

Will Sanctions Against Russia Work? In the News March 22, 2014

From VOA Learning English, this is In The News.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has signed a law for Russia to officially take control of the Crimean peninsula. The signing ceremony took place on Friday after the upper house of Russia's parliament voted to make Crimea a part of Russia. The lower house approved the deal on Thursday, just four days after Crimean voters decided to leave Ukraine and join Russia.

Local officials in Crimea called a special election on the area's future after Ukrainian lawmakers voted to oust President Viktor Yanukovich. The reported election results were one-sided. Ninety-seven percent of those marking ballots chose to join Russia. Crimean officials announced that over 80 percent of everyone permitted to vote took part in the referendum.

The Russian president said the vote met international and democratic values for fairness. But many observers questioned the results. Robert Legvold is with Columbia University in New York City.

"If it was an honest vote and all groups had participated, I would have thought rather than an overwhelming vote, it would have been something like 52 to 53 percent, given the percentage makeup of the groups in Crimea. The fact that it's 97-point-whatever and they report a turnout of 83 percent, creates some suspicion that it wasn't just the shadow of the Russian military presence, but maybe even some manipulation."

Matthew Rojansky works for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington. He thinks the pro-Russian officials in Crimea held the referendum because they expected the results.

"My sense is this was a product of the times in which there has been a real build-up of fear mongering and the overt pressure of armed men. There is nothing quite like a gun in your face."

West Rejects Crimean Vote

The United States and the European Union have described the referendum in Crimea as illegal and in violation of Ukraine's constitution. US and EU officials reacted quickly. They ordered travel bans and financial restrictions on 28 Russian officials and four Ukrainians. US officials have described those targeted as President Putin's "cronies."

Matthew Rojansky says that, for over a year, Mr. Putin urged top Russian officials to sell their international holdings and bring their wealth back to Russia.

“Anybody who has complied with him is sitting pretty and doesn’t have to worry about the international sanctions, and anyone who didn’t - well, it’s their problem; he can cut them loose.”

Sanctions Not Strong Enough

He also believes the current sanctions are not strong enough.

“I don’t think Putin believes us. I don’t think he thinks we actually have the guts to impose really biting sanctions on, for example, the energy sector. I think he just distrusts our resolve because we haven’t made it clear that we are willing to pay the pain on our side.”

Robert Legvold of Columbia University believes stronger sanctions could hurt the world economy.

“Every step that escalates the penalty or the punishment also escalates the cost to those inflicting them, imposing the sanctions.”

On Thursday, President Obama announced additional sanctions on Russian individuals and one bank. Russia reacted to the announcement by ordering entry bans on nine US lawmakers and officials. The following day, Ukraine's acting prime minister signed a political association agreement with the EU.

Observers say it will be very difficult to change what has happened in Crimea. Experts also say it will be interesting to see how far the United States and its Western allies are willing to go to punish Russia for its actions.

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