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Ukraine Fires Hundreds of Police Who 'Sided' With Pro-Russian Rebels

By Anna Dolgov

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Ukraine's interior minister Arsen Avakov.

Ukraine's interior minister has announced firing hundreds of police officers in Donetsk who are accused of siding with pro-Russian rebels and breaking their oath to a unified nation, as the government moved to reassert its authority amid heightening tensions with Russia.

"It is important that such a massive betrayal and dishonorable behavior does not automatically cast a negative shadow on honorable police officers who serve Ukraine," Arsen Avakov said on his Facebook page early Tuesday.

His comments came at a time when government forces were tightening their control around separatist strongholds in eastern Ukraine and amid signs of dramatically escalating tensions with Russia.

Avakov said that 585 police officers in Donetsk have been fired and 242 others who are

currently on leave are under investigation into their allegiance.

When pro-Russian separatists have taken control over parts of eastern Ukraine, they dispatch fighters to police stations to demand that officers switch sides or face punishment, the Western news site Mashable reported.

Scores of officers agreed, but many of those who refused seemed to have vanished, the report said, adding that pro-Moscow militias have abducted hundreds of pro-Ukrainian activists, journalists and police, according to human rights advocates.

Avakov said in his online post that the "lustration process" — the cleansing of the ranks — in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions would be followed by similar investigations in other areas.

"In this situation there is room for betrayal and baseness, but there is also room for honor and heroism," Avakov said.

The Interior Ministry has also moved to root out demonstrators who have doggedly camped out in Kiev's Maidan Square months after their protest that toppled the previous government ended.

The protesters who remain on the Maidan are a "project of the Russian FSB and of fringe political parties that are a thing of the past." Avakov told Ukraine's 1+1 television channel Sunday, referring to a Russian successor agency of the Soviet KGB.

While most of the tents are long gone from the Maidan, some protesters have dug in their heels and refused to leave, despite the government's continued pleas and pressure.

"They have a short time to leave. Take up weapons, and go to the front lines," Avakov said. His comments came amid renewed fears of a military conflict.

The Russian Foreign Ministry threatened "irreversible consequences" Sunday for what it said was Ukrainian forces launching a shell across the border. The ministry said in a statement that it viewed the blast that killed a Russian civilian and injured two others as "another aggressive act" by Ukraine.

The next day, Ukrainian Defense Minister Valery Heletey accused Russia of shooting a missile from its territory and downing a Ukrainian military transport plane — an action that, if true, would signal the start of Russian military involvement in eastern Ukraine.

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