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Kremlin Seeks 'Limited' Ukraine Annexation Vote – Reports

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Men paint a welcome sign the Russian flag colors in the city of Lysychansk, Luhansk region. **Stanislav Krasilnikov / TASS**

The Kremlin is planning to hold referendums on joining Russia next month in just two regions of Ukraine amid continuing heavy fighting, independent Russian media outlets reported Friday.

Moscow is "impatient" and would like to "pull off" referendums in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions as fast as possible amid stalemate on the battlefield, said the Vyorstka news website citing unidentified government sources.

At the same time, the Kremlin is putting off similar referendums in the occupied Ukrainian regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, which it hopes can be staged at a later date, according to Vyorstka.

Putin launched the invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24 days after recognizing the separatist Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) as independent

states.

The current plan, according to Vyorstka, is for votes to be held in the DNR and LNR on Sept. 14 — three days after local elections are scheduled to take place in Russia.

“These territories are Russian regions,” Andrei Turchak, senior Russian lawmaker and leader of the pro-Kremlin United Russia party, said Thursday at a party meeting.

The Vedomosti business daily reported Thursday that the Kremlin had ditched plans to tie the southeast Ukrainian referendums to Russia’s local elections on Sept. 11 because of the ongoing fighting.

While the entirety of Ukraine’s Luhansk region was seized by Russian troops in July, large parts of Donetsk region remain under Kyiv’s control.

“There’s no final scenario,” Vedomosti quoted an unidentified source close to the Kremlin as saying. The source added that the Kremlin’s plans hinge on “the situation on the frontline in general.”

Both reports follow U.S. warnings that Russia could announce the first “sham” referendum in occupied parts of Ukraine by the end of the week.

"Since they obviously are having trouble achieving geographic gains inside Ukraine, they are trying to gain that through false political means,” White House national security spokesman John Kirby said Wednesday.

Kirby said U.S. intelligence shows Russian officials in the occupied areas are worried local residents will not turn out to take part in the vote.

"The Russian officials themselves know that what they're doing will lack legitimacy, and it will not reflect the will of the people,” he added.

AFP contributed reporting.

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