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Pro-Ukrainians in Donetsk Warn Against Federalization

By Oleg Sukhov

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Pro-Kiev protesters shout slogans and wave Ukranian flags during a rally in Donetsk last week.

DONETSK, Ukraine — Pro-Ukrainian protesters and activists in eastern Ukraine have come out firmly against the pro-Russian protesters' push for federalization, saying it would lead to "feudal overlords" taking control of a country already mired in turmoil.

Russia has supported federalization, which would allow the Kremlin to have a strong influence over eastern Ukraine and block any moves by the central government in Kiev that may be deemed unfriendly, such as closer integration with Europe and, ultimately, accession to NATO.

But unless regional and city legislatures are given executive powers, federalization is bound to lead to regional governors in eastern Ukraine seizing all the power and becoming "feudal princes," Oleksy Garan, head of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy's Political Analysis School, said by phone Monday.

Donetsk-based tycoon Rinat Akhmetov and other local heavyweights have promoted the federalization movement to get more autonomy for themselves, Garan said.

"Local elites have been horse-trading with Kiev but now they are running high risks," Garan said.

But, if the movement eventually leads to some eastern Ukrainian areas joining Russia, their interests will be jeopardized because their businesses are based in Ukraine and Europe, he added.

Pro-Russian demonstrators who seized administrative buildings in many cities in the Donetsk region earlier this month have cited both federalization and joining Russia as their demands.

According to the federalization proposal, Ukraine would turn from a unitary state into a federation, with the country's Russian-speaking southeastern regions having greater autonomy and possibly even having a right to secede.

Some critics of federalization said that it was supported by local elites in an effort to stay in power after the overthrow of Kremlin-backed President Viktor Yanukovych, who fled to Russia after February protests in Kiev erupted in violence.

"They want to carve out a principality of Monaco in eastern Ukraine headed by Yanukovych," Svetlana, 48, a literary editor, told The Moscow Times in a Donetsk cafe.

She added that federalization would benefit apparatchiks from Yanukovych's Party of the Regions, which has its turf in eastern Ukraine. The Donetsk region, where Yanukovych was born, was a major source of support for the president, and local elites have been accused of sympathizing with pro-Russian demonstrators, some of whom still consider Yanukovych their legitimate ruler.

Many pro-Ukrainian activists agreed that unless current local authorities appointed by Yanukovych are replaced, nothing will change for the better.

"Yanukovych's family has been building a local power structure with both businessmen and officials for years, and they still remain in their places," Sergei Popov, an activist of the committee of the Donetsk region's Patriotic Forces, the most prominent pro-Ukrainian group in the area, told The Moscow Times at a pro-Ukrainian rally in Donetsk late last week.

"These people are to blame for the current tragic situation," he said.

Nikolai Volynko, head of the Independent Trade Union of Donetsk Region Miners, shared this sentiment when speaking at the rally.

"Local authorities have been bringing us to our knees and robbing us for a long time," he said.

Supporters of the pro-Ukrainian movement have also argued that federalization would further destabilize a country that is already in turmoil.

"Federalization should only be considered when Ukraine is able to succeed as a state,"

Svetlana, a 48-year-old businesswoman, said at the rally.

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