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Tensions rising in Kharkov

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On 28 September one of the largest monuments of Lenin in Ukraine was pulled down in Kharkov. This was done by a group of masked men from nationalist circles and football supporters, and was supported by about 5000 pro-Ukrainian demonstrators. In recent months the statue had been the focal point for demonstrations by the pro-Russian part of the local community. The removal and destruction of the monument was supported by the governor of the Kharkov region Igor Baluta; the legal case that the local prosecutor's office initiated against those responsible for its demolition was also closed. Support for the demonstrators also came from Arsen Avakov, the head of the Interior Ministry, who is from Kharkov. The city's mayor Gennadiy Kernes took the opposite position, promising the restoration of the monument.

Commentary

- The events of 28 September are a sign of the tense atmosphere that has persisted in the city for several weeks. For a long time the Kharkov region has seen increased activity of pro-Russian activists. Local police and the Security Service of Ukraine have been regularly arresting people suspected of supporting separatism, and weapons and money intended for the terrorists in the Donbas have been confiscated. There have been several explosions in the city within the last month. Kharkov is witnessing a clash of two different visions for the future of Ukraine: pro-European and pro-Russian. Currently, due to the large number of police officers on the streets, activity by pro-Ukrainian groups and the actions of the local authorities, who at all costs want to keep peace in the city and the region, the situation is stable. The overthrow of the statue of Lenin, however, could disrupt the fragile peace and lead to further actions by the pro-Russian communities.
- The demonstration by several thousand pro-Ukrainians could give a false impression that Kharkov is a city where the majority of the population supports the policy of the current government, and clearly favour Kyiv in the ongoing conflict. However, sociological studies show that the Kharkov region is the second most pro-Russian region of Ukraine after the Donbas. The Kharkov region shows the highest support in Ukraine (except for the Donbas) for accession to the Customs Union (42%), the lowest for European integration (31%) and for joining NATO (11%). These results are similar to those obtained in the Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts. The passivity of pro-Russian Kharkov results from a general reluctance by that part of society to any form of public activity, as well as the pro-Ukrainian activity supported by the government. This does not mean, however, that in the

case of controlled, externally inspired operations it would be impossible to activate a critical mass and foment unrest in the city.

- The destabilisation of the situation in the region has the potential to foster discord within the local government's camp. The Kyiv-appointed governor Igor Baluta and the mayor Gennadiy Kernes have adopted opposing stances on the events of 28 September, which may herald a political conflict dangerous to peace in the city and the region. Kharkov's mayor is hated by pro-Kyiv activists, who have been calling for the president to replace the municipal authorities. Arsen Avakov may wish to take advantage of the situation; Kharkov is his political home base, and he is interested in strengthening his influence in the region.