

Lavrov and Kerry Fail to Reach Agreement on Ukraine

By [Yekaterina Kravtsova](#)

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Lavrov, right, talking with Kerry at a U.S. diplomatic residence in London on Friday.

Two days before Crimea is set to vote on whether to split from Ukraine and join Russia, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with his U.S. and British counterparts in an attempt to de-escalate tensions over the referendum, but the two sides failed to reach any agreement.

Western leaders have implored Russia, which has effectively taken over the Crimean peninsula following the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich last month, not to support the referendum and said they would not recognize its results. The United States and European Union have both prepared sanctions to punish Russia if it does not retreat in Crimea.

Friday's talks between Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry lasted for more than five hours — the Foreign Ministry tweeted photographs periodically of the two talking while walking around a green lawn at a U.S. diplomatic residence in the British capital — and were

seen as a last-ditch attempt to find a way forward suitable to both Russia and the West. Kerry in particular was seeking to get assurances from Lavrov that Russia would not annex Crimea even if the Ukrainian region votes to join its eastern neighbor, with which the peninsula has strong historical ties.

"We confirmed our position stated by President Vladimir Putin on many occasions that we will respect the decision of Crimean residents that they will make at the upcoming referendum," Lavrov said at a news conference following the talks, Interfax reported.

Kerry said, however, that he did not know for sure what Putin would do after the results of the referendum are announced on Monday, Reuters reported. He said that ratifying the Crimea referendum in Russia's parliament would backdoor annexation.

Lavrov said Crimea was very important for Russia but added that he could not comment further on the upcoming referendum until its results were clear. "Crimea is immeasurably more important for Russia than the Falkland Islands for Britain and the Comoro Islands for France," he said, Interfax reported. "I am sure that if Kosovo was a special case, Crimea is as much special as Kosovo."

Western leaders have rebuked Russia for supposedly not holding a proper dialogue with both the current Ukrainian government and the international community. Russia has refused to acknowledge the new Ukrainian authorities, but Lavrov said that Russia-Ukraine cooperation had not stopped and that Ukraine could talk with Russia directly without using international mechanisms. It was unclear what form such communication could take.

Kerry had earlier presented Lavrov with proposals on Ukraine, offering to organize a contact group in order to establish a dialogue between the two countries. But Lavrov said the proposals were unsatisfactory since they were based on the notion that there was a "conflict between Russia and Ukraine."

Russia launched military exercises involving around 10,000 troops near the Ukrainian border earlier this week, but Lavrov said Russia had no plans to invade Ukraine's southeastern regions, a major concern for Western nations and the new regime in Kiev.

But on Friday afternoon, Russia's Foreign Ministry issued a statement following clashes Thursday in the east Ukrainian city of Donetsk between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian forces in which one man died that said Russia reserved the right to take people under its protection, raising concerns about a possible military incursion.

Lavrov said Russia was ready for international cooperation to de-escalate the tensions and said it had delivered its own proposals on Ukraine to Western countries a week ago. The proposals presented Russia's vision for international efforts aimed at resolving the conflict, he said, but did not elaborate.

Kerry said earlier this week that measures against Russia would be very strict if it kept its military in Ukraine, but Lavrov said after Friday's meeting that Kerry did not make any threats. The Russian foreign minister added that Moscow was aware of what the sanctions could be.

"Our partners also understand that this would be a counterproductive measure," Lavrov said.
"It is a fact that it would not serve our mutual interests in business and overall cooperation."

Meanwhile, President Vladimir Putin said Friday in Sochi at a meeting with the head of the Independent Trade Unions Federation, Mikhail Shmakov, that Russia should concentrate on its domestic issues rather than international ones.

"Despite all the turbulence of international relations, the most important thing is what is happening in our country," Putin said.

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