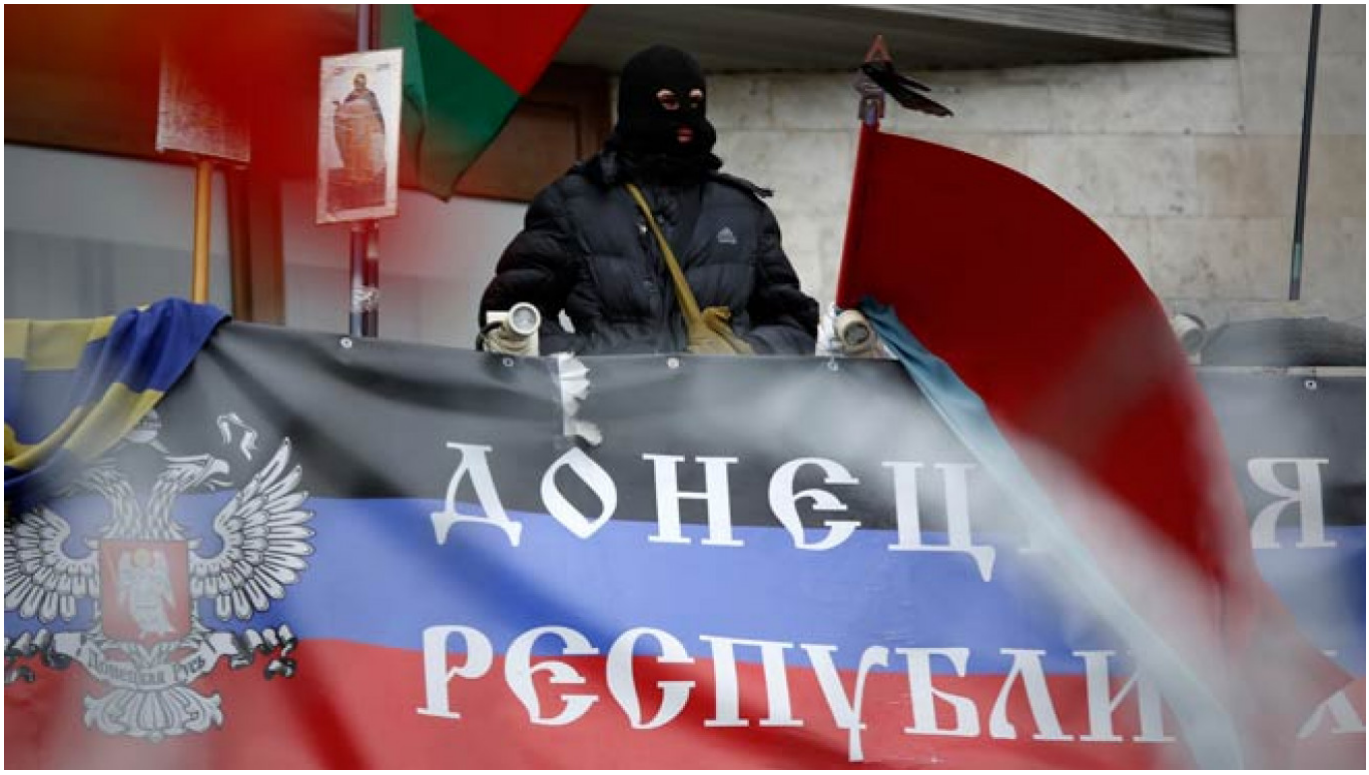
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Pro-Russian Protests Divide People in Yanukovych's Hometown

By Oleg Sukhov

April 21, 2014



A masked pro-Russian activist looking down from a balcony of an occupied Donetsk administration building.

YENAKIIEVE, Ukraine — In the wake of pro-Russian protests in the Ukrainian town of Yenakiieve — the hometown of ousted President Viktor Yanukovych — residents are divided over the protests and over their former leader.

The atmosphere in the town over the weekend was calm, with little remaining evidence of Ukrainian media reports that pro-Russian protesters had seized City Hall, the police headquarters and security service building there earlier this month.

Four unarmed pro-Russian demonstrators stood near City Hall as police officers patrolled nearby, and no barricades were to be seen in the area. Both the protesters and police denied that any seizure of the building had taken place, saying that demonstrators had peacefully entered the building, and that the city administration was still functioning as usual.

Near the police headquarters, neither protesters nor barricades could be seen. Yevgeny, a 34-year-old taxi driver, said that pro-Russian activists had entered the police headquarters and security service building last week in an effort to find weapons but had left them shortly afterwards.

Most locals declined to give their last names, citing fears for their safety.

By Sunday, the protesters had also left City Hall, and a flag of the People's Republic of Donetsk — an entity proclaimed by pro-Russian activists — on the building had been replaced by a Ukrainian one, 30 Days, a Yenakiieve-based news site, reported. By Monday the demonstrators had again entered the building and hoisted a flag of the republic, according to the site.

Protests in the Donetsk region where Yenakiieve is located have intensified in recent weeks, with demonstrators — including men armed with firearms — seizing administrative buildings in cities across the region. Ukrainian authorities have accused Russian special forces of being involved in the unrest, a claim that the Kremlin denies.

Yenakiieve represented a sharp contrast over the weekend with the more tense situation in the Donetsk region city of Slovyansk, where armed pro-Russian gunmen seized major administrative buildings earlier this month and now effectively control the area.

Some locals in Yenakiieve expressed support over the weekend for the pro-Russian protesters' demands.

Denis, a 29-year-old assistant engine driver, said he was in favor of joining Russia because of higher pensions and wages and lower taxes there.

Others suggested that accession to Russia would put an end to the unrest.

"The only upside of joining Russia is that all this instability would end," said Anastasiya, 24, a manager.

But others were not enthusiastic about the idea.

"Russia does not need us," said Maria, a 75-year-old pensioner, adding that she was "tired" of the pro-Russian movement. "We just want to live the rest of our lives in peace. We want to be left alone."

Yevgeny, the taxi driver, echoed this sentiment. "It is better to put our own house in order than to join Russia," he said.

Some locals' desire to accede to Russia seemed to stem from the apparent poverty of the town, which appears to have changed little since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Dilapidated Soviet-style buildings and courtyards create the impression of having traveled back in time to the 1980s. Lackluster cafes with crumbling plaster and no sign of any customers, plus food stores with a poor choice of items also added to the time travel effect.

The town's landscape is dominated by the Yenakiieve Iron and Steel Works, with the pillars

of black smoke that pour out of its chimneys visible everywhere downtown.

Yanukovych, who worked at the factory from 1969 to 1970, was praised by some locals, who were grateful to him for the improvements the city had seen during his presidency. But they said their opinion of him had changed after he fled Ukraine in February during large-scale anti-government protests.

Yevgeny the taxi driver said that under Yanukovych, roads had been repaired, the local factory had been upgraded and playgrounds and various entertainment facilities had been built.

Lyudmila, another 75-year-old pensioner, said she had "shouted her head off" at pro-Yanukovych rallies before, but had lost confidence in him after she saw the spectacular wealth of his Mezhyhirya residence near Kiev in February, which she said was evidence of theft.

"If you and I had been in his place, we would have stolen too," said a friend of hers who refused to give her name.

"No, I would not," Lyudmila replied.

Contact the author at o.sukhov@imedia.ru

Original url:
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