

Crimea Switches to Moscow Time Amid Incorporation Frenzy

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The hands of a clock in the main railway station in Simferopol jumped from 10 p.m. to midnight on Saturday as Crimea switched to Moscow time, symbolically finalizing the region's incorporation into Russia.

Several hundred people gathered on the railway square for the ceremonial change of time, waving Russian national flags and chanting "Crimea! Russia!" after Moscow formally annexed the Black Sea region from Ukraine on March 21.

"I greet you with our return home," Crimea's new pro-Moscow Prime Minister Sergei Aksyonov told the crowd.

"I am confident that all that we have done is to the benefit of Crimea and Crimeans," he exclaimed, extending his thanks to "our President Vladimir Putin" to noisy applause from the crowd.

Wrapped in Russian flags and some with tears of joy in their eyes, the people gathered in the

provincial capital of Simferopol on Saturday sang Russia's national anthem when the clock moved to Moscow time.

"This is my moment of happiness. We all dreamed of this but did not dare think it may come now," said Tatiana, a 35-year-old waitress dancing to the music played on the square.

Her colleague Inga said she was 11-years-old when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, giving Ukraine independence and splitting Crimea from Moscow.

"My heart was crying back then. But now it is rejoicing, we have returned home. We were born on Moscow time and we are back to it again," she said. "I love the Ukrainian people but I do not recognise Ukraine as a country."

Crimea has already introduced the Russian ruble as its official currency and started paying out pensions and state salaries in the unit since the region voted overwhelmingly in favour of joining Russia on March 16.

Kiev and the West have denounced Russia's annexation of Crimea, an impoverished region of 2 million people with a narrow ethnic Russian majority, as illegal and undermining peace in Europe.

The U.S. and Europe curbed cooperation with Moscow and introduced sanctions on Russia as well as some of Putin's closest allies over the move but have refrained from harsh economic sanctions.

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