

Moldova Tells Russia: Don't Eye Annexation Here

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The president of ex-Soviet Moldova warned Russia on Tuesday against considering any move to annex his country's self-proclaimed Transdnestr republic in the same way that it has taken control of Crimea in Ukraine.

The president's comments came a day after the speaker of Transdnestr's separatist parliament, during a trip to Moscow, urged Russia to incorporate his mainly Russian-speaking region, which split from Moldova in 1990.

Moldovan President Nicolae Timofti said Russia would be making a "mistake" if it agreed to the request for annexation from Transdnestr's parliamentary speaker, Mikhail Burla.

"This is an illegal body which has taken no decision on inclusion into Russia," Timofti told a news conference.

"I believe that Burla's actions are counter-productive and will do no good for either Moldova or Russia. And if Russia makes a move to satisfy such proposals, it will be making a mistake,"

he said. President Vladimir Putin and the ethnic Russian leaders of Ukraine's Crimea region signed a treaty on Tuesday in Moscow making the Black Sea peninsula part of Russia after its voters overwhelmingly backed such a move in a referendum on Sunday.

The Russian speakers of Transdnestr seceded from Moldova in 1990, a year before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, amid fears that Moldova would shortly merge with neighboring Romania, whose language and culture it broadly shares.

The separatist region fought a brief war with Moldova in 1992 and it declared itself an independent state, but it remains unrecognized by any country, including Russia.

Attempts to resolve the dispute have made little progress, with Russian "peacekeepers" standing guard over a large Soviet-era arsenal.

A referendum in Transdnestr in 2006 produced a 97.2 percent vote in favour of joining Russia, an even higher score than in Crimea's referendum. Unlike Crimea, however, it is located far from Russia. It shares a border with Ukraine.

Moldova, one of Europe's poorest countries, has been governed by pro-Western leaders since 2009. It has clinched an association agreement with the European Union, as currently sought by the pro-Western leaders who came to power in Ukraine after the removal of Moscow-backed President Viktor Yanukovich.

In his remarks, Timofti denounced as illegal the referendum in Crimea and any bid by Russia to annex the peninsula, echoing criticism from Ukraine's pro-Western leaders, the U.S. and European Union countries. Russia says it is acting in Crimea in accordance with international law.

Timofti said Moldova wanted to solve its Transdnestr standoff through talks anchored in upholding the country's territorial integrity.

"Russia has repeatedly stood by this. Our expectations from Russia are that it will observe international norms in Transdnestr," he said.

Reports from Moscow said speaker Burla told Russian officials his region had given approval in principle to a law that would ensure the implementation of Russian legislation by Transdnestr.

"Transdnestr's very difficult situation could be made even worse if Moldova, which has already signed an association agreement with the EU, now adopts restrictive economic measures," said Burla, according to Russian media.

It was Yanukovich's decision last November not to sign Ukraine's association agreement with the EU and to seek closer economic ties with Russia instead that ignited the street protests that eventually forced his removal from office.

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