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Russia signs treaty to annex Ukraine's Crimea region

**President Vladimir Putin says Russia recovered Crimea 'without a shot fired.'
Ukraine's leaders say their nation will not accept the seizure by Russia.**

By Sergei L. Loiko and Carol J. Williams

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SIMFEROPOL, Ukraine — Russian President Vladimir Putin defied Western warnings and advertisement signed a treaty to annex Ukraine's Crimean peninsula Tuesday, while accusing the United States and its allies of going too far in luring post-Soviet nations away from Moscow.

Putin signed the accord with Crimea's new Moscow-backed leaders, appropriating the region and its vital naval port of Sevastopol less than two days after voters backed secession from Ukraine in a widely criticized referendum. The treaty, which is expected to be ratified by Russia's parliament and Constitutional Court, was signed in a solemn atmosphere in the Kremlin's lavish St. George's Hall.

Shortly before, Putin gave a fiery televised speech often interrupted by applause from jubilant lawmakers, government officials and other dignitaries.

While continuing to deny that the deployment of thousands of Russian troops in Crimea constituted an armed invasion, Putin reiterated his claim that Ukraine in recent weeks came under the rule of fascists and "Russophobes" based in Kiev, the capital.

Putin justified the takeover of Crimea as fulfilling Russia's "historic legacy." Crimea "should be part of a strong and stable sovereignty, which today can only be Russian," he said, stating that Kiev "isn't in control of anything."

Ukraine's interim president, Oleksandr Turchynov, vowed that Kiev would never accept Russia's seizure of Crimea.

"The Ukrainian people and the entire civilized world will never recognize the annexation of Ukrainian land," Turchynov said, according to the UNIAN news agency.

Vice President Joe Biden, on a mission to reassure Eastern European NATO members that the Western alliance will protect them from any Russian aggression, warned that Russia will face increasingly painful sanctions if Putin continues to pursue the "dark path" of violating the territorial integrity of a sovereign neighbor. The United States and the European Union on Monday imposed sanctions such as asset freezes and visa bans on some Russian and Ukrainian officials, but Western options appear limited.

"The world has seen through Russia's actions and has rejected the flawed logic," Biden said at his meeting in Poland with leaders of Russia's former communist allies who have been unnerved by what many consider the Kremlin's brazen land grab.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, in seeking to contain the Ukraine crisis, has deployed surveillance aircraft to Ukraine and the alliance's Eastern European members to demonstrate resolve in preventing further intrusions by Moscow.

Putin boasted in his speech that Russia had recovered Crimea "without a shot fired" and credited the careful actions of local self-defense forces, Moscow's description of the Russian troops that have deployed by the thousands throughout Crimea.

A confrontation Tuesday between Russian and Ukrainian forces, however, turned deadly when Russian snipers reportedly opened fire in the center of Simferopol, the Crimean capital. A Ukrainian soldier died and two were injured, which led the Ukrainian Defense Ministry to order its service members to fire back if attacked, UNIAN reported. Russia's Itar-Tass agency said one member of the local self-defense forces was killed and two wounded in the clash.

Putin chastised the West for what he suggested was an orchestrated campaign to undermine Russia's strategic interests since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

"They have constantly tried to drive us into a corner for our independent stance, for defending it, for calling things their proper names and not being hypocritical," Putin said. "But there are limits. And in the case of Ukraine, our Western partners have crossed a line. They behaved rudely, irresponsibly and unprofessionally."

Kremlin-controlled media cast Western diplomatic contacts with Ukraine's political opposition in the months before President Viktor Yanukovich's ouster as meddling to sway Ukraine to reject a natural alliance and integration with Russia.

Pressure from Putin prompted Yanukovich to reject an EU association deal that would have boosted Ukraine's trade and economic cooperation with Western Europe, prompting the rebellion against the Moscow-allied autocrat.

Three months after the protests began in Kiev's Independence Square, a bloody crackdown by riot police and snipers spurred a three-day melee of urban combat in which scores were killed and defections from Yanukovich's ruling Party of Regions shifted power to the opposition leaders behind the protests. Yanukovich was compelled to agree to early elections and an interim power-sharing agreement but fled after signing the EU-brokered peace deal Feb. 21.

Putin has cast the interim leaders in Kiev as ultranationalists bent on repressing Ukraine's ethnic Russians, who make up 17% of the nation's 46 million people but a majority of Crimea's 2 million residents.

Crimea was ruled by Russia from the 18th century and was part of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic after the Bolshevik Revolution. It was transferred to Ukraine's control in 1954 in a gesture that had little strategic meaning when both republics were part of the Soviet Union.

Putin and the pro-Russia leaders installed in Crimea less than three weeks ago signed a treaty Tuesday to add the peninsula to the Russian Federation's territory by the end of this year. The agreement has to be ratified by parliament, but that is a formality in a legislature dominated by deputies from Putin's United Russia and other loyal parties.

Putin's justification for seizing Crimea "showed in high relief what a real threat Russia is for the civilized world and international security," Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesman Evhen Perebinis said, declaring the annexation a deviation from law and "sensible thinking."

In London, British Foreign Secretary William Hague lamented Putin's choosing "the route of isolation," and warned that the international community will not be swayed by his claims to have been pushed by the West to secure Russia's rightful interests.

"No amount of sham and perverse democratic process or skewed historical references can make up for the fact that this is an incursion into a sovereign state and a land grab of part of its territory," Hague told the House of Commons.

Britain suspended military cooperation with Russia in retaliation for the seizure of Crimea, and France warned it might cancel delivery of two state-of-the-art Mistral warships, the first due by the end of this year under a \$1.3-billion contract.

British Prime Minister David Cameron, reflecting Western worries that Putin's encroachment could spread in Ukraine and beyond, said the Russian moves were "in flagrant breach of international law and send a chilling message across the continent of Europe."

Russia in effect has been suspended from the Group of 8 industrialized nations that it joined in 1998. At President Obama's suggestion, the Group of 7 — the United States, Britain, Germany, Japan, France, Italy and Canada — and the European Union will meet in The Hague next week to consider further sanctions aimed at compelling Putin to back down.

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