

The leader of the Donetsk separatists is assassinated

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On 31 August, in the centre of Donetsk, there was a successful assassination attempt against Aleksandr Zakharchenko, the leader of the unrecognised 'Donetsk People's Republic' (DRL). The bomb was planted in a restaurant owned by Zakharchenko. The assassination is another in the series of unsolved murders of other leaders of the DRL and LRL (Lugansk People's Republic) over the last three years.

Commentary

- The circumstances surrounding Zakharchenko's death indicate that the attack must have involved people associated with local security bodies, who knew Zakharchenko's schedule, the places he lived, and how his bodyguards behaved. These people also had free access to the building of the café where the explosive charge was planted. The bombers' professionalism is demonstrated by the fact that the bomb did not cause a significant loss of life (one fatality, two people injured). It is also curious that the café's staff were uninjured.
- After the attack, routine blockade operations were carried out in Donetsk, freedom of access to the city was limited and a curfew was introduced. An operational group came to Donetsk composed of representatives of the Russian special services, whose purpose was to offer support in establishing the circumstances of the assassination. According to the official version adopted by the regime in Donetsk and supported by Russian propaganda, the mastermind behind the assassination was Zakharchenko's head of security, working in tandem with the Ukrainian services; there is currently no information about this individual's present whereabouts.
- **Zakharchenko's elimination could have been the result of an internal, criminal conflict within the DRL, mainly involving the fight for control over economic assets, but it could just as well have been a decision taken in Moscow, in order to get rid of the separatists' discredited leader.** It should be noted that one version does not exclude the other. Aside from speculation about the real planners of the assassination, its conduct shows that **the DRL's ruling group is not homogeneous internally, and – which remains a possibility – has been challenging the suggestions coming to it from Moscow.**
- Since Zakharchenko's death his duties have been taken over by the former 'deputy prime minister of the DRL government', Dmitri Trapeznikov, who was responsible for internal and foreign policy issues. For a dozen or so years he has run a series of businesses, and

was associated with the local group of entrepreneurs in the orbit of the oligarch Rinat Akhmetov. He was not linked directly with the institutions of force; after a brief stint with a group of anti-Ukrainian volunteers and a job in the local administration, he became responsible for controlling financial operations within the DRL. His temporary assumption of duties after Zakharchenko does not automatically mean Trapeznikov will become head of state of the self-proclaimed Republic. That largely depends on Moscow's acceptance

- **The official Russian reaction to Zakharchenko's assassination was swift and coordinated. The Russian authorities almost immediately blamed the separatist leader's death on the Ukrainians.** In an official telegram, the Russian president suggested such an interpretation, noting that Zakharchenko's murder was "is further evidence that those who have chosen a path of terror, violence and fear do not want to search for a peaceful political solution to the conflict or have a real dialogue with the people in the southeast, but thrive on destabilisation to bring the people of Donbass to their knees". Putin stressed that "Russia will never abandon the people of the Donbas". In turn, Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov called Zakharchenko's assassination "a provocation by Ukraine aimed at breaking the Minsk agreements" and announced the suspension of the Normandy-format meetings (Ukraine, Russia, France, Germany) which had been intended to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine and implement the Minsk agreements of February 2015. The statement by Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, that Zakharchenko's death will have "inevitable consequences", suggests that Russia intends to use this event to take further political actions related to the conflict in Ukraine. So far, however, there have been no signs that the harsh rhetorical reaction by the Russian authorities has been accompanied by any military action (such as increased troop movements).
- **Russia will probably try to exploit the death of the separatist leader to break the stalemate around the Minsk agreements, and persuade Kiev to implement their political part and treat the separatists as full participants in the talks on the Donbas conflict. It is possible that such activities may be accompanied by a periodic intensification in armed clashes with Ukrainian forces.** The change among the DRL's leadership could also be used by the Kremlin to **further strengthen its control of the situation in the separatist republics** (particularly over the funds that the Kremlin spends on maintaining the para-states in the Donbas). A similar change increasing Kremlin control over the separatists occurred after the putsch in the Lugansk People's Republic in November 2017.
- The successful attack on Zakharchenko found a wide social echo in Ukraine, although **representatives of the highest authorities of the State made no comment on the events.** Among the media comments, the opinion predominating was that the attack had been carried out either by Russian special services or Zakharchenko's criminal opponents. On 31 August, the Ukrainian foreign ministry stated that the rapid response by Russian diplomacy to Zakharchenko's murder was proof that "at least an attempt to cover up the puppets which Russia supports and finances". In turn, on 1 September, the head of Ukraine's security service Vasyl Hrytsak revealed two versions of the murder which they are considering: (1) the attack was organised by the FSB, which is continuing to purge the senior leadership circles of both unrecognised republics to get rid of the people who

know the most; or (2) that it was a settling of personal scores between the separatists on financial and criminal grounds.