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Russia, U.S. Have Low Hopes for Ukraine Peace Talks

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A member of the Maidan self-defence forces damages a portrait of Soviet state founder Vladimir Lenin, taken from the Ukrainian Communist party headquarters, in Kiev, Ukraine.

U.S. expectations for talks with Russia on the Ukraine crisis next week are not high, the top top diplomat for Europe Victoria Nuland said, but it is essential to make every effort to ease tensions.

Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Victoria Nuland also reiterated on Wednesday the U.S. accusation that Russia was behind the takeover of government buildings in eastern Ukraine this week.

Russia, Ukraine, the United States and the European Union are planning to hold a ministerial meeting next week to discuss the Ukraine crisis.

"We don't have high expectations for these talks, but we do believe it is very important to keep that diplomatic door open," Nuland testified at a congressional hearing.

Russia said Wednesday the four-way talks must focus on fostering dialogue among Ukrainians and not on bilateral relations among the participants.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov delivered the message in a telephone conversation with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, the Russian Foreign Ministry said. It said Lavrov and Kerry urged all sides to refrain from violence in eastern and southern Ukraine.

"Lavrov noted that this format could be useful if it is aimed not at discussing various aspects of one bilateral relationship or another, but on helping to arrange a broad and equal internal Ukrainian dialogue with the aim of agreeing mutually acceptable constitutional reform," the ministry said.

President Barack Obama's administration has slapped sanctions on Russia and sent economic aid to Ukraine, but lawmakers have been pushing for more sanctions or other action to punish Moscow or deter further incursions in eastern Europe after its annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula last month.

Speaking at a hearing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, Nuland said of the events in eastern Ukraine: "The evidence is overwhelming that this was a very carefully orchestrated, well-planned, well-targeted, well-coordinated effort to take over buildings in four cities within the same 24-hour period."

Nuland declined to discuss much of Washington's evidence in a public setting, but noted widespread reports on social media from Ukraine that U.S. authorities say make obvious that outsiders were involved in the demonstrations.

For example, in the eastern city of Kharkiv, the crowd first tried to take over the city opera house, before going to government buildings they intended to seize, she said.

"These were not boys from Kharkiv and they were not quite as well planned and executed as they might have been," Nuland said.

Russia, which put its relations with Ukraine and the West on the line by annexing Crimea last month, does not want to be forced into talks with the interim government in Kiev because of that administration's role in ousting Moscow-allied President Viktor Yanukovych in what Moscow called an armed, Western-encouraged coup.

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