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Italy's Berlusconi Rubs Shoulders With Putin in Crimea

By The Moscow Times

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President Vladimir Putin and former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi visit a monument to soldiers of the Kingdom of Sardinia, killed during the Crimean War, near Mount Gasfort in Crimea, Sept. 11, 2015.

YALTA, Crimea — Former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi became the most prominent Western politician to visit Russian-annexed Crimea when he strolled beside the Black Sea on Friday with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Western visitors have been rare since Russia seized Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014. The takeover drove relations between Moscow and the West to their lowest point since the Cold War era, and prompted the United States and European Union to slap economic sanctions on Russia.

See the photo gallery: Putin, Berlusconi Get Warm Reception on Trip to Crimea

Putin and Berlusconi, known for their warm rapport going back more than a decade, laid

flowers at a monument commemorating soldiers who fell in a 19th-century war over Crimea. They included troops of the Kingdom of Sardinia, part of modern-day Italy.

Short footage run by Russia's state TV broadcaster showed Putin telling Berlusconi he wanted to find out the names of the Italian soldiers and imprint them on the memorial.

As part of a joint two-day tour of Crimea, the two men then sat down in an open-air restaurant for a meeting with local residents of Italian origin.

A crowd of several hundred along the way cheered Berlusconi and Putin, who at one point took a small girl in his arms. Both took pictures with residents.

Moscow played up a visit by several French parliamentarians to Crimea this summer as it attempts to win international recognition of the annexation.

The scandal-prone Berlusconi was Italy's premier on four occasions and was ousted finally in 2011 in the midst of the euro-zone financial crisis. He now commands a party largely in disarray and falling in the polls.

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