

Kharkiv Court Bans Pro-Russian Rallies

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A woman walks past policemen standing guard during a rally organised by supporters of the detained pro-Russian protesters in front of the court building in Kharkiv, April 10, 2014.

A court in Kharkiv has banned pro-Russian demonstrators from holding peaceful rallies in the eastern Ukrainian city.

Kharkiv city council was named as a plaintiff in Thursday's ruling, which declared an indefinite ban on pro-Russia rallies near state institutions, squares, parks and other public places in Kharkiv, Ukrainian news agency 112.ua reported Friday.

The ruling was undertaken in the interests of "national security and public order."

Demonstrations have gripped Kharkiv during the past week, with pro-Russian protesters storming administrative buildings in the city last Sunday and attempting to declare a "people's republic."

Unrest has also been rife in Donetsk and Luhansk, and demonstrators in those cities and Kharkiv have called for a referendum on their status within Ukraine.

Earlier this week, it was reported that pro-Russian activists had stormed a Kharkiv theater having mistaken it for the city hall, leading some observers to suggest the protesters were not local.

Western critics have accused the Kremlin of bankrolling the demonstrations in eastern Ukraine as a pretext for intervention in the country, a charge that Moscow denies.

The court's ruling is reminiscent of an anti-protest law that the government of former President Viktor Yanukovich introduced in January, which significantly increased fines and imposed jail terms for unauthorized street protests.

The move was intended to put the brakes on the Euromaidan street protest movement in Kiev, but succeeded only in attracting widespread Western condemnation and causing increasingly violent clashes between protesters and police.

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