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Kremlin Eyes Sept. 15 Referendum for Captured Ukraine Regions – Bloomberg

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City of Kherson, Ukraine. **AFP**

The Kremlin is seeking to hold referendums for captured Ukrainian territories to join Russia in September, Bloomberg reported Thursday, corroborating previous reporting on the unconfirmed absorption plans.

The move would likely ignite further ire from Kyiv's Western allies, which do not recognize Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and have already hit Moscow with heavy sanctions over its Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine.

The Kremlin's goal is to conduct these referendums by Sept. 15, Bloomberg cited two unnamed sources familiar with its strategy as saying.

Officials are preparing to organize votes in regions captured by the Russian military in its nearly five-month campaign as well as other areas that could be seized in the coming weeks, three people were cited as saying.

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The regions to be absorbed into Russia include the separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as the southern regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia captured in this year's campaign.

Kremlin first deputy chief of staff Sergei Kiriyenko, who regularly visits the occupied territories to allegedly oversee preparations for the vote, is reportedly in charge of the referendum project.

President Vladimir Putin claimed Russia did not intend to occupy Ukrainian territories when he announced a ground offensive against its pro-Western neighbor in February.

His spokesman Dmitry Peskov repeated his claim that the "future destiny" of seized Ukrainian territories "is in their hands."

"If they are going to make any referendums, it will be their decision," Peskov told Bloomberg.

Moscow-installed officials in occupied Kherson and Zaporizhzhia have indicated intentions to hold referendums on joining Russia.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Wednesday said Russia will pursue expanded "geographical goals" in Ukraine beyond Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, linking the change of plans to Western weapons supplies to Kyiv.

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