

Ukraine Says 51 Hostages Released From Seized Building in Lugansk

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Pro-Russian protesters gather at a barricade outside the offices of the SBU state security service in Lugansk, eastern Ukraine.

KIEV — More than 50 people left a state security service building early Wednesday that had been seized by pro-Russia activists in eastern Ukraine, following negotiations between protesters and officials, Ukraine's state security service said.

Ukraine's security service, or SBU, said Tuesday that the protesters who seized the local headquarters of state security in Luhansk on Sunday had wired it with explosives and were holding 60 people hostage, though this was denied by the protesters themselves.

The SBU said early on Wednesday that 51 people had left the building without arms. It was unclear if they were protesters or hostages.

Interfax news agency later put this number at 56 and said negotiations were continuing between the protesters and local officials to end the occupation.

The activists denied on Tuesday they had any explosives or were holding hostages. But they conceded they had seized an armory full of automatic rifles.

"We do not need hostages to get what we want," said Anton, who declined to give his second name.

The Luhansk building was one of several seized by protesters in the east of the country demanding regional referendums on independence from Kiev.

Protesters in Donetsk, to the south, remain in control of the main regional authority building, but authorities ended the occupation in the city of Kharkiv.

The Ukrainian government says the occupations are part of a Russian-led plan to dismember the country.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry accused Russian agents and special forces on Tuesday of stirring separatist unrest and said Moscow could be trying to prepare for military action as it had in Crimea, annexed by Russia last month.

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