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Tearful Mourners Bid Farewell to Separatist Leader Zakharchenko

By Reuters

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Sergei Malgavko / TASS

The funeral in eastern Ukraine's Donetsk of a pro-Russian rebel leader killed in an explosion last week drew vast crowds of mourners on Sunday, Reuters footage from the breakaway region showed.

Alexander Zakharchenko was fatally injured in an explosion in a cafe in Donetsk on Friday. Russia's foreign ministry accused Ukraine of his murder, while Kiev blamed his death on separatist infighting.

The official media outlet of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic said 200,000 people had gathered for the funeral of Zakharchenko, the republic's leader since 2014. Reuters was unable to verify that figure.

Footage showed long queues of mourners, many carrying red carnations, lining up to pay

their respects outside the city's main opera theater, where Zakharchenko's coffin stood.

"I am here because I really respected him. He did everything for the people ... A good person is gone," Anna, a member of the crowd, said through tears.

A woman who described herself as Zakharchenko's former neighbor, Natalya, was also crying.

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"It is such a shame, such a waste. He was everything to us ... He left, he left fighting for his country. There are no words," Natalya said.

"We will not forgive this," she added.

His coffin, draped in the separatist region's flag and the flag of the Russian Airborne Troops, a division of Russia's armed forces, was carried out of the theater to silent applause, footage showed.

It was placed on the gun-carriage of a large artillery weapon, which was then towed past the crowds by a truck.

"I didn't know him personally but he was a leader to all of us," Katya, a young woman attending the funeral, said.

At least five other leading separatist commanders have been killed in unexplained circumstances not connected to front-line combat since the conflict started in 2014, when Russian-backed rebels threw off Ukrainian central rule in an armed uprising.

A shaky internationally-brokered ceasefire has been in force since 2015, halting large-scale fighting, but frequent outbreaks of shooting on the front line between the separatist and Ukrainian forces continue.

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