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Switzerland Won't Take Sides in Ukraine Crisis, Minister Says

By The Moscow Times

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Johann Schneider-Ammann

GENEVA — Switzerland has no plans to impose sanctions on Russia and will remain neutral in the diplomatic row over Ukraine, Swiss Economy Minister Johann Schneider-Ammann said in a newspaper interview published on Sunday.

Switzerland has frozen funds connected to Ukraine's former president Viktor Yanukovych, but unlike the United States and European Union, it has not sought to punish Russia for annexing Ukraine's Crimea peninsula or for its support for rebels in eastern Ukraine.

Around 75 percent of Russian crude oil exports are traded through Geneva, according to the Swiss government, and Russian assets in Swiss banks stood at nearly 13.8 billion francs ($15.2 billion) in 2012, according to the Swiss National Bank.

Switzerland is the current chairman of the Organization for Cooperation and Security

in Europe, which has been mediating between the two sides and played a role in securing access for international investigators to the crash site of the Malaysian airliner shot down in eastern Ukraine two weeks ago.

"It is especially important now that there is a country that can say, 'we are not taking sides.' And we are offering to help resolve the crisis, which has brought insecurity and war, step by step," he told the Schweiz am Sonntag newspaper.

"Our role would be weakened if we simply imposed the EU sanctions."

Asked if there was any chance of Switzerland changing its policy, Schneider-Ammann said that there had been "great unanimity" in cabinet discussions up to now.

But he reiterated the government's pledge that Switzerland would not allow itself to become a conduit for people or funds trying to bypass European sanctions, and it was reviewing the way it put that pledge into practice to make sure it was working.

Germany's Foreign Ministry last week said it wanted wider cooperation to pressure Russia for its support of separatists in Ukraine, adding that it had been in talks with non-EU countries such as Switzerland and Turkey.

Even if Switzerland does not impose its own sanctions some of the EU measures will apply in Switzerland because it is a member of the 28-nation bloc's passport-free Schengen zone.

No representative from the ministry was immediately available to comment on the remarks.

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