Leaders of pro-Russian separatist forces in eastern Ukraine resign

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Leading figures in the pro-Russian separatist movement in east Ukraine have announced their resignation over the past ten days. The reshuffle, coming alongside recent remarks by Russian President Vladimir Putin rebuffing pro-war sentiment in the Russian parliament, is bound up with the Kremlin's efforts to de-escalate the confrontation with the Western imperialist powers over Ukraine.

At the end of last week, Igor Strelkov, the Donetsk People's Republic's (DPR) top military commander, resigned his post after a visit to Moscow and was replaced by Vladimir Kononov. According to the DPR's new prime minister, Aleksandr Zakharchenko, Strelkov resigned to do "other important work." Zakharchenko said Strelkov is simply in need of a vacation and will eventually return to play a role in Novorossiya, the self-proclaimed state uniting the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR).

Strelkov's departure was announced simultaneously with the resignation of Valery Bolotov, the leader of the LPR. Bolotov has been replaced by Igor Plotnitsky, who was serving as the LPR's defense chief. Previously, on August 7, DPR Prime Minister Aleksandr Borodai left his post, handing over the reins to Zakharchenko.

The leadership changes occur as the DPR and LPR struggle for survival in the face of a siege of both cities by the Ukrainian regime. More than 2,000 have been killed and thousands more wounded. Over half a million have fled to Russia, and residents remaining in the region have been cut off from water, electricity, and telephone service. On Friday, Zakharchenko appealed again for humanitarian aid.

The Kremlin is making renewed overtures to the West and efforts to contain pro-war sentiment within the Russian ruling elite. Yesterday, four-way talks between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and representatives from Ukraine, Germany and France were held in Berlin. These talks followed a meeting between the heads of the Russian and Ukrainian presidential administrations in Sochi.

Over the weekend, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö also shuttled between the two regimes in an effort "to stop the string of negative events and contribute to stabilization."

In Yalta on Thursday, Putin appealed to representatives from the Russian parliament's major political factions in a special session to "calmly and effectively build up our country with dignity, not fence it off from the outside world."

"We need to consolidate and mobilize: not for war or any kind of confrontation, [but] for hard work in the name of Russia," he insisted.

While reiterating Moscow's intention to integrate Crimea into Russia, developing its infrastructure and strengthening its defenses with the stationing of armed forces, Putin also cautioned against "saturating the peninsula with unnecessary personnel and surplus weapons." He said that although Russia had the capacity to secure its sovereignty with "armed forces, ... this is not a panacea."

Putin openly rebuffed far-right leader Vladimir Zhirinovksy, who has called for invading Ukraine, stating that Zhirinovksy's views do not reflect the state's official position.

Putin arrived four hours late to the event. In contrast to normal protocol, his address was not broadcast, and a full transcript of his remarks has not been made available to the press.

The resignation of the DPR and LPR leadership does not represent a shift in the political orientation of the leadership of the separatist movement. All those moved

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into the recently-vacated positions were active in the movement's military or political apparatus from the start. However, in contrast to the DPR's former top leaders, the new appointees are predominantly residents of east Ukraine.

As the Kiev regime has indicated that it will not broker a deal with those it has identified as "Russian invaders," the changes appear to be an attempt to make the DPR-LPR leadership more acceptable to the Ukrainian government to lay the groundwork for a possible cessation of hostilities.

Aleksei Makarkin, deputy director of the Center of Political Technology, argued recently that Strelkov's dismissal was bound up with the fact that being a "hero of the Russian nationalists," he was "absolutely incompatible with any groups of the Ukrainian elite, even with those with a critical attitude towards NATO."

Whether or not the Kiev regime is open to a resolution of the conflict in southeastern Ukraine that falls short of the total destruction of the region remains to be seen. Shortly after the change in personnel in the DPR and the LPR, the Ukrainian government issued new allegations that the separatists are receiving direct aid and training from Moscow, citing remarks made by Zakharchenko to a meeting of his government. In an interview with *LifeNews* on August 16, Zakharchenko denied these allegations.

The forces leading the separatist movement in southeastern Ukraine came to power out of the political vacuum that emerged after mass opposition in the region erupted against the far-right coup in Kiev. They are Russian nationalists with various murky ties to the Kremlin and right-wing movements in Moscow.

Igor Strelkov acknowledged in July that until March 2013 he had been an officer in the Russian security services, and had fought in Transnistria, Bosnia, and Chechnya, the latter as part of Russian military operations. Former DPR Prime Minister Aleksandr Borodai is a Russian nationalist ideologue with a long history of writing for the right-wing press in Moscow and serving as an advisor to business interests. Pavel Gubarev, the "People's Governor" of Donbass (the Donetsk basin), was a member of Russian National Unity, a neo-fascist organization.

Strelkov and Borodai, both Russian citizens who normally reside in Moscow, came to southeastern Ukraine after being in Crimea in the lead-up to the popular vote that led to the reunification of the peninsula with Russia.

These layers secured their control over opposition to the Kiev regime by exploiting nostalgia for the Soviet past to lend a progressive gloss to their nationalist outlook. While proclaiming Russian Orthodoxy to be a state religion, the DPR also plays the Internationale at official functions. On July 8, DPR military commander Strelkov claimed, "We are fighting here specifically for Russia and for the rights of the Donetsk Republic's people. We are battling here for the USSR and for the Donetsk people's rights as a part of the USSR. For the USSR as our universal, divine Motherland."

The separatist Novorossiya project has been praised as a "red-brown" alliance by Eduard Limonov, head of the far-right National Bolshevik Party. In May, the DPR announced it was nationalizing all industry in the region and promised to provide basic social benefits to the population. Its claims were supported by a layer of the Russian and Ukrainian pseudo-left, which insisted that the right-wing leaders of the DPR and LPR were creating a "social state" and forming the basis for a broad populist movement.

By the end of May, however, the DPR had backtracked on its nationalization promises and said it would not touch the holdings of Rinat Akhmetov, the billionaire industrial baron of the region and primary owner of its coal operations.

Then-DPR Prime Minister Aleksandr Borodai stated, "We're not talking about nationalization in relation to [Akhmetov's] enterprises. We have no relationship to communists who seize and nationalize things. We respect the right of private property." While describing Akhmetov's refusal to pay taxes to the DPR government as illegal, Borodai praised the oligarch for all he had done for the region.

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