

Kiev Threatens to Use Force to End Standoff

Top Ukraine Official Says Authorities Are Ready to Intervene Against Protesters

By

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Updated April 9, 2014 11:17 a.m. ET

<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303873604579490860377829796?mg=reno64-wsj&url=http%3A%2F%2Fonline.wsj.com%2Farticle%2FSB10001424052702303873604579490860377829796.html>



Pro-Russian protesters strengthen a barricade in front of the occupied regional administration building in Donetsk, Ukraine, on Wednesday. *European Pressphoto Agency*

MOSCOW—Ukraine's top police official said Wednesday that the authorities were ready to use force to end the days-old occupation of government buildings by pro-Kremlin activists in the country's east.

"I think that a resolution of this crisis will be found in the next 48 hours," Interior Minister Arsen Avakov said at a cabinet meeting in the capital, Kiev. "There are two possible ways it can happen: either through the negotiation process or through forceful intervention." ([Follow the latest developments on the crisis in Ukraine.](#))

Russia has warned that the use of force to dislodge the would-be separatists could provoke a civil war in Ukraine.

On Wednesday, Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) ramped up the pressure on Ukraine's fledgling government by threatening to force it to pay in advance for natural gas supplies because of mounting debts.



Kremlin sympathizers guard the entrance of the Ukrainian security service building in Luhansk on Wednesday, which has been occupied by separatists since Sunday. *Agence France-Presse/Getty Images*

"Our partners in Europe recognize the legitimacy of the current Kiev government but do nothing to support Ukraine—not a single dollar, not a single euro," Mr. Putin said in Moscow. "Russia doesn't recognize the legitimacy of the Kiev authorities but still continues providing economic support and subsidizing the Ukrainian economy with hundreds of millions and billions of dollars. Of course, this situation cannot last forever."

To that end, he said Ukraine could be required to make natural-gas payments one month in advance due to a growing unpaid bill, which Prime Minister [Dmitry Medvedev](#) said now totals \$16.6 billion. That figure is far higher than has been accepted by Ukrainian authorities.

The European Union in early March [pledged a \\$15 billion aid package to Ukraine](#) over several years, and this month the U.S. [Congress approved \\$1 billion in loan guarantees](#). The International Monetary Fund also has said it was prepared to give Ukraine an \$18 billion loan, although the agreement hasn't yet been completed.

Mr. Avakov's comments turn up the heat on pro-Kremlin protesters in the industrial cities of Donetsk, Kharkiv and Luhansk, where many ethnic Russians live.



A woman wrapped in a Russian national flag walks in front of a barricade at the regional administration building in Donetsk, Ukraine, on Wednesday. *Associated Press*

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said ultimatums from Kiev would do little to resolve the crisis. "Talk is essential. They must listen to the people," he said.

Ukraine has accused Moscow of instigating the protests, which began Sunday, to orchestrate a takeover similar to that seen in Crimea last month [ahead of its annexation by Russia](#). Separatists were driven out of the government building in Kharkiv on Tuesday but remain entrenched in Donetsk and Luhansk, where the situation remained volatile. Ukrainian officials said 56 people left a state-security building in Luhansk overnight, amid ongoing negotiations to resolve the occupation there.

It remained unclear whether the people were hostages or protesters, and how many remained in the building Wednesday. There were reports that those still inside were bolstering barricades and appeared to be preparing for a prolonged siege.

On Tuesday, Ukraine's state security service, the SBU, said the protesters had taken 60 people hostage and had set explosives around the building, but this was denied by the people inside the building. Officials also had said the protesters had seized a large cache of weapons held inside.

In a video apparently made inside the building and posted online Tuesday, a man in a balaclava mask with three men holding automatic weapons standing behind him demanded

a referendum on the region's status as part of Ukraine. The man warned against any attempt to storm the building.

Pro-Russian activists remain in control of the regional government building in Donetsk, around which they have erected barricades of tires and sandbags. On Monday, the group had declared itself the [provisional council of the "Donetsk People's Republic"](#) and demanded a referendum on the region's independence.

The head of Donetsk's regional administration said the local government had ground to a halt as a result of the standoff.



Ukrainian policemen stand guard in front of the Kharkiv regional state administration building on April 8. *Agence France-Presse/Getty Images*

Map

[View Graphics](#)



Unrest in Eastern Ukraine

"This has paralyzed work for citizens' economic well-being, the payment of benefits, salaries and pensions," Sergei Taruta said. "On my instructions, negotiations are being conducted with the occupiers of the regional council building."

The Russian Foreign Ministry on Wednesday sought to reassure the West that the large number of troops it has positioned near Ukraine's border pose no threat.

"The United States and Ukraine have no reason to be worried," the ministry said. "Russia has stated many times that it is not carrying out any unusual or unplanned activity on its territory near the border with Ukraine that would be of military significance."

Russia has repeatedly said it [reserves the right to protect ethnic Russians](#) living in Ukraine, who it claims are under threat from nationalist forces in the country.

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