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—Alan Cullison, Alexander Kolyandr and Carol E. Lee contributed to this article.

A Defiant Putin Endorses Crimean Bid to Secede

Kremlin-Backed Official Says Region Could Become Part of Russia Later This Month

*Зухвалий Путін схвалив спробу Криму відділитись
Підтримуваний Кремлем чиновник заявив, що цей регіон може стати
частиною Росії вже наприкінці цього місяця*

*Білий дім заявив, що Президент Барак Обама зустрінеться з нещодавно призначеним
прем'єр-міністром України у Вашингтоні, і попередив, що подальші кроки Росії до анексії
Криму приведуть до більшого економічного і дипломатичного тиску на Москву. Проте
Президент Росії Володимир Путін, проігнорувавши загрози санкцій з боку
Заходу, виступив на підтримку спроби Криму відокремитися від України.*

<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304020104579428981865357124?KEYWORDS=Russia&mg=reno64-wsj>



Pro-Ukrainian supporters take part in a rally in the Crimean capital of Simferopol on Sunday, as Russian forces tightened their grip over the region. Reuters

MOSCOW—Russian President Vladimir Putin threw his support Sunday behind Crimea's move to secede from Ukraine, defying Western threats of sanctions, as a Kremlin-backed official said the region could join Russia as soon as this month.

The White House, meanwhile, said President Barack Obama would meet the newly appointed Ukrainian prime minister in Washington on Wednesday and warned that further steps toward Russian annexing Crimea would lead to more economic and diplomatic pressure on Moscow.

But in calls with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister David Cameron on Sunday, Mr. Putin showed no sign of giving ground. While the West has said Russia's occupation of Crimea and the region's secession referendum, which is scheduled for Sunday, violate international law, Mr. Putin called the planned vote legitimate.

"The steps taken by the legitimate leadership of Crimea are based on the norms of international law and aim to ensure the legal interests of the population of the peninsula," Mr. Putin said Sunday in the calls, according to a statement from the Kremlin.

Mr. Putin didn't say whether Russia intended to annex Crimea if the referendum to leave Ukraine and join Russia passes. But a Kremlin-backed leader in Crimea said the region could become part of Russia by the end of March if the vote succeeds.

Russia's Parliament has been fast-tracking a bill to speed up the process for Russia to absorb a foreign territory and issue Russian passports. A member of Russia's Parliament said Sunday it stood ready to provide the region with 40 billion rubles (\$1.1 billion) for infrastructure development if it becomes part of the country, as Crimea relies largely on Ukraine for its water and electricity.

Tony Blinken, Mr. Obama's deputy national security adviser, said an annexation of Crimea violated international law and would never be recognized.

"If there is an annexation of Crimea, a referendum that moves Crimea from Ukraine to Russia, we won't recognize it, nor will most of the world," he told CNN. "The pressure that we've already exerted in coordination with our partners and allies will go up."

He pointed to steep declines in the Russian ruble and Russia's stock markets last week as a result of international pressure and as proof that Russia was already paying a cost. The ruble has recovered some from the steep losses in recent days, however, and the stock-market losses have had little broader economic impact.

In an address to thousands gathered in central Kiev to celebrate the 200th birthday of Ukrainian nationalist writer Taras Shevchenko, the country's new prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, vowed to protect Ukraine's interests in Crimea but said it would achieve its goals diplomatically.

"This is our land," he told the crowd. "Our fathers and grandfathers have spilled their blood for this land. And we won't budge a single centimeter from Ukrainian land. Let Russia and its president know this."

Russia has increasingly pushed back at the threat of sanctions. On Saturday, Russia state news agencies reported the country's defense ministry may stop fulfilling arms-treaty commitments and block U.S. military inspections of its nuclear weapons in response to a move in Washington to suspend military cooperation with Moscow.

In an article in the state newspaper *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, Kirill Barsky, Russia's special envoy to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization suggested that Russia was prepared to face down any sanctions, noting that similar measures taken against China following the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 proved ineffective and that China's economy surged soon after.

The situation on the ground in Crimea grew more tense over the weekend. Russian troops and locals continued to besiege Ukrainian military bases in Crimea, halting delivery of food and supplies to some of them. On Sunday in Sevastopol, violence flared when a small crowd of

Ukrainians gathered to celebrate Mr. Shevchenko's birthday. They were met by pro-Russian demonstrators who attacked men providing security for the event, punching and kicking them and beating one man with a whip.



Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk speaks during a rally to commemorate the 200th anniversary of poet and national icon Taras Shevchenko at Independence square in central Kiev on Sunday. Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said warning shots were fired as its military observer team attempted to enter the region Saturday and were stopped at an armed checkpoint. On Friday, the group issued a statement condemning reports of harassment and violence against reporters in region. Poland decided to evacuate its consulate in Crimea "because of continuing disturbances by Russian forces," the country's foreign minister, Radoslaw Sikorski, said Saturday.

On Sunday, there were signs of unrest in some eastern Ukrainian cities where Russian speakers are in the majority. In Luhansk, local media reported that a mob of several hundred protesters bearing Russian flags stormed the local government building and forced the new governor appointed by Kiev to sign a letter of resignation.

In the eastern industrial of Donetsk, boxer-turned-politician Vitali Klitschko who plans to run for president in Ukrainian elections on May 25, was forced to cancel a rally after a group of about 5,000 pro-Russian protesters gathered in the city's main square and had minor skirmishes with a pro-Kiev group.

Meanwhile, Sergei Aksyonov, the new Russian-backed leader in Crimea, issued a televised appeal to residents in other regions in Ukraine's south and east, calling on them to defy the new government in Kiev and hold their own votes on secession. He offered the support of the new Crimean government, as well as its "self-defense forces," referring to what Western officials say are Russian troops deployed in Crimea.

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