

Russia Dismisses West's Concerns Over Troops Near Ukraine As 'Groundless'

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A pro-Russian protester standing at a barricade near a regional government building in Donetsk on Wednesday.

Russia on Wednesday dismissed as "groundless" concerns in Kiev and the West over the presence of its troops near the border with Ukraine, saying they posed no threat, and accused Washington and NATO of fueling tension in the region.

Washington has accused Russia of orchestrating separatist unrest in eastern Ukraine this week and NATO has urged President Vladimir Putin to pull back troops from near the Ukrainian border.

"The U.S. and Ukraine have no reason to be worried," the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement. "Russia has stated many times that it is not carrying out any unusual or unplanned activity on its territory near the border with Ukraine that would be of military significance."

A senior Russian official accused NATO, which restricted its cooperation with Moscow following Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region last month, of waging a "harsh,

uncompromising information war" against Russia and trying to poison its relations with Kiev.

"We see what NATO is doing in Ukraine to prevent them from normalizing ties with us. Horror stories about the Russian armed forces are being spread," Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov said, Interfax reported.

NATO says Russia has massed tens of thousands of troops near Ukraine's borders and voiced concerns of a repeat of the takeover of Crimea, which voted to join Russia in a referendum staged after Russian forces were already in control.

Speaking during a security conference at Russia's top diplomatic university, Antonov said the turmoil in Ukraine was a result of Western-sponsored efforts to overthrow rulers it disliked and that Moscow considered any such attempts in the former Soviet Union were aimed against itself.

He indicated Russia was concerned that since the crisis in Ukraine started, NATO had intensified its contacts with Georgia and Moldova — former Soviet republics that are now eyeing closer integration with the alliance and the West.

The Foreign Ministry also said Moscow has shunned a meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE, this week in Vienna, sought by Washington and Kiev over their concerns about Russia's military presence on the border.

The ministry said the U.S. and Ukraine were conducting "an anti-Russian campaign" at the OSCE and increasing tension over Ukraine, where the authorities are trying to quell unrest by pro-Moscow protesters.

"The everyday activity of Russian troops on its [Russian] territory does not threaten the security of the U.S. and other OSCE member states," it said. "Attempts to accuse Russia of building up its armed forces are groundless."

The turmoil in Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea have led to the biggest East-West standoff since the Cold War.

The European Union said on Tuesday that top diplomats from the EU, Russia, Ukraine and the U.S. would meet next week to discuss the crisis, but Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov struck a cool tone and suggested there was no firm agreement.

"Dates have been named [for the meeting] — some time in April. But that is what they want. We are awaiting an explanation of what they intend to do at the meeting," Lavrov told reporters on the sidelines of a government meeting on economic and energy ties with Ukraine.

"There are more questions than answers," he said.

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