EUROPE 11.09.2018

For whose benefit?

What the murder of rebel leader Alexander Zakharchenko means for the peace process in eastern Ukraine

Read this interview in German or Russian.

On the evening of 31 August 2018 in Donetsk, the leader of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), Alexander Zakharchenko (42), was killed and his close ally, Alexander Timofeev, seriously injured in a remote-controlled explosion. In 2014, Zakharchenko was one of the commanders of the Russian-backed insurgency in eastern Ukraine against the Kiev government. He was named Prime Minister of the People's Republic in August 2014 and was one of the signatories of the Minsk Protocol.

Claudia Detsch spoke to Marcel Röthig in Kiev about the situation on the ground and the various reactions to Zakharchenko's assassination.

How has the situation in eastern Ukraine evolved since the assassination?

Initially both sides put their troops on full alert along the contact line. However, so far there have been no reports of an escalation of hostilities. Donetsk itself has been completely sealed off, troops and tanks amassed in the city, a state of emergency declared, and the curfew extended. On Sunday, 200,000 people gathered for Zakharchenko's funeral although teachers and state officials were forced to attend.

The DPR very quickly announced the detention of 'Ukrainian agents' who they said had already confessed to the murder. The SBU, the Ukrainian Security Service, disputes these arrests.

Similarly surprising is the very orderly selection of Zakharchenko's successor, a process that was also consistent with the laws of the DPR. Already on the evening of the assassination, the Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the DPR, Dmitry Trapeznikov, was appointed acting head of the DPR. He announced that the main

objective was still to integrate Ukraine into the Russian Federation. In 2016, the current Security Minister of the DPR, Alexander Khodakovsky, described Trapeznikov as the 'grey cardinal', who he claimed had been directly installed into the separatist leadership by the Russian presidential administration. The fact that they only needed three hours to decide on the new head of the Republic is yet another sign that the Kremlin has the local elite under complete control.

How did Kiev and Moscow react to the murder?

Representatives of the government in Moscow immediately blamed Kiev for the assassination. Zakharchenko's violent death was seen as jeopardising the Minsk Protocol. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Zakharchenko's murder meant that there would be no further meetings in the Normandy format for the foreseeable future. The next meeting had been planned to take place in fall. The Ukrainian President, Petro Poroschenko, has so far refrained from commenting. The foreign ministry in Kiev declared that the rapid reaction of the Russian foreign ministry served to protect the Kremlin-backed puppets. The Ukrainian Security Service believes that Zakharchenko's death could be the result of internal business conflicts among the militants. However, they also didn't rule out the possibility that Russia itself could be behind the murder, as there is information to suggest that Russia was reputed to have been unhappy with Zakharchenko.

What evidence is there to support the theory of a deliberate 'change' of leadership?

Since the start of the summer, Zakharchenko and his close ally, Alexander Timofeev, had been subject to considerable criticism. There was much speculation about Russia's plans to replace both of them. According to the official version of events, one of Zakharchenko's bodyguards who, in all likelihood, planted the explosive also died at the scene. According to other sources, a total of three of his personal guards in fact disappeared. It appears doubtful that the SBU would be in a position to recruit so many saboteurs that close to the leader of the Donetsk Republic.

A transition of power can be solved in different ways. But the version that involves the death of a hero has a clear advantage: it makes it possible to blame Ukraine. The murder of Zakharchenko was, however, not in Kiev's interest because such a provocation could result in Russia officially recognising the DPR and the LPR, the Luhansk People's Republic, as independent states. This would make a

reunification of the breakaway territories with the rest of Ukraine virtually impossible. In the worst-case scenario, however, an action like this coming from Kiev could have triggered open warfare with Russia. Kiev is perfectly well aware that the country could not withstand such a confrontation.

What impact will Zakharchenko's murder have on the peace process?

One possible scenario is that military confrontation could intensify, either because the separatists would seek revenge or one of both sides could withdraw from the Minsk Agreement.

The experience from 2017 would however indicate that the escalation scenario is unlikely. At that time, Igor Plotnitsky, former head of the LNR and also a signatory of the Minsk Protocol, was deposed by his 'comrades-in-arms' and fled to Russia. This had no impact on the Minsk process. The peace on the frontline over the last few days also suggests the escalation scenario won't come to pass. This does not rule out a deterioration in the situation in certain sectors of the front, however.

In terms of the reintegration of DPR into Ukraine then there is another question of crucial importance: the role of the Russian Federation. Is it prepared for a change like this? Or could Russia possibly even be the initiator of such reintegration? Of course there can be no question of a quick and easy return of the uncontrolled zones. But with a moderate head of the DPR and, moreover, one who is loyal to Moscow, the probability of a UN peace mission is likely to grow. This, in turn, could mean the gradual reintegration of Donbass.

How things develop from here depends on whether Ukraine and Russia can reach a consensus on the key issues around Donbass – notably the special status of the region or, in other words, the broad autonomy of the now uncontrolled territories of Donetsk and Luhansk and their return to Ukraine. Four years on and Russia still hasn't recognised the DPR and LNR as independent states and thus does not yet seem to have dismissed the option of returning the regions to Ukraine on its own terms.

For now we therefore have a 'neutral' scenario. Ukrainian presidential elections are planned for the start of 2019. The replacement of the DPR leadership should initially make it easier for Kiev to extend the contentious law on the special status of Donbass by another year thus keeping this emotional topic out of the electoral campaign.