

Russia Refuses to Budge Despite Warnings

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov taking questions from journalists during a news conference in London on Friday.

Russia has blocked the Security Council from declaring invalid Sunday's referendum on the fate of Ukraine's pro-Russian region of Crimea, after talks between Russia and the U.S. on the Ukrainian crisis ended in a stalemate.

Further aggravating the ongoing conflict, Ukraine said Russian troops had been increased and moved further onto its territory, beyond Crimea, on Sunday morning. As the referendum wrapped up on Sunday night, Russia was subjected to a chorus of condemnation from the international community, with the U.S. and the European Union reiterating threats of sanctions against Russia if it annexed Crimea.

Both President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov refused to give in to pressure, however. In a phone call with German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Sunday, Putin

said the secession referendum in Crimea fully complied with international laws, and he welcomed a suggestion to put more OSCE monitors in Ukraine, according to the Kremlin's website.

Lavrov spoke with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry by phone earlier on Sunday, and the two agreed to push for constitutional reforms in a bid to soothe growing tensions in Ukraine.

Yet, perhaps in a sign that the Ukraine saga was far from over, Lavrov reiterated to Kerry concerns of "radical groups in Kiev terrorizing the Russian-speaking population" and called on the U.S. to urge authorities in Kiev to stop the "massive lawlessness," according to a transcript on the Foreign Ministry's website.

Ahead of Sunday's vote, Russia vetoed a U.S.-drafted resolution in the UN Security Council on Saturday. The resolution would have made invalid Sunday's referendum in Crimea on whether to split from Ukraine and join Russia.

Of the council's 15 members, 13 voted in favor of the resolution, including the U.S., France and Britain, while China abstained and Russia objected, the organization's website reported in English.

As one of the five permanent members of the council, Russia wields veto power in its decisions.

Russia's envoy to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, told the council ahead of the vote Saturday that the draft resolution contradicted Article 1 of the UN Charter, which grants all nations the right to self-determination, and a number of other international acts, Churkin's official website reported in Russian.

The referendum on Crimea's independence was "an extraordinary measure" necessitated by the "legal vacuum that appeared as a result of the unconstitutional armed coup performed in Kiev by radical nationalists" in February, Churkin said ahead of the vote.

But U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN Samantha Power, addressing the council after the vote, cited Article 2 of the UN Charter, which bans UN member states from "use of force against the territorial integrity" of any state, Power's official website reported.

Power dismissed Russia's claim that "the rights of people inside Ukraine were under attack," saying "that claim has validity only in the parts of Ukraine where it was Russia, and Russian military forces, that were exercising undue influence."

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with his U.S. and British counterparts Friday in an attempt to de-escalate tensions over the referendum, but the two sides failed to reach any agreement.

Western leaders have implored Russia, which has effectively taken over the Crimean peninsula following the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich last month, not to support the referendum and said they would not recognize its results. The U.S. and EU have both prepared sanctions to punish Russia if it does not retreat in Crimea.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in particular, in a meeting with Lavrov in London on Friday, was seeking to get assurances from Lavrov that Russia would not annex Crimea even if

the Ukrainian region votes to join its eastern neighbor, with which the peninsula has strong historical ties.

But Lavrov told a news conference following his talks with Kerry that Russia "will respect the decision of Crimean residents that they will make at the upcoming referendum," Interfax reported.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry, for its part, said the referendum would not change Crimea's status, as it was at odds with Ukraine's Constitution and international law, the ministry said in English on its website on Saturday.

Russia "has isolated itself not only in the Security Council but in the whole world," Ukraine's Foreign Ministry said.

U.S. White House Press Secretary Jay Carney apparently hinted at sanctions when saying Friday that "we stand ready to respond should the referendum go forward on Sunday," and the response would be made "quickly," possibly as soon as Monday, the White House reported on its website.

The official referendum results are expected to be announced late Sunday or early Monday.

EU foreign ministers will decide on Monday whether to impose asset freezes and visa sanctions and, if so, who to target, the Associated Press reported Sunday.

Russian Economy Minister Alexei Ulyukayev downplayed the impact of possible foreign sanctions against Russia while speaking on state television Saturday.

"I don't expect, frankly speaking, any decisions that will put in doubt our trade turnover or the largest investment projects," Ulyukayev said, Interfax reported.

Meanwhile, on Sunday morning, Ukraine's Foreign Ministry said Russian forces backed by helicopter gunships and armored vehicles on Saturday took control of the Strilkove village near the border with Crimea, in what appeared to be the first move outside Crimea, the Associated Press reported.

Russia launched military exercises involving around 10,000 troops near the Ukrainian border last week, but Lavrov said at the time that Russia had no plans to invade Ukraine's southeastern regions, a major concern for Western nations and the new regime in Kiev.

On Friday, however, following clashes Thursday in the eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian forces in which one man died, Russia's Foreign Ministry said Russia reserved the right to take people under its protection, raising concerns about a possible military incursion.

Russia has refused to acknowledge the new Ukrainian authorities, but Lavrov said that Russia-Ukraine cooperation had not stopped and that Ukraine could talk with Russia directly without using international mechanisms. It was unclear what form such communication could take.

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