The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Belarus Leader Says Ukraine Must be United State

May 22, 2014

Lukashenko and Putin walk side-by-side to a security meeting on May 8.

Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko has criticized separatist referendums in Ukraine and warned Russia not to take any more ex-Soviet territory after annexing Crimea, Russian media reported. ⊠"Ukraine must be a united, whole state. Both the east and the west are Ukraine," Lukashenko said in an interview late on Wednesday with Dozhd.

⊠Lukashenko said he would fight any invader including President Vladimir Putin. "No matter who comes to Belarussian land, I will fight. Even if it is Putin," he said.

⊠Under Lukashenko's authoritarian rule since 1994, Belarus is Russia's closest ally, relying on Moscow for cheap energy and serving as a buffer zone between Russia and NATO nations. But the president often tells Belarussians he will bend to neither Russia nor the West.

⊠The May 11 referendums organized by pro-Moscow separatists in two eastern Ukrainian regions "have no meaning at all from the legal point of view," Lukashenko said.

⊠Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in March after a referendum considered a sham by Kiev and the West.

⊠Putin secured consent from parliament in March to send the military into Ukraine to protect Russian speakers, and NATO says Russia has amassed 40,000 troops near the border with Ukraine. Moscow says some are now being withdrawn.

⊠Lukashenko's comments may add to pressure on Putin to distance Russia from the separatist militants who are threatening to disrupt Ukraine's presidential election on Sunday.

⊠The U.S. and European Union, which accuse Moscow of supporting the separatists, are threatening to impose further sanctions on Russia if it disrupts the vote.

⊠While he relies on Russia economically, Lukashenko holds some sway over Moscow because he is a crucial partner in Putin's efforts to build a Eurasian Economic Union linking former Soviet republics.

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