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Kremlin Reportedly Backs Sacked Official in Ukraine's Breakaway Luhansk

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Igor Cornet (Stanislav Krasilnikov / TASS)

The Kremlin is reportedly throwing its weight behind the fired police chief of the breakaway republic of Luhansk amid an internal power struggle in the eastern Ukrainian region.

Russia has been accused of stoking the conflict between pro-Russian separatists and Kiev since Ukraine's Moscow-friendly leader was toppled in 2014.

Armed men in masks and unmarked military fatigues took up positions outside the local interior ministry in the provincial capital of Luhansk on Tuesday. Luhansk leader Igor Plotnitsky said the occupation "proved" that he correctly fired his interior minister, Igor Kornet, a day earlier.

The tensions surfaced a week after Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke with the Donetsk and Luhansk leaders for the first time by phone, urging them to agree to prisoner swaps with Kiev.

Moscow is backing Kornet in the power struggle, a Kremlin source close to long-time presidential aide Vladislav Surkov told the business outlet RBC on Tuesday. The unnamed source described the internal rivalry as the Kremlin's introduction of a "controlled management model" in breakaway Luhansk.

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"If Donetsk is fairly independent of the Kremlin ... in the case of Luhansk, Moscow decided to intervene and step up its influence in the republic," the source said.

Although Surkov is believed to be the Kremlin's main contact with the separatist leadership in the region, Russia's presidential administration disputed the RBC report.

The power struggle is Luhansk's internal affair and none of its leaders has sought the Kremlin's help, the presidential administration's Mikhail Arutyunov was cited by state-run TASS news agency as saying.

The RBC's source said the Kremlin has "weighed all the risks and decided to influence the political situation," stopping short of getting rid of Plotnitsky entirely.

"He's been given the last chance to rebuild the system — this time without internal squabbles, scandalous assassination attempts and murders."

Ukraine's police spokesman claimed that Plotnitsky has since fled to Russia.

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