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Specter of 'Russian Taliban' Looms in Ukraine

By Alexey Eremenko

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On the same day that Mozgovoi spoke out against women frequenting public eateries, he and his comrades sentenced a man to death.

Women in Ukraine's separatist-held Luhansk region will be arrested if they are seen in cafes, an insurgent warlord has said.

"A woman should be the keeper of the hearth, a mother," Wraith Brigade commander Alexei Mozgovoi says in a video recently posted on YouTube.

"If you want to be true and faithful to your husband, stay home and do your stitching."

This and other radical activity by the separatists have stoked fears that they are on track to becoming "Russia's Taliban."

Such a transformation would spell further trouble for the rebel-held area of eastern Ukraine, which is teetering on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe and in need of qualified

governance rather than ideology.

The Ukrainian separatists are, however, no match for the Taliban's religious fervor, political pundits said Wednesday.

And the few who do fit the bill are being replaced by cooler heads at Moscow's insistence, said Mikhail Remizov, a respected pro-Kremlin analyst at the Institute of National Strategy think tank in Moscow.

Conservative Uprising

On the same day that Mozgovoi spoke out against women frequenting public eateries, he and his comrades sentenced a man to death.

The verdict was passed on an alleged pedophile by a public vote of some 300 Luhansk region residents and separatists, according to a video uploaded to Mozgovoi's YouTube channel.

Another suspected child abuser on trial got away with being deployed to the front, giving him a chance to "die with honor," the separatists said Saturday.

The death penalty is not practiced in either Russia or Ukraine, but that has not deterred pro-Russian insurgents in the past. In at least one case in May, they reportedly sentenced looters to execution on the basis of a 1941 martial law decree issued by the Soviet government.

Conservative Christian values have also been much touted in the insurgency-hit Donbass region, making it onto the constitution of the unrecognized Donetsk People's Republic there.

Members of the LGBT community have faced verbal and physical harassment in Donetsk, though last month's reports that the city had criminalized homosexuality were debunked as a Ukrainian fake.

The ideological trend, admittedly, is typical for the whole region: Russia has ramped up conservative censorship in recent years, and the authorities in Kiev have banned "anti-Ukrainian" Russian movies.

Humanitarian Struggle

Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation in the 6.5-million-resident Donbass region, which has weathered a five-month civil war, remains dire, all sides acknowledge.

Reliable figures are scarce, but Russia has deployed five humanitarian convoys to the region so far, each carrying hundreds of tons of food and other necessities.

A number of major cities, including Luhansk and Donetsk, still suffer from gas, water and/or electricity shortages, according to the website Dopomozhemo.tv, which tracks the humanitarian situation in the region.

A handful of reports also accuse rebel warlords of looting and racketeering, but the extent of the problem is unclear.

Some Ukrainian websites have reported Donbass natives' growing disappointment in the rebels, though the Kiev-based analyst Mikhail Pogrebinsky said it is not strong enough to translate into open protest.

'Nightmare Scenario'

Experts interviewed for this story agreed the rise of radicals is inevitable during war.

"When there's no government, all kinds of miscreants take the stage," said Pogrebinsky, head of Kiev's Center for Political and Conflict Studies think tank.

The situation resembles a microcosm of the popular "nightmare scenario" of Russia's own development, said independent analyst Stanislav Belkovsky.

Some Kremlin backers say President Vladimir Putin's heavy-handed rule is the only thing keeping ultraconservatives from coming to power and ruining the country with purges and economic incompetence.

But Belkovsky and his colleagues said the "nightmare scenario" is unlikely to play out in the Donbass unperturbed.

Little Faith

For one thing, the Donbass separatists are not that radical, experts said.

A better comparison for them would be European radical conservatives such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban or France's Marine Le Pen, not the Taliban, Remizov said.

They also lack the spiritual leaders to promote a Russian sharia, columnist and philosopher Maxim Goryunov said.

"We shouldn't expect that people outside the clergy and without spiritual authority will be able to convince Donetsk residents to start observing religious fasts and going to church," said Goryunov, an expert on Russian conservatism.

"What they have now is colorful, but not so far from life in the Russian countryside," he said.

Russia does have under its wing a formerly war-torn region gone ultraconservative with the Kremlin's tacit endorsement in Chechnya, where alcohol is unavailable and public prayers are the norm.

But the North Caucasus republic, unlike the Donbass, is an actual state, de-facto independent under Russian formal patronage, said Belkovsky.

Moreover, religion-based conservative norms are anaemic in post-Soviet, formerly atheist eastern Ukraine, said Goryunov.

The Russians Are Coming

But more importantly, Moscow appears to be replacing the independent separatist warlords with controllable men, experts said.

Though Russia has never admitted direct meddling in Donbass politics, a number of prominent separatist leaders, including Igor "Strelkov" Girkin and Igor "The Imp" Bezler, have inexplicably quit in recent months.

The new command, including Alexander Zakharchenko and Igor Plotnitsky — the men elected to respective heads of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions at the unrecognized elections last Sunday — are generally believed to have ties to Moscow.

Securing competent governance in the Donbass, likely through direct involvement, is crucial for Moscow because continuing chaos would be a propaganda victory for Ukraine, Remezov said.

But Belkovsky said the warlords could get away with a lot of domestic blunders as long as the war-induced hysteria persists.

"They could make a real mess of things," Belkovsky said of the insurgency leaders. "But their warmongering will keep them in power."

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