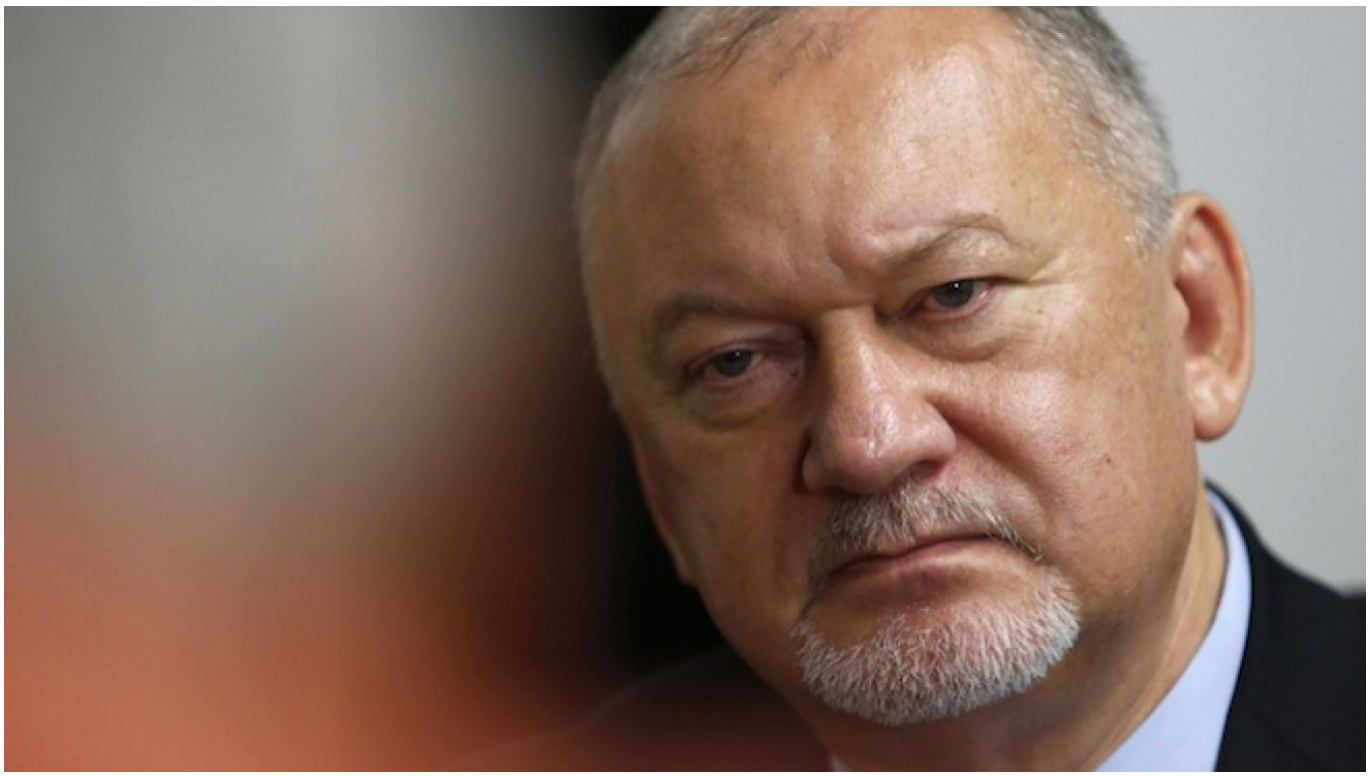
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Rebel Leader Blames Ukrainian War on Masons

August 15, 2014



Vladimir Antyufeyev, deputy prime minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, listens during an interview with a Reuters journalist in Donetsk.

Adding a new actor to the Ukrainian civil war, the chief of the pro-Russian separatists' internal security blamed the ongoing conflict on U.S. and European masons.

"Nobody's to blame that our banks, shops, the airport [in rebel-held Donetsk] are closed — except for the Ukrainian fascists and the masons of the U.S. and Europe," Vladimir Antyufeyev told the Novaya Gazeta newspaper.

When asked whether he was serious, he queried back: "Aren't we aware of the influence that masonic lodges wield in the West?"

Antyufeyev gave no answer to his own question, but said he "personally studied the matter as a political scientist."

He also advised the reporter not to argue with him "because I am a scientist" and said

the world should be rid of the U.S., which he said was a "demonic construct."

Antyufeyev, 63, is a deputy prime minister in the self-proclaimed People's Republic of Donetsk, which has been fighting since March for secession and a union with Russia.

In 2003, he defended a doctoral thesis on "Russia's Geostrategy in the Southwest" at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration in Moscow. The academy's alumni include the Kremlin's current propaganda tsar Vyacheslav Volodin, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and ultraconservative lawmaker Irina Yarovaya.

A former policeman, Antyufeyev has been implicated in a failed attempt to put down the Latvian separatist movement in 1991. He also spent two decades as the security chief in the pro-Russian state of Transdnestr, a job which landed him on a EU blacklist in 2004.

He was sacked from his job in Transdnestr in 2012 and fled to Russia amid abuse of office charges but soon surfaced as an actor in the Ukrainian insurgency, where he supervises internal security — a job that earned him the "grey cardinal" nickname, Novaya Gazeta reported.

Freemasonry, a quasi-religious fraternity that can be traced back to the 18th century, was a frequent target of Russia's prerevolutionary conspiracy theorists, despite the fact that many prominent historical figures in Russia, including the poet Alexander Pushkin and Napoleon's defeater Mikhail Kutuzov, were masons.

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