

In Ukraine's East, Some Beg for Russian Iron Hand

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Demonstrators at a pro-Russian rally in Donetsk, eastern Ukraine, shouting slogans and waving flags Saturday.

LUGANSK, Ukraine — Lidia Gany had some tea and bread, all she can afford these days for most meals, put on her duffel coat with the fake purple fur collar, and came down to the main square of this down-at-the-heels industrial city at Ukraine's eastern edge to join fellow ethnic Russians in urging Moscow to send troops across the border and protect them.

"Only Russia can save us," said the 74-year-old pensioner, crossing herself.

Since Russian troops rolled into Crimea, and lawmakers there scheduled a referendum for Sunday on whether to join Russia, the world's attention has focused on the fate of the lush peninsula that juts into the Black Sea. But here in Ukraine's coal-fired industrial east, where huge numbers of Russians have lived for more than two centuries, a potent mix of economic depression, ethnic solidarity and nostalgia for the certainties of the Soviet past have many

demanding the right to become part of Russia as well.

"I am for living in one country, with no borders, like we used to. Like the fingers on one hand," said 60-year-old Lyudmila Zhuravlyova, who signed a petition asking for Russian President Vladimir Putin's military invention to stop "political persecution and physical annihilation of the Russian-speaking and Orthodox population."

In Lugansk and other eastern Ukraine cities, some men have formed militia groups such as "Lugansk Guard," the "People's Auxiliary" as Russian news broadcasts swarm with alleged atrocity stories about attacks on ethnic Russians and Jews in Ukraine — helping to spur the secession drive and the anxieties that underlie it. The Associated Press and other international media have found no evidence of victimization.

On Sunday, in a possible portent of more trouble to come, pro-Russian demonstrators overran the regional government headquarters just off Soviet Street and forced Gov. Mikhail Bolotskih to sign a resignation letter.

"Among them were young aggressive people in an intoxicated condition, inappropriate condition, with bats, sticks, and it was obvious they were armed with some other kinds of weapons," the governor, who is appointed by Ukraine's central authorities, said Tuesday.

Bolotskih said he put his signature to the letter only to protect the terrified women, children and others who had taken refuge in the building out of fear of pro-Russian mobs. After negotiations that dragged on through the night, the occupiers left, and the governor was able to return to his second-floor office. Three burly Ukrainian policeman stood guard by the main staircase Tuesday.

Ukraine's easternmost city was founded in the late 18th century by Catherine the Great as a foundry to make cannon and cannonballs for the Imperial Russian Army. In Soviet times, it was home to one of the country's blue-ribbon factories that turned out steam locomotives good enough to be designated "IS" — for the Russian-language initials of dictator Josef Stalin.

The city, with its five-story Khrushchev-era apartment blocks and tidy downtown with a pair of spire-topped edifices in a bombastic style known as Stalinist Gothic, seems an architectural throwback to a time when coal miners and locomotive factory workers were considered the proletarian elite.

But the breakup of the Soviet Union and harsh economic realities of the market have not been kind to the east and the Lugansk region, where nearly 70 percent of the population in a 2001 census reported Russian as their mother tongue. Residents say many factories, including the locomotive works, have had to drastically cut both payrolls and production. Fewer smokestacks these days belch the sour-smelling coal smoke that shows people still work there. It all means that many people see Russia as the cure-all to their problems.

Some in Luhansk, including Gany, have relatives in Russia who tell them life is better on their side of the border. She now must make ends meet on about \$100 a month in pension payments, she says half of which goes to pay her rent. Her husband is dead. She held a variety of jobs in the old Soviet Union, from the BAM railway project in Siberia to a fish cannery in Kamchatka, but much of her savings vanished when the former superpower broke up.

She now fears persecution from Ukraine's new leaders, and is afraid to travel to other regions of the country.

In 2010, the year of Ukraine's last presidential election, Lugansk gave 89 percent of its votes to Viktor Yanukovich, a native of another town in the Donbas coal-mining region. The pro-Moscow president fled office last month after prolonged street protests and bloodshed in Kiev, and was succeeded by a government made up of politicians friendlier to the U.S. and European Union.

For some in the east, the regime change was not only blatantly unconstitutional, but a catastrophe.

"The West wants to put Hitler's Plan Ost into effect," said Zoya Kozlova, 54, a teacher of philology. That plan, if fully implemented, would have meant the enslavement, expulsion and extermination of most of the Slavic peoples in Europe.

Pro-Moscow forces in Luhansk already have a leader, self-styled "people's governor" Alexander Kharitonov, who is spearheading the drive for a referendum. "The people of Luhansk do not recognize illegitimate Kiev. We think that the government has been changed through a coup d'etat," he said. And Kharitonov said he hopes for assistance from Moscow to right that situation.

"The Maidan [the anti-Yanukovich protests in Kiev] showed us the police are not able to protect us. neo-Nazi groups that were created on the Maidan have spread throughout Ukraine. The police are not able to protect us from them."

"The new government won't do it. So we think we have the right to ask our friend Russia to protect us," Kharitonov said.

Already, the Kremlin has made clear that it's closely watching developments. On Monday, in an official statement, the Russian Foreign Ministry said lawlessness "now rules in eastern regions of Ukraine" and blamed the Right Sector, a grouping of far-right and nationalist factions whose activists were among the most radical and confrontational during three months of protests that led to Yanukovich's ouster.

"Without Putin's help, they will annihilate us," said Sergei Chupeyev, 69, a retired mining engineer from Lugansk. "We need to ask him for help, or tomorrow there will be fascists here."

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