International Press Coverage of the Congress' statement on the elections in occupied Ukrainian territories

Russia holds elections in occupied Ukrainian regions in an effort to tighten its grip there
Russian authorities are holding local elections in occupied parts of Ukraine in an effort to tighten their grip on territories Moscow illegally annexed a year ago and still does not fully control. "It constitutes a flagrant violation of international law, which Russia continues to disregard," the Council of Europe, the continent's foremost human rights body, said this week. Kyiv echoed that sentiment, with the parliament saying in a statement that the balloting in areas where Russia "conducts active hostilities" poses a threat to Ukrainian lives. / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS - RFE/RL - INDEPENDENT ONLINE

Ukraine condemns 'sham' elections in Russian-occupied regions
People living in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine are being asked to vote in what the authorities are describing as local elections. Ukraine's foreign minister called the polls a "sham", saying the votes would not have any legal standing. The Council of Europe, a human rights body, condemned the move in the "illegally annexed Ukrainian territories" as a "flagrant violation of international law, which Russia continues to disregard". / BBC

Ukraine criticises Russian 'fake elections' in occupied regions
Voting taking place in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia as well as 54 Russian regions. The Kremlin is holding votes in occupied regions of Ukraine in a process that has been dismissed as "fake elections" and a "sham" by Kyiv and western capitals. The US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, said in Kyiv on Thursday that "Russia's sham elections in occupied areas of Ukraine are illegitimate", and the Council of Europe has called them a "flagrant violation of international law". / THE GUARDIAN

Russia holds elections in illegally occupied Ukrainian regions
In the face of international condemnation, Russia on Friday began to hold local elections in regions of occupied Ukraine that President Vladimir Putin declared annexed nearly a year ago and that Moscow has yet to gain control over amid its ongoing war. The elections are expected to be widely condemned as Putin's declaration of annexation nearly a year ago was overwhelmingly rejected at the United Nations by nearly 150 countries. The Council of Europe, the continent's leading human rights organization, also condemned the elections. / YAHOO NEWS – UPI

'The results are already well-known': Polls open in Russia-occupied Ukrainian territory
Sixty miles north-east of Melitopol, a Ukrainian counteroffensive is grinding laboriously through Russian-held territory, hoping to liberate regions from the grips of Moscow's rule. The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Friday that the so-called elections further violated Ukraine's "sovereignty and territorial integrity," and the Council of Europe has labeled them "a flagrant violation of international law which Russia continues to disregard." / CNN

Russia holds elections denounced by Kyiv in occupied Ukrainian regions
Russian authorities are holding local elections in occupied parts of Ukraine in an effort to tighten their grip on territories Moscow illegally annexed a year ago and still does not fully control. The voting for Russian-installed legislatures in the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhia regions has already begun and concludes Sunday. The elections have been denounced by Kyiv and the West. "It constitutes a flagrant violation of international law, which Russia continues to disregard," the Council of Europe, the continent's foremost human rights body, said. / AL JAZEERA

Putin encourages Russians to vote in elections, including in annexed Ukrainian regions
The five parties represented in the Russian Parliament, which all vote with United Russia on important issues, are participating in the elections, with which Russia aims to consolidate the annexation, although there is no opposition. Ukraine has called the polls in the occupied territories a "sham," while the US, the European Union, Nato, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe, Japan and Spain have condemned the "farce". / EFE - EL UNIVERSAL - SWISSINFO

Le Canada ne reconnaîtra pas les élections russes en Ukraine, dit Trudeau
Le premier ministre Justin Trudeau a déclaré que le Canada ne reconnaîtrait pas les résultats des élections tenues cette semaine par les autorités russes dans les régions occupées de l'Ukraine. Il

affirme que les élections sont « une tentative cynique de légitimer la conquête militaire sous couvert de démocratie » et une violation du droit international. Ces votes ont été dénoncés par Kiev, le Conseil de l'Europe et d'autres pays occidentaux. / NEWS 24

Putin encourages Russians to vote in elections, including in annexed Ukrainian regions [10-09-2023]   EFE , El Universal , SwissInfo

Russian president Vladimir Putin on Saturday urged citizens to turn out in large numbers in local and regional elections being held this weekend. Polling stations opened on Friday across the country, as well as in the four Ukrainian territories that Moscow illegally annexed last year. Putin voted in the Moscow mayoral elections after publicly endorsing the current mayor, Sergey Sobyanin, as a candidate of the ruling United Russia party after previously running as an independent. Four other candidates are running for mayor, but it is assumed that Sobyanin will be reelected for another five years. Amid the prevailing apathy in the capital, with hardly any posters of the candidates, the almost complete absence of debates and with most of the opposition in jail or exile, Putin stressed that the elections are "a direct expression of the will of citizens, an opportunity to influence the future of their city, town and country as a whole (...)".

Elections are being held for the first time in Russian-occupied areas in the Ukrainian oblasts of Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Lugansk and Donetsk. The five parties represented in the Russian Parliament, which all vote with United Russia on important issues, are participating in the elections, with which Russia aims to consolidate the annexation, although there is no opposition. Ukraine has called the polls in the occupied territories a "sham," while the US, the European Union, Nato, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe, Japan and Spain have condemned the "farce".

Le Canada ne reconnaîtra pas les élections russes en Ukraine, dit Trudeau [10-09-2023]   News 24

Le premier ministre Justin Trudeau a déclaré que le Canada ne reconnaîtrait pas les résultats des élections tenues cette semaine par les autorités russes dans les régions occupées de l'Ukraine.
Trudeau a condamné les élections dans une déclaration publiée aujourd'hui par l'intermédiaire de son bureau, les qualifiant de « imposture ».
Il affirme que les élections sont « une tentative cynique de légitimer la conquête militaire sous couvert de démocratie » et une violation du droit international.
Les élections locales pour les législatures installées par la Russie ont commencé plus tôt cette semaine dans les régions de Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk et Zaporizhzhia.
Ils devraient se terminer dimanche.
Ces votes ont été dénoncés par Kiev, le Conseil de l'Europe et d'autres pays occidentaux.

'The results are already well-known': Polls open in Russia-occupied Ukrainian territory [09-09-2023]   CNN

Sixty miles north-east of Melitopol, a Ukrainian counteroffensive is grinding laboriously through Russian-held territory, hoping to liberate regions from the grips of Moscow's rule.
But in this city – one of the first captured by Russian forces after their invasion last February – another operation is in full swing. There is one key difference: everyone knows how this one is going to end.
Voting is underway in Russia-occupied eastern and southern Ukraine, as Moscow attempts to exert authority with elections the international community have widely dismissed as a sham.
Campaign material has apparently been dropped in from Russia to give the appearance of a proper contest. "It seems like there is nothing left in the city except the headquarters of (Russia's ruling party) United Russia, the military and the billboards," said a Melitopol resident in her early 30s who has refused to flee the city. CNN is referring to the woman by the pseudonym Baska, because of concerns for her safety.
As well as Putin's party, there are billboards promoting the Communist party and Just Russia (Spravedlivaya Rossiya). "There is so much information noise that people simply do not have time to think for themselves," she said.
The elections represent another attempt by Moscow to enforce a narrative of Russian legitimacy in the parts of Ukraine it holds – some but not all of Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson and Luhansk regions – even as Kyiv's counteroffensive makes some progress towards liberating towns in the south.
Early voting has already been held in the occupied territories, and in-person polling was expected to start Friday and run until Sunday, according to Ukraine's National Resistance Center (NRC), an

official agency of the government in Kyiv, which has dismissed the elections as a propaganda exercise.

Kremlin-backed candidates, some of whom are running unopposed, are widely expected to be installed after the process.

"They just come and say 'vote.' So people vote," Baska told CNN. "It has nothing to do with normal elections."

She has not seen heavy-handed coercion to force people to take part. "Why? Because they don't care who votes and how, they have already counted the results," she said.

But reminders of the election are ever-present. "Here, when you buy a SIM card for your phone, you immediately get an SMS from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and United Russia Party," Baska said.

The text messages carry pro-Kremlin messaging, informing voters that "about 90% of voters are ready to vote for Yedianaya Rossiya (United Russia)," or that "United Russia is helping Zaporizhzhia region," she added.

"In other words, the election results are already well known," she said, predicting low turnout even among those in the city that support Russia. "People are generally apolitical, inert, and know who will win anyways."

'People are tired of waiting'

Kyiv and the West have poured scorn on the process, with the NRC urging Ukrainians to ignore any appeals to take part.

"Given that these 'polling stations' will be empty, the occupiers are preparing to create a propaganda picture," the NRC said on Thursday. The agency predicted that people will "vote in an organized manner at certain polling stations under the supervision of pre-placed cameras of 'journalists.'"

The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Friday that the so-called elections further violated Ukraine's "sovereignty and territorial integrity," and the Council of Europe has labeled them "a flagrant violation of international law which Russia continues to disregard."

"These territories are and will remain an integral part of Ukraine," it said in a statement on Monday.

Russia held similar sham referendums in the four regions last year, in an attempt to project authority over the parts of Ukraine its troops had captured. The new round of elections is being held alongside local votes inside Russia.

The votes come as Russian President Vladimir Putin's authority and the success of his campaign in Ukraine are increasingly scrutinized. Ukraine is "slowly gaining ground" in its counteroffensive despite weeks of "difficult" fighting, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg told the European Parliament on Thursday.

"This is heavy fighting, difficult fighting but they have been able to breach the defensive lines of the Russian forces. And they are moving forward," the NATO chief said.

But in Melitopol, which lies south of the lines of the ground campaign, the realities of Russian control are taking hold. Guerrilla activity by Ukrainian partisans has taken place but is more difficult to achieve now, Baska told CNN.

"Most people are tired of waiting, they realize that there will be no liberation this year, and maybe not even next year. So more and more are looking for opportunities to leave," she said.

While Melitopol was struck earlier in the year by Ukrainian missile attacks on Russian targets, recently things have been quiet. "People here do not feel the war. If last year almost every person standing at the queue at the market was talking about Mariupol or Crimea, now people have different feelings," she added. "There are now fewer local people in the city than newcomers … soon there will be a complete replacement of the local population (by Russians), it feels like."

Street combat has been replaced by exhibitions depicting Russian greatness, such as one in a park whose entrance is patrolled by armed troops.

'Nothing to do with democracy'

Few residents in Melitopol are interested in the bogus elections taking place, Baska told CNN. But to Moscow, the votes across occupied Ukraine are another tool through which to enforce control – even if international observers are unmoved.

"For the first time we are electing local self-government bodies under Russian law," the head of the so called Donetsk People's Republic Denis Pushilin wrote on Telegram Friday, calling the elections "a vote for the Russian Donbas."

It comes alongside an effort to force residents in the regions to accept Russian citizenship, according to a report released last month by the Yale Humanitarian Research Lab.

Moscow's official agencies have touted the progress of the early voting window in recent days, during which house-to-house visits were made by members of precinct election commissions, according to Russia's governing United Russia party.

Voting also took place at "extraterritorial" polling stations in Russia. There is no way to confirm the official figures released by Russian authorities, and no international observers of the polling.

Yuriy Sobolevskyi, deputy head of Kherson region council, covering part of the territory Ukraine regained in its counteroffensive last year, told CNN that the elections had "nothing to do with democracy or free expression of will. What is happening now is a show that they call elections in order to create a propaganda narrative."

"The emphasis in these elections is on door-to-door work, when two collaborators accompanied by armed men from the Russian Guard, police, and in some cases the military, go from house to house in the settlements. They visit every house in the settlements and actually force people to vote under psychological pressure," Sobolevskyi said.

"We know that they have brought in a number of 'artists' to give interviews to propagandists, pretending to be locals who have been waiting for Russia for a long time and are now excited about the elections."

Russia holds elections in illegally occupied Ukrainian regions [08-09-2023]   Yahoo News , UPI

In the face of international condemnation, Russia on Friday began to hold local elections in regions of occupied Ukraine that President Vladimir Putin declared annexed nearly a year ago and that Moscow has yet to gain control over amid its ongoing war.

Eleven months ago, Putin signed federal laws formally approving the illegal annexation of Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporozhye and Kherson, and on Friday elections in those regions began for Kremlin-installed legislative assemblies as more than 4,000 local and regional elections were being held over the weekend across Russia.

Polling stations opened Friday morning and will close Sunday night, according to Russian state-run TASS news agency, which said elections in the four regions of Ukraine were to seat deputies in their legislative assemblies.

The elections are expected to be widely condemned as Putin's declaration of annexation nearly a year ago was overwhelmingly rejected at the United Nations by nearly 150 countries.

Russia has pointed to referendum it held a month prior to Putin's signing of the declarations as proof that the Ukrainians in the four regions wish to join the Russian federation.

But the United States had long warned prior to and after the referendums were held that they were shams, as would be any elections that would follow.

On Thursday, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken renewed his accusations that Russia was conducting "sham elections" a year after it staged "sham referenda" to support its illegal usurping of Ukrainian land.

"The Kremlin hopes these predetermined, fabricated results will strengthen Russia's illegitimate claims to the parts of Ukraine it occupies, but this is nothing more than a propaganda exercise," Blinken said in a statement, warning those who support it will be at risk of sanctions and visa restrictions.

"The United States will never recognize the Russian Federation's claims to any of Ukraine's sovereign territory."

The Russian Embassy in Washington characterized Blinken's statement in one of its own on Friday as meddling in its internal affairs, while pointing to the widely discredited referendums as proof that Ukrainians in those regions wanted to join Russia.

On Sunday, the Council of Europe, the continent's leading human rights organization, also condemned the elections.

"It constitutes a flagrant violation of international law, which Russia continues to disregard, as it was the case with the pseudo-referendums last year," it said in a statement.

"Holding local elections in occupied territories only creates an illusion of democracy but clearly violates the right of citizens to participate in the conduct of local public affairs."

Kyiv's Center for Strategic Communication and Information Security of Ukraine is warning that the number of voters, turnout and results in the election are expected to be falsified.

"Russia's pseudo-elections are accompanied by terror against the occupied population, who are forced to play a part in this propaganda show. Any declared pseudo-election results are void. They will not be recognized by anyone," it said in a statement.

"Ukraine will eventually free its citizens from Russia. We remember everyone in occupied territories. All those responsible for terror will be held accountable."

Ukraine criticises Russian 'fake elections' in occupied regions [08-09-2023]   The Guardian

Voting taking place in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia as well as 54 Russian regions.

The Kremlin is holding votes in occupied regions of Ukraine in a process that has been dismissed as "fake elections" and a "sham" by Kyiv and western capitals.

The vote comes as 54 Russian regions also hold votes, and the Ukrainian ballots are aimed at bolstering Vladimir Putin's claims on the occupied areas. Some of the votes concern territories where the Kremlin does not hold de facto control despite Putin declaring their annexation last September.

The Kremlin is expected to claim a heavy victory in the votes for the Kremlin-adjacent United Russia or nominal opposition parties.

Ukraine's foreign ministry criticised the votes as "pseudo-elections", called on other governments not to recognise their results and said it would lobby for new international sanctions on all those involved in organising the vote.

"Russia's pseudo-elections in the temporarily occupied territories are negligible. They will have no legal consequences and will not lead to a change in the status of the Ukrainian territories captured by the Russian army. By organising fake elections in the Ukrainian regions and Crimea, the Kremlin continues to delegitimise the Russian legal system," the ministry said.

The US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, said in Kyiv on Thursday that "Russia's sham elections in occupied areas of Ukraine are illegitimate", and the Council of Europe has called them a "flagrant violation of international law".

Voting for the Russian-controlled legislatures will be held in the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions of Ukraine, where Russia holds only partial control on the ground. Those legislatures will then appoint local Kremlin-loyal governors.

Ballots are also being held in 50 regions of Russia, including in Moscow where the powerful mayor, Sergei Sobyanin, is expected to remain in post as he enjoys the Kremlin's support.

Ben Noble, an associate professor of Russian politics at University College London, said: "The illegal 'elections' being held in the occupied territories of Ukraine can be seen as an attempt by the Kremlin to demonstrate its control over these territories when that control is challenged on so many other fronts. The intention is to project an image of normality."

He said orchestrating elections was "part of the bread and butter of local, regional and federal governance in Russia, so rolling elections out to occupied territories is also part of Moscow's attempt to establish the Russian way of doing things, including by forming chains of command, lines of responsibility and expectations regarding voting and results."

The voting may prove to be a dress rehearsal for the 2024 presidential elections, in which Putin will seek another six-year term having launched a war that has resulted in hundreds of thousands of Russian casualties, an economic downturn and international isolation.

Representatives of the Russian foreign ministry have said criticism of the elections is seen as interference in Russian domestic politics.

Russia's lack of control of the Ukrainian territory was on display again on Friday when three people were killed in a Russian airstrike in the village of Odradakamianka, in the Kherson region. Putin nominally annexed the region last September but the Russian army has since abandoned large swaths of the territory due to a Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Ivan Fedorov, the Ukrainian mayor of Melitopol, who is in exile in government-controlled territory, said on Telegram there were two explosions at a polling station set up by Russians in the occupied city of Berdiansk.

Askad Ashurbekov, a councillor in Zaporizhzhia city, told a Ukrainian television network there were two goals of the so-called elections: to provide propaganda images for internal Russian consumption, and to expose pro-Ukrainian residents of occupied areas, who would refuse to vote.

Ashurbekov said: "The situation is fully absurd. They are posting photographs on their official sites where members of the so-called 'election commissions' are accompanied by armed guards."

Russia has rolled out new technology, including electronic voting, that observers believe will make it easier for the Kremlin to falsify votes. The Kremlin may use this week's ballots to calibrate the technology before the 2024 vote.

"From a technical point of view, these elections are also being used by Russia's Central Electoral Commission to further test online voting, manipulations of which are much trickier to detect, before the March 2024 presidential election," Noble said.

Ukraine was scheduled to hold nationwide parliamentary elections next month and a presidential election in spring next year, but according to the constitution, elections cannot be held while martial law is in force. There is a discussion in Ukrainian society over when elections should be held, with some voices suggesting that even in times of war, elections are required to keep democracy functioning.

Last month, the US senator Lindsey Graham called on Kyiv to organise elections despite the war. Volodymyr Zelenskiy has said there are several problems with holding elections now, including how to

ensure those Ukrainians living in occupied territories can vote, and the organisational headache of organising voting for the millions of Ukrainians who have left Ukraine since the war began.

"We are ready, there's no question about it," Zelenskiy said at a conference in Kyiv. "It's not a question of democracy, this is exclusively an issue of security. We have to do everything possible to make sure that our military can vote, those in the trenches at the frontline, because they are fighting for the rights of our people and being disfranchised is out of the question."

[Russia holds elections denounced by Kyiv in occupied Ukrainian regions](#) [08-09-2023]   Al Jazeera

Russian authorities are holding local elections in occupied parts of Ukraine in an effort to tighten their grip on territories Moscow illegally annexed a year ago and still does not fully control.

The voting for Russian-installed legislatures in the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhia regions has already begun and concludes Sunday. The elections have been denounced by Kyiv and the West.

"It constitutes a flagrant violation of international law, which Russia continues to disregard," the Council of Europe, the continent's foremost human rights body, said this week.

Kyiv echoed that sentiment, with the parliament saying in a statement that balloting in areas where Russia "conducts active hostilities" poses a threat to Ukrainian lives.

Ukrainian officials have urged other countries not to recognise the results of the vote, which the foreign ministry called "fake elections".

Voters are supposed to elect regional legislatures, which, in turn, will appoint regional governors. In the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces, thousands of candidates are also competing for seats on dozens of local councils.

The balloting is scheduled for the same weekend as other local elections in Russia, which launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine 18 months ago.

In the occupied regions, early voting kicked off last week as election officials went door to door or set up makeshift polling stations in public places to attract passersby.

The main contender in the election is United Russia, the Putin-loyal party that dominates Russian politics, although others, such as the Communist Party and the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party, are also on the ballots.

For some residents of Donetsk and Luhansk, large swaths of which have been held by Russian-backed separatists since 2014, there is nothing unusual about the vote.

"For the last nine years, we've been striving to get closer with Russia, and Russian politicians are well-known to us," Sergei, a 47-year-old resident of the occupied city of Luhansk, told The Associated Press news agency, asking that his last name be withheld for security reasons. "We're speaking Russian and have felt like part of Russia for a long time, and these elections only confirm that."

Some voters in Donetsk shared Sergei's sentiment, expressing love for Russia and saying they wanted to be part of it.

Kherson and Zaporizhia

The picture appears bleaker in Kherson and Zaporizhia. Residents and Ukrainian activists said poll workers make house calls accompanied by armed soldiers, and most voters know little about the candidates, up to half of whom reportedly arrived from Russia – including remote regions in Siberia and the Far East.

"In most cases, we don't know these Russian candidates, and we're not even trying to figure it out," said Konstantin, who currently lives in the Russian-held part of the Kherson region on the eastern bank of the Dnipro River.

Using only his first name for safety reasons, Konstantin said in a phone interview that billboards advertising Russian political parties have sprung up along the highways, and campaign workers have been bused in before the vote.

But "locals understand that these elections don't influence anything" and "are held for Russian propaganda purposes," Konstantin said, comparing this year's vote to the referendums Moscow staged last year in the four partially occupied regions.

Those referendums were designed to put a veneer of democracy on the annexation. Ukraine and the West denounced them as a sham and decried the annexation as illegal.

Weeks after the referendums, Russian troops withdrew from the city of Kherson, the capital of the region of the same name, and areas around it, ceding them back to Ukraine. As a result, Moscow has maintained control of about 70 percent of the region.

Three other regions are also only partially occupied, and Kyiv's forces have managed to regain more land – albeit slowly and in small chunks – during their counteroffensive this year.

[Ukraine condemns 'sham' elections in Russian-occupied regions](#) [08-09-2023]   BBC

People living in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine are being asked to vote in what the authorities are describing as local elections.

Ukraine's foreign minister called the polls a "sham", saying the votes would not have any legal standing.

Candidates are all either Russian or pro-Russian, and include governors hand-picked by Moscow. Many taking part in early polling have been asked to cast their votes in the presence of armed Russian soldiers.

Ukrainian officials have warned people not to participate. They say any Ukrainian citizens involved in organising the elections can expect to be punished in the future.

The Council of Europe, a human rights body, condemned the move in the "illegally annexed Ukrainian territories" as a "flagrant violation of international law, which Russia continues to disregard".

Not only are these areas an integral part of Ukraine, but the decision to hold elections there "creates the illusion of democracy", the council said in a statement.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken also decried the polls saying: "Russia's sham elections in occupied areas of Ukraine are illegitimate." This sparked a response from the Russian embassy in the US, which accused Washington of meddling in Moscow's internal affairs.

The elections, which conclude on Sunday, and are taking place in four regions that Russia does not even fully control - Donetsk and Luhansk in the east, and the southern regions of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson.

Together they make up around 15% of Ukraine's sovereign territory.

Elections are also taking place in Crimea - under illegal Russian occupation since 2014 - and are being run in parallel to local polls in Russia itself.

Under the eyes of armed soldiers

Images shared by Russia's election commission provide an almost surreal glimpse into the polling stations.

As well as the expected setups in schools and administrative buildings, some stations are in the backyards of homes or even on street benches.

Photos depict voters dropping ballots into boxes seemingly under the watchful eyes of heavily-armed, balaclava-clad soldiers. Some photos showed polls being dropped into a clear plastic ballot boxes, with the votes clearly visible.

The commission reports that the voter turnout for so-called regional parliaments has exceeded 50% in Kherson and 40% in Donetsk.

This is a much higher than seen in Russian regional polls in the last decade. It also stands out given that the Russian military does not have complete control over the claimed regions, and pulled out of the city of Kherson, the regional capital, almost a year ago.

There are no independent observers to validate these elections and the total vote count has not been disclosed.

The exiled mayor of the city of Melitopol Ivan Fedorov described the elections as "illegal and worthless", saying that many candidates in the Zaporizhzhia region were not residents, with some even coming from Siberia in Russia's far east.

He told the AP news agency the city had faced tighter security in recent days and residents were intimidated because voting in an occupied city was like "voting in a prison".

The four occupied regions where elections are taking place were claimed by Moscow as its own in September last year, after holding illegal annexation referendums on the future of the occupied lands.

Those referendums were also condemned by the international community as a sham - with reports of over 99% support for the regions switching to Moscow's control - and at times involved armed soldiers going from door to door to gather votes.

In the occupied lands, Russia has banned the use of Ukraine's currency since January.

Moscow has said it rolling out its own mobile networks and will refurbish schools. But as recently as August, Russian authorities admitted that only about 20% of schools in these regions had seen reconstruction and its regular mobile networks - the ones commonly used in Russia - are conspicuously missing in the occupied zones.

In an unusual move, Ukrainians can still cast their ballots using their Ukrainian passports. This might be because a significant number have not adopted Russian nationality.

The Zaporizhzhia region - one of the areas where Russia is holding elections - is also the focus of Kyiv's counter-offensive, which was launched in the summer.

Ukrainian generals claim they have breached Russia's formidable first line of defences in that region, suggesting the counter-offensive there is poised to gain momentum.

Analysts at the US-based Institute for the Study of War (ISW) say recent advances there are "tactically significant" and are "widening the Ukrainian breach of Russian defensive lines in the area and threatening Russian secondary lines of defence".

The focus of Ukraine's efforts there have been around the village of Robotyne, which is some 56km (35 miles) south-east of the city of Zaporizhzhia, the regional capital. Kyiv would like to see its forces cut the Russian supply lines that allow Moscow's forces to maintain a presence in the southern part of the Kherson region.

However, on Friday Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said that Moscow's air superiority was impeding the counter-offensive, and complained that arms deliveries from the West were becoming "complicated and slower".

[Russia holds elections in occupied Ukrainian regions in an effort to tighten its grip there](#) [08-09-2023]   The Associated Press, Independent Online , RFE/RL

Russian authorities are holding local elections this weekend in occupied parts of Ukraine in an effort to tighten their grip on territories Moscow illegally annexed a year ago and still does not fully control.

The voting for Russian-installed legislatures in the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions begins Friday and concludes Sunday. It has already been denounced by Kyiv and the West.

"It constitutes a flagrant violation of international law, which Russia continues to disregard," the Council of Europe, the continent's foremost human rights body, said this week.

Kyiv echoed that sentiment, with the parliament saying in a statement that the balloting in areas where Russia "conducts active hostilities" poses a threat to Ukrainian lives. Lawmakers urged other countries not to recognize the results of the vote.

For Russia, it is important to go on with the voting to maintain the illusion of normalcy, despite the fact that the Kremlin does not have full control over the annexed regions, political analyst Abbas Gallyamov said.

"The Russian authorities are trying hard to pretend that everything is going according to plan, everything is fine. And if everything is going according to plan, then the political process should go according to plan," said Gallyamov, who worked as a speechwriter for Russian President Vladimir Putin when Putin served as prime minister.

Voters are supposed to elect regional legislatures, which in turn will appoint regional governors. In the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces, thousands of candidates are also competing for seats on dozens of local councils.

The balloting is scheduled for the same weekend as other local elections in Russia. In the occupied regions, early voting kicked off last week as election officials went door to door or set up makeshift polling stations in public places to attract passersby.

The main contender in the election is United Russia, the Putin-loyal party that dominates Russian politics, although other parties, such as the Communist Party or the nationalist Liberal Democratic party, are also on the ballots.

For some residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, large swaths of which have been held by Russian-backed separatists since 2014, there is nothing unusual about the vote.

"For the last nine years, we've been striving to get closer with Russia, and Russian politicians are well-known to us," Sergei, a 47-year-old resident of the occupied city of Luhansk, told The Associated Press, asking that his last name be withheld for security reasons. "We're speaking Russian and have felt like part of Russia for a long time, and these elections only confirm that."

Some voters in Donetsk shared Sergei's sentiment, expressing love for Russia and saying they want to be part of it.

The picture appears bleaker in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. Local residents and Ukrainian activists say poll workers make house calls accompanied by armed soldiers, and most voters know little about the candidates, up to half of whom reportedly arrived from Russia — including remote regions in Siberia and the far east.

"In most cases, we don't know these Russian candidates, and we're not even trying to figure it out," said Konstantin, who currently lives in the Russian-held part of the Kherson region on the eastern bank of the Dnieper River.

Using only his first name for safety reasons, Konstantin said in a phone interview that billboards advertising Russian political parties have sprung up along the highways, and campaign workers have been bused in ahead of the vote.

But "locals understand that these elections don't influence anything" and "are held for Russian propaganda purposes," Kostantin said, comparing this year's vote to the referendums Moscow staged last year in the four partially occupied regions.

Those referendums were designed to put a veneer of democracy on the annexation. Ukraine and the West denounced them as a sham and decried the annexation as illegal.

Weeks after the referendums, Russian troops withdrew from the city of Kherson, the capital of the Kherson region, and areas around it, ceding them back to Ukraine. As a result, Moscow has maintained control of about 70% of the Kherson region.

Three other regions are also only partially occupied, and Kyiv's forces have managed to regain more land — albeit slowly and in small chunks — during their summer counteroffensive.

In the occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region, where the counteroffensive efforts are focused, Moscow-installed authorities declared a holiday for Friday, the first day of voting.

The Russian-appointed governor of the annexed region, Yevgeny Balitsky, noted in a recent statement that 13 front-line cities and villages in the region come under regular shelling, but he expressed hope that despite the difficulties, the United Russia party "will get the result it deserves."

In the meantime, early voting is underway. Ivan Fyodorov, Ukrainian mayor of Melitopol, a Russian-held city in the Zaporizhzhia region, told AP that local residents are effectively being forced to vote. "When there's an armed person standing in front of you, it's hard to say no," he said.

Early in the war, Fyodorov was kidnapped by Russian troops and held in captivity. He moved to Ukrainian-controlled territory upon release.

There are four different parties on the ballot, the mayor said, but billboards advertise only one — United Russia. "It looks like the Russian authorities know the result (of the election) already," Fyodorov said.

The city's population of 60,000 — down from 149,000 before the war — has been subject to enhanced security in the days leading up to the election, according to Fyodorov. Authorities stop people in the streets to check their identification documents and detain anyone who looks suspicious, he said.

"People are intimidated and scared, because everyone understands that an election in an occupied city is like voting in prison," Fyodorov said.

Russian authorities aim to have up to 80% of the population take part in the early voting, according to the Eastern Human Rights Group, a Ukrainian rights group that monitors the vote in the occupied territories.

Poll workers go door to door — to markets, grocery stores and other public places — to get people to cast ballots. Both those who have gotten Russian citizenship and those still holding Ukrainian passports are allowed to vote.

Those who refuse to vote are being detained for three or four hours, the group's coordinator, Pavlo Lysianskyi, said. The authorities make them "write an explanatory statement, which later becomes grounds for a criminal case against the person."

Lysianskyi's group has counted at least 104 cases of Ukrainians being detained in occupied regions for refusing to take part in the vote.

In the end, said Gallyamov, the Russian analyst, Russian authorities will not get "anything good in terms of boosting their legitimacy" in the occupied regions.