The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Experts See Dark Plot in Spate of Mystery Bombings in Ukraine

By Allison Quinn

February 25, 2015



A member of the Ukrainian armed forces rides a military vehicle near Artemivsk, eastern Ukraine, Feb. 25.

As the latest blast in a recent string of mysterious bombings in eastern Ukraine claimed another victim Wednesday, experts warned that there would be more to come — and they could spread the conflict further from the front lines.

A Donetsk grocery store became the latest scene of carnage Wednesday when a grenade attack killed one person and injured at least two, according to the Interfax news agency. Three days earlier, a bombing at a peaceful protest march in Kharkiv commemorating the first anniversary of the Maidan protests left four dead and about a dozen wounded.

Ukrainian authorities said prior to Wednesday's attack that the recent spate of bombings in the country was orchestrated by Russia's security services in a bid to destabilize the country and ultimately gain more control.

"Making all attempts, at any price, to shatter the situation in Ukraine, Russia has today begun an absolutely cynical practice of organizing terrorist attacks in Ukrainian cities beyond the territory of the counter-terrorism operation [official Kiev's term for its conflict with the separatists]," Yevgeny Perebiinis, a spokesman for Ukraine's Interior Ministry, was cited as saying by Interfax on Tuesday.

Russian officials have not yet commented on the allegations, but over the weekend President Vladimir Putin called claims that the Kremlin was involved in last year's fatal sniper shootings of Maidan protesters "absolute nonsense."

Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city and home to about 1.4 million, is more than 200 kilometers from the separatist conflict zone, but speculation has been rife that the bombings are part of an elaborate maneuver to spread the separatists' influence further into Ukrainian territory.

Experts interviewed by The Moscow Times on Wednesday were divided on who was to blame, saying there were numerous parties who could benefit from the "atmosphere of fear" that has intentionally been created in Kharkiv and now Donetsk.

Mark Galeotti, an expert on Russia's security services, said it was clear that the attacks were part of a wider scheme, albeit one with an unknown endgame, since the bombings didn't "follow the usual pattern of terrorism, in which attacks go hand in hand with political statements and demands."

Deadly Trend

The string of bombings began in mid-November when a blast at a Kharkiv rock club injured at least 11 people. The club's owner, Mikhail Ozerov, told Ukrainian media at the time that an unknown person had left a bag filled with explosives at the bar.

Ukrainian authorities blamed that attack on a pro-Russian group calling itself the Kharkiv Partisans, a mysterious group that has released several videos on social media vowing to take down the "Kiev junta" and its supporters using guerrilla-style tactics.

A month after that attack, another blast tore through a furniture workshop in the city, though no one was injured. That attack was also classified by authorities as an act of terror.

A similar grenade attack on a group of Ukrainian nationalists in late January injured another 13 people.

Authorities have been quick to point the finger at the Kharkiv Partisans in all the attacks, but the group denied responsibility for the most recent bombing in Kharkiv in a video posted on social networking site VKontakte.

"We didn't plan, and we do not currently plan, any actions at mass public gatherings with peaceful civilians, regardless of their political stances. We believe that many ordinary Ukrainians have been fooled by the media controlled by the Kiev junta, but we have declared several times already that we will not put their lives at risk," Filipp Ekozyants, a representative for the group, said in an online video message released by the group Sunday.

Markiyan Lubkivsky, an aide to the head of Ukraine's security service, wrote on Facebook on Sunday that several people had been detained in connection with the bombing, and that they had been plotting more attacks.

Russian Fingerprints?

Galeotti said there was plenty of evidence to suggest Russian involvement in the mysterious attacks.

"It is certainly possible, not least as the Kharkiv bombing was only the most recent in a whole spate of terrorist incidents, and it would fit with Russia's non-linear war tactics of seeking to use numerous covert, as well as overt, means of putting pressure on Kiev and trying to distract and destabilize the government there," he said.

But Ukrainian security services' allegations against Russia should also be taken with a grain of salt, he warned, since the security service "has a mixed track record regarding the credibility of its claims."

Even if Moscow had been using the Kharkiv Partisans as puppets in a broader scheme, Galeotti said, "it is still hard to tell whether it is just encouraging and supporting attacks carried out by disgruntled locals or actively recruiting and tasking agents."

Closer to Home

According to some pro-Kiev activists in Kharkiv, members of the local Kharkiv administration could stand to gain from the bombings.

Igor Rassokha, a Euromaidan activist who was present at the rally on Sunday, said in comments to news portal Rosbalt.ru that he wouldn't rule out Russian involvement — but even then, it wouldn't have been a one-man job.

"It's entirely possible that the perpetrators were acting on orders from Russian security services, but they had their own people in the local administration. But I also wouldn't rule out that those behind the bombing are people at the very top of the regional administration ... The administration still consists of people from the Yanukovych style of management," Rassokha was cited as saying.

"The regional administration is only interested in getting kickbacks and bribes. For them it's not at all profitable for Ukraine to become a part of Europe, and after the bombing, it will be a lot easier for them to deal with inconvenient people such as the Euromaidan activists," he said.

Alexander Sherman, another activist who was present at Sunday's demonstration, agreed with Rassokha's assessment, telling Rosbalt.ru that there were plenty of members of the local administration who saw Euromaidan activists as enemies.

Viktor Mironenko, head of the Ukrainian Studies Center at the Russian Academy of Sciences' European Institute, said it was impossible to say with any certainty who was behind the attacks.

But he echoed Rassokha's suspicion that local politicians could somehow be involved.

"The atmosphere in which these terrorist acts are happening and will continue to happen was created by specific people quite deliberately with the sole purpose of hiding their own personal failures as politicians and managers," he said.

Contact the author at a.quinn@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/02/25/experts-see-dark-plot-in-spate-of-mystery-bombings-in-ukraine-a44238