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Australia imposes sanctions on Russia after it 'steals' Crimea from Ukraine

Julie Bishop disputes legitimacy of referendum and condemns the use of violence against citizens

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Financial sanctions and travel bans will be imposed by the Australian government as it condemns Russia for trying to “steal” Ukrainian territory.

The foreign affairs minister, Julie Bishop, disputed the legitimacy of Sunday’s referendum in which Crimeans voted to secede from Ukraine.

Bishop said Australia would target 12 Russian and Ukrainian individuals who had been “instrumental in the Russian threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine”.

“International law does not allow one state to steal the territory of another on the basis of a referendum that cannot be considered free or fair,” she told parliament on Wednesday.

Bishop said the Crimean referendum was not authorised by Ukraine “and was carried out while Russian forces were effectively in control of the territory”.

“It cannot form the legitimate basis of any alteration to the status of Crimea,” she said.

“I condemn in the strongest possible terms the use of violence against Ukraine and its citizens. The situation in Ukraine remains serious with the potential for military confrontation. The fatal attack on a Ukrainian serviceman in Crimea is to be deplored and underlines the volatility of the crisis that Russia is fuelling.”

The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, denounced western hypocrisy as he announced the annexation of Crimea on Tuesday.

“We are being told that we are breaking the norms of international law,” Putin said. “Well, at least it’s good that they’ve remembered that international law exists. Better late than never.”

Bishop said Russia was the only member of the UN security council that opposed a resolution that declared the referendum had no validity.

She said Australia’s actions were aligned with steps taken by the European Union, the US and Canada, which had implemented targeted sanctions and travel bans.

Bishop said Russia should abide by its international obligations and “return to constructive and diplomatic dialogue”.

The opposition’s foreign affairs spokeswoman, Tanya Plibersek, said Labor supported the government in implementing targeted financial statements and travel bans.

“Australia has a special responsibility as a member of the security council to join the international community in taking strong action to make clear our condemnation of the moves by Russia to annex Crimea and of the fatal attack on the Ukrainian serviceman in Crimea,” Plibersek said.

Putin said that, in the hearts and minds of people, Crimea had always been and remained an “inseparable part of Russia”.

The White House said the US president, Barack Obama, told Putin in a phone call on Sunday “that Russia’s actions were in violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and that, in co-ordination with our European partners, we are prepared to impose additional costs on Russia for its actions”.