

Ukraine crisis: Russia steps up rhetoric on possible intervention

By John Reed in Donetsk and Kathrin Hille in Moscow



Sergei Lavrov, Russian foreign minister

Russia's foreign minister vowed to "stop" unrest in eastern Ukraine on Monday, fuelling concerns about escalation of the conflict between pro-Kiev and secessionist forces.

Speaking in Moscow before US vice-president Joe Biden arrived in Kiev for an official visit, [Sergei Lavrov](#) warned about a possible [Russian military intervention in Ukraine](#), saying his country faced growing demands to "rescue" its western neighbour.

"There are more and more calls to Russia for rescue from this lawlessness," Mr Lavrov said. "That puts us in an extremely complicated situation. Those who are deliberately trying to trigger a civil war, obviously hoping to provoke a big, serious, bloody conflict, are engaging in a criminal policy. And we will not only condemn but also stop it."

Mr Lavrov's remarks came a day after a [shootout at a roadblock in Slavyansk](#), a hardcore secessionist stronghold in eastern Ukraine, which killed at least three people and raised doubts over an [agreement reached by the US, Russia, Ukraine, the EU and the UN in Geneva last week to de-escalate the crisis](#).

Ukrainian officials described the clash as a provocation stage-managed by pro-Russia forces, but Moscow blamed Ukrainian rightwingers for the skirmish. Slavyansk's pro-Russian "people's mayor" Vyacheslav Ponomarev called on Sunday for Moscow to send in peacekeeping troops in response to the shooting.

With administrative buildings controlled by secessionists in about a dozen eastern Ukrainian cities and tens of thousands of Russian troops massed along the border, Ukrainian and western leaders fear that Moscow might militarily intervene in eastern Ukraine, as it did in Crimea six weeks ago.

Mr Biden will hold talks on Tuesday with Ukraine's interim leaders and offer Ukraine technical assistance, a senior US official said.

US technical experts will provide advice on a "reverse flow" of natural gas by pipeline to Ukraine from Slovakia and Hungary. They will also work on boosting conventional gas production, technology for unconventional gas and energy efficiency issues. No new money will be involved in the package.

It remains unclear what new initiatives Washington could deliver to help Kiev contain pro-Russian rebels in eastern regions.

The US official said Washington did not have concrete information on who was responsible for the apparent outbreak of violence in eastern Ukraine on Sunday but added “we have seen certain activities that have been discouraging”.

Tensions in eastern Ukraine remained high on Monday. Slavyansk – where Russian special forces like those seen in Crimea before its annexation now operate openly – announced a midnight to 6am curfew, after the shooting.

Irma Krat, a Ukrainian activist and journalist, was detained by pro-Russia activists overnight in Slavyansk and paraded blindfolded before television cameras. Russia’s pro-Kremlin Life News reported that Ms Krat was being held for “war crimes” in connection with the shooting of a Berkut riot policeman during Ukraine’s [Euro-Maidan protests](#). Ms Krat said she had come to Slavyansk as a journalist.

Separately, three foreign reporters – two from Italy and one from Belarus – were briefly held in Slavyansk on Monday, before being released.

Elsewhere in Ukraine, pro and anti-secession demonstrators staged rallies.

At a rare pro-Ukrainian unity demonstration in the provincial eastern Ukrainian city of Khartsyzk about 150 people gathered, carrying or wrapping themselves in the country’s blue and yellow flag. Secessionist militants who seized the city’s administration building just over a week ago and raised the red, blue and black flag of the self-declared breakaway “Donbass Republic” held a separate demonstration about the same size, calling for a referendum on autonomy for the region to be held next month.

Vyacheslav Redko, a businessman who organised the pro-Kiev rally, said: “We organised this demonstration to show that we are Ukrainians, and this is Ukraine regardless of the flag other people are putting up. We will do everything so that others respect us, and we will protect our territory.”

During the rally, some members of the crowd jeered and heckled Igor Kolodei, a city official, taking him to task for failing to keep the Ukrainian flag flying at the city’s administration building, which secessionists seized on April 13, facing no resistance from police or local authorities. The building is now hung with signs reading “America get lost” and “No EU”.

Ukrainian flags are becoming an increasingly rare sight in the country’s eastern regions bordering Russia. Svetlana Alennikova, a teacher and activist said: “It’s very dangerous to go outdoors with the flag of our country right now, because right away they will start the name-calling.” Ms Alennikova, an activist in a civil society organisation called *Novye Lyudi* (New People) that publishes a newspaper and website, said its office in Torez, about 40km (25 miles) east of Khartsyzk was targeted by men who threw bottles and started a fire that burnt some furniture.

Ms Alennikova deplored fellow Ukrainians who, she said, influenced by Russian television channels, were calling for a referendum that could pave the way for a annexation of parts of the east. “If people call on the president of another country to ‘help’, of course it will lead to war,” she said. “People should think about what they are saying.”

Lyudmila Pogromskaya, a teacher of English, said she “hoped very much” that Ukraine would be able to hold its May 25 presidential election in the east. “We want to have a civilised society with an honest judicial system, with all European principles but not with the principles of crime, of these families, corruption and so on,” she said. “We have a neighbour, and this neighbour is an aggressor now.”

Additional reporting by Geoff Dyer in Washington and Roman Olearchyk in Kiev