

Crimean Lawmakers Vote to Leave Ukraine, Join Russia In the News March 8, 2014

From VOA Learning English, this is In the News.

The crisis in Ukraine continued this week. On Thursday, lawmakers in Crimea approved a measure to make the peninsula part of Russia. The Crimean lawmakers also called a referendum on the issue. The special election is set for March 16th.

Sergei Shuvainikov is a deputy in the Crimean parliament. He said voters would be asked two questions: "First, 'Do you vote for the reunion of Crimea with the Russian Federation, as a subject of the Russian Federation?' Second, 'Do you vote for the restoration of the 1992 constitution and for Crimea to be part of Ukraine?'"

The vote in the Crimean parliament came as European Union leaders held emergency meetings in Brussels, Belgium. EU officials want to pressure Russia into recalling military forces from Crimea.

An aide to the commander of Ukraine's border guards said there are now 30,000 Russian soldiers in the area. That is in comparison to the 11,000 troops that were with Russia's Black Sea fleet in the port of Sevastopol before the crisis began. Russian officials have denied the additional soldiers belong to its armed forces.

Ukraine's acting Prime Minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, was at the talks in Brussels. He dismissed the Crimean parliament's vote to join Russia.

"This is illegitimate decision and this so-called referendum has no legal grounds at all. That's the reason why we urge the Russian government not to support those who claim separatism in Ukraine. Crimea was, is and will be an integral part of Ukraine."

He also said his government is open to talks with Russia about the crisis.

"We are ready for co-operation, but we are not ready to surrender and to be the subordinate of Russia."

The situation in Ukraine has worsened Russian relations with the West, including the United States. President Barack Obama says the presence of Russian forces in the Crimean peninsula violates Ukraine's rights as an independent country. On Thursday, he ordered sanctions against individuals found to have violated Ukraine's territorial integrity. The actions include visa

restrictions. The EU also announced measures against Russia, suspending talks on visas and a new economic agreement.

President Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke by telephone for about an hour on Thursday. President Putin dismissed an American warning over Russia's involvement in Crimea. Russian officials said Mr. Putin denounced Ukraine's new western-supported government as "illegitimate". And he said his country cannot ignore calls for help from Crimea and the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine.

As a way of finding a solution to the crisis, President Obama called for direct talks between Russia and Ukraine.

Mr. Obama is not alone in his reaction to the increased Russian involvement in Crimea. A top official of the European Union called the Russian actions illegal. Jan Tombinski, the EU's representative in Russia, said Crimea cannot decide to leave Ukraine just because of an election that included only Crimea. He said article 73 in Ukraine's constitution makes the referendum illegal.

And that's In the News from VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember.