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Are the Donbass Separatists Paid Stooges?

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When former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky visited Donetsk a week ago, the masked men holding the regional administration building refused to let him in, saying "you can easily learn everything about what is going on in Donbass from Russian media reports."

Two hours later, Denis Pushilin, the self-proclaimed leader of the Donetsk People's Republic, came running to meet with Khodorkovsky. Pushilin — who formerly headed the Donetsk branch of the MMM company, Russia's most notorious Ponzi scheme — was simply following orders issued by Rinat Akhmetov, the richest man in Ukraine.

When a high-profile mediator like Khodorkovsky arrives to speak with the insurgents but is told to "go watch the evening news," it suggests that the insurgents are not insurgents at all but paid stooges.

Human nature has not changed in the last three months: A person fighting for something he believes in and who feels his back has been pushed up against the wall will always welcome

an opportunity to state his case. And when given the chance, he'll talk your ear off. But someone who is just carrying out orders will simply ask his superiors how he should respond to questions.

I also visited the occupied administration building in Donetsk. The pro-Russian protesters fell into two distinct categories.

The first group consisted of pensioners and a motley assortment of local residents. The pensioners kept screaming slogans in support of President Vladimir Putin, which were intermixed with slogans that U.S.-backed fascists had occupied Kiev.

The second group consisted of armed men in masks, the leaders of the "Donetsk Republic" and even their press secretary who, rather than state the insurgents' position, told me to listen to his interview on Russian television. He then told his men to escort me out of the building.

Khodorkovsky received the same treatment.

Pushilin then showed up to have a talk with Khodorkovsky — not only because Akhmetov told him to do it but because he thought the photo-op with Putin's exiled political rival would raise his status.

The whole episode was absurd. First, Akhmetov did not sit at the same table with Pushilin. He said hello and promptly left. Second, Akhmetov sent one of his men at the meeting who simply watched the proceedings in silence. He watched Pushilin to make sure he did not say too much to Khodorkovsky.

But when Khodorkovsky, who saw that the man was a strong Russian Orthodox believer, attempted to get Akhmetov's representative to say a few words about the Ukrainian and Moscow patriarchs, he made a move to respond but apparently realized that he was not authorized to speak and shut his mouth again.

The problem is that pensioners and a handful of bored, unemployed local residents are not enough to seize and hold the regional administration building. That is why it is likely that they are being backed up by others.

These are the people who can voice their demands to Russian state-controlled television, reading from teleprompters scripted by the very same station but who break into a sweat at the prospect of delivering those same demands, unaided, to anybody else.

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