

Bomb Explosions Hit Kirovograd Ahead of Yanukovych Visit

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Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych.

In the early hours of October 22, three bomb explosions occurred in the central Ukrainian city of Kirovograd, an opposition stronghold. President, Viktor Yanukovych, visited the city later that morning. The explosions targeted the prosecutor-general's office, interior ministry (MVS) and a court building. The bombs were crude and consisted of artillery shells, clocks and batteries (Ukrayinska Pravda, October 22).

Yanukovych commented that, "If somebody wanted to say something, for example, to me (through these explosions), I am ready to listen. If they wanted to say it in such a manner they will be brought to justice" (Ukrayinska Pravda, October 22). A senior MVS official told the Kyiv Post (October 22) that the explosions were not connected to Yanukovych's visit to the city, but were the work of local criminal gangs ahead of the October 31 local elections. Deputy Interior Minister, Vasyl Farynnyk, told Ukrainskyi Novyny on October 23, that a struggle between organized criminal gangs was one of three possible theories; the other two being "hooliganism" and political terrorism.

Although the explosions are being investigated separately, Farynnyk believes they could be merged into a single investigation. "If the expertise identifies that the explosions are linked to one another then we, most likely, will unite the three investigations into one case" (Ukrainski Novyny, October 23). "The terrorism version also has a right to exist," Farynnyk said. This version is the most controversial theory, as it signifies either real discontent channeled into violence or the authorities themselves organizing "terrorism" to justify unspecified ends.

The MVS Department on the Struggle Against Organized Crime is undertaking the investigation. If the terrorism theory becomes the most prominent, the Security Service (SBU) would take over the investigation. After the presidential guard (UDO: Directorate on State Protection) was informed about the explosions it ordered the presidential route and location of meetings to be changed. Yanukovych planned to open a new international terminal at Kirovograd airport (<http://censor.net.ua>, October 23).

Linking the explosions to the local elections would aim to blame the opposition for seeking to “destabilize the situation.” Different senior officials and siloviki ministers have warned that the opposition is likely to lose the elections and is therefore voicing concern about the likelihood of election fraud and non-free elections in order to justify their low results. Mogiliov believes that the majority of mass protests linked to the local elections have a “provocative character.” These have “only one aim: to increase tension, divide, and thereby to establish certain facts that the elections were not free” (Ukrayinska Pravda, October 25). Yanukovich told diplomats in Kyiv that international observers should only look for “real falsifications and provocations,” adding “What concerns me in these elections are only provocations, as if no provocations are specially undertaken by teams of provocateurs then there will be no problems (in the election)” (Ukrayinska Pravda, October 26).

Mogiliov instructed his officers to ensure the collection of intelligence about the organization of such protests. Not only is this instruction illegal, as it not within the competence of the MVS to collect political intelligence, but unconstitutional as it infringes the rights of Ukrainians to freely protest. The siloviki have become a major threat to holding free elections. Parliamentary Human Rights Ombudsman Nina Karpachova said, “I cannot stay silent over the fact that recently regional departments of SBU launched hotlines for control over violations of the election legislation. Even divisions of the military security service are involved in the election process... Such total control of the special services is a threat to Ukraine's democracy,” adding “that neither the law on the security service of Ukraine, nor the Ukrainian president’s order of September 16, 2010, give the SBU control over the observance of the right to vote (Interfax-Ukraine, October 23)”.

Parliamentary Deputy Chairman, Mykola Tomenko, a senior member of the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc, said what many opposition leaders believe. The explosions look like a “primitive special operation” that aims to pressure Yanukovich to increase his presidential guard, which is already double in size to those of former Presidents Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yushchenko.

Yanukovich has an ingrained assassination-phobia that his entourage feeds (EDM, June 28). Or, Tomenko believes the explosions aim to show to Yanukovich that there is a “need for an ‘iron’ hand or ‘strong hand’ because there is anarchy in the country” (Hazeta po Ukrainski, October 23). Indeed, twice the number of Ukrainians feel their country is moving to instability than believe Ukraine is heading for stability and a majority of Ukrainians consider that democratic freedoms are under threat (<http://www.ifes.org/Content/Events/2010/Post-Orange-Ukraine.aspx>).

The authorities used explosions in the 1999 elections when Socialist Party activists allegedly sought to assassinate Progressive Socialist Party leader and candidate Natalia Vitrenko. The aim was to remove SPU leader, Oleksandr Moroz, against whom he was unsure of winning, from the second round in order for Kuchma to face Communist Party leader, Piotr Symonenko. In September 2004, with the purpose of distracting attention from Yushchenko’s poisoning earlier that month, a fake assassination was planned on Yanukovich in Ivano-Frankivsk where he was to be shot by blanks while wearing a bullet proof vest under his coat. The plan was foiled by a student throwing an egg which confused Yanukovich who fell down as though he had been shot as planned by a blank bullet (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fP0vWkqOQT8>). Nevertheless,

Yanukovych election officials, without knowing about the egg, appeared in the media as pre-planned to accuse the Yushchenko election campaign of harboring “terrorists.”

The offices of Pora, the youth NGO active in the 2004 elections and Orange Revolution, had terrorist devices planted in order to link the opposition to “terrorism.” Pora and other NGO’s associated with the opposition were denounced as “extremists” (EDM, May 26, September 22-23, 30, October 20, 22, 2004). Similar tactics had been used against the Serbian Otpor youth NGO in the 2000 Yugoslav elections. Ukraine’s major nationalist group, Svoboda, is dogged by accusations that it is financed by the oligarch Igor Kolomoysky, during Yushchenko’s presidency, and since by the Party of Regions (through Andriy Kluyev who headed Yanukovych’s 2004 shadow “dirty tricks” campaign). The financing aims to take votes from mainstream national democrats and to mobilize the east Ukrainian vote against “nationalism” (Oleksiy Mustafin in Zerkalo Nedeli, October 23).

The explosions are unlikely to be the work of the opposition and a “controlled” nationalist party is not likely to be permitted to indulge in terrorism. If planted by the authorities they could be the prelude to what took place in Russia in 2000 when bomb explosions, which were blamed on Chechen terrorists though there were suspicions about the involvement of the Federal Security Service (FSB), paved the way for Vladimir Putin’s rise to power. Nevertheless, the “stability” that for some reason Western governments associates with Yanukovych was always a myth as his policies serve only to deepen Ukraine’s regional, political, cultural and religious divisions.