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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Residents in Alaska, Gaza Strip Want to Join Russia

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A petition calling for Alaska to secede from the U.S. and join Russia gathered more than 12,000 signatures in just a few days.

Russia's annexation of Crimea following a referendum has prompted calls from such distant places as Alaska and the Gaza Strip to hold votes on their own absorption by Russia.

A petition calling for Alaska to secede from the U.S. and join Russia gathered more than 12,000 signatures on the White House website by early Monday morning, just a few days after it was posted by an unidentified local resident.

Entitled "Alaska back to Russia," the petition cites the travels of 18th-century Russian explorers to Alaska, which was a Russian colony until the U.S. bought it in 1867 for a mere $7.2 million, or $120 million adjusted for inflation. The petition must attract 100,000 signatures by April 20 to be reviewed by President Barack Obama's administration.

In the Middle East, the Russian-language version of a Palestinian website run by Hamas said that Russian speakers in the Gaza Strip planned to hold a referendum on their territory join Russia, though no confirmation by Hamas leaders of any such plans were reported.

An activist supposedly involved in the referendum movement, and identified only by her initial "N," cited Moscow's statements about its readiness to protect Russian citizens in any part of the world, Palestine-info.ru website reported.

Joining Russia would provide Gaza with "modern weapons — even nuclear ones cannot be ruled out," the woman was quoted as saying.

Palestine-info said the number of Russian citizens living in Gaza is about 50,000, most of them Russian women who married Palestinian men, though Voice of Russia cited Russian media reports as saying that the actual number was less than 400 people.

Moscow's annexation of Crimea under the guise of protecting its Russian speakers have prompted a flurry of mock appeals for protection, including one from a journalist in Vologda who asked Putin to dispatch troops to that Russian region to "protect" its people from corrupt officials. The Vologda regional governor responded by having prosecutors summon the journalist, Roman Romanenko, for questioning on suspicion of "extremist" activities, the journalist said.

The White House petition site currently has more than 120 petitions gathering signatures. Any American can create a petition on the website under the First Amendment, which protects the freedom of speech and the right to petition the government.

An earlier petition for secession by the state of Texas passed the 100,000 signature threshold required for consideration, but the White House turned it down, saying that while "no one disputes that our country faces big challenges," Americans needed to work together to resolve them, instead of letting debates tear the country apart.

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