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Occupied Kherson Readying for Vote to Join Russia, Official Claims

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Russian servicemen standing guard near the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) on the Dnieper River in Kakhovka, near Kherson, Ukraine. **SERGEI ILNITSKY / EPA / TASS**

Southern Ukraine's occupied Kherson region is preparing to vote on officially joining Russia, a Moscow-backed official said Wednesday.

"We're preparing for the referendum and we will carry it out," Kirill Stremousov, deputy chief of the Kherson region's Moscow-installed administration, said in a video address.

"The Kherson region will decide to join the Russian Federation and become a full-fledged subject as one unified state."

Russian forces captured the port city of Kherson, a key land bridge used to connect mainland Russia to annexed Crimea, soon after invading Ukraine in late February.

Kyiv has since accused Moscow of plotting sham independence referendums in the occupied regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia to officially annex the area.

Ukrainian officials have previously floated Sept. 11, when several Russian regions will be holding regional elections, as a likely referendum date.

Moscow has repeatedly claimed that it will not occupy Ukrainian territories, despite sending troops into the country on Feb. 24.

But a growing chorus of Russian and pro-Moscow officials have indicated that the Kremlin intends to remain in territories it currently controls in southern Ukraine.

Russian lawmakers have said a referendum could take place as early as July.

Kremlin-backed officials in eastern Ukraine's breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk have also expressed interest in joining Russia.

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