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Fight Club, Donetsk

Meet eastern Ukraine's emerging warlords

Бійцівський клуб, Донецьк

З квітня в Донецьку на перший план висунулися три потужні збройні фракції: "Російська православна армія", батальйон "Схід" і "Оплот". Кожна з них будується навколо впливового командира, який витрачає свій час не тільки на ведення триваючої партизанської війни проти сил Києва, а й на те, щоб вершити суворе правосуддя і затримувати цивільних осіб, іноді з метою обміну полоненими. Хто вони, лідери угруповань, - кістяк майбутньої незалежної Східної України або потенційні польові командири, які намагаються на всякий випадок застопити за собою територію? На даний момент їх згуртувала антитерористична операція Києва, хоча кожен з цих людей по-своєму бачить політичне майбутнє регіону. Повстанці здебільшого вважають, що новий кийвський уряд - це американські маріонетки, серед яких домінують ультра націоналісти і "фашисти".

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On a recent sunny afternoon in Donetsk, Vadim Kerch was holding court in a dark office in the former headquarters of Ukraine's security service, which has been occupied since last month by a group of rebels who call themselves the Russian Orthodox Army. Kerch is one of their two commanders.

A local resident was appealing to Kerch for help. At the end of May, the man said, armed men claiming to be part of the pro-Russian uprising seized his car in the neighboring city of Makeyevka and then called him asking how much he was willing to pay for its return.

Between answering calls on his cell phone, Kerch told the supplicant to get to the point. One of the half-dozen Kalashnikov-toting rebels grouped in a loose circle around the desk spoke up, noting that at least 46 vehicles had been carjacked in Makeyevka. Finally, Kerch promised to go with the newly appointed "people's prosecutor" later that day to get the car back.

"Today is full of bullshit rather than war," he joked.

When pro-Russian protesters first occupied the Donetsk regional administration building in April, different rebel groups and units staked out each of the 11 floors. Since then, these motley bands have been eclipsed by three powerful, armed factions: the Russian Orthodox Army, the Vostok Battalion, and Oplot. Each is built around an influential commander who spends his time not only waging the ongoing guerrilla war against Kiev's forces, but also dispensing harsh justice and detaining civilians, sometimes for prisoner exchanges. Each group has several hundred men, including Russian volunteers, and heavy armaments. (During a recent visit to Vostok's base, I saw four fighting vehicles, two anti-aircraft guns, numerous rocket-propelled grenades, and surface-to-air missiles.)

Are these commanders the backbone of an emerging independent East Ukraine, or are they burgeoning warlords staking out their turf for whatever comes next?

So far, Kiev's "anti-terrorist operation" to take back eastern Ukraine has united the rebel leaders in the defense of the self-declared Donetsk and Lugansk "People's Republics," even though each has his own vision of the region's political future. The rebels largely view the new Kiev government as an American puppet dominated by ultranationalists and "fascists" and have called on Russia to deploy troops.

Ukraine's Health Ministry said last week that at least 270 people have died in eastern Ukraine since the military operation began in April, though this number has since risen to at least 330. In the bloodiest day of fighting yet, rebels killed three border guards in Mariupol on Saturday, June 14, and shot down a Ukrainian military transport plane outside Lugansk, killing all 49 servicemen on board.

But President Petro Poroshenko's efforts toward de-escalation, including the promise of a cease-fire if rebels agree to lay down their arms, could soon test these commanders' willingness to submit themselves to a greater authority. Their real allegiances -- whether to the Russian government, a certain local oligarch, the people's republics, or simply themselves -- remain unclear.

Vostok is the most battle-ready group, led by Alexander Khodakovsky, a thoughtful man with a closely shaved head and goatee who was formerly the head of an elite special forces unit. The third major armed force in Donetsk is Oplot, a civic organization and mixed martial arts club espousing clean living and pan-Slavic nationalism that in Donetsk has been transformed into a militia under the command of Alexander Zakharchenko, a sardonic former mechanic with a potbelly and a deep tan.

But there are other emerging warlords too. Igor Girkin, who goes by the nom de guerre Strelkov and is alleged by the Ukrainian government to be a Russian intelligence agent, controls the besieged city of Sloviansk, where journalists have been abducted and two rebels from competing groups were recently executed on his orders. Last week, he arrested the "people's mayor" of Sloviansk, Vyacheslav Ponomarev. In the next region over, the city of Lugansk and several nearby towns are under the control of the Army of the Southeast, whose founder, Valery Bolotov, recently traveled to Russia to recuperate from an assassination attempt. "Only our army is preserving the safety of Lugansk residents," Vladimir Gromov, the head of counterintelligence in the Army of the Southeast, told me.

Several other small cities in the region are largely under the control of strongman commanders, from Igor Bezler -- a former lieutenant colonel in the Russian army and also an alleged intelligence agent -- in Gorlovka to a group of Russian Cossacks in Antratsyt. Bezler, who is known by the nickname "Bes" or "Demon," recently appeared in a video in which he appeared to execute two Ukrainian intelligence agents by firing squad. (Some analysts have said the video may have been staged.)

A symbolic moment in the transition from hodgepodge groups of men with clubs to a few heavily armed militias came at the end of May, when members of the Vostok Battalion kicked all rebels who were not members of the self-appointed government out of the Donetsk administration building. Many saw the tense showdown as a move by Vostok to establish itself as the premier power in Donetsk, but Khodakovsky said the "show of force" was a side effect. The real goal, he said, was to punish looters who had stolen alcohol and other goods from a supermarket that was abandoned during heavy fighting at the airport that killed at least 50 of Khodakovsky's men, including 31 Russian citizens.

A rash of marauding that has hit eastern Ukraine in recent weeks has positioned militia commanders as the ultimate arbiters in their locales. Strelkov even ordered the shooting of two of his men for "looting, armed robbery, kidnapping, [and] leaving battle positions," according to an execution order posted online that appeared to be stamped and signed by Strelkov.

These days, eastern Ukraine's countryside is largely a lawless territory dotted with checkpoints run by pro-Russian rebels and Ukrainian government forces, while the cities have retained a sense of order. But all three Donetsk militia commanders told me that criminality is on the rise.

"We catch several looters every day," Zakharchenko, Oplot's commander, told me. "They steal cars, rob people on the street, steal from stores, and commit other provocations." Most police have declared fealty to the new People's Republic and are powerless next to the heavily armed militants around the region. The regional head of police resigned after speaking with pro-Russian protesters who stormed his headquarters shortly after the start of the uprising in April.

Kerch said law enforcement officers have been "demoralized" by the rebel movement. "The police are used to working with criminals, but now there are many people with machine guns in the city, and far from all of those who started taking part in this movement think about their homeland first and foremost," he said. "Donetsk People's Republic bandits who weren't around before now wear the symbols and masks and rob people."

To crack down on such actions, rebel militias have conducted day and night patrols, sometimes working with police and volunteers. In Donetsk, violators are not shot, Khodakovsky said, though they may be publicly humiliated, such as two men in a recently published video who were forced to sweep sidewalks wearing signs saying, "I'm a thief." But Kerch said executions could be warranted in wartime.

The outbreak of kidnappings and detentions in rebel-held areas, however, reveals the darker side of vigilante justice, including that meted out by rebel commanders. Reports by the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and Human Rights Watch have suggested that the number of abductions in eastern Ukraine is growing. Journalists, local citizens, and OSCE monitors have been held hostage. The local rights organization Prosvita recently estimated that 200 people are being detained illegally, a number that Kerch confirmed. Zakharchenko said Oplot alone is holding 40 to 50 prisoners.

An electoral commission member from Donetsk, who wished to remain anonymous, said he and three friends were seized three days before the May 25 presidential election and held for six days in the basement of the security services building where the Russian Orthodox Army is headquartered. They were interrogated, beaten, and tortured with electroshocks. Their captors shot live bullets into the wall next to them. The electoral commission member was later hospitalized with a ruptured eardrum, a basal skull fracture, and a kidney contusion, he said. Although the man was blindfolded, he said his main interrogator had a strong Russian accent. Another 20 to 30 people were being held in the basement with him.

Kerch said he was holding prisoners, including two "looters" who had stolen the man's car in Makeyevka, but declined to comment further. (Kerch said he had returned the car to its owner.) He said the Russian Orthodox Army is "actively searching" for Kiev agents.

The Russian Orthodox Army also seized Nikolai Yakubovich, a local pro-Kiev activist and advisor to Ukraine's security council, and exchanged him for rebel prisoners. In a video filmed during his captivity, one of Yakubovich's eyes is bruised shut and he shows signs of other injuries.

Dmitry Verzilov, an electoral commission member and district council member in Donetsk, said he himself was seized for several hours when he went to speak to rebel leaders about the hostage problem. He was thrown in the basement of the Donetsk administration building, where he says he counted 83 prisoners. A Donetsk People's Republic spokesperson denied that prisoners were being held in the basement of the administration building.

In another hint of the growing lawlessness, Maxim Petrukhin, an aide to Donetsk People's Republic chairman Denis Pushilin, was gunned down by a passing car in the city center in broad daylight on Sunday. Pushilin said "Kiev agents" were likely to blame.

Donetsk People's Republic leaders have said each militia will oversee certain areas of law enforcement and military operations. But the commanders say there is no clear separation of duties yet, and all remain a law to themselves, with their alliances hard to guess. All three major Donetsk units were suspected of working with local oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine's richest man and an ally of former President Viktor Yanukovich, after their fighters stopped an angry crowd from storming his residence and guarded it for days after. The militia leaders said their men were simply trying to prevent mass disorder.

Their ties to the Kremlin are also unclear. Mark Galeotti, a professor of global affairs at New York University and an expert on Russian security services, says that Khodakovsky was known as an officer of the "more close to Moscow variety" in Ukraine's special forces, where Russian agents were notoriously pervasive. Gromov in Lugansk was recently photographed in Moscow with Russian nationalist MP Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. But the three Donetsk commanders denied direct links with the Kremlin and said they had obtained their weapons from captured military installations.

Kiev has accused Russia of sending men and weapons into eastern Ukraine, including a pair of tanks that it said had come across the border on June 12. Rebels said they had seized the tanks from a military warehouse. (I saw three tanks flying a Russian flag outside Donetsk later that day.)

If the rebellion's military leaders are receiving money from Russia, it is most likely from nationalist oligarchs such as Konstantin Malofeev, who previously employed both Sloviansk commander Strelkov and Donetsk People's Republic Prime Minister Alexander Borodai at his firm, according to reporting by the independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* and well-known journalist Oleg Kashin. Malofeev also funded a separatist leader in Crimea, Kashin reported.

The Donetsk militia chiefs say they are loyal to the Donetsk People's Republic, though those ties seem informal and in some cases tenuous. "There's no Donetsk People's Republic; this is all just some project that I don't understand," Khodakovsky said. "I didn't vote in the referendum [on independence]. I didn't vote for this. I just faced a choice: to be with my own people or to be against my own people. Russia is my country. I served there. My relatives live there."

Their end goal is also vague: Zakharchenko said he would be able to lay down his weapons when "no tanks or fighting vehicles are pointing their barrels at me." But for now they remain united in a conflict against what they see as an unjust, aggressive government in Kiev. "A Russian man invented this in World War II," Zakharchenko said, gesturing to a huge Simonov anti-tank rifle pointing out of a window next to his office below a Soviet-built television tower, "and Russian men are still using it to defend their homeland."

Although Poroshenko has pledged amnesty for rebels who agree to lay down their arms, he specifically excluded those who have committed grievous crimes. Given that Borodai and Pushilin were slapped last week with charges of terrorism and attempting to overthrow the government, militia leaders can more likely expect prosecution than amnesty if Kiev retakes the east. Their actions have also divided the local populace, a majority of which opposes the rebels' tactics. If the stalemate continues or if eastern Ukraine successfully separates from the rest of the country, will these men eventually relinquish their power and risk their personal safety? Or will they begin fighting among themselves?

"If we put down our weapons by agreement, there are always people who don't want to do so because they've gotten used to the power that weapons give them," says Khodakovsky, the Vostok Battalion's commander. "We will have to detain them and force them to."