

Putin Sees No Political Future for Yanukovych

By [Christopher Brennan](#)

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President Vladimir Putin addressing journalists at a news conference on Tuesday.

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President Vladimir Putin spoke publicly about the political turmoil in Ukraine on Tuesday for the first time since ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych fled Kiev amid violence between police and anti-government protesters.

Putin echoed comments made by Yanukovych at a news conference in Rostov-on-Don last week, saying that the current Ukrainian government and president are illegitimate and that they were installed as a result of an “anti-constitutional coup and armed seizure of power.”

He also said that he sees no future in politics for Yanukovych.

Putin advised Ukraine to hold a referendum soon, adding that residents in the east of the country — an area with many pro-Russian and Russian-speaking citizens — are not

currently involved in the political process.

Answering questions posed by the Kremlin press pool, Putin said that it was “unnecessary” to send troops to Ukraine, but that he reserved the right to deploy forces in “extreme circumstances.”

“It’s a humanitarian mission, we don’t want to enslave anyone,” he said, adding on more than one occasion that Ukraine has “fraternal” ties with Russia and is not just a neighboring state.

The president asked for and received approval to use force in Ukraine from the Federation Council on Saturday and many observers have said that unidentified soldiers currently in de facto control of the largely pro-Russia Crimea region are Russian.

When asked about the similarity of the soldier's uniforms to Russian military apparel, Putin said that such uniforms were common in former Soviet countries and can be bought in stores. He described the troops as local pro-Russian "self-defense" forces.

He said that he would not consider the possibility of annexing Crimea.

Southeastern Ukraine and Crimea have seen increasing separatist tension since Yanukovych fled and the parliament in Kiev approved a new government headed by pro-Western Prime Minister Arseny Yatsenyuk. The presence of the unidentified forces in Ukraine has led to criticism from the United States and Europe and has brought about a suspension of trade and military negotiations with the U.S and talk of economic sanctions and expulsion from the G8.

On Tuesday, Putin said sanctions would be mutually harmful and criticized Western countries' recognition of the Kiev government, comparing their policy in Ukraine to experimenting with lab rats. The Federation Council, Russia's upper house of parliament, had earlier urged the withdrawal of the Russian ambassador in Washington following strong statements from U.S. President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry, a move that Putin rejected.

Russia will continue to develop ties with Ukraine, Putin said, but added that it will not recognize a new Ukrainian president if elections take place in an atmosphere of “terror.” A presidential election has been scheduled for May 25.

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