

Protesters Seize New Building in Eastern Ukraine

April 29, 2014



Pro-Russian activists addressing Ukrainian riot police outside the regional government headquarters in Luhansk, eastern Ukraine, on Tuesday. Hundreds of demonstrators stormed the building and later opened fire on a local police station and took over a television station's headquarters.

LUHANSK, Ukraine — Protesters demanding more power for Ukraine's regions stormed the government building in Luhansk with baseball bats Tuesday, seizing control of a key site in one of the largest cities in Ukraine's troubled east.

The move further raises tensions in the east, where insurgents have seized city halls, police stations and other government buildings in at least 10 cities and towns.

The demonstrators who overran the building are seeking — at the very least — a referendum on granting greater authority to Ukraine's regions. Eastern Ukraine, which has a large Russian-speaking population, was the heartland of support for Viktor Yanukovich, the president who fled to Russia in February. The government that replaced him in Kiev has resisted those demands so far, fearing they could lead to a breakup of the country or mean that more regions — like Crimea — are annexed by Russia.

The storming came as 1,000 demonstrators gathered in front of the building. About 150 people, some masked and wielding baseball bats, broke out of the crowd and charged into the building, meeting no resistance. Later protesters formed a corridor for police who had been inside the building to leave.

Luhansk, a city of about 450,000, is just 25 kilometers west of the border with Russia.

Regional autonomy is a core issue in the unrest in eastern Ukraine, where insurgents fear the government that took power after Yanukovych will suppress the region's Russian speakers.

In Kiev, Ukraine's parliament on Tuesday discussed the possibility of holding a national referendum on whether the country should remain united or become a loose federation that allows the regions more powers. However, no consensus was reached on how such a referendum would be phrased or when it could be held.

Ukraine is already holding a new presidential election on May 25.

Yulia Tymoshenko, a former prime minister who is running for president and whose party dominates the new government, spoke out Tuesday against excessive decentralization.

"While we are giving authority to local administrative bodies, we are obliged — under any circumstances — not to lose authority over the country," Tymoshenko told lawmakers. She asked them to allow local self-governance "but not to lose the possibility of building a whole, unified, governable country, a country that is moving ahead under a strategy determined by all the elites and the people."

Russia has massed tens of thousands of troops in areas near the Ukrainian border, feeding concerns that Moscow aims to use unrest in the east as a pretext for an invasion.

See also:

[Ukraine Mayor Shot as Protesters Occupy More Buildings](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/04/29/protesters-seize-new-building-in-eastern-ukraine-a3485)

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