Ukraine Region Votes to Join Russia

Overwhelming Support for Breakaway in Crimea Raises East-West Tensions; U.S. Prepares Sanctions

By Anton Troianovski in Krasnogvardeyskoye, Ukraine, and Paul Sonne in Sevastopol, Ukraine

Updated March 16, 2014 9:05 p.m. ET

Crimeans voted overwhelmingly on Sunday to break away from Ukraine and join Russia, according to preliminary results of a referendum that the West condemned as illegal. Photo: AP

More than 96% of Crimeans voted to break away from Ukraine and rejoin Russia, according to preliminary results, in a referendum that raises the stakes in the most acute East-West confrontation since the Cold War.

The U.S. and European Union quickly condemned the referendum as illegal. President Barack Obama, speaking by phone with Russian President Vladimir Putin, told him Sunday that the Crimean vote took place "under duress of Russian military intervention" and wouldn't be recognized. The Russian leader responded that the vote fully complied with international norms, the Kremlin said, issuing a statement that showed no sign of diplomatic progress in the crisis.

Mr. Obama also told Mr. Putin that no diplomatic resolution was possible in the midst of "large-scale Russian military exercises on Ukraine's borders," after troops staged a rapid airborne operation to take control of a natural gas pumping station on Saturday, the White House said.

A Crimean referendum voter left a polling booth on Sunday. Spencer Platt/Getty Images

U.S. officials planned to begin instituting sanctions to retaliate for Russia's actions in Ukraine, saying that a first round would come as early as Monday. European officials meet Monday to decide on possible sanctions, which diplomats say could initially affect about 20 top Russian officials and be broadened if the Kremlin doesn't back down.
The focal points of the Ukraine crisis now shift to Moscow and eastern Ukraine. In the Russian capital, lawmakers and the Kremlin will consider whether to quickly annex Crimea, defying threats of sanctions from the U.S. and Europe and heightening international tensions even further. In eastern Ukraine, thousands of people have also staged pro-Russian protests, raising worries over another possible military incursion by Russia.

Excluding Sevastopol, the final vote count showed that 96.77% of Crimean residents voted to break away from Ukraine.

Mr. Putin and Russian lawmakers could move swiftly and annex Crimea within weeks. Or, as Western diplomats hope, they could allow time for negotiations with Ukraine and other countries. Meanwhile, across Crimea, which was once part of Russia, many waved Russian flags, raised their glasses and honked their horns in celebration.

For the Kremlin and its allies, the potential annexation of Crimea represents a landmark in Mr. Putin's efforts to restore Soviet glory.

Pro-Russian protesters in Simferopol, Ukraine, during Crimea's referendum on Sunday. European Pressphoto Agency

"We must acknowledge that since 1991, we have only lost territory and people," Sergei Naryshkin, chairman of the lower house of Russian parliament, said on state television. "And now finally, for the first time since 1945, we are gaining compatriots."

The referendum—held as armored personnel carriers guarded city streets and military convoys rumbled down rural roads—marked the latest escalation in Russia's standoff with the West over the future of Ukraine. But it also showed the surge in anti-Western sentiment in Crimea, as people across the region echoed the claims of Russian state television that Crimea was at risk of being overrun by “fascist” forces that overthrew the Russian-friendly government in Kiev last month.

"Crimea was always Russian," said Lyudmila Korol, a 47-year-old nurse in the town of Krasnogvardeyskoye, who said she was thankful for Russian troops protecting her from anti-Russian violence. "It is so wonderful that, without having to travel anywhere, we are going home."

There was a festive atmosphere at some polling stations in Crimea where a referendum on whether the region should secede from Ukraine and join Russia was taking place, reports Anton Troianovski. Photo: Getty Images

In eastern mainland Ukraine, also home to large pro-Russian populations, thousands of people protested against the new Kiev government. Russian troops, however, appear to have partially pulled back from
their incursion onto the mainland after taking control of the natural gas pumping station on Saturday, U.S. and Ukrainian officials said.

U.S. officials believe that if Mr. Putin ordered forces into Eastern Ukraine, the Ukrainian military would attempt to repel the attack, a senior official said, adding that Russian troops didn't appear to be massing on the border.

American officials realize that they misjudged Mr. Putin and are working to predict his next move, the senior official said. "We have misread Putin. He is not going to give up," the official said.

In Berlin, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said he would call for a "graduated approach" when EU foreign ministers meet in Brussels on Monday to consider sanctions against Russia. His top priority, he said, wasn't to halt Russia's annexation of Crimea but to prevent a wider conflict.

"We should not raise too much hope that the developments in Crimea can be reversed quickly," Mr. Steinmeier said. "It is now our task…to make sure that this not insignificant conflict doesn't turn into something that will lead to a confrontation between Russian and Ukrainian forces."

In Crimea, the referendum results appeared a foregone conclusion as soon as plans for the vote were announced.

Crimea, a region that the Kremlin transferred from Russia to Ukraine in 1954, is home mostly to ethnic Russians. Since Russia's incursion into the Crimean peninsula in late February, pro-Ukrainian media have been largely silenced. Billboards agitating for secession—some comparing the new powers in Ukraine to Nazi Germany—line highways and city streets. The new de facto mayor of Sevastopol, which is home to Russia's Black Sea fleet, said in a video address Saturday that residents faced a choice between becoming honorable descendants of World War II martyrs or joining "a herd of sheep that need euro-shepherds to take us to a promised feed-box."

Sure enough, inside the dozens of transparent ballot boxes viewed by Wall Street Journal reporters across Crimea, not a single vote against joining Russia could be seen.

The festive air of the vote—and the lack of suspense over the outcome—recalled Soviet times. To some, who lament Crimea's economic travails since the Soviet Union's collapse, that felt like a good thing. In Sevastopol, a privileged place to live in the Soviet days, oldies of the era such as "Moscow Nights" played over speakers at a polling station.

"People are coming here as if for a celebration," precinct deputy chairwoman Elena Kondratyukh said in Gvardeyskoye. "It's like how our parents took us to vote."
A woman cast her ballot during the referendum at a polling station in Simferopol. The referendum, which has been dismissed as illegal by the West, follows the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovych by pro-Western and nationalist protesters. Vasily Fedosenko/Reuters

Sergei Aksyonov, a pro-Russia politician who took over as regional prime minister as unidentified armed men seized control of Crimea's parliament in late February, said Sunday night the gears were already in motion for Crimea's quick annexation to Russia. Officials in Moscow haven't spelled out a time frame yet, however.

Mr. Aksyonov said that the Russian ruble would become an official currency in Crimea within days, and that a delegation of regional lawmakers would travel to Moscow on Monday to start sorting out the details of joining Russia, according to Russian news agency Interfax.

Many Crimeans who disagreed with the referendum appeared to have stayed home. They included thousands of Crimean Tatars, an ethnic minority that accounts for about 12% of the peninsula's population and remains skeptical of Kremlin rule after facing deportation to Central Asia under Joseph Stalin. The community's leader has called the referendum unlawful.

Many ethnic Russians and Ukrainians who don't want Crimea to leave Ukraine have stayed silent. They cite pressure from friends and relatives as well as the tense atmosphere on the streets, where militias have been patrolling with Russian flags.

"I didn't go. I boycotted," said Denis Matsola, a 26-year-old left-wing activist from Simferopol, who says he considers himself Russian but would rather Crimea remain part of Ukraine.

Though Ukraine's economy is worse, it is still freer than Russia, said Mr. Matsola, who worries that as an activist, he will end up getting beaten up or jailed once Crimea is part of Russia. "I understand that it will be hard for me to live in a Russian reality," he says, noting that many of his activist friends have left for mainland Ukraine.

Mr. Matsola said among those he knows who also want Crimea to stay within Ukraine, he knows only one person who actually went to vote. Most have remained quiet. "People are afraid to talk," he said. "Even just within families there's this national pressure on people."

—Philip Shishkin,
Julian E. Barnes, Adam Entous, Carol E. Lee and Bertrand Benoit contributed to this article.

Write to Paul Sonne at paul.sonne@wsj.com and Anton Troianovski at anton.troianovski@wsj.com