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Lavrov Denies Obama's Claims Russia Is Isolated

By Alexey Eremenko

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U.S. President Barack Obama

Moscow dismissed Thursday claims by U.S. President Barack Obama of having isolated Russia internationally.

Isolating Russia is "impossible" and "unrealistic," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in Moscow, echoing President Vladimir Putin's earlier comments on the issue.

Lavrov cited last week's economic forum in St. Petersburg as proof of Russia's continuing global integration.

"It is enough to think of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, see the multitude of guests from across the world and feel its vibe — the humor and the business mood — to see whether Russia has been isolated," Lavrov said in a statement.

The annual forum attracted 7,500 visitors from 73 countries this year, organizers said.

However, many U.S. company chiefs pulled out of the event at the public request of the White House.

Obama said Wednesday that the "American leadership" had effectively blocked Russia on the international arena following the conflict in Ukraine, where Moscow and Washington backed different sides in a political crisis teetering on the brink of civil war.

"Our ability to shape world opinion helped isolate Russia right away," Obama said in a speech at West Point military academy, according to a transcript on the White House's site.

After Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in March, a handful of Russian officials and companies were blacklisted in the European Union and the U.S.

A Group of Eight summit in the Russian city of Sochi set for next week also fell through after all participants except Russia pulled out.

Russia has spoken of rerouting its geopolitical affiliations eastward. Putin helped Gazprom seal a major gas deal with China worth $400 billion on the eve of the St. Petersburg forum, though experts were divided on how profitable the deal was for Moscow.

One aim of Obama's speech was to provide reassurance for domestic audiences and U.S. allies in Eastern Europe, said Alexei Fenenko of the Institute of International Security Problems at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

But it also appeared to be an attempted provocation to lure Russia deeper into the conflict in Ukraine, Fenenko said by telephone.

A pro-Russian insurgency is seething in Ukraine's east, but Russia has so far avoided sending its troops to the region or heeding rebels' calls to annex their regions like Crimea.

Direct military involvement in Ukraine could result in a full-scale war, while annexation of the rebel provinces would be a burden to Russia's already-flagging economy, experts have been warning for months.

"Russia understood the point of the U.S. game long ago, and Putin is simply ignoring the provocations," Fenenko said.

Contact the author at a.eremenko@imedia.ru

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