

Obama Calls For Diplomacy in Phone Call With Putin

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U.S. President Obama urged Putin to seek a diplomatic solution to the ongoing Crimean crisis./ Pete Souza / Official White House

U.S. President Barack Obama has urged Russian leader Vladimir Putin in a phone call to seek a diplomatic solution to the ongoing crisis in Crimea, but the Kremlin said the conversation produced little agreement.

"The conversation revealed differences in the approaches to and assessments of the causes of the current crisis," the Kremlin said in a statement early Friday morning.

The White House said that during the hour-long phone call, which marked the first known contact between the two leaders since last week, Obama "emphasized that Russia's actions were in violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity" and that "there is a way to resolve the situation diplomatically."

Russia's deployment of troops in the Crimea last week and the decision by the region's legislature to schedule a referendum on joining Russia has prompted the U.S and the European Union "to take several steps in response," the White House said in a statement.

The measures included travel bans on Russian officials and the suspension of U.S. trade talks and military exercises with Russia. Additionally, the U.S. has sent fighter jets to patrol the air space over the Baltic countries.

The U.S. has also expanded a military exercise in response to Russia's deployment in Crimea, and will dispatch another dozen F-16 fighters and 300 troops to Poland next week, Britain's The Telegraph reported.

Putin told Obama that the ouster of Ukraine's previous administration by protesters was the result of an "unconstitutional coup" and that Moscow "cannot ignore the appeals for help that are addressed to it, and is acting appropriately and in full correspondence with international law," the Kremlin said.

On Monday, Russia told the U.N. Security Council that Ukraine's ousted leader Viktor Yanukovich, whom the Kremlin considers the legitimate Ukrainian president, had signed a letter to Putin, asking him to dispatch troops to Ukraine to ensure "peace, law and order."

Putin has said that Russia needs to "protect" Russian-speaking residents of Ukraine, who he says are threatened by "neo-Nazis, nationalists and anti-Semites."

Ukrainian Jewish leaders, who represent a mostly Russian-speaking population, responded by sending an open letter to Putin, saying that his assessment "does not correspond to the actual facts."

"You must have mistaken Ukraine for Russia, where Jewish organizations reported a rise of anti-Semitism last year," said the letter by an association of Ukraine's Jewish organizations, or Vaad, and other Jewish community leaders.

The only agreement that the Kremlin and the White House reported as having been reached during Obama's phone conversation with Putin was that Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry would continue discussions about the Ukrainian crisis.

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