The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Kremlin Set to Annex Four Ukraine Territories at Ceremony

By AFP

September 30, 2022

Voting at the DNR's embassy in Moscow in the separatist-controlled region's referendum on joining Russia. **Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency**

Russia is expected to annex four occupied regions of Ukraine at a lavish Kremlin ceremony on Friday that follows a threat by President Vladimir Putin to use nuclear weapons in their defense.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that the annexations would be formalized at the ceremony and Putin would deliver a "major" speech.

It comes after foreign leaders critical of Russia voiced their opposition to the plan, with U.S. President Joe Biden saying the United States would "never, never, never" recognize Russian sovereignty over the territories.

The Kremlin's atomic threats have not deterred a sweeping Ukrainian counter-offensive,

which has been pushing back Russian troops in the east.

Kyiv's forces are on the doorstep of the Donetsk region town of Lyman, which Moscow's forces pummelled for weeks before capturing it this summer.

Putin has blamed the war in Ukraine on the West and said simmering conflicts in the former Soviet Union were the result of its collapse.

The rhetoric built on his now famous phrase that the fall of the U.S.S.R. was a tragedy, and he has recently suggested Moscow should again extend its influence over the former Soviet region.

The four regions' Kremlin-installed leaders who pleaded to Putin for annexation this week assembled in the Russian capital ahead of the ceremony.

Their almost simultaneous requests came after they claimed residents had unanimously backed the move in hastily organized referendums that were dismissed by Kyiv and the West as illegal, fraudulent and void.

20% of Ukraine

Ukraine said the only appropriate response from the West was to hit Russia with more sanctions and to supply Ukrainian forces with more weapons to keep reclaiming territory.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned the annexation plans as "a dangerous escalation" that "has no place in the modern world."

The UN Security Council will vote Friday on a resolution condemning the referendums, according to France, the council's current president, but it has no chance of passing due to Moscow's veto power.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky called an "urgent" meeting of his national security council for Friday, his spokesman said, after the Kremlin announced the timing of the annexation ceremony.

The four territories — Kherson and Zaporizhzhia in the south and Donetsk and Lugansk in the east — create a crucial land corridor between Russia and the Crimean peninsula, annexed by Moscow in 2014.

Together, all five make up around 20% of Ukraine, whose forces in recent weeks have been clawing back ground.

Ukrainian troops have been progressing in the eastern Kharkiv region and recapturing territory in Donetsk. Military observers say Kyiv's forces are close to capturing Lyman.

Moscow's forces are striking back along the entire front line and officials in Kyiv said Thursday that Russian bombardment had killed three people in the Dnipropetrovsk region, five in Donetsk and wounded seven in the Kharkiv region.

Along with threats to use nuclear weapons, Putin announced a mobilization of hundreds of

thousands of Russians to bolster Moscow's army in Ukraine, sparking demonstrations and an exodus of men abroad.

Putin on Thursday called for mistakes with the draft to be "corrected," as discontent grows over the often-chaotic conscription push.

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