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Putin, Obama Discuss Ukraine in Tense Phone Call

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Pro-Russian armed men stand guard as pro-Russian supporters gather outside the mayor's office in Slovyansk, eastern Ukraine.

President Vladimir Putin has denied accusations that Russia is involved in the escalating violence in eastern Ukraine during a phone conversation with U.S. counterpart Barack Obama, the Kremlin has said.

"In response to the concerns expressed by the president of the U.S. about Russia's supposed meddling in southeastern Ukraine, the president of Russia noted that such speculations are based on inaccurate information," the Kremlin said Monday in an online statement.

"The Russian side emphasized that protest movements in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Slovyansk and other cities of Ukraine's southeast are the result of the unwillingness and the inability of the Kiev leadership to take into consideration the interests of the Russian and Russian-speaking population," the statement said.

In the course of a week, pro-Russian groups have occupied administrative buildings in at least nine cities in eastern Ukraine, while on Monday an armed mob stormed a police station in the city of Horlivka, 100 kilometers from the Russian border.

Ukraine's central government had given protesters until Monday to vacate government buildings by Monday or face an "anti-terrorist operation," but the deadline passed with no reported attempts to take back the buildings by storm.

According to a White House description of the phone call, Obama "expressed grave concern about Russian government support for the actions of armed, pro-Russian separatists who threaten to undermine and destabilize the government of Ukraine," Reuters reported. U.S. officials have previously cited strong evidence of Russia's involvement in eastern Ukraine.

Obama also "noted Russia's growing political and economic isolation as a result of its actions in Ukraine and made clear that the costs Russia already has incurred will increase if those actions persist," the White House said.

Ahead of Obama's phone call with Putin, U.S. officials stopped short of announcing a new set of sanctions against Russia but said they were in consultations with European partners about the prospect.

The European Union announced Monday that they were stepping up sanctions against Moscow by expanding a list of people subjected to asset freezes and visa bans.

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