

# *Russian Foreign Minister Says Moscow Will Finalize Crimea Accession Procedure This Week*

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Moscow, March 20 (RHC) -- All legal procedures governing accession of Crimea into Russia are to be completed this week, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Thursday. "Currently practical steps are being undertaken to implement the treaty signed by Russian, Crimea and Sevastopol leaders about accession of two new regions into Russia," Lavrov told a foreign ministry meeting.

He noted that Moscow would continue protecting Russians abroad with political, diplomatic and other legal means. "We will insist that the countries where our fellow citizens live, fully respect their rights and freedoms," Lavrov said.

On Wednesday, Russia began to issue passports to the residents of Crimean Peninsula. President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday signed the treaty with leaders of Crimea to accept the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol as part of Russian territory.

Russian parliament's lower house, the State Duma, is set to ratify the treaty on Thursday.

Crimea, a Ukrainian autonomous republic that once belonged to Russia, held a referendum Sunday with some 96.6 percent of voters opting to join Russia.

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