

Crimean Leader's Visit to India With Putin's Delegation Could Antagonize the West

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Sergei Aksyonov (C), the leader of Crimea, the former Ukrainian territory annexed by Russia, walks inside a hotel after having his lunch as Indian businessman Gul Kripalani (R) watches, in New Delhi on Dec. 11, 2014.

The leader of Crimea, the former Ukrainian territory annexed by Russia, visited India on Thursday as a member of President Vladimir Putin's summit delegation, in a move likely to provoke the West.

India does not back Western sanctions against Russia, but the unofficial trip by Sergei Aksyonov could spoil the mood before Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosts U.S. President Barack Obama for India's Republic Day festivities in January.

Aksyonov arrived at the upscale Oberoi hotel accompanied by Russian diplomats to be greeted by Gul Kripalani, a Mumbai-based seafood merchant who wants to boost trade with Russia.

Speaking to reporters after signing a memorandum of understanding to promote business, Aksyonov said his visit had "a private character" and he did not take part in any official events.

He tweeted separately, however, that he had come to India as "a member of the delegation under the leadership of the president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin."

The towering 42-year-old, previously an obscure nationalist politician, was elected in a closed session of the regional parliament after Russian forces in February took control of the Crimea Peninsula in a bloodless operation.

He masterminded a quick-fire referendum to join Russia that was recognized by Moscow. Kiev and the West say it was rigged.

It was clear that his visit enjoyed Russia's full diplomatic backing, with the consul general to Mumbai and an aide to Ambassador Alexander Kadakin present at the meeting and lunch with businessmen.

No Indian officials were present.

Crimea Commotion

News of the event leaked out on Wednesday when the Russian Embassy invited reporters to a signing ceremony only to cancel late in the evening.

A spokesman for India's External Affairs Ministry said he was not officially aware of the Crimean visit. It is highly unlikely, however, that such an event would have taken place without New Delhi being in the loop.

Modi, addressing a joint news conference after meeting Putin, emphasized India's deep security ties with Russia — long its top arms supplier until the United States took the No. 1 spot recently.

"Even if India's options have increased, Russia remains our most important defense partner," Modi told reporters. No potentially awkward questions were allowed at the tightly stage-managed event held at an old princely palace.

India, which observes a policy of non-intervention, has refrained from criticizing Moscow's takeover of Crimea and support for an uprising in eastern Ukraine that has killed more than 4,300 people since April.

Kripalani, who said his Pijikay Group turns over about 150 million euros (\$190 million), signed the memorandum on behalf of the India-Crimean Partnership — a previously unknown group that he said represented five businesses.

He declined to say whether he opposed sanctions, but added: "The business community does not want to be involved in politics."

"I just wish they would all work together," said Kripalani, who wore a gray beard and glasses and said he was a Christian. "God made us united, and we divided ourselves."

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