Russian Citizen Elected Sevastopol Mayor Amid Pro-Moscow Protests in Crimea

By Anna Dolgov

February 24, 2014

Pro-Moscow demonstrators in Crimea have named a Russian citizen as the new mayor of Sevastopol, underscoring fears that the region may try to break away from turmoil-gripped Ukraine.

About 20,000 demonstrators carrying Russian flags gathered in Sevastopol for a rally on Sunday, electing businessman Alexei Chalov, a Russian citizen, as their new mayor, Crimea's Navigator news agency reported.

Sevastopol is the only city in Ukraine whose residents do not get to elect their mayor directly as a law on the seaport's municipal governance is yet to be approved by Ukraine's parliament, Sevastopolskaya Gazeta reported.

Following the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovych over the weekend, many in Sevastopol

no longer recognize the activities of the Ukrainian parliament, however.

The protests unfolded just as a White House national security adviser urged Russia on Sunday not to interfere militarily in Crimea, where Russia houses its Black Sea naval fleet. Moscow has vowed to "protect" the region if Ukraine splits.

In the eastern Crimean city of Kerch, protesters tore down the Ukrainian flag from the City Hall and replaced it with the Russian one, Kerch.com.ua reported.

After the rally, many protesters headed to the offices of the Russian Unity organization to enlist in a self-defense force.

In an appearance on NBC's Meet the Press program on Sunday, National Security Adviser Susan Rice said that it "would be a grave mistake" for Russian President Vladimir Putin's military to interfere to install a pro-Moscow government in Ukraine or to carve up the country.

"It is not in the interests of Ukraine or of Russia or of Europe or the U.S. to see the country split. It is in nobody's interest to see violence return and the situation escalate," she said.

Protesters in Sevastopol were calling on Moscow to do just that, carrying banners that said "Putin is our president," and "Russia, we have been abandoned, take us back."

Crimea was part of Russia before Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev "transferred" it to the then-Soviet republic of Ukraine. Two decades after the Soviet collapse, the huge peninsula is still viewed by many Russians as their rightful territory.

A senior Russian official said last week that Russia would interfere militarily to preserve its influence in Crimea.

"If Ukraine breaks apart, it will trigger a war," the unidentified official told the Financial Times on Thursday. "They will lose Crimea first [because] we will go in and protect [it], just as we did in Georgia."

Russia attacked Georgia in 2008, to prevent it from reclaiming a separatist territory, South Ossetia, whose residents Moscow had courted for more than a decade with handouts of Russian citizenship and associated economic perks.