

German foreign minister Steinmeier woos Ukrainian oligarchs

Peter Schwarz
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At the weekend, German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD) visited Donetsk in eastern Ukraine to pay his respects to the oligarchs of the industrial metropolis. First to receive him was Rinat Akhmetov in his glass-clad corporate headquarters, where they held a private conversation lasting one hour.

With an estimated fortune of \$18 billion, Akhmetov is the richest man in Ukraine. His investment company, System Capital Management (SCM), controls large parts of eastern Ukraine's steel and coal industries, and plays a leading role in the food and transport industries, as well as commercial agriculture. Akhmetov also enjoys influence with the regional media and is president of the Shakhtar Donetsk Football Club, which he built up into the leading Ukrainian club with massive financial support.

For a long time, the "Godfather of Donetsk" was regarded as the *eminence grise* of Viktor Yanukovich, who was deposed as president on February 22. Akhmetov financed Yanukovich's election campaigns in 2004 and 2010, and has sat as a deputy in the Ukrainian parliament since 2006 for Yanukovich's Party of Regions. However, he has always hedged his bets in all political directions. Yanukovich's rival Yulia Timoshenko has also benefited from the financial drip feed of the richest Ukrainian oligarch.

Following the extensive private discussion with Akhmetov, "the German foreign minister appeared very pleased", reported Stefan Braun, who accompanied Steinmeier to Donetsk as a correspondent for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

"He had come to find out whether 'those' who hold sway here economically and politically support the changes in the country", Braun quoted the foreign minister. "And now, following the conversation with

Akhmetov, he had the impression, 'It is accepted that there will be a new Ukraine'."

Steinmeier's comment is a damning indictment of his own policy. For weeks, he has personally been telling politicians of all parties in the Bundestag (parliament) and the media that a democratic transformation had taken place in Ukraine, bringing a new government to power that enjoys the trust and support of the people. Now, the German foreign minister mentions in passing that the oligarchs "hold sway economically and politically" and that he needs their support in order to complete the desired "changes in the country".

Apparently, Steinmeier managed to convince Akhmetov that the "changes" are in his interest.

The goal of the putsch in Kiev supported by Germany, the US and other European countries was never "democracy and freedom", but rather the exploitation of the raw materials and cheap labour of Ukraine by Western corporations and the imperialist penetration into the territory of the former Soviet Union, at the expense of Russia. This goal also corresponded to the means employed: open collaboration with the fascists of Svoboda and the Right Sector, who intimidated and terrorised any opposition to the new government.

Akhmetov is the living embodiment of the parasitic group of oligarchs who unscrupulously plundered the state-owned property, amassed enormous fortunes and shifted a large part of their wealth to safety abroad. Three years ago, he made headlines when, for €156 million, he bought the most expensive private home in London ever sold in the British capital.

Steinmeier's cap-in-hand trip to Donetsk was aimed at assuring the "Godfather of Donetsk" and all the other Ukrainian oligarchs that their illegitimate wealth was not in any danger from the imperialist takeover,

and that they will be able to continue exploiting the Ukrainian working class.

After seeing Akhmetov, Steinmeier paid a visit to another Donetsk oligarch, the new governor of the Donbass region, Sergei Taruta. The visit almost did not take place because thousands of pro-Russian demonstrators blocked access to the Governor's Palace.

Like Akhmetov, Taruta controls parts of the Ukrainian steel industry. Moreover, he has also bought the former Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk, Poland, and two steel plants in Poland and Hungary. With an estimated fortune of \$660 million, he ranks well below Akhmetov on the list of wealthy Ukrainians, reaching a humble 55th place.

Taruta does not owe his office to anything resembling a democratic election, but was elevated into the influential posts by the (also unelected) new Ukrainian president, Olexandr Turchynov.

In his home city of Dnipropetrovsk, Turchynov has also appointed an oligarch as governor: Ihor Kolomojskyj, who made his fortune in oil, iron, and food, ranking as the third most wealthy Ukrainian, with \$2.4 billion, and is also a donor to Vitali Klitschko. Steinmeier did not visit him, presumably due to lack of time.

Instead, he paid his respects to Sergey Tihipko (estimated fortune \$370 million) in Kiev. This oligarch from Dnipropetrovsk made his money in the banking sector and has been politically active since the 1990s. Among other positions, he was National Bank chief and economics minister. In 2010, he unsuccessfully contested the presidential election. From March 2010 to February 2014, he was deputy prime minister of Ukraine. If he contests the presidential elections in May, he could possibly expect European support.



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