announce a program of arms shipments to the Kiev regime. In an interview in Beijing with the *Financial Times*, former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said: “I personally would hope there would be a much more robust deployment of American forces” to Eastern Europe.

Two opinion polls released this week attest to the broad popular opposition that exists to Washington’s war-mongering policy, despite a relentless barrage of anti-Russian propaganda from the media, and the utter disregard of the ruling elite for the democratic will of the population.

A *USA Today* /Pew Research Center Poll found that a narrow majority of Americans supports tighter economic sanctions on Moscow, but the public opposes by more than two-to-one (62 percent to 30 percent) the dispatch of arms or military supplies to the Ukrainian government.

A *Washington Post* -ABC News poll found that Obama’s approval rating has fallen to 41 percent, down from 46 percent through the first three months of the year and the lowest of his presidency. Only 34 percent approve of his handling of the Ukraine crisis, while 46 percent disapprove.

While the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin is signaling that it wants to ease tensions and find some basis for accommodation with the West, Washington is giving no indication of a desire to reciprocate.

Late Monday, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, in a telephone conversation with US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, reiterated Moscow’s denials that its forces are behind the rebel groups in eastern Ukraine. According to the Russian Defense Ministry, Shoigu urged Hagel to “tone down the rhetoric.”

The Russian defense chief told Hagel that Russian troops near the border with Ukraine had returned to their barracks after the Kiev government said it would not use military units against “the unarmed population.”

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said Tuesday that Moscow had no intention of invading or annexing eastern Ukraine. “We have absolutely no intention, and I stress it, to repeat the so-called Crimean scenario in Ukraine’s southeast,” Ryabkov said in an interview.

The Pentagon confirmed the telephone call between Shoigu and Hagel, but spurned Moscow’s conciliatory gestures, saying Hagel had demanded that Russia cease “destabilizing” Ukraine and had warned against “continued aggression.”

Senior US and European Union officials are scheduled to meet Wednesday in Brussels to discuss the next steps in the confrontation with Russia. Washington has been pressing the Europeans to take a harder line against Moscow.