

Local Man Replaces Rebel Leader as Head of Donetsk People's Republic

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Alexander Borodai the Prime Minister of the self proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic" shakes hands with Alexander Zakharchenko, who heads a heavily armed rebel unit called Oplot during their news conference in Donetsk, Ukraine.

MOSCOW/DONETSK — A native of eastern Ukraine has replaced a Russian as leader of separatists in their stronghold of Donetsk, in a move aimed at blunting Western accusations the rebellion is being run by Moscow.

Alexander Borodai, one of several Russian nationals in top roles among the pro-Moscow rebels as the head of the self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic," or DNR, told a news conference he would now serve as deputy to the new leader.

The new head of the separatist rebels, Alexander Zakharchenko, was sitting to his left in a conference room in what used to be the Donetsk regional administration building until it was turned the rebels' headquarters.

"After all, I am a native of Moscow and I think the DNR should be run by a person who is body

and soul of Donbass," Borodai said, referring to the wider Donetsk region.

Zakharchenko, sporting a green camouflage jacket, said he would go on fighting for the region's independence from Kiev.

A native of Donetsk in his late 30s, Zakharchenko commands a heavily armed rebel unit called Oplot, which has taken part in some of the fiercest battles and has its origins in a martial arts club.

He was among the first separatists to occupy the regional administration building in Donetsk after pro-Russian crowds captured it in March following the ousting of a Moscow-allied president in Kiev the previous month.

"That is great news, he is an experienced fighter and commander, not some talking-head politician," said one of the fighters of the Vostok, or East, rebel battalion, which cooperates closely with Zakharchenko's Oplot.

Seasoned Fighter

The nomination of a seasoned fighter to head the DNR also comes as fighting intensifies in eastern Ukraine where Kiev troops have pressed ahead with a campaign against the pro-Russian rebellion and recaptured some ground in recent weeks.

Fighting intensified after Ukraine's new, pro-Western President Petro Poroshenko was inaugurated in early June and stepped up again after a Malaysian airliner was shot down over rebel-held territory on July 17, killing all 298 people on board.

The West accuses the rebels of downing the passenger plane by mistake with a Russian-made missile. The United Nations says the conflict has killed more than 1,100 people.

The crisis in Ukraine, which started with pro-Western street protests in Kiev followed by pro-Russian unrest in the east, has exacerbated tensions between Moscow and the West.

Moscow banned Western food imports on Thursday in retaliation for U.S. and EU sanctions.

Unlike Borodai and two other Russians at the helm of the DNR, Zakharchenko has not been put on the European Union sanctions lists over Ukraine.

A political analyst in Kiev said his appointment as leader would not greatly influence events, which were being steered in Moscow.

"It is not a matter of principle who Zakharchenko is since the decision-making is not done by those people who give their faces (to the DNR] in public anyway," said Taras Berezovets of Berta Communications group.

Moscow denies playing any role in east Ukraine.

See also:

[Rebel Fighter Speaks Out Against East Ukraine Separatist Leaders](#)

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