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Crimea Asks Putin to Let it Become Part of Russia

By Christopher Brennan

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The Crimean parliament asked President Vladimir Putin to integrate the region into the Russian Federation on Thursday, ahead of a referendum in which the peninsula will vote on the question of greater autonomy from Ukraine.

Crimean Deputy Prime Minister Rustam Temirgaliev said on his Facebook page that 78 of 81 deputies in the region's legislature voted earlier Thursday in favor of asking Russia to annex Crimea, which has been controlled by unidentified pro-Russian forces since last weekend.

Crimea's referendum will include only two questions for residents, whether to return to the 1992 constitution and remain a part of Ukraine and whether to join Russia. The plebiscite, originally scheduled for May 25 and then moved up to March 30, has been brought forward to next Sunday, March 16.

Temirgaliev told reporters that voters would answer questions about the constitution,

in which Crimea is part of Ukraine, and becoming part of Russia, RIA Novosti reported.

At a news conference on Tuesday, Putin said that he was not considering annexing Crimea, a semi-autonomous region that has a large ethnic Russian population and is home to the Russian Navy's Black Sea fleet. He said that the unidentified troops in the region were not Russian, as widely reported, but local self-defense groups.

The region has seen increasing separatist tension since a pro-Western government took over in Kiev after ousted Ukrainian president and Kremlin ally Viktor Yanukovych fled the capital for Russia amid violent protests last month. Thursday's decision to ask for annexation was accompanied by an explanatory note that said Kiev authorities had seized power in an unconstitutional coup and that nationalist forces had violated residents' inalienable rights, including their "right to speak their native language."

One of the interim government's first decisions was to remove the regional status of Russian language in Ukraine, as move that infuriated the country's Russian speaking populace.

Putin received approval from the Federation Council on Saturday to send troops to Ukraine, and Russian authorities have reiterated that they will use force to protect Russian citizens and Russian speakers in their neighboring country.

While Putin denied the possibility of annexation, a State Duma bill was registered last week that would make it easier for Russia to annex parts of other countries. Despite Russia signing treaties establishing the "territorial integrity" of Ukraine, notes accompanying the Russian annexation bill said that as guarantor of that integrity Russia had a right and obligation to intervene for Ukrainian citizens.

Leonid Slutsky, head of the Duma committee on CIS Affairs and Relations With Russian Nationals Abroad, said that the lower house of parliament will determine its position on Crimea after the referendum.

Putin met with his Security Council on Thursday afternoon to discuss Crimea, Interfax reported.

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