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# Assassinations Of Russia-Installed Officials On the Rise in Occupied Ukraine

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A Russian police officer in occupied Ukrainian Kherson stands by a poster reading "Kherson - the cradle of the Russian Black Sea Fleet." **Sergei Bobylev / TASS**

Alexei Kovalev was found Sunday shot to death in his home in the Russian-occupied Ukrainian town of Hola Prystan.

Nearby lay his girlfriend, reportedly badly injured with stab wounds to her neck, and a Mossberg pump-action shotgun.

Prior to Russia's attack on Ukraine in February, Kovalev was a deputy in the Ukrainian parliament and a member of President Volodymyr Zelensky's Servant of the People party — but, after much of Ukraine's southern Kherson region was seized by Russian troops in the first weeks of the invasion, he switched sides.

Appointed the deputy head of the Moscow-installed administration in Kherson, Kovalev appeared to have been murdered for working with Russia.

The tempo of such killings in Russian occupied Ukraine has risen in recent weeks as the Kremlin looks to accelerate the political integration of occupied Ukraine into Russia and Kyiv pushes forward with an offensive to retake land around the strategic city of Kherson.

A tally by volunteer project WarTranslated that was corroborated by The Moscow Times shows nine such assassination attempts took place last month, up from three in July. In total, there have been at least 19 attempted assassination in Russian-controlled areas of Ukraine since the invasion.

While many assume these are political killings ordered by Kyiv to deter collaborators and undermine Moscow's political integration plans, experts said that some could have been part of local power struggles or business disputes.

Despite regular Russian media reports about Kremlin plans for referendums on joining Russia in occupied Ukraine, no concrete timetable for such votes has yet been put in place.

"I think Moscow has not yet made a final decision on the referendums — it will depend on the situation on the ground and how well Russia controls the territories. Kyiv understands this very well," political analyst Ivan Preobrazhensky told The Moscow Times.

As well as a politician, Kovalev was also closely involved in the agricultural business for which southern Ukraine is famous, reportedly playing a key role in arranging shipments of Ukrainian grain to Russia after the invasion.

Kovalev met top Kremlin official Sergei Kiriyenko, who oversees occupied Ukrainian territory, in June, after which he posted on Facebook: "Russia is here seriously and forever!" Two weeks later, he survived a car bombing.

Perhaps the most exotic assassination attempt so far, took place in early August when the Moscow-appointed head of Kherson region Vladimir Saldo — Kovalev's boss — was apparently poisoned.

Saldo, 66, a former Kherson mayor and local businessman, was transferred to a Moscow hospital after reportedly eating a meal prepared by a new cook and Russia's Defense Ministry said he may have ingested a nerve agent.

Despite reports Saldo's health had "significantly" improved, he has not been seen in public since.

The day after Saldo's alleged poisoning another pro-Kremlin official in the Kherson region,Vitaly Gura, was shot dead outside his home.

And, as Ukraine stepped up preparations for an offensive near Kherson last week, the Moscow-appointed deputy head of domestic policy for Kherson region, Igor Telegin, survived when what is reported to have been a remote-controlled explosive was detonated by the side of the road.

While most attacks — 10 of the 19 tallied by WarTranslated — seem to have taken place in the Kherson region other regions of occupied Ukraine have also witnessed a spate of killings.

In occupied Zaporizhzhia region last week, traffic police officer Alexander Kolesnikov died after being injured in an explosion in the city of Berdyansk and Ivan Sushko, the Russian-appointed head of the town of Mykhailivka was killed in a car bombing.

Oleg Shostak, apparently affiliated with Russia's ruling party United Russia, was severely injured in an attack in Melitopol earlier this month.

Yevgeny Yunakov, the Russian-appointed head of a small town in the Kharkiv region in northeast Ukraine, was killed by a car bomb last month.

While the local Russian-installed authorities have blamed Ukraine for most of these assassinations, Kyiv has neither confirmed nor denied its involvement.

The exiled mayor of Melitopol Ivan Fedorov said earlier this month that Ukrainians working with Moscow "will be held accountable" and that "the hunt for collaborators preparing for the pseudo-referendum has begun."

Ukrainian investigators have said that some 1,150 people across the country are currently being investigated for treason or collaboration with Russia.

The attacks "are a warning to people who are collaborating with Russia," said Konstantin Skorkin, an expert on the politics of eastern Ukraine at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

One result of the killings is that Russia is likely to face staff shortages for political and administrative roles in the occupied regions, according to experts.

And there is evidence some officials have already left for safer areas.

Kirill Stremousov, the deputy head of the Russian-installed Kherson administration once accused of attacking a local newspaper office with tear gas, was seen Tuesday in a video filmed in the Russian city of Voronezh.

Contacted by journalists, Stremousov confirmed that he had left Kherson, but said that his work meant he was "constantly traveling."

While many believe Ukrainian partisans have been behind the killings, other analysts have pointed out that some could be part of local power battles or business diagreements.

"Ukraine's south is a rich area. Local ports, active trade and smuggling usually cause a high crime level. Some are also fighting over money and power," Skorkin told the Moscow Times.

"We have to take into account various pre-war showdowns between Ukrainian businessmen and officials — for example, Saldo is a prominent figure in local political and economic life and he has a lot of enemies," Skorkin added.

Saldo, who stated shortly before switching sides that "Kherson is Ukraine," was accused of kidnapping his former business partner, Denis Pashchenko, in 2016 and was arrested in the Dominican Republic. Although he denied the accusations, he was also subsequently accused of

killing Pashchenko's brother — a claim he also rejected.

"The [occupied Ukrainian] regions have always had a stormy life," Skorkin said.

Either way, if Kyiv's counteroffensive in southern Ukraine stalls, the number and frequency of assassinations by Ukranian partisans could rise, Skorkin said, as "spreading chaos" in the rear of Russian troops becomes a substitute for retaking territory.

The "goal is to make it obvious that the Russian-installed administrations do not really control anything," analyst Preobrazhensky said.

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