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Russia Warns Kiev of 'Civil War' in Eastern Ukraine

By Peter Spinella

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Pro-Russian protesters gather at a barricade outside the offices of the SBU state security service in Luhansk, in eastern Ukraine.

Russia's Foreign Ministry on Tuesday warned Kiev that amassing troops in eastern Ukraine has the potential to "unleash civil war," a day after the U.S. ambassador to the OSCE said that Russia was strengthening its own forces on the border.

Pro-Russia protesters in recent days have occupied local government buildings in three eastern regional capitals, calling for Russian peacekeeping forces to be sent in and scheduling a referendum for at least one of the regions to secede to Russia.

In a statement posted on its website, Russia's Foreign Ministry urged Kiev to "immediately stop military preparations" and noted as "particularly alarming" the presence of "American" mercenaries and Ukrainian ultranationalist militants from the Right Sector group, which was

implicated in violence in the Kiev protests.

Russia's warning comes a day after Daniel Baer — U.S. ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a security alliance that comprises nearly all European states — told reporters after an emergency meeting that Russia had amassed "tens of thousands of forces on the border," Reuters reported.

Baer said that the troops were "again not in their normal peacetime positions or garrisons," referring to the reported dissemination of forces from Russian military bases in the former Ukrainian territory of Crimea, which Russia recently annexed to much outcry in the West.



Yevgeni Volokin / Reuters

A man looks at a graffiti produced to support the territorial integrity of Ukraine and to protest Russia's annexation of the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea in Odessa.

On Monday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in an opinion piece titled "It's Not Russia That Is Destabilizing Ukraine," published by the British newspaper The Guardian, that "the West has been needlessly whipping up tension — if we don't cooperate soon, chaos may take hold."

He said that Ukraine is searching for a "balance of interests among its various regions, the peoples of which have different cultural roots and speak different languages," and that the EU and U.S. "have been trying to compel Ukraine to make a painful choice between East and West, further aggravating internal differences."

He also implicated the "direct participation of ministers and other officials from the U.S.

and EU countries" in the "violent street protests" through which "power in Kiev was seized undemocratically."

Tuesday's statement by Russia's Foreign Ministry added that "about 150 American specialists from the private military organization Greystone" have donned Ukrainian special forces uniforms in preparation for intervention in eastern Ukraine.

Since Sunday, pro-Russia protesters have occupied government buildings in the eastern regional capitals Donetsk, Kharkiv and Luhansk, triggering fears of a so-called "Crimea scenario" at a point of heightened tensions between Russia and the West over what European and U.S. leaders see as Russia's illegal annexation of the former southeast Ukrainian peninsula.

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