

Russia's Move to Send Troops to Ukraine Spurs Talk of War

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People holding up portraits of those killed in Kiev at a rally there on Sunday. Rallies in Moscow came out for and against military involvement in Ukraine. **Gleb Garanich**

Russian lawmakers have given President Vladimir Putin the go-ahead to use Russian troops in Ukraine, a move that has thrown the international community into a tizzy and prompted Ukraine to mobilize its own troops.

The Federation Council's approval of the measure on Saturday has further complicated the Ukraine crisis, which began with mass protests in Kiev in November after then-President Viktor Yanukovich backed out of a trade deal with the European Union in favor of closer ties with Russia. Since then, Ukraine has been at the center of a tug-of-war between Russia and the EU — but only now has the conflict given way to warnings of World War Three.

After Yanukovich's ouster and the establishment of a new de facto government, Russia has repeatedly expressed concerns for the safety of Russian-speakers in Crimea, saying they face

discrimination and possible violence by the hands of nationalists.

It is precisely this concern that Putin cited when seeking lawmakers' approval for military involvement in Ukraine. He asked the upper chamber of parliament to allow him to use Russia's Black Sea Fleet based in southern Ukraine "in connection with extraordinary circumstances that have developed in Ukraine," which pose "a threat to the lives of Russian nationals" and to the Russian troops in Ukraine themselves, the Kremlin website reported.

Putin's concern seemed to be vindicated on Sunday, when Russia's Border Guard Service said it had recorded 675,000 civilians fleeing from Ukraine into Russia in the past two months, 143,000 of those in the past fortnight, Interfax reported.

Putin's request for military involvement came a day after U.S. President Barack Obama issued a stark warning to Russia, saying "the United States will stand with the international community in affirming that there will be costs for any military intervention in Ukraine."

Later Saturday, the Federation Council unanimously approved Putin's request, which is mandated by the Russian Constitution, Interfax reported.

While Moscow already has 150,000 troops on high alert near the border with Ukraine, there has been no official word from the Kremlin on the deployment of more troops. Federation Council speaker Valentina Matviyenko said on Saturday that a "limited number" of troops may be deployed in addition to the Black Sea Fleet. However, there have been various media reports of armed men patrolling certain areas of Crimea, including airports and a military base, according to The Associated Press.

The latest developments have fueled fears of an armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, supported by NATO, but political analysts seemed to agree that the stand-off between pro-Russian and pro-Western forces in Ukraine was not likely to spill over into war.

"So far the conflict is frozen," former Kremlin spin doctor Gleb Pavlovsky said by phone, adding that the Ukrainian opposition in power did not need an armed conflict, a fact which was proven by acting Ukrainian President Olexander Turchynov's veto on Friday of a law that would have abolished Russian as one of Ukraine's two national languages.

Independent opposition-minded political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky said an armed conflict was "a possibility," but that it would in no way benefit Russia.

"It would lead to the collapse of the Russian Federation because Russia would not survive any direct military competition with NATO," Belkovsky said by phone.

Putin discussed the matter with several foreign leaders by phone over the weekend, including Obama. In those conversations, Putin maintained that Russia's intention to defend the Russian-speaking population was in line with the international law, the Kremlin website reported.

Putin also talked to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, European Council President Herman Van Rompuy, French President Francois Hollande, British Prime Minister David Cameron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Finnish President Sauli Niinistö.

In a separate development in the Ukraine crisis, Russian lawmakers moved to recall Russia's ambassador to the U.S. over remarks made by Obama, signalling a further deterioration in relations.

"When the U.S. president is actually threatening Russia, saying that Russia will pay dearly for it [the introduction of troops], this is disrespect to our people, to Russia, and we think that in these circumstances we have to act accordingly, and we will ask president [Putin] to recall the Russian ambassador to the U.S.," Matviyenko said, Interfax reported.

Ukraine responded to the movement of Russian troops around southern Ukraine by mobilizing its own troops and calling up the reserves.

The country's acting President Olexander Turchynov ordered on Saturday night to put Ukrainian troops "on combat alert," Interfax reported, citing Andrei Paruby, secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council.

The council also ordered the Foreign Ministry to urgently ask the U.S. and Britain to secure safety in Ukraine and advise Kiev on security issues, Interfax reported.

Separately, on Saturday, Ukraine requested that NATO "consider using all possibilities to protect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, the Ukrainian people and nuclear facilities on Ukrainian territory," Foreign Minister Sergei Deshchiritsya said, Reuters reported.

Analyst Pavlovsky dismissed Turchynsky's call for the mobilization of troops, saying "no mobilization is taking place" because the current Ukrainian government "does not have enough authority to conduct mobilization," he said.

Pavlovsky also stressed that Russia had "not deployed troops to Ukraine," but had used the ones that were already there.

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