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Putin signs treaty for Crimean annexation, blasts West

March 18, 2014

President Vladimir Putin addresses the Russian parliament, March 18, 2014. Sergei Ilnitsky/EPA
President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday raised the ante in the showdown over Ukraine, signing a treaty to incorporate Crimea into the Russian Federation following Sunday's referendum vote, while accusing the new Ukrainian government of abusing the rights of ethnic Russians and dismissing Western objections as based on "double standards."

"In our hearts we know Crimea has always been an inalienable part of Russia," Putin said in an address to Russia's parliament. He welcomed the "Republic of Crimea" and the "City of Sevastopol" as new members of the Russian Federation, drawing a standing ovation with the Russian anthem playing in the background.

The attempts to "frighten" Russia by imposing sanctions had been received in ill regard, he said, ignoring the warnings the United States and the European Union had issued Monday. Putin later told a flag-waving rally in Red Square beneath the walls of the Kremlin that Crimea has returned to "home port."

Crimea's incorporation has to be endorsed by Russia's Constitutional Court and ratified by both houses of parliament to take effect, but those steps are considered mere formalities and approval was expected within hours or days.

In a sign of escalating tensions, the Russian military has boosted its presence in Crimea, where Russian troops in Simferopol are reported to have stormed the Ukrainian military base. Ukraine's Defense Ministry said that "armed masked men" had killed a Ukrainian serviceman during the attack, and later authorized its troops in Crimea to use arms to defend their lives.

"Today Russian soldiers began shooting at Ukrainian servicemen," Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk said. "This is a war crime."

The atmosphere is also increasingly tense in Donetsk and Kharkov, predominantly Russian-speaking industrial centers in Eastern Ukraine where clashes between pro- and anti-Russian demonstrators last weekend saw three people killed and dozens wounded. Ukrainian leaders accused Moscow of fomenting the violence and distorting the truth of what happened. A Russian foreign ministry statement said the clashes showed the Ukrainians had lost control of the situation and Russia reserved the right to protect its compatriots in eastern Ukraine.

It remains unclear whether, and in what way, Moscow will move to strengthen its influence in eastern Ukraine. Putin said in his speech that he doesn't aspire to a division of Ukraine, but Kiev fears that a buildup of Russian forces on the border signals Putin's ambition to extend his control. Ukrainian government leaders have accused Putin of stirring unrest by sending pro-Russian armed groups across the border.

Yatsenyuk condemned the treaty, based on a referendum that's legality he had rejected – and found moral support from Western allies. Kiev is grappling with demands for greater autonomy from within the pro-Russian population in Eastern provinces, indicating discontent among ethnic minorities who strongly identify with the former Soviet Union.

Western reaction to Putin's treaty was immediate – although concrete responses in the form of sanctions have thus far been notably limited. Alarmed by last week's riots in Eastern Ukraine, British Foreign Minister William Hague said that there is a grave danger that provocation in Ukraine could be used as a Russian pretext for further military escalation under the guise of protecting Russian constituencies. Hague said all military cooperation with Russia has been suspended.

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, who was visiting Poland, condemned Russia's actions as "nothing more than a land grab." He said the international community rejected Russia's moves as a continuing assault on Ukraine's sovereignty, and that this would be punished by more sanctions, while exploring the need to diversify Europe's energy supplies for such sanctions to be effective – about 75 percent of Russian gas exports fuels Western European economies.

Biden also revived Cold-War-era strategic agreements and underscored NATO's focus on the Crimean crisis, encouraging the transatlantic alliance to update its contingency planning on Ukraine and reiterating his commitment to building a missile defense system in Poland by 2018.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said the international community could not accept Russia's annexation of Crimea. And Estonia, which achieved independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 after more than five decades of occupation, said the Crimean crisis shows U.S. presence in Europe is absolutely vital.

Putin said Crimea's referendum was in line with international law, reflecting the region's right to self-determination, comparing Crimea's split from Ukraine to Ukraine's own secession from the Soviet Union in 1991 and even Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence.

Putin denied Western accusations that Russia invaded Crimea prior to the referendum, saying Russian personnel were sent there in line with a treaty with Ukraine that allows Russia to have up to 25,000 troops at its Black Sea Fleet base in the Crimean city of Sevastopol.

Residents of Crimea on Sunday voted overwhelmingly to secede from Ukraine and seek to join Russia. The hastily called vote was held two weeks after Russian troops effectively took control of the region. The West and Ukraine described the referendum, which was announced two weeks ago, as illegitimate and illegal.

The United States and the European Union on Monday announced asset freezes and other sanctions against Russian and Ukrainian officials involved in the Crimean crisis. President Barack Obama warned that more would come if Russia didn't stop interfering in Ukraine.

France's Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said Tuesday that leaders of the Group of Eight world powers "decided to suspend Russia's participation, and it is envisaged that all the other countries, the seven leading countries will unite without Russia." The other seven members of the group had already suspended preparations for a G-8 summit that Russia is scheduled to host in June in Sochi.