

“A Birdie is Flying Towards You”



Identifying the Separatists Linked to the
Downing of MH17

A bell;ngcat Investigation

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Introduction

The Bellingcat Investigation Team has previously published a number of reports demonstrating that the Buk missile launcher that was used to shoot down Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) over Ukraine on 17 July 2014 originated from Russia; that its deployment in the separatist-held territories of eastern Ukraine involved senior officers of the Russian Ministry of Defense and its military intelligence agency — the GRU; and that it was (former) Russian GRU officer and separatist leader Sergey Dubinsky who was the key figure in organizing the transport of the Buk to the launch site south of Snizhne. However, questions still linger over the involvement in the downing of other unidentified individuals. Who were the people many of whom were described as local separatist fighters and commanders heard on the intercepted phone calls published by the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team (JIT) and the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) in the aftermath of the downing? What role did infamous separatist leaders such as Igor Bezler, Aleksandr Khodakovskiy, and Igor Strelkov (real name Igor Girkin) have in the operation? This report seeks to answer these questions which have not yet been covered by previous major investigations into the downing of MH17 and to shed new light on the events that unfolded in separatist-held territories of Ukraine in the summer of 2014, shortly before and after the tragic loss of 298 lives over the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.

After the downing of MH17, the SBU released a number of recorded phone intercepts on their YouTube channel, aimed at convincing the international community that MH17 was shot down by Donbas-based, Russia-linked militants. These published calls were just a small selection of their total collection, as the official Dutch-led criminal investigation into the downing, the Joint Investigation Team (JIT), is known to have received data on about 150,000 intercepted phone conversations from the Ukrainian authorities.¹ An unknown portion of these calls contain evidence related to the MH17 case, and some were later published by the JIT both on their YouTube channel and during their press conferences as part of a call for witnesses, and as further evidence supporting their assertions regarding the events that led to and followed the tragedy.

Intercepted phone conversations published by a government intelligence service, in this case the SBU, should not be trusted without verification, but there has already been a plethora of evidence from open sources corroborating the authenticity of the published calls. Firstly, the route that the Buk convoy took in Ukraine matches the exact route discussed in the recorded conversations. Secondly, the separatist leaders Dubinsky, Bezler, and Nikolay Kozitsyn have admitted that it was indeed their voices that were heard on some of the intercepts. Lastly, voice comparisons carried out by forensic analysts in two research institutions have confirmed the identity of Russian officers Nikolay “Delfin” Tkachev and Oleg “Orion” Ivannikov, as described in previous Bellingcat publications. Nevertheless, while the intercepts appear to be authentic, the question remains whether

¹ The figure of 150,000 was mentioned in 60 Minutes Australia, available at: <https://youtu.be/VwmlOFl9CXI?t=12m48s>

if some of the recordings were deliberately taken out of context by the SBU or misdated. For example, Bezler claimed that he was recorded while talking about a different incident in which his forces had downed a Ukrainian military jet, rather than MH17.

This report attempts to resolve these questions by identifying and investigating most of the people heard on the SBU intercepts who were hitherto unknown to the public, thereby providing further context around the intercepted phone conversations and revealing new suspects in the downing of MH17. The level of involvement in the downing of the separatists heard on the SBU intercepts is also discussed. The report is divided into several chapters that primarily, although not exclusively, focus on the involvement of the following three separatist groups which, together with the “regular” forces of the separatist army directly commanded by Igor Strelkov controlled most of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) in the summer of 2014: the Bezler Group led by Igor Bezler; the Vostok Brigade led by Aleksandr Khodakovsky; and the DNR’s intelligence agency — the GRU DNR — led by Sergey Dubinsky.



Figure 1. A map of the the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine on 17 July 2014. The Russian-backed separatist militias in the Donetsk Oblast were primarily affiliated with the DNR (Donetsk People’s Republic), here highlighted in blue, whereas the separatists in the Luhansk Oblast were largely divided between the LNR (Luhansk People’s Republic), highlighted in red; and the Cossack National Guard, highlighted in yellow. The approximate frontline positions are based on a large collection of combat reports from both sides of the conflict.

1) The Bezler Group

The SBU intercepts released to the public after the downing of MH17 include two conversations with Igor Nikolaevich Bezler — a Crimean-born Russian citizen (b. 30 December 1965) who is also known by his nickname “Bes” (Demon). According to the SBU, Bezler was a former GRU officer who finished his service in 2002 with the rank of lieutenant colonel. They claim that he was recruited back by the Russian military intelligence in February 2014 to participate in the annexation of Crimea, and later to form insurgent groups in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.² Bezler himself did not want to confirm rumors about having served in Afghanistan and Chechnya, but admitted that he retired from the Russian Armed Forces before he returned to Crimea.³ At the start of the war in the Donbas, Bezler became a well-known separatist leader of the DNR, with his stronghold being the city of Horlivka.⁴ Although Bezler had the reputation of an independent warlord, he still recognized the DNR leadership and coordinated operations with other DNR commanders. By mid-July, his forces — informally known as the Bezler Group — also controlled the surrounding towns of Yenakieve, Dzerzhynsk (Toretsk⁵), and parts of Makiivka, while some of his units were reportedly also backing other separatist militias on the frontlines near Donetsk.⁶

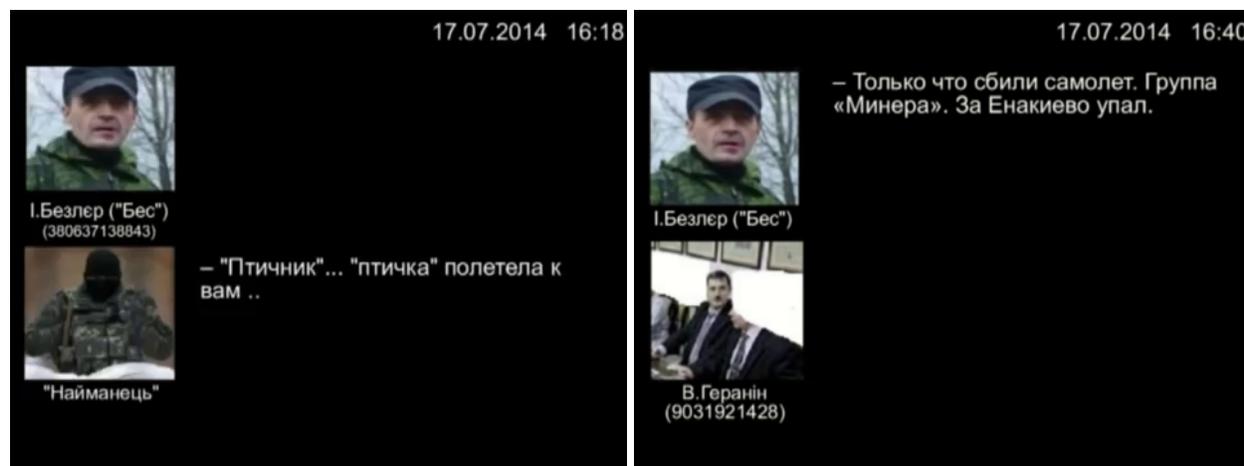


Figure 2. Screenshots of the two SBU intercepts with Bezler. All public SBU recordings were released as videos with Russian transcripts or translations in English and other languages. Since the Russian transcripts are not always precise and the translations often faulty, Bellingcat uses its own translations instead for this investigation.

² <https://gordonua.com/news/separatism/sbu-obyavila-v-rozysk-rossiyskogo-diversanta-igorya-bezlera-18893.html>;

<https://dumskaya.net/news/gorlovskij-podpolkovnik-rossijskoj-armii-okazals-034812/>

³ <https://ria.ru/20140716/1016094469.html>

⁴ This report will consistently use the Ukrainian spellings for all settlements inside Ukrainian territory

⁵ Hereinafter place names given in parentheses refer to the new names of villages and towns renamed under the Ukrainian 2015 “decommunization law”, which required most places or institutions named after Soviet leaders or concepts to be renamed.

⁶ In an interview with *RIA Novosti*, published in the morning of 16 July 2014, Bezler stated that his subordinates were fighting on the frontlines near Artemivsk (now Bakhmut, north of Horlivka) and Karlivka (west of Donetsk), while also aiding the “Luhansk militia”: <https://ria.ru/interview/20140716/1016094469.html>

Before discussing the involvement of Bezler himself, the following three sections will first identify some of the other people heard on the SBU intercepts, whom this investigation found to be his subordinates.

1.1 Valery “Naemnik” Stelmakh and the spotting of MH17

The earliest of the two conversations with Bezler was uploaded by the SBU on 25 July 2014.⁷ It was supposedly recorded at 4:18pm [note: all times in this report are Kyiv time] on 17 July 2014 — just two minutes before MH17 was hit by a Buk missile. In this conversation Bezler, using a Ukrainian phone number, is told by a man with the military call sign “Naemnik” (Mercenary) that a “birdie”, used as a slang word for “aircraft”, is heading his way:

Naemnik: Nikolaevich...

Bezler: Yes, Naemnik

Naemnik: A birdman [*misspeaks*]... a birdie is flying towards you.

Bezler: Is a birdie flying towards us?

Naemnik: Yes... [just] one, for now...

Bezler: A reconnaissance [aircraft] or a big one?

Naemnik: Can't see behind the clouds... [it's flying] too high...

Bezler: I see... roger... report upwards.

At first glance, Naemnik appears to be a member of a unit that first noticed flight MH17 as it flew eastward towards the Russian–Ukrainian border. He seems unsure what type of plane it is because it is flying high beyond the clouds, which suggests he or other members of his unit had only briefly seen it and/or heard it flying over, but both him and Bezler seem to assume that it involved a Ukrainian military aircraft.

In order to identify the man behind the call sign Naemnik, it is helpful to try to determine where Naemnik and Bezler were situated at the time of their conversation. Clues about their locations are contained in the other recorded conversation with Bezler, which was uploaded by the SBU in the evening of 17 July 2014, not long after the downing of MH17. According to the SBU, this call was recorded at 4:40pm, approximately twenty minutes after the downing.⁸ In this conversation, Bezler claims responsibility for the shootdown when reporting to a man with a Russian phone number whom the SBU identified as a GRU agent named Vasily Geranin (from open sources alone, it is difficult to prove that the person on this recording is indeed Geranin, but in this report the person on the recording will be referred to by this name whenever this recording is mentioned).⁹

⁷ <https://youtu.be/WnSrYKAzgcc>

⁸ <https://youtu.be/V5E8kDo2n6g>

⁹ The photograph that was used in the SBU's video turned out to be a different person than Geranin, but Ukrainian activists eventually claimed to have identified Geranin in another photograph. For more details: <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/geranin-vasilij-nikolaevich/>

Bezler: A plane was just shot down. The Minyor unit. It went down beyond Yenakieve. Now went...
Geranin: Pilots? Where are the pilots?
Bezler: Went to search for and photograph the downed aircraft. [It's] emitting smoke...
Geranin: How many minutes ago?
Bezler: About 30 minutes ago.

What is important here is that Bezler can be heard saying that the plane was downed “behind” or “beyond Yenakieve” (*za Yenakievo*). This comment suggests that Bezler was most likely stationed in his stronghold of Horlivka during the two phone calls because from there the town of Yenakieve and the MH17 crash-site were both to his south-east and beyond Yenakieve, as the following map illustrates:

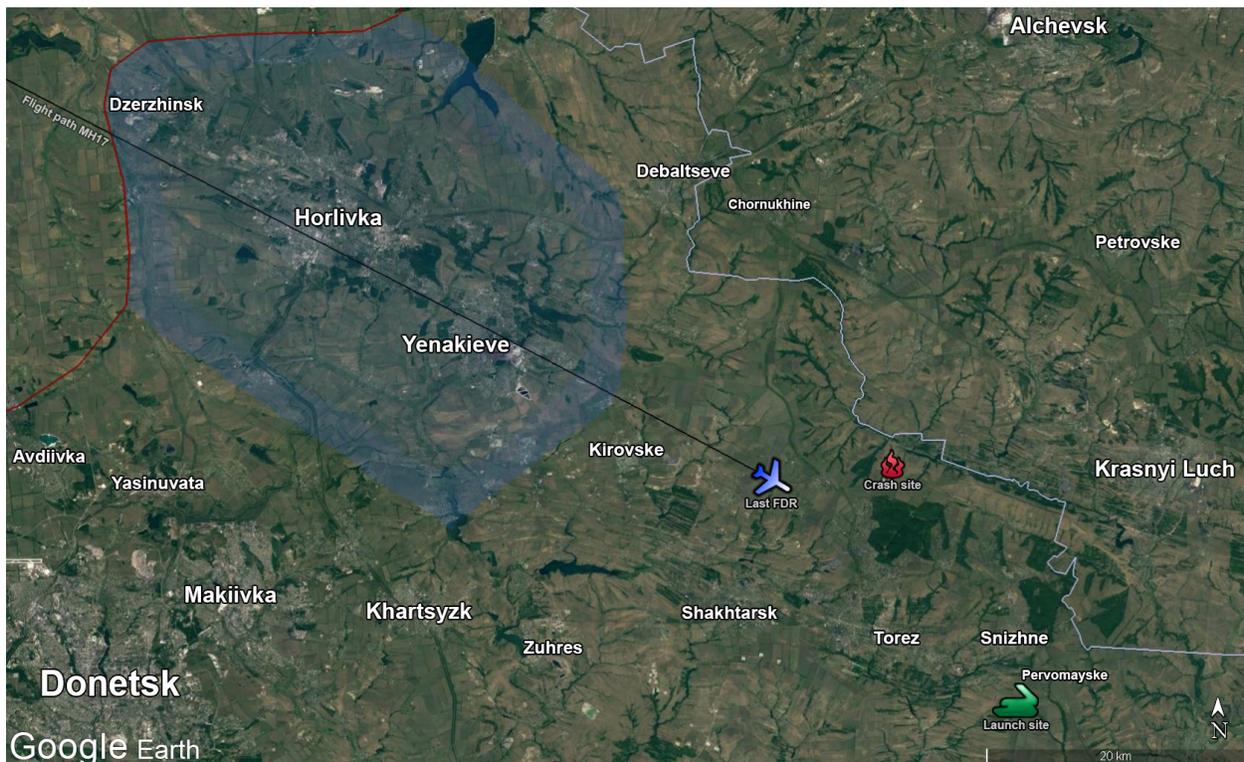


Figure 3. The flight path and the last FDR (Flight Data Recorder) point of MH17 displayed together with the frontlines in red; the approximate Bezler-controlled territory highlighted in blue; and the administrative border between the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts in white. The Buk missile launch site and the main crash site are indicated with respectively green and red icons.

On the assumption that Bezler was indeed stationed in Horlivka, it is also possible to calculate where the spotter could have been standing just before Naemnik made the call to Bezler. In the minutes leading up to the downing, the Boeing 777 aircraft was flying at a groundspeed of 914 kilometers per hour (494 knots) while the last secondary radar return — i.e. the moment when the plane was struck by the missile — was at 4:20:03pm Kyiv time.¹⁰ Based on this information and by studying

¹⁰ Dutch Safety Board, *Crash of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17* (The Hague, 2015) p 40, 47, available at: <https://www.onderzoeksraad.nl/en/page/3546/crash-mh17-17-july-2014>

the flight path of MH17, we can conclude that the airliner first entered the airspace over separatist-held territory approximately four minutes before the shootdown when it flew just south of separatist-held Dzerzhynsk; one minute later it flew over the westernmost outskirts of Horlivka; and at two minutes before the downing it was about to fly over Yenakieve. This suggests that the spotter must have been standing northwest of Horlivka when Naemnik made the phone call to Bezler because this was the direction from which MH17 flew. As such, assuming that the spotter was standing in rebel-held territory at the time of the call, he was most likely standing close to the frontlines near Dzerzhynsk.

Problematically, this version of events contradicts the information provided by the SBU that the phone call was made two minutes before the downing of MH17; by then the plane had already flown past Horlivka, and as such the “birdie” (i.e. the plane) that Naemnik reported about could no longer be flying “towards” Bezler in Horlivka. It is still possible, however, that Naemnik made an error when estimating where the plane was flying at the time of the call to Bezler, or that the SBU time stamp of the recording was simply off by one or two minutes, with the phone call actually taking place three or four minutes before the downing when the aircraft was still flying in-between Dzerzhynsk and Horlivka.

New evidence that Naemnik was the call sign belonging to a subordinate of Bezler based in the town of Dzerzhynsk lends further support to hypothesis that Naemnik and Bezler were indeed stationed in respectively Dzerzhynsk and Horlivka at the time of the phone call. After a search for militants with the call sign Naemnik who were based in this area, it has been possible to identify him as Valery Aleksandrovich Stelmakh, who was at the time the militia commandant (*kommendant*) of Dzerzhynsk. While Stelmakh has the call sign “Batya”, he also calls himself “Valery Naemnik” on two of his social media profiles (this is not unusual, since many separatists owe their nickname to a previously used call sign).¹¹ However, the most convincing evidence linking Stelmakh to the Naemnik heard on the SBU intercept is his distinctive deep, asthmatic voice which can be clearly recognized in a video message from June 2015 published by Russian news portal *Segodnia.ru*. In it, Stelmakh publicly asks his former commander Bezler to return to the Donbas (Bezler had returned to his native Crimea since autumn 2014).¹²

¹¹ <https://www.ok.ru/profile/571229134786> (archived: <http://archive.fo/Hha18>); <https://vk.com/id308679219>; (archived: <http://archive.fo/sLSP>)

¹² <https://rutube.ru/video/51d819d91ed78cd061cc9132317946ca/>

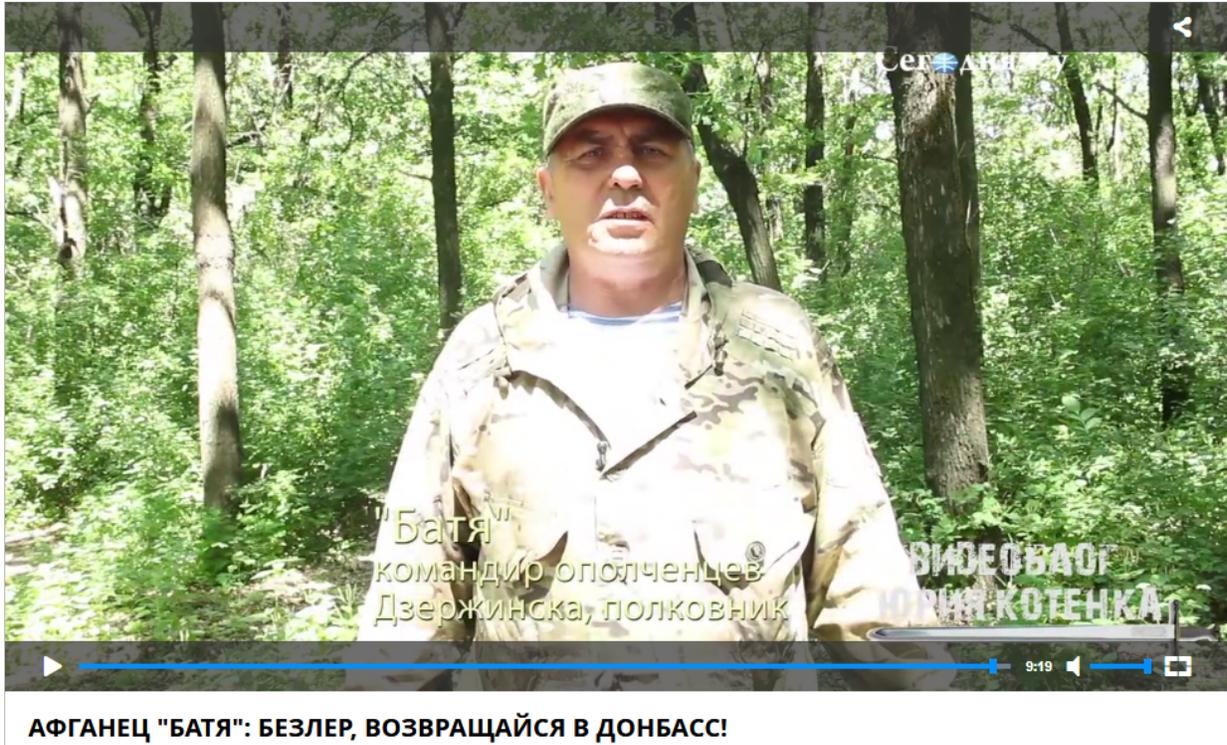


Figure 4. Still from a video interview of Stelmakh from June 2015 in which he is introduced as colonel “Batya”, commander of the Dzerzhynsk militia. The title of the video translates to: Afghan[istan veteran] “Batya”: Bezler, come back to the Donbas!

Valery Stelmakh was born on 1 August 1955 in Dzerzhynsk, Soviet Ukraine, and is a distinguished veteran of the Soviet–Afghan War who reportedly held the rank of Major in the Soviet Armed Forces.¹³ In the video interview, he also boasts to have fought in Yugoslavia and Chechnya, which suggests that besides a Ukrainian passport, which he shows in the video above, he may have also held Russian citizenship if he fought with the Russian Armed Forces in Chechnya. Before the outbreak of the conflict in the Donbas, Stelmakh had become the director of a cooperative farm in Zarya, just southwest of Dzerzhynsk. As the deputy chairman of the Ukrainian Union of Afghanistan Veterans in Dzerzhynsk, he was a known figure in his hometown, often appearing at events and gatherings which celebrated veterans of the Soviet Army.¹⁴ It appears that Stelmakh joined up with the DNR separatists not long after the outbreak of the conflict in the Donbas, as he can be seen in a video

¹³ <http://old.npu.gov.ua/mvs/control/main/uk/publish/article/1158999> (archived: <http://archive.fo/MpS0l>) and see also his entry in the Myrotvorets database: <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/stelmax-valerij-aleksandrovich/>

¹⁴ https://www.dzerghinsk.org/news/zhivet_vojna_v_vospominanjakh/2011-02-15-1744/
https://www.dzerghinsk.org/news/ukhodja_pacanam_i_vozvrashhajtes_muzhchinami/2012-10-12-3753

from 14 April 2014 during a meeting between the “Dzerzhynsk People’s Militia” and local police officials.¹⁵

Головна » Верхнє меню » Діяльність » АТО » Розшук терористів

УВАГА! РОЗШУКУЄТЬСЯ СТЕЛЬМАХ ВАЛЕРІЙ ОЛЕКСАНДРОВИЧ

20.09.2014 | 13:37



Стельмах Валерій Олександрович, 01.08.1955 р.н., адреса проживання: Донецька область, Дзержинський район, с. Новгородське, вул. Горлівська, 70.

Активний учасник незаконного збройного формування.

Розшукується Дзержинським МВ ГУМВС України в Донецькій області за ст.ст. 260, 341 КК України.

Figure 5. Since 20 September 2014, Stelmakh has been listed as a wanted terrorist on the official website of the National Police of Ukraine for the creation of illegal armed units and the seizure of state institutions (articles 260 and 341 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine).

Based on the content of the SBU intercepts, Valery Stelmakh’s role in the downing of MH17 was quite important, as he appears to be the first ranking officer who, minutes before the downing, flagged the Boeing 777 as a potential enemy aircraft without allowing for the possibility that it could have been a passenger jet. It remains unclear if he had spotted the aircraft himself or that he had received this information from one of his subordinates. Stelmakh first relayed the spotting information to Bezler, and then, assuming that he had followed Bezler’s instruction, also reported it to another superior. Without further information we can only guess who this was, but considering that Bezler can be heard instructing his subordinate Stelmakh to report the information “upwards”, this was most likely someone senior to both of them such as a senior figure in the GRU DNR (led by Sergey Dubinsky); the Minister of Defense of the DNR, Igor Strelkov; or a member of the Russian military or security services, such as the GRU. Unless MH17 was somehow spotted and misidentified a second time by another unit, it was Stelmakh’s message that must have eventually reached the Buk crew one way or the other.

Valery Stelmakh was forced to abandon his hometown Dzerzhynsk when the town was recaptured by the Ukrainian army without much effort on 21 July 2014, just four days after the downing of MH17. The town has remained outside Russian and separatist control ever since. It appears that Stelmakh was still active as a separatist militant in 2015, but that he has been living in Russia in the

¹⁵ <http://youtu.be/p3eucHjMYk?t=163>

years thereafter.¹⁶ On 31 January 2017, Stelmakh uploaded photos on Odnoklassniki that showed him at a gathering of Cossacks in the Russian city of Novochoerkassk, the historic capital of the Don Cossacks in Rostov Oblast.¹⁷ The gathering appears to be led by Russian Cossack leader (*ataman*) Nikolay Kozitsyn, the commander of a volunteer army known as the Cossack National Guard that controlled large parts of separatist-held areas in eastern Ukraine in the period May–November 2014 (he left the Donbas thereafter due to a conflict with the LNR leadership). It is notable that on these photos Stelmakh can be seen wearing a patch of the Don Cossacks, which was not the case in older photos available online.¹⁸



Figure 6. Cropped version of a group photo of a Don Cossack meeting in Novochoerkassk, Russia. Indicated with circles are Kozitsyn (top), Stelmakh (bottom), and Vladimir Borodinov, the ataman of the Chornukhine Cossacks (left, see chapter 2.3 for information on Borodinov).

Stelmakh did not provide a date for the photos, but it is notable that on 30 January 2017, just one day before the photos were uploaded, Kozitsyn issued a degree for all Don Cossacks to again “prepare for the defense of the Donbas”, which might indicate that the gathering had taken place that day.¹⁹ Whether Stelmakh already was a Cossack before 2017, or otherwise associated with

¹⁶ Per response from one of Stelmakh's acquaintances (who was not informed about the context of the query)

¹⁷ <https://www.ok.ru/profile/571229134786/photos> (archived: <http://archive.fo/EU7i7>)

¹⁸ For other photos of this patch: <https://yandex.ru/images/search?text=донское+казачье+войско+шевроп>

¹⁹ <http://xn--80aaaajfszd7a3b0e.xn--p1ai/117-vazhno-prikaz-atamana-ot-30-01-2017.html>

Kozitsyn remains unknown, but one connection between Stelmakh and Kozitsyn is that both were born in Dzerzhynsk.

1.2 Was the Minyor unit involved in the downing of MH17?

When Bezler reports the shootdown of MH17 in the phone call to Geranin, he also mentions that this was somehow related or accomplished by the “Minyor unit”. To our knowledge, this separatist unit has never been properly identified and discussed in relation to the MH17 case, which is remarkable considering that there is a still-active artillery commander with the call sign “Minyor” who used to be one of Bezler’s subordinates. Unlike many other military call signs in the Russian speaking world, the name Minyor (Минёр) is quite rare; though it can be transcribed as “Miner” (such as in the English version of the SBU intercepts), “Minyor” is actually an old-fashioned Russian word for a military combat engineer (or sapper) specialized in laying and clearing land mines.

One of the first confirmations that Minyor was indeed Bezler’s deputy comes from the generally overlooked statements released the morning after the downing of MH17 by Yevgeny Kryzhin, a volunteer militant from the Russian Far East who described himself as a member of the Minyor unit based in Yenakieve. Kryzhin posted the following statement on his LiveJournal blog at 9:32am:

And about the downed Boeing...

I can't say this is a good morning, because the Minyor unit has woken up infamous due to the audio recordings of what is claimed to be conversations concerning the downed Boeing. I have to state the following:

The Minyor unit expresses its deep condolences in connection with the death of the passengers of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17.

In connection with the mass dissemination of the fake audio recordings, which allegedly contain conversations with people who are supposedly related to the unit, I declare the following:

1. The call sign Major belongs to one of Yenakieve's militiamen who did not leave Yenakieve yesterday.
2. The call sign Grek belongs to the militia commandant of Yenakieve, who was near the unit for almost the entire day yesterday, except for short-lasting patrolling of the checkpoints.
3. Minyor himself was also near the unit yesterday.
4. The most powerful weapons that the unit has are RPO, RPG, anti-tank guided systems, and mortars. Air defense [weaponry] — there is not even a portable one.
5. The Chornukhine checkpoint²⁰ is actually in the Luhansk Oblast, [and] at the checkpoint there are NO air defense weapons, the soldiers are armed with standard small arms of Soviet manufacture: AK, SKS, PK, RPK, and RPGs.

²⁰ See the next section for more information about this checkpoint.

So *Ukry* [i.e. degenerative slang for “Ukrainians”] — fuck off with your fakes.²¹

That same morning, Kryzhin also released the statement as a video message, in which he added that he had personally seen Grek on 17 July between 4:00pm and 6:00pm, while he was told by others that Major was also present in Yenakieve around the time of the crash.²² Furthermore, after being confronted by a Ukrainian LiveJournal user regarding the presence of a Buk among the separatists, Kryzhin commented that only Strelkov had Buk vehicles, though he doubted that they were operational ones.²³

Although Kryzhin denied any wrongdoing by the Minyor unit, his statements reveal that this unit was at the time based in Yenakieve, a city which was under control of the Bezler Group. He also mentions that Major and Grek, who can be heard on other SBU intercepts, are the call signs of other Yenakieve-based militants (they are discussed in the next section). Other posts and media released by Kryzhin confirm he was serving under Minyor around the time of the crash. For example, on 15 July 2014, two days before the downing of MH17, Kryzhin announced on his LiveJournal that he had just joined the Minyor unit in Yenakieve. He had arrived there on 13 July while smuggling (military) aid into rebel-held Ukraine for a small Russian “aid organization” named KCPN.²⁴ Kryzhin initially worked for the unit as a medical assistant and in radio communications, though in early 2015 later he would also serve as the commander of an artillery battery.²⁵

Kryzhin’s claims that the Minyor unit did not have any type of anti-aircraft weapons are difficult to verify, but it is notable that just two weeks later he would claim on Facebook that his unit had just downed an aircraft (“birdie”) over the village of Nyzhnya Krynka (just south of Yenakieve) using a Man-portable air-defense system (MANPADS) and were searching for its pilots.²⁶ However, the Ukrainian military denied that they lost an aircraft that day, and a shootdown has also not been confirmed by other sources.²⁷

²¹ <https://fareastener.livejournal.com/108103.html> (archived: <http://archive.fo/GZclz>). Earlier refutations by Kryzhin were already made in the morning of July 18 in the following comments:

<https://macos.livejournal.com/930571.html?thread=59075851#t59075851> (archived: <http://archive.fo/nSPsf>) and <https://macos.livejournal.com/930571.html?thread=59061771#t59061771> (archived: <http://archive.fo/BasZ0>).

²² This video was uploaded at 11:13am and is available at: <https://youtu.be/pCVd3dlqgcs>

²³ <https://macos.livejournal.com/930571.html?thread=59102731#t59102731>

²⁴ For the post from 15 July 2014: <https://fareastener.livejournal.com/107611.html>. For the arrival date see the interviews with Kryzhin from 21 May 2015 and 4 July 2017: <https://ukraina.ru/interview/20150521/1013138996.html> and <https://riafan.ru/852694-dobrovolec-armii-dnr-evgenii-kryzhin-ukraine-plevat-na-minskie-dogovorennosti>. For more details about Kryzhin’s journey to the DNR and the military aid by the KCPN in general: <http://archive.fo/zlelW>; https://lj.rossia.org/users/rene_spb/; <http://archive.fo/NxDI7>; and <https://youtu.be/J2zGbId4m60>

²⁵ <https://macos.livejournal.com/930571.html?thread=59289355#t59289355> See also a news item on the Minyor unit in Yenakieve from 10 February 2015 in which Kryzhin is introduced as the commander of an artillery battery, available at: <https://youtu.be/ir9ND5pTqY0>

²⁶ <https://www.depo.ua/rus/svit/kto-na-samom-dele-voyuyut-na-donbasse-protiv-ukrainy-02082014142400>

²⁷ <https://www.interfax.ru/world/389282>; <https://www.interfax.ru/world/389284>; and <https://www.interfax.ru/world/389295> Note: while a video appeared on YouTube on 3 August 2014 showing the wreckage of a Ukrainian Su-25, this aircraft was actually shot down on 23 July 2014: <https://lostarmour.info/aviation/item.php?id=1119>

According to information from open sources (including posts by Kryzhin), the real name of the commander with the call sign Minyor is Igor Ivanovich Ukrainets.²⁸ Igor Ukrainets was born on 24 December 1971 and grew up in the village Verbky in the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast of Soviet Ukraine. Before the outbreak of war in the Donbas, he was living in the Ukrainian town of Bilytske in the Donetsk Oblast. He holds Ukrainian citizenship.²⁹ Based on the statements of one of his unit members, Ukrainets' previous military experience was limited to service in the Soviet Armed Forces.³⁰ Ukrainets was also mentioned by Ukraine's military intelligence in a list of separatist commanders who received special training by the Russian Armed Forces at the Mikhailovsky Artillery School in St. Petersburg, as reported by Ukrainian news website *Glavcom.ua* on 3 June 2016.³¹

According to his own writings on his now-deleted VK (VKontakte) profile, Ukrainets became involved in the armed conflict in the Donbas on 6 April 2014 when he oversaw the removal of explosives in a weapons basement inside the main SBU building of Luhansk (the building had been stormed by activists earlier that day). From then on, he received the call sign "Minyor" (in addition, his colleagues also jokingly refer to him as the cartoon character "Dyadyushka Au"). Shortly thereafter, he moved to the Tsaritsyno checkpoint near Slovyansk and eventually participated in the Battle of Slovyansk (12 April–5 July 2014) as the commander of one of Bezler's infantry units (this unit became an artillery unit by late 2014).³² At one point during the conflict, he reportedly received the rank of lieutenant colonel within the ranks of the DNR.³³

²⁸ See for example an interview with Kryzhin from October 2014, available at: <http://archive.li/AGFMh> and the comments by Kryzhin (username "fareastener") from 15 November 2014: <https://trueredrat.livejournal.com/2043.html>

²⁹ <https://glavcom.ua/news/rozvidka-vstanovila-gromadyan-ukrajini-yaki-priynyati-na-sluzhbu-do-rosijskih-okupacijnih-vijsk-foto-354850.html>

³⁰ <http://zavtra.ru/blogs/pochemu-bezler-stal-legendoj-pri-zhizni>

³¹ <http://archive.fo/bgR46>

<https://glavcom.ua/news/rozvidka-vstanovila-gromadyan-ukrajini-yaki-priynyati-na-sluzhbu-do-rosijskih-okupacijnih-vijsk-foto-354850.html>

³² See Igor Ukrainet's post from 6 May 2016: https://vk.com/wall29607259_8640?reply=8969 (archived: <http://archive.fo/gMuX4>) and Bezler's post from 29 April 2016: https://vk.com/wall283528124_129 (archived: <http://archive.fo/HY1QP>). See also: <http://zavtra.ru/blogs/pochemu-bezler-stal-legendoj-pri-zhizni>

³³ When he received this rank is unknown. On 12 June 2015 Kryzhin reported that Igor Ukrainets had been promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel, but in earlier documents Minyor was already referred to as a *podpolkovnik*: <https://kerzak-1.livejournal.com/1842533.html>; <https://stopterror.in.ua/info/2015/10/3-ya-otdelnaya-motostrelkovaya-brigada-berkut-3-ombr-v-ch-08803/>



Figure 7. Left: Photograph of Igor Ukrainets uploaded on his now-deleted VK profile in 2012.³⁴ Right: Ukrainets in an NTV news report from 6 April 2016 about DNR troops at the frontlines near Zaytseve.³⁵

Igor Ukrainets became the subject of a controversy after he withdrew his unit from positions at Mykolaivka near Slovyansk on 1 July 2014 on the orders of Bezler. Two days later, Slovyansk fell to the Ukrainian army and DNR commander Strelkov, who had led the defense of Slovyansk, publicly accused Minyor and two other separatists of desertion. He called for their arrest and their names were released to the public.³⁶ Both Ukrainets and Bezler have denied these charges, but the accusations have often been repeated by Strelkov leading to heated discussions between them and their supporters (some of the posts made by Ukrainets and Bezler during these discussions contain valuable information and are cited in this section).³⁷ Ukrainets was never arrested (despite one botched attempt according to Kryzhin³⁸), and in early July, after the fall of Slovyansk, he continued to command a separatist unit of the Bezler Group.³⁹ Their main base became a former boarding school in the village of Karlo-Marksove (Sofiivka) on the northwestern outskirts of Yenakieve (and

³⁴ Based on other photographs of Ukrainets, it has been possible to establish that the originally uploaded photo was mirrored. For a copy of the original upload: <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/ukrainec-igor-ivanovich/>

³⁵ Ukrainets could be recognized in the full video by facial similarity, but he also linked the video himself on his VK page during a discussion on 6 May 2016 in order to prove that he recently fought at Zaytseve: https://vk.com/wall29607259_8640?reply=8952 (archived: <http://archive.fo/ZbA75>). For the video: <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/1619598>

³⁶ <https://ria.ru/world/20140703/1014578818.html> The names of Minyor and a certain “Filin” were posted on the popular Strelkov_info page: https://vk.com/wall-57424472_5007 (archived: <http://archive.fo/pZ4LL>)

³⁷ For posts by Strelkov and Bezler on this topic, see: https://vk.com/wall347260249_3558 (archived: <http://archive.fo/9xjnz>); https://vk.com/wall283528124_129; and https://vk.com/wall283528124_131 (archived: <http://archive.fo/a2okK>). For comments on the issue by Igor Ukrainets: https://vk.com/wall29607259_8640?reply=8844 (archived: <http://archive.fo/v5M9c>). For further information: <https://polynkov.livejournal.com/1318439.html>

³⁸ <https://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/1862736.html?page=2>

³⁹ Bezler later explained that he had initially sent this unit to Yenakieve to prevent a scenario in which Strelkov would enter the city and overtake it by force. See Bezler’s posts from 27 and 29 April 2016: https://vk.com/wall283528124_128 (archived: <http://archive.fo/NvzZA>) and https://vk.com/wall283528124_129

part of the Yenakieve city council), close to Horlivka. This is apparent from geolocated photographs and videos of the base from before and after the MH17 crash.⁴⁰



Figure 8. Left: A photo uploaded by Evgeny Kryzhin on 16 July 2014 showing himself in front of the base at Karlo-Marksove shortly after his arrival there. The other militant (left) goes by the name Den Mirovoretz.⁴¹ Right: A still from a video interview with Igor Ukrainets recorded in front of the same building, uploaded to YouTube on 3 February 2016, which was also used for geolocating the base.⁴²

It is difficult to say if and what role Igor Ukrainets might have played in the Buk transport and/or the downing of MH17. The version of the recorded conversation between Bezler and Geranin uploaded by the SBU appears to be a fragment of a longer conversation, as no greetings are audible, but unfortunately no further transcripts have been released to the public. In the actual recording, Bezler can only be heard saying: “A plane was just shot down. The Minyor unit. It went down beyond Yenakieve”. While many have interpreted this as if Bezler reported that the plane was shot down *by* the Minyor unit, this is not explicitly mentioned by Bezler, leaving open the possibility that Ukrainets’ unit was simply the one that had reported the shutdown to Bezler. However, considering that Bezler knew that his own troops were involved in the spotting of the aircraft, it seems unlikely that he would leave out the involvement of his own group when reporting the downing to his contact in Russia (Geranin) twenty minutes after the downing of MH17.

Another possibility that cannot be fully excluded is that Bezler was simply bluffing to Geranin about his forces having downed the aircraft, which would not have been the first time such misreporting took place. For example, in the morning of 16 July an interview with Bezler was published by *RIA Novosti* in which he claimed that his troops had already downed a total of four Ukrainian aircraft,

⁴⁰ Other photos from DNR militants taken at the same base were already geolocated by InformNapalm, but they did not provide information on which units this base belonged to: <https://informnapalm.org/12043-gorlovka-naideny-rszo-sau-tanky-y-mesta-yh-skoplenyya/> For the location of the base: <http://wikimapia.org/25160495/Yenakiieve-primary-and-secondary-general-school-of-social-rehabilitation> Note: satellite photos from 2016 also show what appear to be Howitzer artillery pieces parked at the base, which matches the information that the unit was by then an artillery unit: <https://twitter.com/loogunda/status/1007752662211756038>

⁴¹ From Kryzhin’s now-deleted Facebook page, archived at: <http://archive.fo/TW4h4>

⁴² <https://youtu.be/IS6lr9V4wU0>

even though none of those have ever been confirmed.⁴³ Considering that he was under the impression that the plane had crashed close to Yenakieve, it would make sense that he would credit his Minyor unit with this achievement because they were based in Yenakieve at the time.

If, however, Bezler indeed meant that the Minyor unit downed the aircraft, the question remains what their exact role was. Due to the complexity of the weapons system, it is unlikely that members of a separatist infantry unit were assigned to control the Buk that day. Instead, all available evidence suggests that the missile launcher was most likely controlled by properly trained officers and/or soldiers of the Russian Armed Forces, with members of the 2nd Battalion of the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade from Kursk being particularly suspect; it was this battalion that had brought the Buk to the border with Ukraine.⁴⁴ Further evidence on the involvement of Russian officers can be found in the SBU intercept in which an unidentified militant with the call sign “Buryat” explains to Khmury (Sergey Dubinsky) that the missile launcher crossed the Russian–Ukrainian border on its own power and arrived in Donetsk with a crew.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, it is still possible that the Minyor unit played a smaller, yet significant, role in the Buk operation, which prompted Bezler to boast to Moscow about the involvement of his own subordinates in the downing of the aircraft.

One way in which Bezler’s message to Geranin can be explained is that he believed Minyor unit was also involved in the spotting of MH17. Since the aircraft flew over Yenakieve, thereby also directly passing over the base of the Minyor unit (see figure 3), this unit could have provided information on the trajectory of the aircraft. But it is also possible that part of the group was stationed in or near Dzerzhynsk alongside Stelmakh (Naemnik) who reported to Bezler that a “Birdie” was flying in his direction. Although the base of the Minyor unit was far away from the frontlines near Dzerzhynsk and Horlivka, Igor Ukrainets himself explained on VK that his unit was a 150-men strong mobile fighting force that was often dispatched to the frontlines near Horlivka in July 2014.⁴⁶ In one of his posts, he also recalls how on 21 July 2014 — four days after the MH17 crash — he and 45 of his fighters were sent out to support separatist forces in Dzerzhynsk as the town was being overrun by the Ukrainian Armed Forces.⁴⁷ If members of his unit were also in Dzerzhynsk on 17 July remains unclear, however.

⁴³ <https://ria.ru/interview/20140716/1016094469.html> For an overview of confirmed aircraft losses during the conflict, see: <http://lostarmour.info/aviation/>

⁴⁴ See the previous Bellingcat reports: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2016/02/23/53rd-report-en/>; and https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2016/05/03/the_lost_digit/

⁴⁵ <https://youtu.be/YgdqdklrqDA?t=93>

⁴⁶ See the posts by Ukrainets from 5–6 May 2016: https://vk.com/wall29607259_8640?reply=8947 (archived: <http://archive.fo/Ukcxj>)

⁴⁷ Ukrainets even bragged that they were the ones who “burned” Ukrainian forces during a fight over the building of the town’s main city council (according to Ukrainian sources, however, this event only resulted in several wounded soldiers). See Ukrainets’ post to Andrey from 10 May 2016: https://vk.com/wall29607259_8640?reply=8947&w=wall29607259_8640_r9037 (archived: <http://archive.fo/siO2d>). For Ukraine’s version of events, see: <https://www.petrizmazepa.com/freedomfortoretsk.html> and <https://web.archive.org/web/20181016211322/http://sprotyv.info:80/ru/news/kiiev/bylo-ochen-zharko-21-iyulya-2014-goda-boy-za-osvobozhdenie-torecka-ot-rossiyskih>

Another possibility is that the Minyor unit simply helped facilitate part of the transport of the Buk to Snizhne. This version of events is backed by a statement from a “highly placed rebel official” that was published by the *Associated Press (AP)* on 25 July 2014.⁴⁸ This official was quoted as saying that Minyor, who is referred to by the AP editors as “Sapper”, had accompanied the Buk missile launcher as it was traveling through DNR-controlled territory towards the launch location near the town of Snizhne:

A highly placed rebel, speaking to the AP this week, admitted that rebels were responsible. He said a unit based in the hometown of ousted President Viktor Yanukovich, made up of both Russians and Ukrainians, was involved in the firing of an SA-11 from near Snizhne. The rebel, who has direct access to the inner circle of the insurgent leadership in Donetsk, said that he could not be named because he was contradicting the rebels’ official line.

...

The rebel official who spoke to the AP about the incident said that Bezler commanded another fighter, code-named Sapper, who was the ranking rebel officer with the missile launcher at the time.

According to the rebel official, Sapper led a rebel unit, about half of which was made up of men from far eastern Russia, many from the island of Sakhalin off Russia's Pacific coast.

Sapper is from the nearby town of Yenakieve, he said. The town also happens to be the home of the former president, Yanukovich.

Sapper could not be reached for comment; his real identity is not known. Bezler, contacted on Friday by the AP, denied any connection to the attack on the plane. "I did not shoot down the Malaysia Airlines plane. I did not have the physical capabilities to do so," he declared.

According to the account of the rebel official, however, Sapper had been sent that day to inspect three checkpoints — in the towns of Debaltseve, Chornukhine and Snizhne, all of which are within a 20-mile (30-kilometer) radius of where the plane went down. At some point in these travels, he joined up with the convoy accompanying the missile launch system.

The identity of the source was not revealed, and it is unknown if he has also given his testimony to the Dutch-led JIT. He nevertheless seems to have detailed knowledge of the events as he correctly describes how Minyor’s unit was from Yenakieve, something which was not widely known at the time since the unit had only recently arrived there and generally kept a low profile. While the source did not specify when and where Minyor supposedly joined up with the Buk convoy, it is worth noting that the low-loader with the Buk reportedly drove through his base town of Yenakieve towards Donetsk at about 8:00 in the morning on 17 July, according to an eyewitness that was later

⁴⁸ <http://archive.fo/y3xwz>; <https://www.businessinsider.com/mh17-story-2014-7/>

cited by the JIT.⁴⁹ This was part of the same route that was taken by a military convoy on 15 July that has previously been linked to the Buk transport.⁵⁰

Also interesting is the claim that about half of the Minyor unit was made up of “men from far eastern Russia, many from the island of Sakhalin”. It is difficult to assess if this is true, or partially true, but there are several clues which suggest that it could have been the case. For example, Yevgeny Kryzhin was indeed from Sakhalin island, and in August 2014 he reported he was helping another volunteer from Sakhalin to join up with the separatists in Yenakieve through the same organization that had brought Kryzhin there the previous month.⁵¹ This organization, the KCPN, which was already running supplies (including weaponry) to DNR units since at least June 2014, had offices in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Irkutsk — one of the largest cities in eastern Siberia.⁵² It is also notable that in one of his VK posts, Ukrainets admits that a member of the “Northern Wind” had joined his unit sometime after the withdrawal from Slovyansk. As it is well researched that the term “Northern Wind” refers to the period of massive Russian military intervention in the war in the Donbas, this reads like an admission that at least one Russian agent or serviceman was among his ranks.⁵³

Although the AP source appears to have had inside knowledge into the DNR, the statements should still be treated with caution, especially since the identity of this “highly placed rebel” has not been revealed. Considering that the AP stated that Minyor’s real identity is unknown, it seems that the source only knew Ukrainets’ military call sign and the town in which he was stationed, which might indicate that his actual insider knowledge was still limited. Furthermore, considering that the testimony was only published on 25 July, it should also be taken into account that the source could have been influenced by the 17 July dissemination of the recording in which Bezler already mentions the “Minyor unit” in relation to the downing of the aircraft. The involvement of Ukrainets as the leader of the incoming Buk convoy is anyway difficult to square with the fact that this mission was coordinated by Sergey Dubinsky (Khmury) who, as the head of the GRU DNR, had plenty of manpower of his own (see chapter 4). Additionally, Dubinsky was a deputy of Strelkov who had recently charged Ukrainets with treason, and Ukrainets seems like an even worse pick for such an important mission.

Ukrainets’ unit continued to serve in the Bezler Group after the downing of MH17, and was eventually integrated into the DNR’s Berkut Brigade (a.k.a. military unit 08803) — the successor to the Bezler Group that was set up after Bezler left the Donbas for his native Crimea in the autumn of 2014. The Minyor unit became officially known as the Howitzer Artillery Division and kept its base

⁴⁹ The Buk convoy was spotted in Yenakieve by an eyewitness cited by the Joint Investigation Team (JIT): <https://youtu.be/Sf6gJ8NDhYA?t=1m23s>

⁵⁰ For more information on this convoy: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2016/03/04/8110/>

⁵¹ <https://quarterbackrene.livejournal.com/887.html>

⁵² <http://web.archive.org/web/20141124001630/http://kcpn.info:80/contacts>. For the early supply runs, see the post from June 25th: https://lj.rossia.org/users/rene_spb/

⁵³ See Ukrainets’ post from 7 May 2016: https://vk.com/wall29607259_8640?reply=8995 (archived: <http://archive.fo/LvFMi>)

in Karlo-Marksove, Yenakieve.⁵⁴ On 27 October 2016, Ukrainets was reportedly heavily wounded while fighting alongside Mikhail “Givi” Tolstykh on the frontlines near Zaytseve.⁵⁵ Rumors even circulated that he had been killed in action, but this turned out to be false, and about a month later, Ukrainets’ VK profile showed activity again. On 24 December 2018, a new video interview of Ukrainets was released by the Russian website PolitRussia which showed he was still active as a separatist commander.⁵⁶

1.3 A look at Bezler’s defense arguments

Igor Bezler has occasionally responded to evidence linking him to the Buk transport and the downing of MH17. On 18 July 2014, the day after the shootdown, the Russian news agency *RIA Novosti* posted Bezler’s response to the leaked conversation between him and Moscow (Geranin):

We really did discuss over the phone the searches of an aircraft, but those who think that we shot it down [i.e. the Boeing] have too much *kefir* in their brain. On the tape, it is clearly audible that the talk was about an aircraft in Yenakieve. The Boeing fell in the area of Snizhne. There are 100 kilometers between them, I don't have weapons capable of downing planes at such a distance.⁵⁷

The actual distance between Yenakieve and Snizhne is not 100 but 43 kilometers in a straight line, and this is not the area where MH17 crashed but where the Buk missile was launched from. Measured from the outskirts of Yenakieve, the main crash site at Hrabove was about 30 kilometers away and the last FDR point, which indicates where MH17 last flew before it got hit, approximately 23 kilometers away (with a lot of plane debris also scattered over the area in-between these two points). Nevertheless, Bezler’s main defense argument is that the recording concerned the shoot-down of a different aircraft over Yenakieve, although in this specific message he did not yet specify which aircraft he was referring to.

On 28 September 2016, after the JIT presented its initial results, Bezler issued another response via the VK account that he shares with his wife.⁵⁸ The translation of the most relevant part of his message is as follows:

In the evening, after coming home from work, I checked the internet to see the published results of the investigation by the international commission on the Malaysian Boeing crash. I looked through the video, and at 01:31 I had to laugh and from then on I watched it as an animated fiction movie. At 01:31, the video shows the transport in Yenakieve. On 17 July 2014, in Horlivka, Yenakieve, and their vicinity even hedgehogs did not dare walk their baby hedgehogs to the toilet without my

⁵⁴ <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/ukrainec-igor-ivanovich/>. For an overview of the separate divisions of military unit 08803: <https://stopterror.in.ua/info/2015/10/3-ya-otdelnaya-motostrelkovaya-brigada-berkut-3-ombr-v-ch-08803/> and <https://stopterror.in.ua/info/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Military-DNR2.pdf>

⁵⁵ https://www.dialog.ua/news/101291_1477817875

⁵⁶ <https://youtu.be/mYbhKWGeipY>

⁵⁷ <https://lenta.ru/news/2014/07/18/bezler/>

⁵⁸ https://vk.com/angeligo?w=wall283528124_196 (archived: <http://archive.fo/CU2pL>)

permission. And here the commission tells tales about a BUK being transported there. Well, I get it when the unbelievable idiots from the SBU, the Service of Brainless Ukrainians, managed to pass off a conversation about the downed SU [i.e. Sukhoi aircraft], which took place almost 24 hours before the tragedy, as if I reported the shooting down of the Boeing. These idiots did not even pay attention to the phrase that pilots who ejected from the plane were looked for, and that the aircraft went down behind Yenakieve. (I'm certainly not an aviator, but I have flown on civilian airliners and never heard of pilots that ejected from them).

In Horlivka, there was [only] a Strela-10 [low-altitude anti-aircraft missile launcher] captured from the Ukrainian Army (VSU), and what luck: in the midst of all the Ukrainian air-raids a BUK is supposedly driving through Yenakieve, and it's even going to Donetsk. These dimwits can't even fathom that if this were the case then five minutes after entering Yenakieve (my territory) this imaginary BUK would be on duty standing somewhere in the vicinity of Lake Horlivka.⁵⁹ The law was: all the best stuff goes to Horlivka. (At the time, even the Ukrainian media mentioned that orders and instructions from the DNR did not apply to Horlivka).

In this message, Bezler essentially adds that his conversation with Geranin was supposedly about a Sukhoi jet downed near Yenakieve almost 24 hours before the MH17; i.e. in the late afternoon or early evening of 16 July. However, while Ukraine has confirmed that a Sukhoi Su-25M1 had been downed at 6:55pm in the evening, this aircraft had actually crashed near Hryhorivka — a small village south of Snizhne near the border with Russia, which is almost twice as far from Yenakieve than the MH17 crash site. The approximate time and location of this shutdown can be confirmed by live messages from eyewitnesses that appeared on VK. Photos and a video of the smoke plume as well as photos of the plane wreckage were also shared online.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the plane wreckage also showed up on satellite imagery after 16 July:

⁵⁹ The "Gorlovskoe More" is a lake on the southern outskirts of Horlivka: <http://wikimapia.org/14740359/ru/горловское-море>

⁶⁰ A live eyewitness account from 6:59pm is available at: https://vk.com/wall235893372_14840 (archived: <http://archive.fo/48uz2>). Another eyewitness account from 7:00pm followed by a photograph of the smoke plume is available at: https://vk.com/wall235893372_14843 (archived: <http://archive.fo/7XKxL>) and https://vk.com/wall235893372_14893 (<http://archive.fo/DQ21h>). For other photos: <http://lostarmour.info/aviation/item.php?id=8327>.



Figure 9. Left: Still frame of a video of the crashed Su-25 recorded by Ukrainian soldiers on 16 July 2014 from their camp near the border with Russia. Right: Satellite imagery from 21 July 2014 showing the Su-25 wreckage in the red circle close to the border with Russia (in yellow). The white circle shows the location of the military base from where the video was filmed.

According to Ukrainian officials, the Su-25M1 was flying at an altitude of 6,250 meters over the Amrosiivska district until it was hit at by either an air-to-air missile fired from Russian airspace by a Miyokan MiG-29 fighter jet, or a surface-to-air missile launched from Russian territory by a Pantsir system. The pilot successfully ejected and safely made it back to Ukrainian-held territory.⁶¹ Years later, a video recorded by Ukrainian servicemen who were stationed near the border with Russia appeared online in which the smoke plume from the crash site is visible. The recording soldier can also be heard saying that he had witnessed how the Su-25 was downed by a surface-to-air missile from just across the Russian border.⁶² Nevertheless, the Russian Defense Ministry has denied any Russian involvement in the downing.⁶³

Pro-separatist sources seem to agree that the downed Su-25 was originally hit while flying close to area near the Russian border where it crashed, which diminishes the possibility that it was hit while

⁶¹ <http://mediarnbo.org/2014/07/18/nsc-news-analysis-center-briefing-at-12-00-july-18-2014/> For the figure of 6,250 and the version with the Pantsir, see: Dutch Safety Board, *Crash of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17*, p 185, available at: <https://www.onderzoeksraad.nl/en/onderzoek/2049/investigation-crash-mh17-17-july-2014/>

⁶² <https://youtu.be/CB9aqf2sWOc>

⁶³ <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/386408> (archived: <http://archive.fo/C8gcd>)

flying over area controlled by the Bezler Group. For example, an early report by the DNR's information service mentions that the Su-25 was shot down over Hryhorivka.⁶⁴ Also, the Russian news website *LifeNews* cited a source from a law enforcement agency from Russia's Rostov Oblast as saying that the Su-25 was shot down near the border by separatists while flying at an altitude of 6,000 meters, supposedly when flying back from Russian airspace after illegally crossing it shortly prior (since the separatists were by then not known to possess any weapons capable of reaching aircraft flying higher than 3,500 meters, this message only draws more suspicion to direct Russian involvement into the downing).⁶⁵ In addition, the Russian news website Donnews.ru reported that according to Russian eyewitnesses two Ukrainian aircraft had been shot down at the border near Kuybyshevo (close to Hryhorivka) that day, with one of them supposedly downed by a Russian Pantsir-S1 after it illegally entered Russian airspace.⁶⁶

There is also no indication that Bezler was talking about a different incident that occurred on 16 July. While numerous live eyewitness statements can be found on social media about the downing of the Su-25 near Hryhorivka, members of a VK group for residents of Yenakieve mentioned that the evening of 16 July was mostly quiet for them.⁶⁷ Furthermore, while it is true that more Ukrainian aircrafts were shot at by the separatists that day, none of them are known to have crashed. This is despite claims by separatist media that two other Su-25s had also been downed earlier that day. In response to such reports, the Ukrainian Defense Ministry had released a statement on 16 July at 6:35pm (twenty minutes before the downing of the Su-25 near Hryhorivka) in which they explained that the separatists had so far only managed to damage one Su-25:

The information spread by the militants that the Armed Forces of Ukraine lost two Su-25 strike aircraft is false.

Today, July 16, at about 13.00, while carrying out a combat mission in the area of the anti-terrorist operation, terrorists using a portable air-defense system inflicted damage on the wingman of a pair of Su-25's.

The pilot directed the plane to the designated area and successfully performed an emergency landing.

The pilot of the aircraft was unharmed. The airplane has minor damage and is being repaired.⁶⁸

Further details from the Ukrainians about this incident appeared later in the Ukrainian media. The damaged Su-25 was reportedly hit by one out of three missiles fired from MANPADS while conducting combat sorties south of Snizhne near the border with Russia, and was then safely

⁶⁴ See the post by Vladislav Berdichevskiy (here Vladislav Brig) on his now-deleted Facebook who was at the time head of the DNR's information service, archived at: <http://archive.fo/SdueH>

⁶⁵ <https://life.ru/t/новости/136731> (archived: <http://archive.fo/gr0jW>)

⁶⁶ http://www.donnews.ru/V-neskolkkih-kilometrah-ot-Kuybyshevo-sbity-dva-samoleta-ukrainskih-VVS_16144 (archived: <http://archive.fo/yNPUc>)

⁶⁷ https://vk.com/wall-32205256_195247?w=wall-32205256_195247 (archived link: <http://archive.fo/Pd5lr>)

⁶⁸ <http://www.mil.gov.ua/news/2014/07/16/bojovi-litaki-povitryanih-sil-zs-ukraini-v-ramkah-vidnovlennya-bojovih-zavdan-nanesli-dekilka-tochkovih-aviaudariv-po-viznachenih-obektah-protivnika/> (archived: <http://archive.fo/5FE5p>) Note: in the report from the Dutch Safety Board it is erroneously stated that this source is from 17 July 2014.

escorted westward by the lead aircraft.⁶⁹ Photographs of the Su-25 taken shortly after it performed the emergency landing show extensive damage to the right wing.⁷⁰ One video that supposedly shows a thick smoke trail in the sky over Torez on 16 July appeared on YouTube, but is difficult to verify if this concerns footage from the same incident.⁷¹

The separatist claims that two other Su-25 fighter jets were downed prior to the Su-25 crash near Hryhorivka seems to originate from the DNR's military information service. This service disseminated at least two contradictory messages. The first message had been posted on Facebook by the head of this service claiming that two Sukhoi jets which bombed Savur-Mohyla — a strategic height south of Snizhne — were shot down.⁷² The second message was relayed to Interfax with the claim that two Su-25 fighter jets that attacked positions near Savur-Mohyla were hit (but not necessarily downed) by the separatists. One of the planes was supposedly damaged by MANPADS fire near Horlivka and flew back westward to Ukrainian-held territory while “emitting a lot of smoke”, and the other incident was still being assessed.⁷³ It is not clear if one of these incidents concerns the same as the one that the Ukrainian officials reported about, but on the popular Strelkov_info page it was explained that the second Su-25 had supposedly been downed over Snizhne by the Oplot Battalion with three shots from MANPADS — the same number of shots as mentioned by Ukrainian officials.⁷⁴

With no other known incidents reported, Bezler's main argument — that his conversation with Geranin concerned talk over an Su-25 aircraft downed on 16 July near Yenakieve — appears to be an attempt at manipulation. Even though it is still unclear how exactly the Su-25 that crashed near Hryhorivka was downed, all available sources suggest that it was hit by a missile when flying at a high altitude near the border with Russia, something which Bezler's forces could not have accomplished with the low-altitude and short-range anti-aircraft weaponry within their arsenal. There is also no reason to believe that he was referring to any other incident as no other shootdown on 16 July has ever been confirmed by Ukrainian officials, no pilot has been captured by the separatists or went missing that day, no photos or videos of a smoke plume or a plane wreckage have appeared online, and no crash site has been identified on open-source satellite imagery (which would be easy if Bezler were to pinpoint a location). Although claims of other shootdowns were made that day, these were unclear and contradictory with no visual corroboration. This was not unusual at the time, as numerous unconfirmed and fantastic claims of downed Ukrainian aircraft already appeared before 16 July (alongside confirmed shoot-downs).

⁶⁹ <https://fraza.ua/analytics/254608-%C2%ABletajuschie-tanki%C2%BB-ukrainskoj-aviatsii-shturmoviki-su-25-v-vojne-na-Donbase-and-https://dumskaya.net/news/boevaya-rabota-i-spasenie-tovarishchey-za-hto-v-083746/>

⁷⁰ <http://militaryaviation.in.ua/en/2017/07/08/skill-of-the-ukrainian-pilot-of-the-su-25/>

⁷¹ https://youtu.be/lPA1_i7jy7I

⁷² <https://rian.com.ua/incidents/20140716/354949283.html>

⁷³ <http://www.interfax.ru/world/386162>

⁷⁴ https://vk.com/wall-57424472_7115 (archived: <http://archive.fo/lrMOT>)

In contrast to Bezler’s rhetoric, there is actually nothing illogical about his message to Geranin that MH17 was downed “behind” or “beyond” Yenakieve. As was already explained in the first section of this report, Bezler was most likely in or near Horlivka when he made the call to Geranin, and from there, both the crash site and the point where the Buk missile struck MH17 were indeed beyond the outskirts of Yenakieve. Although the plane crashed quite far from Yenakieve, a Boeing crash makes a lot more noise and leaves a much larger smoke plume than the crash of a fighter jet, so that for many, including Bezler, the shootdown initially may have appeared closer than it actually was. This is also apparent from eyewitness accounts on social media. For example, shortly after MH17 crashed a thread was opened on a VK community page for Yenakieve by a resident of this city who asked: “Five minutes ago I heard an airplane humming, and a couple of seconds later something exploded. Did anyone else hear anything?” Some members report that they did not hear anything, while others testify that they did. The thread starter then suggests that the plane was downed near Kirovske (Khrestivka), which is in-between Yenakieve and the point where MH17 flew when it was struck by a missile. Eventually residents from Kirovske and Olkhovatka shared photos of the smoke plume, and it became clear to everyone that the plane had actually crashed further to the east.⁷⁵



Figure 10. Photograph of the MH17 smoke plume taken from Kirovske (geolocated coordinates: 48.1582801,38.3694481), posted on the VK community page for Yenakieve.

⁷⁵ https://vk.com/wall-32205256_195615?w=wall-32205256_195615 (archived: <http://archive.fo/D7EU7>)

Bezler's argument that his message could not have concerned MH17 because he mentioned pilots who had ejected from the plane is also weak. In the actual conversation, Geranin asks Bezler where the pilots are, and in response Bezler does not mention the spotting of parachutes, only that he has dispatched a search party and that his men would take photographs of the crash site. If Bezler was indeed talking about pilots, then it would only prove that he was under the impression that a military aircraft had been downed—this is nothing unusual, since a search for pilots who could have ejected from a damaged fighter jet is a normal procedure in times of war. In fact, in a video recorded almost half an hour after the downing by members of the Oplot Battalion, who were the first unit to arrive at the crash site, the separatists can still be heard discussing a search for Ukrainian parachutists.⁷⁶ One member of this unit later explained in an interview that he was initially instructed by his commanders to be prepared to face Ukrainians who had reportedly bailed out of the aircraft, as “white objects had been seen floating in the clouds”.⁷⁷

Also unconvincing is Bezler's argument that he would never have allowed the Buk missile launcher to be used for anything else but the defense of his stronghold of Horlivka. It has already been determined that the employment of the Buk missile launcher in rebel-held Ukraine was a mission coordinated by the Russian GRU, and there is no reason to believe that Bezler, who himself has always been suspected of having ties with the GRU, would have disobeyed their instructions. But even if the GRU did not determine where the Buk was to be employed, Bezler also had good reasons why he would want to see the anti-aircraft system operating near the frontline south of Snizhne. This was near the Marynivka border crossing which separatists were trying to capture to create a corridor to Russia. At the time, the capture of the crossing seemed to be of vital importance for DNR separatists such as Bezler, in the first place because it would open up a direct supply line from Russia to the DNR, and in the second place because it would effectively entrap thousands of Ukrainian forces who were stationed in the southern part of Luhansk Oblast along the border with Russia.

At the end of his post on VK, Bezler also added the following message concerning the route of the Buk transport: “P.S. For European dimwits! To travel from Luhansk to Donetsk through Yenakieve is like traveling from Berlin to Potsdam via London”. However, this argument is also weak because the city of Yenakieve is actually en route when traveling to Donetsk on the fastest route from Luhansk via Debaltseve.⁷⁸ Under normal circumstances, the Buk transport would probably have driven around Yenakieve on the M04 motorway to Donetsk, but on 17 July this was riskier due to the volatile frontlines near Avdiivka and the Donetsk airport. It has previously been established that

⁷⁶ <https://www.news.com.au/travel/travel-updates/incidents/neverbeforeseen-footage-reveals-russianbacked-rebels-arriving-at-the-wreckage-of-mh17/news-story/c5f6bc5e9629a22d17fe2680bfbd61a5> For a full detailed reconstruction of the arrival of separatists at the crash sites: <https://www.arnoldg.xyz/reconstructing-arrival-of-the-separatists/>

⁷⁷ https://www.corriere.it/english/14_luglio_22/how-malaysian-plane-was-shot-down-51e99c60-118f-11e4-affb-3320a03d21e8.shtml?refresh_ce-cp

⁷⁸ See for example the standard route provided by Yandex Maps: <https://yandex.ru/maps/-/CBBmRRtRHD>

the 15 July military convoy also went from Luhansk to Donetsk via Yenakieve and Makiivka; a somewhat slower journey, but much further away from the front.⁷⁹

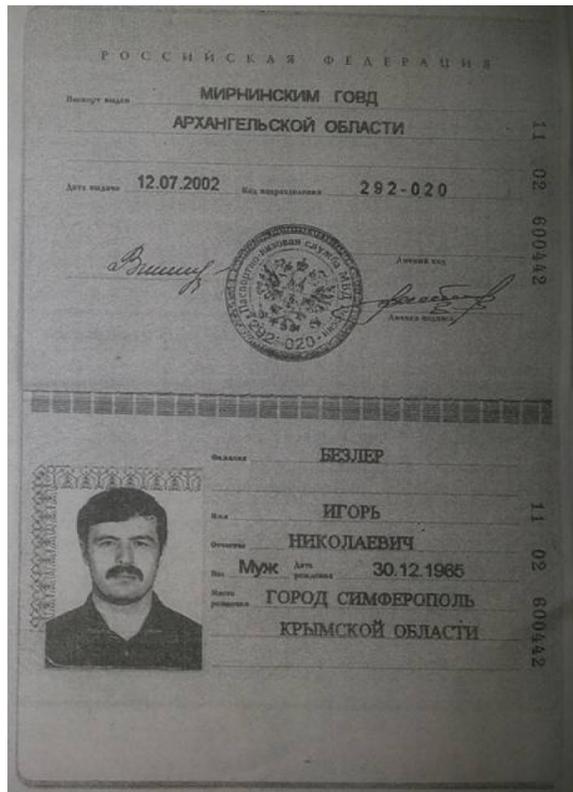


Figure 11. Copy of a Russian passport of Igor Nikolaevich Bezler released by the SBU in April 2014. The passport indicates that it was issued in 2002 by the local administration of the closed spaceport town of Mirny in Arkhangelsk Oblast.

On 8 December 2017, it was reported that Bezler had also given a testimony to members of the JIT. Snippets of his testimony were cited in the media and do not appear to deviate from his previous line of arguments. Bezler reportedly denied that the Buk crossed Horlivka, but since this route was not even alleged by the JIT, the reporting media have confused this city with Yenakieve. In his defense, Bezler also referred to eyewitnesses, including Ukrainian prisoners of war whom he had kept in Horlivka around the time of the downing.⁸⁰ It is not explained how these eyewitnesses could help his defense, but maybe he has simply tried to prove that he never left his headquarters that day. This, however, would not have mattered since Bezler could have easily coordinated everything from Horlivka. In fact, this would only corroborate that he was indeed stationed in Horlivka when he received the message from his subordinate in Dzerzhynsk (Stelmakh) that a “birdie” was flying in his

⁷⁹ See our previous investigation concerning this transport: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2016/03/04/8110/>. According to Yandex Maps, the route from Vuhlehirsk to Donetsk over the M04 is a 67 km drive, and the route from Vuhlehirsk to Donetsk via Yenakieve approximately 70 km: <https://yandex.ru/maps/-/CBBBVCUUXC>

⁸⁰ <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/28905738.html>

direction, and when he subsequently reported to Geranin that his men had shot down a plane that went down “beyond Yenakieve”.

Based on the available evidence it can be concluded that Bezler had played an important role in the operation that resulted in the downing of MH17. Apart from allowing the Buk transport to drive through the territory under his control, he had cooperated with his subordinate Stelmakh in identifying MH17 as a potential target, and for reasons still unclear, even linked his Minyor unit to the shootdown. While it is still unknown who gave the direct order to shoot down MH17, there is no doubt that Bezler was an important eyewitness to these events and has chosen to hide behind misstatements, deflections and weak arguments in order to blame Ukraine for the crash. According to his VK profile, Bezler is currently residing in Simferopol, Crimea, from where he remains in touch with his former colleagues in the separatist movement. He showed himself visiting separatist-held Ukraine in July 2018.⁸¹ On 18 October 2017, he uploaded a photo of himself meeting with important former DNR figures, including Sergey Dubinsky (Khmury). The photo (Figure 10) was taken in front of the Congress Hotel Don-Plaza in the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don (where Dubinsky currently lives), and Bezler added the following description: “We are peaceful citizens (but if necessary, we will find an armoured train)”.⁸²



Figure 12. From left to right: Valentin Ivanovich Motuzenko (former commander of the Kalnius Battalion); Igor Bezler; Sergey Dubinsky; and Vadim Viktorovich Pogodin (former commander of the Kerch battalion).

⁸¹ https://vk.com/wall283528124_466 (archived: <http://archive.fo/Jalt1>); https://vk.com/wall283528124_467 (archived: <http://archive.fo/s8Li3>)

⁸² https://vk.com/wall283528124_387?z=photo283528124_456240498%2Fae771042e4e0ef9190 (archived: <http://archive.fo/DByPR>)

2) Who were Major, Grek and the Chornukhine Cossacks?

2.1 Call sign “Major”

Other recordings uploaded by the SBU on the day of the shutdown concern three conversations between a man identified as “Major”⁸³ and a certain “Grek”, whose call sign is mentioned in the SBU video but not heard on record:

First call (4:33pm):

Grek: Yes Major!

Major: So, these were the Chornukhine guys that shot down a plane!

Grek: Who shot it down again?

Major: From the Chornukhine checkpoint, Cossacks that are stationed near Chornukhine!

Second call (5:11pm):

Grek: Yes Major.

Major: Well, the plane disintegrated in the air, in the vicinity of... ehh... the Pertropavlivska mine! The first Cargo 200 [*note*: this is a military jargon for dead body] ... found the first Cargo 200! [It's] a civilian!

Third call (5:32pm):

Major: Yes Sasha?

Grek: Well, what is happening over there?

Major: Shit, it's definitely a civilian aircraft.

Grek: Ok I see. Are there a lot of people?

Major: It's a fucking mess. The debris fell straight into people's yards.

Grek: What kind of plane?

Major: I haven't figured this out yet because I haven't been close to the main part yet. I'm only looking where the first bodies fell. Here are the remnants of internal brackets, chairs, bodies...

Grek: I see. Any weaponry there?

Major: Nothing at all. Civilian belongings, medical bits and pieces, towels, toilet paper...

Grek: Any documents?

Major: Yes. From an Indonesian student. From Thompson University, fuck.

The first phone call was supposedly recorded just thirteen minutes after the downing of MH17, which is earlier than any of the other public recordings from after the shutdown. The second and third phone calls are made after Major arrived at part of the crash-site and found out, to his surprise, that their side had downed a civilian aircraft. Based on the content of the recordings, neither of the

⁸³ In this research, “Майор” is transliterated as Major (the rank) in order to avoid having to use “Mayor” (the political position).

two seem to be involved in the downing of the aircraft, though Major initially claims to know which group was responsible.

In the previous section it was already mentioned that Yevgeny Kryzhin of the Minyor unit described both individuals as Yenakieve-based militants who according to him did not leave the city limits on the day of the downing. However, an analysis of the recordings shows that it is more likely that Major traveled from a western direction, perhaps from or via Yenakieve, towards the crash-site shortly after the downing of MH17.

In the second recording an important reference point is mentioned when Major reports to Grek that the plane fell apart over the “Pertropavlivska mine”. Confusion has existed over the location of this mine. In the Russian transcript of the recording it is written as “Petropavlovskoy” and in the English transcript as “Petropavlovskaya”, but there is no mine with a such a name in the vicinity of the crash-site. However, a mining village with the name Petropavlivka is just 1 kilometer to the north of the point where MH17 was hit by the Buk missile. This village also has a spoil tip of the Rasypnyanskaya-2 mine, which Major must have referred to by its Russian name as “Petropavlivska mine” (the spoil tips of mines act as important geographic reference points for both separatists and locals in the Donbas region). Some pieces of debris were scattered over Petropavlivka, including part of the right engine which landed just 440 meters west of the spoil tip.⁸⁴



Figure 13. Overview of the six wreckage areas provided by the Dutch Safety Board. The larger areas indicate an in-flight break-up.⁸⁵

In the second and third conversations, Major reports that he is near the area where the first bodies and pieces of debris had fallen, but also that he has not yet reached the site of the main wreckage.

⁸⁴ For a quick overview of the wreckage sites, see: <http://graphics.wsj.com/mh17-crash-map/>

⁸⁵ Dutch Safety Board, *Crash of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17*, p 53–54.

This suggests he had approached the crash site from the west. Indeed, if he wanted to travel straight from Yenakieve to the main crash site near the village of Hrabove he would have passed through, respectively, Orlovo-Ivanivka, Petropavlivka, and Rozsypne — all of which are in areas where a large amount of debris had scattered.

It turns out that the man behind the call sign Major possibly was another member of the Bezler Group. Since 2014, the pro-Ukrainian website [Myrotvorets.center](http://myrotvorets.center) (which attempts to reveal personal information of individuals whom they consider Russian fighters, separatists, collaborators, and other “enemies of Ukraine”) has been publishing information on a lieutenant colonel with the call sign Major, whom they described as “one of those who shot down flight MH17”. This entry concerns Igor Nikolaevich Afonin, a Ukrainian citizen from Horlivka who reportedly committed suicide on 20 March 2016 at the age of 48. His death was reported in the Ukrainian media, and has been confirmed by his spouse.⁸⁶ In the news reports on his death, Afonin was described as a deputy commander for logistics of the Berkut Brigade — the successor to the Bezler Group. It was also stated that he was a colonel in the Russian army, but no evidence has been discovered that corroborates this claim.⁸⁷ On Myrotvorets, it is not explained why they think Afonin’s call sign was Major, and they do not elaborate on his alleged involvement in the downing of MH17.

Although Igor Afonin used to have multiple social media profiles, most of them have been deleted by now. However, some of his blogs and his Google+ profile could still be found and showed, amongst other details, his Ukrainian work phone number.⁸⁸ This number can be found in two telephone number-sharing apps that are popular in countries of the former Soviet Union, one of which is GetContact. In the database of the latter, his phone number is saved under “Igor Major”, an indication that Afonin indeed used the call sign Major.

⁸⁶ <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/afonin-igor-nikolaevich/>

⁸⁷ <https://www.segodnya.ua/regions/donetsk/v-gorlovke-posle-proverki-iz-rossii-povesilsya-polkovnik-dnr-razvedka-701834.html> and https://www.dialog.ua/news/81588_1458740679

⁸⁸ Afonin managed a poorly-read digital news blog. The contact info for this page also showed Afonin’s phone number and mail address. For an archived copy of his Google+ profile: <http://archive.fo/xebiz>

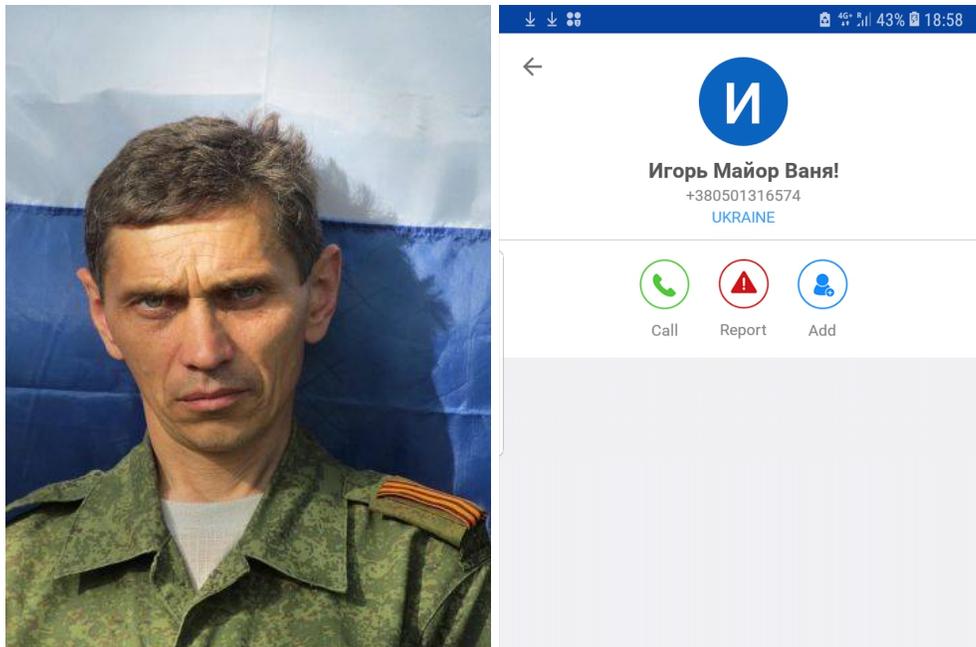


Figure 14. Left: A photograph of the now deceased Igor Afonin. Right: Igor Afonin's phone number as shown in GetContact.

Several videos in which Afonin can be heard talking are also still online, allowing a comparison of his voice with the voice of Major heard on the SBU intercepts. In this video, which he uploaded on his YouTube channel in October 2013, Afonin can be heard advertising an MMM website, a well-known Ponzi scheme (before the war in the Donbas, he, like many in DNR leadership positions, was involved in MMM).⁸⁹ While Afonin's voice sounds quite similar, it is difficult to compare because in the SBU intercepts Major sounds very emotional, which greatly affects his pitch.

Although Kryzhin spoke of a militant based in Yenakieve with the call sign Major, it seems that Afonin was primarily based near his hometown of Horlivka, which might suggest Kryzhin was talking about a different person (the call sign Major is popular among separatists). In the summer of 2014, Afonin was tasked with the management of DNR block posts on the outskirts of Horlivka as a member of a unit that initially called itself the Knights of the Donbas Battalion.⁹⁰ He can already be spotted in a video from 4 April 2014 about a gathering with DNR activists and close associates of Bezler near the "Majorsky checkpoint", set up to the north of Horlivka.⁹¹ Another early checkpoint

⁸⁹ <https://youtu.be/XMIKLOg0xIg>. For another video in which Afoni can be heard talking: <https://youtu.be/rdCrdA7GKV0>. For another example of him advertising a Ponzi scheme website:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20130717064915/http://mmmHorlivka.blogspot.com/>.

⁹⁰ A VK page for this battalion was active from 9 June 2014 until 22 November 2014. One of the two moderators of this page is Afonin's wife: <https://vk.com/gorlovkadnr>. For a mention of this battalion in relation to the securing of DNR checkpoints: <http://crime.in.ua/node/5773>

⁹¹ Afonin is visible throughout the video wearing a black beanie and dark grey hooded jacket: <https://youtu.be/C21m8oP7xfY>. Also present in the video are the "Mayor of Horlivka" Evgeny Klep (<https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/klep-evgenij-viktorovich/>), and Oleg Gubanov, a close associate of Bezler (<https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/gubanov-oleg-vladimirovich/>). The Majorsky checkpoint was most likely named after the nearby Majorska train station. Afonin is more often associated with this checkpoint, and as such there is a chance his call sign Major might be derived from it rather than the rank of Major, as one might first presume. For

where Afonin was stationed in the summer of 2014 was the “Dinamo checkpoint” at the southern entrance to Horlivka.⁹² Considering that Horlivka was fully under control of the Bezler Group, there is little doubt that Afonin was a member of the Bezler Group. In fact, Afonin and Bezler appear to have been close friends, as a video uploaded in October 2014 shows Bezler singing and playing the guitar during a party after Afonin’s wedding.⁹³

2.2 Call sign “Grek”

Further details on the man behind the call sign Grek can reveal more about the context of the three recorded conversations. However, his call sign (The Greek) is fairly popular among separatists, making it difficult to determine his real identity. An important detail is that Major called him Sasha, diminutive of Aleksandr. Even then, there are several known separatists with the call sign Grek who also have the common first name of Aleksandr.

One of them stands out because he was reported to be a militia commander in Yenakieve somewhere in 2014, just like how Kryzhin described the Grek that we hear on the SBU intercepts. This concerns Aleksandr Afendikov (b. 1974) who is best known for serving as the separatist mayor of Debaltseve from February to October 2015. In a later interview Afendikov explained he had joined the separatists in the spring of 2014 when setting up a mobile fighting unit known as “Grecki” (the Greeks) which reportedly became a unit of the DNR’s military intelligence.⁹⁴ However, Afendikov has recently explained that he only served in Yenakieve in the autumn of 2014 (i.e. after the downing of MH17). He added that another Grek from Yenakieve was coincidentally also named Aleksandr.⁹⁵ Kryzhin too explained that this Grek was not related to Afendikov, but he did not remember his real name. He also stated that he never personally knew Major.⁹⁶

Although the three voice recordings of Grek that were released by the SBU are too short for any professional comparison, his voice can be heard on at least two other recorded conversations that have appeared on the internet. The first was in a set of two recordings made by Austria-based

another account of Afonin working at the Majorsky checkpoint: <http://podrobnosti.ua/987127-zaderzhanyj-na-Donbase-reporter-iz-ufy-sdal-vse-imena-terroristov-video.html>

⁹² Afonin can be recognized on a photograph taken on 1 August 2014 by Mikhail Voskresensky at the Dinamo checkpoint: https://ria.ru/photolents/20140804/1018698979.html#ria_media=g1018698979_0%3D1018696888. Based on another photograph in the album the checkpoint was geolocated to 48.275638, 38.020571. The same photograph of Afonin was previously posted by Afonin himself on his VK profile and was reshared by one of his contacts two days after his death:

https://vk.com/wall175565529?offset=1960&own=1&cw=wall175565529_555 (archived: <http://archive.fo/trjL7>)

⁹³ Three videos of this event were added by Tatyana Artemova to her VK videos: <https://vk.com/videos24959182> (archived: <http://archive.fo/UwSts>). According to another uploader on YouTube, the video is from 18 October 2014:

https://youtu.be/1qtSI2hP_Sl. However, a photograph uploaded by Tatyana that appears related to the wedding has 3 September 2014 as the creation date in the metadata: <https://get.google.com/u/0/albumarchive/110827957343928143569> (archived: <http://archive.fo/P78pI>)

⁹⁴ <https://life.ru/150107>; <https://yar72.ru/text/1654-aleksandr-afendikov-ya-grek-i-est.html>

⁹⁵ Per response from Afendikov via his VK account in August 2018 (he was not informed about the context of the query): <https://vk.com/id262645472> (archived: <http://archive.fo/tMlm2>)

⁹⁶ Per response from Kryzhin via his Facebook account in August 2018 (he was not informed about the context of the query): <https://www.facebook.com/evgen.kryzhin> (archived: <http://archive.fo/brD2x>)

journalist Christo Grozev (now also a member of the Bellingcat Investigation Team) who managed to reach Grek shortly after the downing of MH17 on the phone number displayed in SBU's YouTube video. Grozev successfully greeted him with the name Aleksandr, and when he confronted him with the recordings Grek answered he was unaware of the publications and denied that the recordings could be genuine — first by calling them CIA forgeries, but then later adding that “part of the phone call may have taken place”. He also explained that he was stationed in the Donetsk Oblast, but revealed no further details about his identity.⁹⁷

The last known recording of Grek that appeared on the internet concerns a phone intercept in which he and a certain “Koshmar” (Nightmare) can be heard negotiating with the commander of the separatist “Troy” militia. This militia was formed in 2014 by locals from the town of Kirovske (east of Yenakieve), who in the winter of 2016 were besieged by other separatist units after falling out with the DNR over organized crime allegations. The audio recording was shared by Ukrainian journalist Denis Kazansky on 30 January 2016, possibly after being leaked by the SBU. This was also the day when the base of the Troy militia was stormed, which was by then located in the Ozeryanivka suburb of Horlivka (right next to the aforementioned Dinamo checkpoint).⁹⁸ Based on the content of the recording, it seems that Grek and Koshmar were part of a DNR unit that participated in the effort to disarm this base of the Troy militia.

In his publication, Kazansky described Grek as one of the leaders of a Yenakieve-based militia since 2014 who had ties with the criminal underground. He also added that it was the same Grek whose voice can be heard on the MH17-related SBU intercepts.⁹⁹ While Kazansky did not explain where he got his information from, there is indeed no doubt that this concerns the same Grek as the one heard on the MH17-related SBU intercepts due to the similarity in voices (this is especially apparent in the recording from Grozev). What also matches in Kazansky's recording is that Grek is referred to as “Sanya”, another diminutive of the name Aleksandr. When Bellingcat asked Kazansky about the identify of Grek, he stated that Grek was either the earlier-mentioned Afendikov or some local criminal.

Back in 2016, Kryzhin also commented on the leaked recording by stating that it concerned another SBU forgery, but he also explained to others that the actual Grek from Yenakieve was a former platoon commander in the “2nd MSB” who had acquired quite a reputation in 2014.¹⁰⁰ Since MSB is short for Motorized Rifle Battalion, this unit most likely concerns the 2nd Motorized Rifle Battalion (*2-y motostrelkovyy Batal'on*) that was stationed in Yenakieve throughout 2014. Like the other units of the Bezler Group, it became part of the Berkut Brigade after Bezler left the Donbas. Even though there are several videos of this unit as well as a community page, it has generally kept a low profile. What can be confirmed, however, is that the person from Kazansky's recording with the

⁹⁷ <https://cgrozev.wordpress.com/2014/07/20/an-interview-with-grek/>

⁹⁸ <http://archive.fo/cW3JW>; <https://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/1956644.html> (<http://archive.fo/wxhtU>)

⁹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/den.kazansky/videos/984053775007468/>

¹⁰⁰ <https://chervonec-001.livejournal.com/1134866.html?thread=15883282#t15883282>

call sign Koshmar was also a commander of the 2nd Motorized Rifle Battalion, namely Boris Aleksandrovich Borozdin from Yenakieve who was reportedly killed by rival separatists in late 2016.¹⁰¹

While the identity of Aleksandr “Grek” remains undetermined, the available sources indicate that he was another member of the Bezler Group stationed in Yenakieve in the period leading up to the downing of MH17. It appears that Grek’s only relation with the downing is that Major (possibly Igor Afonin) reported to him about the downing of an airplane while rushing towards the crash-site, perhaps from the direction of Horlivka–Yenakieve. Although the relation between these two separatists is unknown, it makes sense that they were in contact with each other considering that they were both members of the Bezler Group.

2.3 The Chornukhine Cossacks and the Cossack National Guard

Neither Grek nor Major were directly involved with the downing of MH17. The conversations between these two separatists were the first to have been released by the SBU on the day of the downing along with Bezler’s call to Geranin. They were therefore not necessarily recordings of important figures but simply some of the first MH17-related recordings that the SBU had noticed among their freshly collected phone intercepts. Nevertheless, initially Major must have appeared to the SBU as an important eyewitness because of his message that the plane was shot down by a group of Chornukhine Cossacks from the Chornukhine checkpoint. However, this statement has only caused confusion because the village of Chornukhine is 20 km away from the crash-site, and approximately 42 km away from the Buk missile launch-site. Furthermore, no Cossack militia has ever been publicly linked to the downing of MH17. Then what could have prompted Major to report to Grek that this group had downed the airplane?

Around the time of the MH17 crash, there were two checkpoints near Chornukhine: one roadblock at an intersection to the south of the town, and another roadblock to the northwest of the town. The latter was closer to Debaltseve than to Chornukhine, but could have also been referred to as a Chornukhine checkpoint because it was right next to the Chornukhine forest and the so-called Chornukhine overpass (a set of two bridges on the M04 road).¹⁰² Both checkpoints were visited one day after the MH17 downing by a Russian journalist working for state-owned news agency *RIA Novosti* who wanted to emphasize that these militants were not involved in the downing and did not even own any anti-aircraft weaponry. He described the checkpoint to the northwest of Chornukhine

¹⁰¹ For Borozdin’s page on Myrotvorets: <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/borozdin-boris-aleksandrovich/>. Borozdin can be recognized in a video from the 2nd Motorized Rifle Battalion uploaded on 17 March 2017: <https://youtu.be/BwqMOBLIbG0>. His death allegedly at the hands of DNR police was reported by Ukrainian news outlet *Tribun* on 24 November 2016: <https://tribun.com.ua/38440>. Borozdin’s call sign Koshmar is mentioned in messages about his funeral: https://vk.com/id152146787?w=wall152146787_8586 (archived: <http://archive.fo/bm5jf>); <https://odnarodyna.org/content/zolotaya-zvezda-sestry-miloserdya>

¹⁰² The coordinates for the roadblocks were respectively 48.293704, 38.534387 and 48.348632, 38.456006.

as “small”, but provided no information on who manned it.¹⁰³ Chances are that it was guarded by members of the Cossack National Guard, which by then controlled large parts of the Luhansk Oblast, including Debaltseve and Chornukhine.¹⁰⁴

The *RIA Novosti* journalist reported that the larger checkpoint to the south of Chornukhine was manned by members of the Chornukhine St. Nicholas Cossack Regiment. Other sources, including a community page of this group on Odnoklassniki, reveal that the regiment already existed years before the conflict in the Donbas as a religious community of Old Believers, but after the outbreak of the conflict it also became part of the Cossack National Guard.¹⁰⁵ One of the photos that accompanied *RIA Novosti*'s report shows a senior member of the Chornukhine Cossacks at the checkpoint who can be recognized as Vladimir Ivanovich Borodinov (b. 01.11.1956), the *ataman* of the regiment since 2008.¹⁰⁶



Figure 15. Left: Crop of *RIA Novosti*'s Photograph from 18 July 2014 at the checkpoint south of Chornukhine. Right: Photograph of the *ataman* of the Chornukhine Cossacks uploaded on their community page on 17 November 2013.

It remains unknown why Major initially reported to Grek that the Chornukhine Cossacks were responsible for the downing of MH17. Perhaps he initially simply believed that the smoke plume from the crash-site was close to the area where this militia was stationed and therefore concluded that they were the ones that had downed the aircraft. The seemingly erroneous statement may have also been related to the circumstance that the low-loader carrying the Buk missile launcher must have passed through at least one of the two checkpoints in the early morning on the day of the

¹⁰³ <https://ria.ru/mh17/20140718/1016570399.html>

¹⁰⁴ On 14 May 2014 it was announced that Cossacks of the Great Don Host had entered Debaltseve to “maintain law and order”: <https://debaltsveo.com/news/2014-05-14-1544>, and from a report from 16 June 2014 it is apparent that Cossacks were still in charge by then: <https://debaltsveo.com/news/2014-06-16-1561> By late May, Kozitsyn's forces had established control over the entire Perevalsk district: <http://argumentua.com/stati/luganshchinu-zakhvatyvaet-kakoi-russkii-samozvannyi-ataman>

¹⁰⁵ For the community page of the Chornukhine Svyato-Nikolaevsk Cossack Regiment: <https://ok.ru/chernuk>

¹⁰⁶ <https://yadocent.livejournal.com/784174.html> For the photo that reveals the similarity: <https://ok.ru/chernuk/album/51509939011719/531865392263> (archived: <http://archive.fo/EzGfS>). Borodinov's name is also mentioned underneath another photo: <https://ok.ru/chernuk/album/51509939011719/463142326919> (archived: <http://archive.fo/YWof6>) See also Figure 6 for another appearance of Borodinov.

shootdown. Considering that the Buk was spotted in Yenakieve in the morning of 17 July while being transported from the east towards Donetsk, it most likely arrived there over the M04 road from the direction of Debaltseve–Chornukhine. Since the transport came from the Russian border, the checkpoints at Debaltseve and Chornukhine were the last stop before reaching DNR territory (more specifically, area controlled by the Bezler Group). As such, it is possible that the Buk transport was temporarily halted at one of the two checkpoints. In case Igor Afonin was indeed the man with the call sign Major, then he could have easily overheard that a Buk missile launcher had arrived at this checkpoint; as the manager of the checkpoints near Horlivka, he was probably in regular contact with the other checkpoints of nearby towns such as Debaltseve and Chornukhine. Thus, later that day when he first noticed that a plane was shot down, he could have made the incorrect assumption that Cossacks from the Chornukhine checkpoint were still with the missile launcher. Due to Afonin's early death, however, this might always remain an unexplained episode.

There is another reason to believe that the people who manned the two roadblocks knew about the presence of a Buk missile launcher in separatist-held territory when they were visited by the *RIA Novosti* correspondent around noon on 18 July. According to the JIT, when the Buk was escorted back to Russian territory following the downing of MH17, it was transported on top of the low-loader from Snizhne to the Russian border via Krasnyi Luch and Debaltseve in the late evening hours and during the night.¹⁰⁷ This would indicate that the Buk convoy traveled through both of the checkpoints near Chornukhine before reaching Luhansk, where it was filmed with three instead of four missiles in the early morning hours of 18 July.

Cossack leader Nikolay Kozitsyn probably also knew about the removal of the Buk considering that the route that the convoy traveled between Snizhne and Luhansk was largely under the control of his Cossack National Guard. Whether Kozitsyn also knew beforehand about the arrival of the missile launcher is unknown. Nevertheless, he is also featured in one of the SBU recordings from the day of the downing. This concerns a conversation at 5:42pm in which he is informed by an unidentified militant about the shootdown of a civilian aircraft:

Militant: As to this plane shot down nearby Snizhne–Torez: this turned out to be a passenger one. It fell down outside Hrabove, there are lots of bodies of women and children. Cossacks are now looking around there. On television they say that it concerns a Ukrainian AN-26 — a transport aircraft — but I am told the writing [on the downed aircraft] says “Malaysia Airlines”. What was it doing over the territory of Ukraine?

Kozitsyn: Well then it was bringing spies. They got no fucking business flying. There's a fucking war going on.

When confronted by the recording by a *Vice News* journalist in November 2014, Kozitsyn admitted that the recording was authentic. He also admitted that it was a missile that had brought down

¹⁰⁷ <https://youtu.be/Sf6gJ8NDhYA?t=572>

MH17, thereby contradicting the theory at the time still propagated by state-funded and pro-Kremlin media that a Ukrainian military jet had downed the aircraft with cannon fire. However, when asked if he knew who downed the plane, Kozitsyn only responded with “no comment”.¹⁰⁸



Figure 16. Cossack leader Nikolay Kozitsyn during the interview with Vice News.

¹⁰⁸ <https://youtu.be/cYEH6Tfzouo?t=421>

3) The Vostok Brigade

A link between the Buk transport and the Donetsk-based Vostok Brigade has previously been discussed by Bellingcat and other researchers, but unclarity still remains on the degree of the collaboration and the identities of the members involved.¹⁰⁹ Vostok was set up in May 2014 by Aleksandr Sergeyeovich Khodakovsky (b. 18 December 1972), call sign “Skif” (Scythian), a native of Donetsk and citizen of Ukraine who served as the commander of the SBU’s Alpha special forces unit in Donetsk until he chose to switch sides after the outbreak of the conflict in the Donbas. Until 16 July 2014, Khodakovsky also held the position of Minister of State Security of the DNR. His group was initially known as the Vostok Battalion, but it quickly grew to one of the largest military formations in separatist-held territory and was therefore renamed to Vostok Brigade in mid-July.¹¹⁰ By then, his forces were stationed on the frontlines near the Donetsk Airport, Karlivka, and Savur-Mohyla where, together with several other separatist units, they were actively fighting against the Ukrainian forces.¹¹¹

The link between the Vostok Brigade and the Buk transport is most apparent from an SBU recording in which Sergey Dubinsky (Khmury) is heard handing out instructions to a person with the call sign “Buryat” that the Buk is supposed to join a column of Vostok tanks. After the downing, Khodakovsky has also been implicated in an attempt to hide MH17’s flight recorders (also known as black boxes) on the orders from Moscow, as SBU intercepts recorded one day after the downing reveal. This chapter will further examine the involvement of the Vostok Brigade and the activities of Khodakovsky, thereby also identifying some of the unidentified people heard on the relevant SBU intercepts.

3.1 Identifying Sanych

The SBU intercept in which the Vostok tanks are mentioned concerns one of two recorded conversations between Dubinsky and the person with the call sign Buryat. In the first conversation, which was recorded at 9:08am on 17 July, Buryat explicitly mentions the arrival of the Buk-M missile launcher with a crew, which Buryat had brought to Donetsk just prior. Interestingly, when Dubinsky was later asked about this conversation on a forum where he regularly posted, he responded with “the record is authentic”.¹¹² The second conversation was recorded not long after, and went as follows:

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/02/the-role-of-sergey-dubinsky-in-the-downing-of-mh17/>

¹¹⁰ When exactly the unit became known as a brigade is unknown, but in an interview from 16 July 2014 Khodakovsky already referred to his unit as the “Vostok Brigade”: <https://eot.su/node/17435>

¹¹¹ Ibid.; <https://eot.su/node/17423>; <https://eot.su/node/17443>; <https://eot.su/node/17456>

¹¹² See his post from 2 August 2015 as “Nekhoroshiy”: <https://glav.su/forum/1/2664/messages/3236971/#message3236971> (archived: <http://archive.fo/TBX6Q>)

Buryat: Hello?

Khmury: Hello? Where are you now? Have you brought me one...?

Buryat: Hello, Nikolaevich? Now I'm...

Khmury: ...or two? Tell me.

Buryat: No... one, one... because they had a misunderstanding there. They didn't throw over our low-loader here.

Khmury: I got it.

Buryat: ...unloaded and brought it here under its own power.

Khmury: Look, don't put it... did it [i.e. the Buk missile launcher] come under its own power? Or on a low-loader?

Buryat: It crossed [under its own power], crossed the line [i.e. the Russia-Ukraine border].

Khmury: Aaaah, and now you brought it on a low-loader, yes?

Buryat: Yes, yes, yes.

Khmury: So, look. You don't whatsit it anywhere... I'll say now where it should go. It will go together with the Vostok tanks. Clear, yes? Yes? Hello?

Buryat: Aha. Hello. I got it. I got it.

Khmury: Now. Keep, keep in touch, OK?

Buryat: OK. That's it. Aha.¹¹³

According to the timestamp added by the SBU, this conversation took place at 9:22am, not long after the Buk arrived in Donetsk.¹¹⁴ This is also consistent with the logistics discussed in a conversation between Dubinsky and a certain Sanych recorded just one minute later at 9:23am:

Khmury: Sanych, where should I... the point is that my Buk-M will go together with yours, [it] came overnight, it's on a low-loader. Where should I bring it so that it can join the column?

Sanych: There, behind the Motel, before Hornostayivska.

Khmury: Right behind the Motel, right?¹¹⁵

In this conversation, the "Motel" refers to a roundabout in east Donetsk where there was a checkpoint frequently used by the Vostok Brigade, which also had a base nearby. In the English version of the SBU video, Hornostayivska is called a village, but this turned out to be incorrect. The blogger Ukraine@War was probably the first to point out that it most likely referred to Hornostayivska street (*Hornostaevska* in Russian), about 1.8 km to the east of the Motel roundabout, though he incorrectly hypothesized that this street was a reference point because there was supposedly a military base nearby.¹¹⁶ The actual reference point must have been the Hornostayivska checkpoint, reportedly also set up by the Vostok Brigade, on the Makiivka highway

¹¹³ <https://youtu.be/YgdqdklrqDA?t=132>

¹¹⁴ The timestamp of 9:22am is shown in the English version of this video and in the video from JIT: <https://youtu.be/MVAOTWpMM4?t=130> and <https://youtu.be/Sf6gI8NDhYA?t=99>

¹¹⁵ <https://youtu.be/YgdqdklrqDA?t=162> The timestamp of 9:23am is only shown in the English version of the video: <https://youtu.be/MVAOTWpMM4?t=163>

¹¹⁶ <http://ukraineatwar.blogspot.com/2014/07/reconstruction-of-whereabouts-of-buk.html>

right next to the exit lane to Hornostayivska street.¹¹⁷ Thus, when Sanych instructed Khmury to park the low-loader with the Buk “behind the Motel, before Hornostaevska”, he probably meant that it should be parked on the Makiivka highway between the Motel and Hornostaevska checkpoints when driving from a westerly direction (i.e. from Donetsk rather than Makiivka). Apart from eyewitness accounts, this route has also been confirmed by a geolocated photo and video of the Buk transport:



Figure 17. Left: Photograph of the Buk and low-loader parked on Ilycha avenue in Donetsk, about 1.1 kilometer west of the Motel roundabout.¹¹⁸ Right: A still from a video showing the Buk standing still on the Makiivka Highway right behind the Motel roundabout, recorded at about 10:23am. This particular frame has low quality but is of significance because it appears to show three individuals, one wearing blue, sitting on the grass in the shade behind the low-loader — possibly the Buk crew.¹¹⁹

In the audio recording, the SBU initially described Sanych as a deputy of Khmury (Dubinsky), but considering that SBU did not publish his name, this was possibly simply a guess based on the interaction between Dubinsky and Sanych.

Another conversation between Dubinsky and Sanych one day before the downing has also been released by the SBU, and its existence suggests that Sanych was an important enough person to be in regular contact with Dubinsky. In this conversation, which was recorded in the early evening, Dubinsky tells Sanych that he hopes to receive a Buk missile launcher the morning after in order to protect his forces stationed on the frontline south of Snizhne:

Khmury: Screw it, Sanych, I don't even know if my men will be able to hold there today or not. Because they are going to start flattening them with Grads [Soviet multi-launching rocket systems widely used by both sides of the war] and then I'll be left without a reconnaissance battalion and a spetsnaz company. This shit somehow got even more fucked up. Oh crap...

Sanych: And so...

¹¹⁷ The coordinates for the checkpoint are 48.012984, 37.891223. It was first set up by Vostok militants on 31 May 2014: <http://hronika.info/videonovosti/23518-v-donecke-gotovyatsya-k-vozbnovlenu-boya-segodnya-poyavilis-novye-blokposty-video.html> Both the Motel and Hornostaevska checkpoints are also mentioned in this video from 5 June 2014: <https://youtu.be/axDy4rCHiRE>

¹¹⁸ <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/10/20/new-mh17-photograph-geolocated-donetsk/>

¹¹⁹ For the video: <https://youtu.be/Sf6gI8NDhYA?t=182>

Khmury: And there's nothing we can do about it... Now, Grads are something we can fucking bear with, but if Sushkas [i.e. Sukhoi jets] strike in the morning... If I can receive a Buk [missile launcher] in the morning and send it over there, that'd be good. If not, things will go totally fucked up. I'm going there myself at night, so...

Sanych: So you're here for now, right?

Khmury: Well, I, err... When you left, I had a two-hour nap and then I went there, we took over the hills and [the village of] Marynivka itself.

Sanych: Uh-huh.

Khmury: Then I left. And after that the heli... the planes were probably striking from 5 or 6 kilometers, because we couldn't even hear those Sushkas.

Sanych: Dead right. I saw them flying in that direction all night long and...

Khmury: That's it... They came down on them real hard.

Sanych: Real hard...¹²⁰

Khmury: Yes. Yes, yes, yes.

Sanych: Well, look here, Nikolaevich, if you need..., we'll send there... about... [inaudible]

A closer analysis of the two recorded conversations suggests that it is more likely that Sanych was a high-ranking member of the Vostok Brigade rather than a subordinate of Dubinsky. This is especially apparent in the conversation from 17 July, in which Dubinsky asks Sanych where the Buk can join the “column”. Considering how, one minute before this conversation, Dubinsky had explained to Buryat that the Buk transport should join a number of Vostok tanks, this column might concern a tank column, which would suggest that Sanych was the person with the command over these tanks.

In an interview from 30 November 2014, conducted by the now-defunct separatist news outlet *icorpus*, Dubinsky confirmed that he had received the Vostok tanks from Vostok Brigade commander Khodakovsky, explaining that:

... when I went to Stepanivka [on the frontline south of Snizhne], right before the Boeing crash, Khodakovsky called me for some reason instead of Igor Ivanovich [Strelkov], and told me: “If you need to, you can take 3–4 of my tanks”. And I took them because I needed them.¹²¹

In the same interview, when discussing a different subject, Dubinsky also mentions a deputy of Khodakovsky with the “call sign San Sanych”. In the Russian-speaking world, the name San Sanych is a popular nickname for people with the combined name and patronym Aleksandr Aleksandrovich. This makes it all the more apparent that Dubinsky was referring to Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Semyonov, the deputy of Khodakovsky, who is commonly referred to as San Sanych, or simply Sanych. It is very likely that this concerns the same Sanych as the one that Dubinsky talked to on the

¹²⁰ <https://youtu.be/94LF4sg14Zc>

¹²¹ The interview was conducted by the separatist news outlet *Icorpus*. For an archived copy: <http://archive.fo/O2dHP> or <https://web.archive.org/web/20141203001459/http://icorpus.ru/intervyu-s-generalom-petrovskim/>

SBU intercepts, especially since Semyonov has given several video interviews which reveal that his voice sounds very similar.¹²²

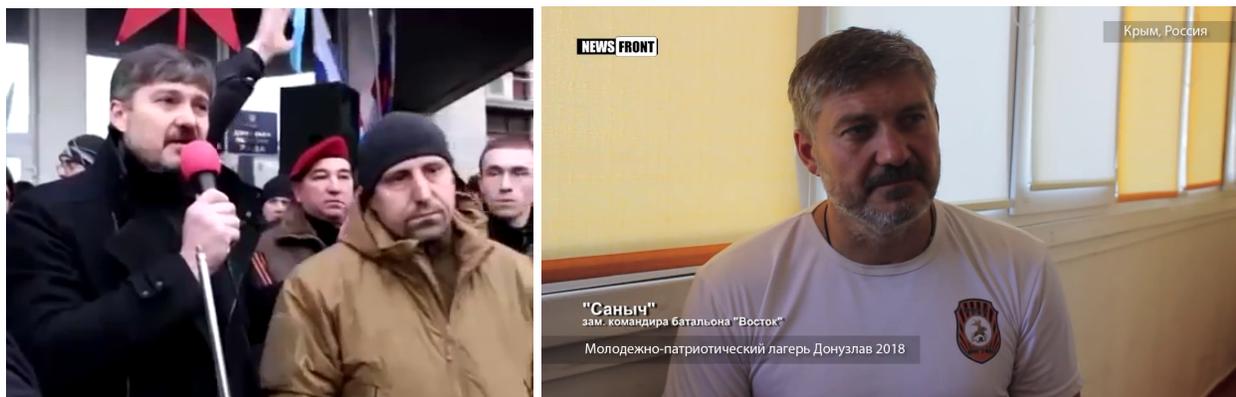


Figure 18. Left: A video still of Aleksandr Semyonov speaking at a pro-Russia rally in central Donetsk on 1 March 2014. Standing next to him is future Vostok commander Khodakovskiy.¹²³ Right: A more recent video interview of Semyonov in which he is introduced as “Sanych”.¹²⁴

Aleksandr Semyonov was born on 21 December 1967 and is a resident of Donetsk. According to his entry in the Myrotvorets database, his birthplace is Yenakieve and he holds Ukrainian citizenship.¹²⁵ Semyonov appears to have been close to Vostok Brigade commander Khodakovskiy since the beginning of the conflict in the Donbas, as they can already be seen participating in a pro-Russia rally on 1 March 2014 (see Figure 18). Apart from serving as the deputy commander of the Vostok Brigade, Semyonov was also the DNR’s “Deputy Prime Minister for Economy” since May 2014, a position which he was reportedly still holding three years later.¹²⁶

Since Dubinsky stated that the decision to lend him the Vostok tanks was made by Khodakovskiy, Sanych was most likely following orders from Khodakovskiy (though the latter could have been ordered directly by Strelkov or the Russian GRU to provide these tanks to Dubinsky). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Sanych also helped coordinate the positioning of the Buk transport in Donetsk, as the SBU intercepts indicate, which at least makes him an important eyewitness to these events. However, in the days following the downing, Semyonov was mostly sharing conspiracies on his Facebook profile that the Buk missile launcher was Ukrainian and that the downing was part of a deliberate false flag attack orchestrated by Ukraine, the United States, and Royal Dutch Shell.¹²⁷

¹²² <https://youtu.be/W8wMxycy08c> and <https://youtu.be/0w9RjHjECa0>

¹²³ <https://youtu.be/4HXwMtDhOWY>

¹²⁴ <https://youtu.be/0w9RjHjECa0>

¹²⁵ <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/semenov-aleksandr-aleksandrovich/>

¹²⁶ <https://apostrophe.ua/news/society/accidents/2017-05-31/stalo-izvestno-o-jelanii-zaharchenko-likvidirovat-srazu-neskolkih-glavarey-dnr/97497>

¹²⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/al.al.semenov/posts/737886259606513> (archived: <http://archive.fo/K8GXa>);

<https://www.facebook.com/al.al.semenov/posts/737937316268074> (archived: <http://archive.fo/aL1mw>);

<https://www.facebook.com/al.al.semenov/posts/737945309600608> (archived: <http://archive.fo/OgFZf>);

<https://www.facebook.com/al.al.semenov/posts/738085439586595> (archived: <http://archive.fo/170cC>).

Based on his social media activity, Semyonov continues to reside in Donetsk where he remains involved in DNR politics.

3.2 Vostok and the Buk Transport

The significance of the Vostok tanks in covering the Buk transport from Donetsk to Snizhne seems small. Several videos exist of the column of three tanks driving from Donetsk towards Snizhne that same morning, but without the Buk transport nearby.¹²⁸ It is also unclear if the tank column provided any cover to the Buk after it was unloaded from the low-loader in Snizhne and drove further on its own. Ukrainian politician Anton Herashchenko later reported that four Vostok tanks and an Ural truck had left Snizhne and drove back in the direction of Donetsk about an hour before the downing of MH17.¹²⁹ However, these may have been confused with four tanks of the Oplot Battalion — a military unit that was at the time led by Aleksandr Zakharchenko and closely-associated with Vostok — which were photographed earlier that day at a gas station in Snizhne and also filmed in Makiivka driving towards Donetsk.¹³⁰

In an interview from 24 July 2014, Khodakovsky mentioned that the Vostok tanks from 17 July were destined for Marynivka, a small village on the frontline south of Snizhne that had been captured by the separatists just one day prior, but he denied that these tanks were ever near a Buk vehicle.¹³¹ The last known recorded video of the Vostok tanks was uploaded on 17 July and although it is of low quality, it shows three tanks and probably the same Ural truck driving in Snizhne on Gagarina street in the direction of Pervomayskyy and Marynivka — the same route taken by the Buk that same day.¹³² It therefore seems plausible that the Vostok tanks were indeed destined for Marynivka. While this would have provided an extra layer of security to the Buk, which would station itself in a field west of Pervomayskyy, it is also possible that the tank column was only meant for the overall strengthening of the separatist positions on the frontline near the border with Russia.

There is little doubt that the separatists who accompanied the Vostok transport are important eyewitnesses of the Buk transport. Based on the available video footage, the Vostok transport included three tanks carrying at least 15 separatists, a Ural truck with improvised armor that carried at least 10 more separatists, a white Volkswagen Transporter, and a black SUV. A compilation of three videos showing the transport driving from Shakhtarsk to Torez was uploaded on the official

¹²⁸ See this early reconstruction of the Vostok tanks in relation to the Buk transport:

<http://ukraineatwar.blogspot.com/2015/09/suncalcing-buk-and-vostok-transport-to.html>

¹²⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/anton.gerashchenko.7/posts/694823677271149> (archived: <http://archive.fo/Vwg8u>)

¹³⁰ For the videos: <https://youtu.be/QKUUasao5Pk>; <https://youtu.be/NBG-yiSO1uc>; <https://youtu.be/NBG-yiSO1uc>; and <https://youtu.be/4Co587-K4Qc> For the photos taken by Dmitry Lovetsky:

<http://www.apimages.com/Search?query=Lovetsky+snizhne&ss=10&st=kw&entitysearch=&toItem=24&orderBy=Oldest&searchMediaType=excludecollections>

¹³¹ <https://eot.su/node/17463>

¹³² <https://youtu.be/PvRoVnGCGRE> Geolocation: 48.0150486,38.7624966.

YouTube channel of the “Essence of Time”, a Russian pro-Soviet nationalist movement which had members serving in the Vostok Brigade.¹³³



Figure 19. Left: Russian volunteer Alan Mamiev. The Ural truck and one of the Vostok tanks are visible in the background. Right: Other members of the Vostok Brigade on top of the Ural truck as it drove from Shakhtarsk towards Torez. They are speaking to a reporter from the Russian channel NTV.

One of the members can be identified as a Russian (Ossetian) “volunteer” militant, namely Alan Valerevich Mamiev (b. 1978).¹³⁴ Since Mamiev was both a Vostok militant and a correspondent for the Essence of Time channel, it is not certain whether he accompanied the Vostok transport or only shot videos of it for propaganda purposes. One of the videos also shows someone holding a microphone of the Russian channel *NTV* during the filming, which suggests at least one other journalist was present at the time of Mamiev’s recordings. That said, a connection to the Essence of Time Movement is interesting because the Russian key ideologue of this movement, Sergey Kurginyan, who had arrived in Donetsk on 3 July 2014, may have had foreknowledge of the arrival of the Buk missile launcher in separatist-held territory. On 13 July, Kurginyan mentioned in a speech that the separatists had captured a Buk from the Ukrainian forces, stating that:

Our talented and often brilliant electronics engineers, of course, will repair — and I think have already repaired, it seems to me so — the Buk installation seized from the Ukrainian-Banderovite gangs (I’m not talking about Ukrainian people, but the Banderovite gangs). And they will as soon as possible... I just know the brilliant electronics engineers, who flew in there specifically as civic society representatives to help the brotherly people... they will repair as soon as possible — it will be repaired, yes — and it may even turn out that there are several [Buk] installations.¹³⁵

Kurginyan later argued that his only source for this statement was the “Donetsk and Russian media”.¹³⁶ However, an analysis of publicly available archived news reports does not support this notion. It is true that the separatist-linked Twitter account “@dnrpress” reported about the capture of “Buk anti-aircraft missile systems” as early as 29 June 2014, but nothing about the need for

¹³³ <http://eot.su/node/17407> and <http://eot.su/node/18873>

¹³⁴ For the video: <https://youtu.be/-OdjOt6TRsk> For details of Mamiev: <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/mamiev-alan-valerevich/>

¹³⁵ For the original video: <https://youtu.be/7iF0kHsEOIw> and <https://vimeo.com/100661490>

¹³⁶ <https://eot.su/node/17444>

engineers to repair them.¹³⁷ It seems that such a report only appeared on 14 July after a Ukrainian An-26 transport aircraft was shot down close to the border with Russia. According to Ukraine, the plane was shot down by the Russian Armed Forces, but separatist sources claimed that this was accomplished by a captured Buk missile launcher:

Today, the Militia 9K37M1 air defense system (better known as the “Buk”) was used by the militia to destroy the enemy’s AN-26 aircraft at an altitude of over 6.000 meters. A few weeks ago, the militia reportedly captured these systems. Now they are repaired, staffed with crews and deployed.¹³⁸

The capture of any Ukrainian Buk vehicle has never been confirmed. To the contrary, all available evidence suggests that this was just a cover story to hide the planned dispatch by the GRU of one or more Buk missile launchers with serving officers from Russia. Nevertheless, Kurginyan’s statement from 13 July suggests that the leadership of the Vostok Brigade may have been well-informed about the arrival days in advance.

If the Vostok Brigade knew about the arrival of a Buk days in advance, they were not the only military unit who were informed about this. This is most apparent from the intercepted phone call from 14 July (at 7:12pm) between “Orion” — previously identified by Bellingcat as senior Russian GRU officer Oleg Ivannikov — and Oleg Bugrov, at the time the Deputy Minister of Defense of the LNR. In this conversation, Ivannikov can be heard saying “We already have a Buk, we will be shooting them down”, to which Bugrov can be heard responding “Yes, I kinda... Yes, I do know this” shortly before the audio file is cut off.¹³⁹ Bugrov’s voice, which can be heard in a video interview from November 2014, is very similar to the person heard on the intercept with Ivannikov.¹⁴⁰ Add to this that various separatist sources have indicated that the Minister of Defense of the LNR, Igor Plotnitsky, was also under Ivannikov’s tutelage, and that by 17 July all the separatist-held border crossings with Russia were controlled by the LNR in conjunction with the GRU, there is a good chance that the LNR leadership helped facilitate the arrival of the Buk from Russian territory.

At least one other source indicates that the Vostok Brigade also helped coordinate the arrival of the Buk missile launcher from Russia. The pro-Ukrainian investigative website InformNapalm has published alleged mail correspondence from several hacked mail boxes of Russian journalists. This leak included emails received by a Russian reporter for Channel One, one of which was supposedly sent by the earlier mentioned *Reuters* correspondent Anton Zverev who conducted many interviews in DNR-territory in relation to the MH17 downing. In an e-mail from 29 November 2014, Zverev provided excerpts of several important interviews he had conducted, one of which mentions a member of the Vostok Brigade:

¹³⁷ <http://archive.fo/96Kf8> (original link: <https://twitter.com/dnrpress/status/483248037629018112>)

¹³⁸ <https://vz.ru/news/2014/7/14/695525.html>

¹³⁹ <https://youtu.be/YgdqdklrqDA?t=44>

¹⁴⁰ <https://youtu.be/QINsZdBtemk>

Yes, they [the Ukrainian forces?] were aware of this, most likely, and [also aware that] the Buk was pulled out to Russia. To be honest, they [the Ukrainian Armed Forces] also knew that the Buk arrived. [This is because] the Buk was led through Uralo-Kavkaz. There are two roads there [that you can take] when you come from Severnyy (a checkpoint on the border with the Russian Federation). You can turn towards Uralo-Kavkaz before reaching Sukhodilsk, and slip right past the outskirts of Krasnodon via Uralo-Kavkaz towards Sverdlovsk. But this road is very risky, you have to slip right under the noses of the Ukries [i.e. Ukrainian soldiers]. They didn't hold this exit to Uralo-Kavkaz then, but their positions were there, and they clearly saw everything that moved on that road. And the second safe route was to leave for Sukhodilsk, but Ukries were there too. So when the hardware roared to Sukhodilsk, it got shelled by Ukrainian Grads. And when the shelling I, the Buk passed by the bottom [road], through Uralo-Kavkaz. I know that it was even towed along the reserve road. The transport loader and the installation itself. And the now-deceased Odessa (Vostok Battalion), chief of counterintelligence, he was [the one] towing this parcel.¹⁴¹

Without further information, it is difficult to verify the Buk route that this source describes since there is no known footage from 17 July of the Buk in the Luhansk region, but some of the details match up with what has already been reported. According to information released by the SBU to the public soon after the downing, at least one Buk with crew members indeed crossed the Russia–Ukraine border near Severnyy on 17 July in the middle of the night.¹⁴² In addition, other sources also confirm that the area around Krasnodon and Uralo-Kavkaz was indeed the scene of frequent clashes before the downing of MH17.¹⁴³

The supposed identity of the Vostok member with the call sign “Odessa” is unknown, but several sources confirm that there was indeed a person with this call sign who held the position of chief of counterintelligence within the Vostok Brigade, until he was killed during the battle for Yasinuvata (which took place in August–September 2014). Whether by coincidence or not, the same “Odessa” was reportedly also training members of the Essence of Time movement who served in the Vostok Brigade.¹⁴⁴ If it is true that “Odessa” was involved, then perhaps he is related to the person with the call sign “Buryat” who oversaw the transport of the Buk on top of the low-loader (which came from a vehicle yard in Donetsk¹⁴⁵) from the Russian border to Donetsk. However, without further information, the identities of “Buryat” and “Odessa” remain elusive.

A question remains if members of the Vostok Brigade were still close to the Buk during the fatal missile attack from the field west of Pervomayskyy (south of Snizhne). In March 2015, *Reuters* correspondent Anton Zverev interviewed a former separatist from Vostok named Igor as saying that

¹⁴¹ <https://informnapalm.org/23880-mh17-forbidden-interview/>

¹⁴² <https://youtu.be/YgdqdklrqDA?t=60> The estimated time of the Buk entry into Ukraine also suggests that, contrary to what the source claimed, Ukrainian forces could not have easily spotted such vehicles as it was dark.

¹⁴³ See Ukraine's situation map from 17 July, 12:00am, released by Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, available at: <https://www.imbf.org/info/karta-boevyh-dejstvij-na-ukraine-17-07-2014.html>

¹⁴⁴ <https://rossaprimavera.ru/article/formirovanie-otdelnoy-takticheskoy-gruppy-sut-vremeni?gazeta=/gazeta/187> and <https://informnapalm.org/23880-mh17-forbidden-interview/>

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2015/06/30/low-loader/>

he was stationed near “a Buk battery [that] was in Chervony Zhovten on July 17”.¹⁴⁶ It is difficult to say how reliable this source is. What makes his account seem plausible is that the village of Chervony Zhovten was just 1.8 kilometers west of the launch site, separated only by open fields. In the same interview, however, the source claimed that he had witnessed this Buk firing one of its missiles at a Ukrainian Su-25 just half an hour before the downing of MH17, but this has never been corroborated with any evidence by even pro-separatist sources. In fact, a video of the Buk from after the downing shows that it missed only one of its four missiles—the one that destroyed flight MH17. This suggests the source was either mistaken, or deliberately lying in order to emphasize the often-repeated claim that Ukrainian aircraft were conducting airstrikes in that area shortly before the downing.

If troops of the Vostok Brigade were indeed in Chervony Zhovten on 17 July, this begs the question if they also manned the checkpoint on the road to Snizhne 325 meters to the east of the launch site.¹⁴⁷ Based on a reconstruction of the route, the crew of the Buk must have also passed through this checkpoint as they drove the missile launcher from Snizhne towards the launch area, and also a second time when they drove it back to Snizhne after downing MH17. It is difficult to determine who manned this checkpoint due to a lack of available footage. The roadblock was visited by Dutch journalists in the spring of 2015, in which the commander of the checkpoint was quoted as saying that he had never seen a Buk vehicle.¹⁴⁸ The checkpoint was also filmed by German *ARD* journalists in the winter of 2015. By then, it was manned by members of the Snizhne division of the Oplot Battalion, as their patches reveal.¹⁴⁹ If these separatists also manned the checkpoint on 17 July 2014 remains unclear, however.

Other troops of the Vostok Brigade stationed at the frontline south of Snizhne may have also witnessed the launch of the missile that downed MH17. The overall commander of these Vostok forces was Yuri “Dushman” Protsenko, a deputy of Khodakovsky. His forces consisted of one company and three platoons, one of which was stationed at the strategic Savur-Mohyla height south of Snizhne in mid-July. This was the platoon led by Oleg “Medved” Grishin, who was killed in action on 28 July 2014.¹⁵⁰ His successor, Oleg “Som” Sotnikov, later said on Dutch television that some of his men had witnessed the launch of a missile near Snizhne around the time when MH17

¹⁴⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-airliner-idUSKBN0M81XF20150312>

¹⁴⁷ The coordinates for this checkpoint: 47.973142, 38.768564.

¹⁴⁸ <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2036005-het-spoor-van-de-buk-van-donetsk-naar-severnoje.html>

¹⁴⁹ <https://youtu.be/pi-54jTZP-0>

¹⁵⁰ According to a chronicle published on the VK page of the Essence of Time movement, the two other platoon commanders had the call signs “Zmey” (Snake) and “Vedmak” (Witcher): https://vk.com/page-76371964_49833797 (archived: <http://archive.fo/5ab22>). For information about Grishin, see: https://vk.com/wall-120223306_457 (archived: <http://archive.fo/NtseB>) and <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/grishin-oleg-grigorevich/> For further information on the battle for Savur-Mohyla: <http://voicesevas.ru/news/yugo-vostok/4558-tsyachi-lyudey-prishli-na-saur-mogilu-v-den-osvobozhdeniya-donbassa-ot-nemecko-fashistskih-zahvatchikov.html>; https://vk.com/wall-46007361_28459 (archived: <http://archive.fo/TTAhf>); and <https://svpressa.ru/war21/article/172276/>

was downed. While Sotnikov believed it could have been a Buk missile, he also felt the need to claim that it did not hit the aircraft.¹⁵¹

3.3 The role of Aleksandr Khodakovsky

On 22 July 2014, Anton Zverev of *Reuters* conducted an interview with Vostok Brigade commander Khodakovsky, in which Khodakovsky allegedly admitted that the separatists were in possession of Buk missile systems on 17 July, the day of the MH17 downing. This supposedly included four inoperable Buk vehicles captured from Ukrainian forces plus another Buk that came from Luhansk and was heading for Snizhne.¹⁵² However, shortly after excerpts from the interview were published by *Reuters*, Khodakovsky stated to journalists that *Reuters* had taken his words out of context, allegedly because they were interested in “blowing up the situation” for sensational purposes. Most importantly, he claimed that he had never stated that the separatists were in possession of a Buk missile launcher.¹⁵³

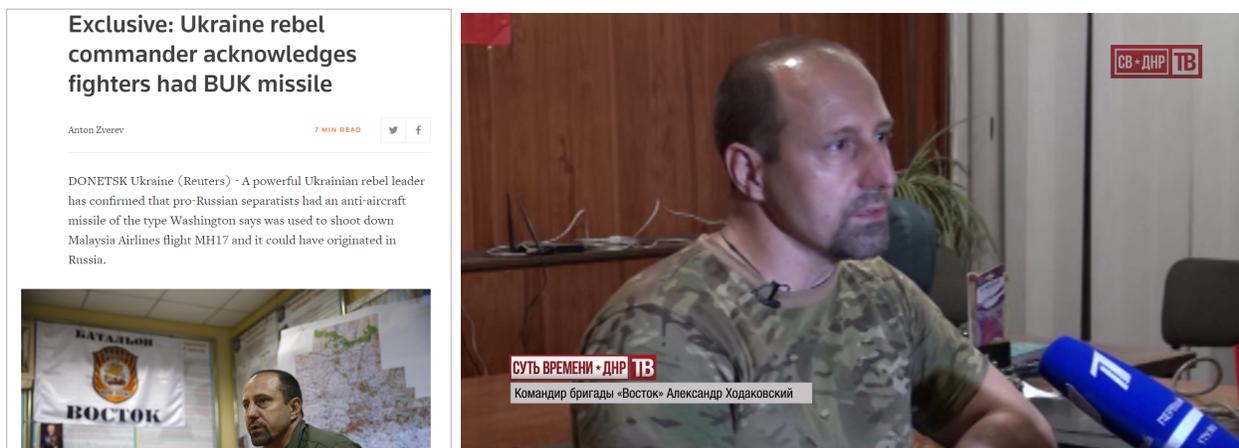


Figure 20. Left: Headline of the Reuters piece from 23 July. Right: Video interview with Khodakovsky from 24 July in which he denies having told Reuters that the separatists had a Buk system.

In response to the criticism from Khodakovsky, *Reuters* quickly released an audio recording with the parts of the interview that were cited in the article.¹⁵⁴ Khodakovsky himself claimed he also had a 1.5-hour long video of the conversation with Zverev that was secretly recorded by one of his men, and which he could use to refute all the insinuations that arose as a result of the interview. However,

¹⁵¹ <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2180903-zo-kwam-mh17-midden-in-een-veldslag-terecht.html> For Oleg Sotnikov: <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/sotnikov-oleg-mixajlovich/>

¹⁵² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-commander-exclusive/exclusive-ukraine-rebel-commander-acknowledges-fighters-had-buk-missile-idUSKBN0FS1V920140723>

¹⁵³ <https://eot.su/node/17463> and <https://life.ru/t/новости/137189>

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-rebel-commander-buk-missile/25468569.html>

it appears that he has never released such a file to the public.¹⁵⁵ As such, it is only possible to analyze the available fragments of the interview that have been released by *Reuters*. In their two minute and 24-seconds long audio file, it is clearly audible that several cuts were made, making it challenging to assess whether Khodakovsky's answers have indeed been taken out of context. In total, three segments can be discerned from the audio file. In one of these, Khodakovsky can be heard saying the following:

They [i.e. the Ukrainians] knew that there was a Buk, they knew that the Buk was heading for Snizhne, they knew that it would [be] use[d] there. They provoked the use of the Buk, for example, by the fact that they suddenly launched air attacks on an objective that they no longer needed — Savur-Mohyla — which hadn't been touched by aircraft for a week. And on this day, they were intensely flying ... and just when there were strikes, at that moment a civilian plane flew overhead, they conducted airstrikes on Savur-Mohyla. That is, even if there was a Buk, even if it was used, Ukraine did everything to ensure that a civilian plane was shot down.

When confronted with these statements, Khodakovsky argued that in the “long conversation” with the *Reuters* correspondent, he had only discussed the different versions about the downing of MH17 that were already floating around in the global “information space” (*informprostranstve*). His actual argument was that *if* Ukraine's version of events were to be true, which he believed was not the case, then Ukraine was still to blame for the tragedy because they allowed civilian flights to fly over the conflict area while knowing beforehand that a Buk was with the separatists, as their own evidence supposedly indicated.¹⁵⁶ Considering that Khodakovsky also made this argument in a video interview with the Essence of Time movement that was released shortly before the *Reuters* publication, it indeed seems plausible that he may have meant it this way.¹⁵⁷

Why Khodakovsky felt the need to defend the role of the separatists in a scenario which he denied ever happened is not immediately clear. The argument is, in any case, quite weak. In the days leading up to the downing of MH17, the Savur-Mohyla area south of Snizhne was actually part of one of the most active frontlines in all of the Donbas, and it experienced frequent airstrikes by the Ukrainian Air Force. Some high-profile incidents attest to that, such as the bombing of Snizhne on 15 July, which caused many civilian casualties, and the downing of the Su-25 on 16 July (as discussed in the previous chapter). The claim that the Ukrainian Air Force launched airstrikes on Savur-Mohyla when MH17 flew overhead has also been proven wrong; based on both Ukrainian and Russian radar data, the Dutch Safety Board, concluded that “no (military) aeroplanes were within at least 30 km of flight MH17 at the time of the crash” — an area which includes the airspace over Snizhne and Savur-Mohyla.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ <https://eot.su/node/17468>

¹⁵⁶ <https://eot.su/node/17463>

¹⁵⁷ <https://eot.su/node/17460>

¹⁵⁸ Dutch Safety Board, *Crash of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17*, p 113–114.

What is more striking is that Khodakovsky did not elaborate on the other part of the interview in which he admitted that the separatists were in possession of a Buk. In this audio segment, he can be heard saying the following:

Khodakovsky: I knew that the Buk was coming from Luhansk. At the time, I was told that a Buk was coming from the direction of Luhansk under the flag of LNR towards Snizhne, but god knows where it is [now]... That Buk I knew about, I heard about it.

Reuters journalist: Did it make it to the destination in the end?

Khodakovsky: I think it was sent back, because I found out about it exactly when I learned that this tragedy had happened. Most likely it was sent back in order to conceal the evidence of its presence. But the question, you know, the question should be considered in the following context: Ukraine received advance information that the rebels, because of Russia, had this kind of weapon, and not only did not do anything to ensure safety, but it even provoked the use of this kind of weapon against an airplane that carried civilians.

It seems impossible to argue that these words could have been taken out of context, but why would Khodakovsky confess about the arrival, and subsequent removal, of the Buk in separatist-held territory when he was clearly unwilling to confirm this fact on all other occasions? Perhaps Khodakovsky made the statements off-record to a journalist who had won over his trust? This could certainly be the case considering that this segment sounds different from the other segments; Khodakovsky's voice is more distant and there are frequent audible mic rustles, as if the recording device was in someone's pants when this part of the conversation took place. When asked about these statements by another foreign journalist, Khodakovsky simply answered: "There's no such information, there's no such [audio] fragment where I would say that", and repeated that he has "a one and a half hour recording of the conversation with the *Reuters* journalist" to prove himself right.¹⁵⁹

One reason why Khodakovsky could have been eager to reveal more than what Moscow or the DNR leadership would tolerate is because lying about these events may have been weighing on his conscience. This might be apparent from another segment of the recording in which he can be heard saying the following:

The thing is that I'm a party with interests [to this conflict], I'm: a terrorist, a separatist, a militiaman; you name it... meaning that consequently I'm already in a biased position. This means that I have to promote the side that I represent and whitewash whatever happens, even if I think otherwise, see things differently, or have a different attitude. And this causes a certain discomfort to my soul.

¹⁵⁹ <https://eot.su/node/17468>

It is difficult to say if Khodakovsky truly felt this way, but it would not be surprising considering that he was more often described as a relative “moderate” among the separatist leaders.¹⁶⁰

Khodakovsky’s hands were certainly not clean, however. Apart from providing support to the Buk transport, he has also been implicated in a plan to hide MH17’s flight recorders on behalf of Moscow. The evidence for this allegation was uploaded to YouTube by the SBU on 20 July 2014. The video file contains three conversations with Khodakovsky from 18 July; two of them with someone named Aleksey (displayed in Ukrainian as “Oleksiy”), and the other with a certain Andrey (displayed in Ukrainian as “Andriy”). Both were labeled employees of the DNR’s Ministry of Emergencies, but based on the content of the conversations, it appears this actually only applied to Aleksey. The first of the three calls took place at 5:53pm:

Khodakovsky: Are your men working there, at the crash site?

Aleksey: Yes, they are working, Sasha.

Khodakovsky: Are you there yourself or not?

Aleksey: Yes, I am here...

Khodakovsky: Lyosha [i.e. Alexey], who has the black boxes?

Aleksey: We don’t have them...

Khodakovsky: Who has them Lyosha?

Aleksey: Wait a minute, I will figure it out... try to find it out...

Khodakovsky: Find it out very quickly! It’s urgent! Moscow is inquiring about the black boxes.

Please report it to me, Lyosha, we need to find it out quickly.

Aleksey: OK.

Khodakovsky: Who is there besides you? Are Strelkov’s men there?

Aleksey: I don’t know... The OSCE has now arrived...

Khodakovsky: Listen to me, Lyosha, the fate of the black boxes is the most important thing! They have to end up under our control. Please complete this task. OK?

Aleksey: OK.¹⁶¹

The second call, with Andrey, took place at 6:10pm:

Khodakovsky: I have a request for you... it’s not mine, you know. Our comrades from up there are very interested in the fate of the black boxes. I mean Moscow. There are two... two units with Khmury, Strelkov’s [i.e. Strelkov’s] head of intelligence. So, uh... please work together with the MoE [i.e. Ministry of Emergencies] and ensure that nothing you find gets into any wrong hands. [It should end up with] either you or Strelkov’s men, Khmury, doesn’t matter.

Andrey: All right, I got it.

Khodakovsky: Please control this process, and together with this MoE guy, Alexey, try everything... everything you find. Please take everything you find so that no third parties get it. No one who

¹⁶⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28652079> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/30/world/europe/ukraine-separatists-rewrite-history-of-1930s-famine.html>

¹⁶¹ https://youtu.be/RDt_LgoUv_8?t=9

| comes, OSCE or others [should get the black boxes], OK?

| **Andrey:** I got it. OK., aye-aye.¹⁶²

It was possible to establish that the person named Aleksey is Aleksey Aleksandrovich Kostrubitsky (b. 24 August 1978), who has been the head of the DNR's Ministry of Emergencies to this day. This is apparent from the fact that his voice sounds very similar, and also because the phone number that was displayed in the SBU video shows up in GetContact with his full name. The identity of Andrey is more difficult to verify, as he speaks little and his phone number has not been published by the SBU.¹⁶³

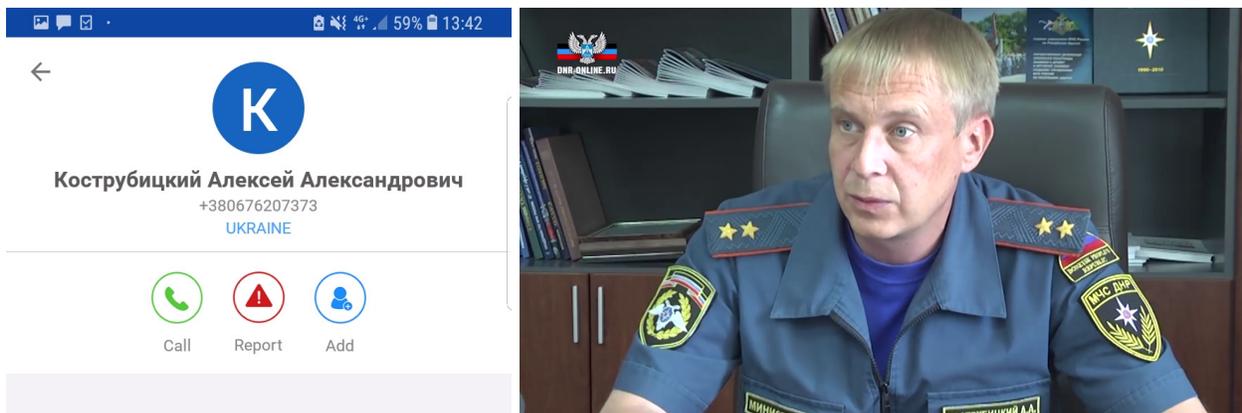


Figure 21. Left: The phone number of “Aleksey” shown in GetContact under the name Aleksey Aleksandrovich Kostrubitsky. Right: Still from a video interview with Aleksey Kostrubitsky from 17 July 2018, exactly four years after the MH17 downing, in which he shares his memories about working at the crash sites in the periods 17–21 July 2014; 16–21 November 2014; and 16–28 April 2015.¹⁶⁴

In an interview with a foreign journalist from 24 July 2014, Khodakovsky stated that he had also heard the recordings and did not deny that they were genuine. To the contrary, he explained that at the time, he and his colleagues were only stressed about obtaining the flight recorders because they could fall into the hands of “looters”, whereas his ambition was to hand them over to the investigators. When asked about the instructions from Moscow, Khodakovsky explained: “We have contact with some circles in Moscow. Not with official circles, [but] with social circles”. He also argued that Russia was also interested in finding out the truth about the tragedy and did not want to see the flight recorders end up in the wrong hands since this would bring about all kinds of “insinuations against Russia”.¹⁶⁵ However, in the actual recording, Khodakovsky can clearly be heard

¹⁶² https://youtu.be/RDt_LgoUv_8?t=52

¹⁶³ In the original SBU video, the phone number of Aleksey is displayed as +380634119133 during the first call and +380676207373 during the second call. The first number must have been an error from the editor because it is the confirmed phone number belonging to Oleg “Orion” Ivannikov in the other SBU intercepts (see: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/05/25/mh17-russian-gru-commander-orion-identified-oleg-ivannikov/>). This mistake is repeated in the English version of the SBU video (available at: https://youtu.be/9ff_LTlZZI8) for both the first and the third call. In both the original and the English videos, the number of Andrey is also erroneously displayed as +380676207373, which is actually the number belonging to Aleksey.

¹⁶⁴ <https://youtu.be/GCdiTNvbQ5M> and <https://dnr-online.ru/my-svoyu-rabotu-vypolnili-pravilno-aleksej-kostrubitskij-o-spatatelnyh-rabotah-na-meste-katastrofy-malajzijskogo-boinga-video/>

¹⁶⁵ <https://eot.su/node/17468>

saying that the black boxes also had to be hidden from the OSCE, which sounds like a clear attempt to hide evidence related to the downing of MH17. It also makes no sense that Khodakovsky, who sounds clearly panicked on the phone intercepts, was trying to obtain the black boxes on behalf of “social circles in Moscow”. As such, his comment that “Moscow is inquiring about the black boxes” only suggests that Russian officials were behind such a plan, and that Khodakovsky was willing to follow orders from Moscow.

According to the Dutch Safety Board, the two flight recorders were removed from the wreckage area by “individuals unknown to the investigation team”, and handed over by the DNR leadership to a Malaysian official in Donetsk on 21 July 2014.¹⁶⁶ This means that if Moscow and the separatists were initially interested in tampering with evidence on the flight recorders, they changed their minds quickly thereafter, perhaps because they became aware that short-term hacking of the flight recorders was practically too difficult, or because they realized that the data on the flight recorders was not threatening to their version of events, whereas the disappearance of these items would only work against them.

It is not exactly clear why Khodakovsky was stressed about finding the flight recorders when he also mentioned that Khmury (Dubinsky) had by then already obtained “two units”. Perhaps he did not know how many flight recorders there were in total, or he was considering the possibility that these two units were not the actual flight recorders. It is also possible that Moscow was still interested in obtaining the Quick Access Recorder. This device saves similar data as the flight recorder, but is not designed to withstand a plane crash. The Dutch Safety Board has reported that the Quick access Recorder was not recovered.¹⁶⁷ The same goes for the plane’s two Emergency Locator Transmitters, models ADT 406 AF and ADT 406 AP, which could have easily been mistaken for flight recorders because they have a similar bright orange colour. At least one of the Emergency Locator Transmitters was disabled and removed from a wreckage site in the afternoon of 18 July and never reached the Dutch investigators.¹⁶⁸

A second call between Khodakovsky and Aleksey Kostrubitsky was recorded at 19.00 on 18 July, and reveals that there was indeed a plan to hide all objects that resemble flight recorders:

Aleksey: Look... they should look like some kind of orange barrels, right?

Khodakovsky: How should I know, Lyosha? You should know better.

Aleksey: All right, so we found some piece o’ shit... It’s just a box, with “Satellite Navigation

¹⁶⁶ Dutch Safety Board, *Crash of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17*, p 44.

¹⁶⁷ Dutch Safety Board, *Crash of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17*, p 48.

¹⁶⁸ Shortly after the downing of MH17, one of the two onboard Emergency Locator Transmitters automatically began to send out an emergency signal from a wreckage site near the poultry farm south of Hrabove (the other transmitter was a portable unit for emergency evacuations that could only be activated manually). Even though the beacon is capable of transmitting a signal for at least 60 hours, this signal stopped abruptly on 1:48:06 Kyiv time on 18 July. The DSB also noted that the fuselage structure on which this transmitter was mounted was later recovered, but with the transmitter no longer attached: Dutch Safety Board, *Crash of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17*, p 48–50.

Unit”¹⁶⁹ written on it.

Khodakovsky: Well, fuck, anyway... Anyway, hide fucking everything! They could be disguised as anything.

Aleksey: All right, got it.¹⁷⁰

Based on these recordings alone, it is hard to tell if Aleksey Kostrubitsky was truly willing to go ahead with hiding the black boxes from international investigators. It appears that after this incident he would fully cooperate with the Dutch-led investigation team, because on 30 August 2014, he received a letter from the Dutch embassy in Kyiv in which the International Mission for the Protection of the Investigation thanked the regional branch of the emergency service for its “excellent work in collecting human remains and personal belongings immediately after the downing”.¹⁷¹

Based on the available evidence, it can be concluded that Aleksandr Khodakovsky played a important role in the operation that led to the downing of MH17 by facilitating the transport of the Buk as it drove through territory under the control of his Vostok Brigade. Some clues indicate that members of the Vostok Brigade may have also helped in facilitating the arrival of the Buk from Russia to separatist-held Ukraine. Furthermore, after the crash, Khodakovsky also coordinated a short-lived plan to hide the black boxes from the investigators on the orders from Moscow. At the same time, all available information also suggests that, unlike the Bezler Group, the Vostok Brigade had nothing to do with the targeting of flight MH17. While Khodakovsky has often denied any complicity of the separatists in the downing of MH17, it turns out that many of his statements are conflicting with the official line of defense, and actually reveal more important information about the downing of MH17 than he probably anticipated. Khodakovsky moved to Russia in the summer of 2018 as a result of a power struggle with the DNR leadership, and has resided there ever since (despite not having Russian citizenship).¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ The title “Satellite Navigation Unit (“*Blok sputnikovoy navigatsii*”) does not appear on any of these items. Perhaps this was simply a botched translation of the English “Emergency Locator Transmitter” or the French “Balise de Distresse” which are both displayed on the model ADT 406 AF and ADT 406 AP transmitters.

¹⁷⁰ https://youtu.be/RDt_LgoUv_8

¹⁷¹ <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/artikel/1671441/bedankbrief-nederland-aan-oeckraaiense-functionaris>

¹⁷² <https://dnews.dn.ua/news/711924>

4) The GRU DNR

Since Bellingcat has explained that (former) Russian GRU officer Sergey Dubinsky was the man behind the call sign “Khmury” and the key figure in organizing the transport of the Buk from Donetsk to the eventual launch site south of Snizhne, questions remain on the identities and involvement of his subordinates. In the summer of 2014, Dubinsky was the head of the military intelligence agency of the DNR known as the “GRU DNR” — the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Donetsk People’s Republic. A lot of details on the formation and functioning of the GRU DNR has been revealed by Dubinsky and other DNR leaders in interviews and postings on forums and social media.¹⁷³ Further information on its structure can be found in the database on the official web portal of the judiciary of Ukraine, especially documents from late 2017 when a criminal case concerning various charges of terrorism was prepared by the SBU against eight alleged former GRU DNR officers including Dubinsky (though none of the accused showed up for interrogation).¹⁷⁴

The establishment of the GRU DNR goes back to mid-May 2014 during the early stage of the Battle of Slovyansk — the first major confrontation between the Russian-backed separatists and the Ukrainian army — which on the side of the separatists was led by the commander of the DNR militia Igor Strelkov. According to Dubinsky, Strelkov was by then in control of Slovyansk and Krasnyy Lyman, while he himself, as Strelkov’s deputy, commanded the militias in Kramatorsk, Druzhkivka, and Kostyantynivka. Dubinsky organized some of these militias into intelligence and special forces (*spetsnaz*) units. This agency was introduced simply as “Strelkov’s Spetsnaz”, and its command office was in the city of Kramatorsk.¹⁷⁵ By then, Strelkov and Dubinsky were already heavily dependent on weapons transfers from Russia, with Dubinsky admitting that their forces had received about 3,000–3,500 assault rifles from a total of 12,000 that came from Russia’s Rostov Oblast during the Battle of Slovyansk.¹⁷⁶

After the retreat from Slovyansk, Kramatorsk, and Kostyantynivka on 5 July 2014, Strelkov and Dubinsky withdrew their forces to Donetsk. From there, they continued to consolidate their power over other rebel groups who were initially reluctant to recognize Strelkov as their Minister of Defense. Strelkov’s units were also sent to the frontline settlements Mospyne, Ilovaysk, Shakhtarsk,

¹⁷³ For an overview of the information about the GRU DNR that was already collected by Twitter activist Necro Mancer (@666_mancer), see: <https://donersite.wordpress.com/2017/11/02/ru-t1/>

¹⁷⁴ The prosecution of the eight individuals became known to the public after the call to summons was published in: *Uryadovyy kur’yer* Nr. 70–6186 (12 October 2017) p. 14, available at: https://ukurier.gov.ua/media/newspaper/adv/2017-10-11/192_6061r.pdf After it was reported in the media that the eight were wanted in relation to the MH17-case, the press center of the SBU issued a statement of denial, explaining that these individuals were summoned in relation to a different criminal case.

¹⁷⁵ See the post by Dubinsky on the Glav.su forum under username Nekhoroshiy from 7 August 2015, and the posts on VK by user Khm Khm, who can be recognized as Dubinsky, from 26 March 2015: https://vk.com/wall-88035976_1653 (archived: <http://archive.fo/fo4DO>); <https://glav.su/forum/1/2664/messages/3246703/#message3246703> (archived: <http://archive.fo/fo4DO>); <https://web.archive.org/save/https://glav.su/forum/1/2664/messages/3246703/#message3246703>)

¹⁷⁶ See the post from Dubinsky on the Glav.su forum dated 9 July 2015: <https://glav.su/forum/1/2664/messages/3194785/#message3194785> (archived: <https://archive.fo/kjnr8>)

Torez, and Snizhne.¹⁷⁷ Dubinsky continued to head the DNR’s military intelligence agency from a newly-established headquarters in Donetsk on Baidukova Street 70–72. This agency, which had become known as the GRU DNR, continued to grow, employing at its peak anywhere between 800 and 1,500 separatists who were divided over the following five departments: the 1st Department — analytics and foreign intelligence; the 2nd Department — reconnaissance and special operations; the 3rd Department — domestic intelligence; the 4th Department — radio intelligence; the 5th Department — logistics. Dubinsky would continue to head the GRU DNR until he left the Donbas region for Russia in February 2015 under pressure from rivals. The intelligence agency was reorganized into the DNR’s Republican Guard, and in July 2015 many of Dubinsky loyalists were purged from the organization by the new DNR leadership.¹⁷⁸



Figure 22. Cropped versions of photos from Sergey Dubinsky of his old DNR identity cards which carried his pseudonym Sergey Nikolaevich Petrovsky (left) and his Russian passport with his real name (right). Both photos were shared to the VK community page for the GRU DNR to prove the authenticity of his VK account.¹⁷⁹

This chapter will further examine the involvement of the GRU DNR in the Buk transport and the downing of MH17 by identifying many of the people heard on the SBU intercepts as Dubinsky’s subordinates, analyzing their conversations, and specifying which unit was most likely present at the launch-site that day. The main focus will be on the 2nd Department of the GRU DNR, which Dubinsky described as the largest within the agency and one that consisted of special forces units that were actively deployed on the frontlines. Before July 2014, their achievements were modest, but in mid-July units of the 2nd Department became heavily involved in the fighting on the frontline south of Snizhne by participating in operations at Stepanivka, Dmitrivka, Kozhevnyia, and

¹⁷⁷ See the interview with Strelkov from March 2015: <https://vbloknot.com/5890-strelkov-o-sdache-donecka.html>

¹⁷⁸ See the information on the GRU DNR mentioned in the indictment against Dubinsky from 14 December 2017: Ukraine Court Records, Case 185/9535/17, Proceeding 1-ks/185/1974/17, available at: <http://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/71005928>; as well as the summary overview of the GRU DNR written by Dubinsky via his verified VK profile on 8 June 2018: https://vk.com/grudnr?w=wall-163104776_1443 (archived: <https://archive.fo/IBjMr>)

¹⁷⁹ For the original uncropped photos, see Dubinsky’s posts from 9–10 June 2018: https://vk.com/wall-163104776_1443?reply=1481 (archived: <http://archive.fo/92ntr>); https://vk.com/wall-163104776_1443?reply=1513 (archived: <http://archive.fo/Si8hE>)

Dibrivka.¹⁸⁰ The main objective of these operation was to capture the Marynivka border crossing. At the time, this was the most the most important strategic objective for all parties in the conflict — apart from creating a second supply line for the separatists, the capture of this crossing would also create a pocket with thousands of Ukrainian forces who were stationed to the east along the border with Russia.

4.1 Confirming the identity of Oleg “Gyurza” Pulatov

In one of the SBU intercepts released one day after the downing, Sergey Dubinsky can be heard instructing an unidentified separatist to guard the missile launcher until it reaches an area close Pervomayske, a village south of Snizhne that was very close to the eventual launch site.¹⁸¹ While the original video file showed no time indication, a version with an English translation uploaded by the SBU notes that the conversation took place at 9:54am, which is approximately half an hour after Sanych (i.e. Vostok commander Semyonov) instructed Dubinsky to park the Buk-M1 behind the Motel roundabout in Donetsk:

Khmury: Listen to me carefully, so now... call Bibliotekar, behind the Motel roundabout will stand you-know-what [i.e. the Buk missile launcher], yes? Hello?

DNR terrorist: Yes... yes-yes-yes-yes-yes...

Khmury: You take there only [people] from those that came back, only as many as you need for escorting. Got it, yes? Leave the rest here. That’s first. When you arrive there, Pervomayske will be nearby, look at [your] map.

DNR terrorist: Ah-ha... Got it.

Khmury: Position yourself somewhere in that area, bring up the rest of your [people]. And your task is reserve, plus guarding this thingie which you will now escort [i.e. the Buk missile launcher]. Do you understand?

DNR terrorist: Got it.

Khmury: Gyurza will also join you there. OK, we keep in touch.

DNR terrorist: Good... all right.¹⁸²

Unlike many of the phone intercepts, the SBU only labeled the person who received the orders as “DNR terrorist”, which might suggest that they were not familiar with his call sign or real identity shortly after the downing. Dubinsky can also be heard mentioning two unidentified militants with the call signs “Bibliotekar” (Librarian) and “Gyurza” (Levantine Viper). The separatist with the call

¹⁸⁰ https://vk.com/grudnr?w=wall-163104776_1443

¹⁸¹ A conspiracy theory which states that Dubinsky must have referred instead to the village of Pervomayske, west of Donetsk, has previously been debunked by Bellingcat: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/08/08/addressing-aeroflot-mh17-conspiracy-theory/>

¹⁸² <https://youtu.be/YgdqdklrqDA?t=3m8s>

sign “Bibliotekar” has never been publicly identified, though some information indicates that it might be the same person as the one with the call sign “Buryat”.¹⁸³

On 16 April 2017, the anonymous Donetsk-based twitter activist Necro Mancer (@666_mancer) suggested that the Gyrza who is mentioned by Dubinsky on the intercepted phone call concerns a former subordinate of Dubinsky who is otherwise known as “Khalif” (Caliph).¹⁸⁴ Khalif was by then already identified on the internet as a Russian citizen named Oleg Yuldashevich Pulatov. The same Pulatov (b. 24 July 1966) is also one of the eight alleged former GRU DNR leaders indicted with alleged acts of terrorism (unrelated to MH17) by Ukrainian prosecutors. In the official indictment, it is stated that Pulatov, whom they describe as a veteran of the Chechen wars, used the call signs Gyrza and Khalif while heading the GRU DNR’s 2nd Department (reconnaissance and special operations) in the period from July 2014 until May 2015.¹⁸⁵ In order to find out if both Gyrza and Khalif are indeed monikers of Oleg Pulatov, and in order to assess whether this concerns the same Gyrza that Dubinsky refers to on the phone recording, a point-by-point re-evaluation of the available open-source information is required.

Oleg Pulatov’s name first appeared on Russian nationalist forums in September 2015 as the real identity of a person who is active on the Antikvariat and Glav.su forums with the username “Khalif”. The Antikvariat forum is famous among pro-separatists because Strelkov had been posting frontline updates there since the start of the conflict in the Donbas under the username “Kotych” (Cat) — a nickname which he has verified in a video message.¹⁸⁶ Dubinsky, too, is known to be active on Antikvariat under the username “Plokhoy Soldat” (Bad Soldier). The authenticity of this account can be verified by the fact that, already before he was publicly outed, Dubinsky shared personal photos via this account, including one of himself, taken at his home residence in Bolshoy Log, a suburb of the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don (this address was previously confirmed by Bellingcat).¹⁸⁷ Dubinsky is also known to be posting on the Glav.su forum with the username

¹⁸³ In Ukraine’s case file submitted to the ICJ, the transcripts of the calls between Buryat and Khmuryi (Dubinsky) are shown, but in the first recording Buryat is only referred to as Bibliotekar: Ukraine, *Case concerning: Ukraine v. Russian Federation* (12 June 2018) p. 91 and Annex. 397, available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/files/case-related/166/166-20180612-WRI-01-00-EN.pdf> Furthermore, at the end of the second call between Dubinsky and Buryat, Dubinsky can be heard mentioning the name Bibliotekar (though it is not clear who he is saying it to). This is apparent only in the version of the call that was released by the JIT on 30 March 2015:

<https://youtu.be/olQNPtXSnTo?t=202>

¹⁸⁴ A dossier compiled by Necro Mancer has been shared on his blog, available at:

<https://donetskite.wordpress.com/2017/04/16/xalif/>

¹⁸⁵ Ukraine Court Records, Case 185/9535/17, Proceedings 1-ks/185/1970/17 and 1-ks/185/1974/17 available at:

<http://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/71006039>; <http://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/71005928>

¹⁸⁶ <https://youtu.be/tmyqDwapEYc>

¹⁸⁷ See his posts with photos from 8 and 16 August 2016: <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/214488-gostinaya?p=2899816> and <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/231049-klub-holostyakov?p=2904782> (archived: <http://archive.fo/NKPF0> and <http://archive.fo/q1H5O>) For the geolocation: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/02/15/identifying-khmuryi-the-major-general-linked-to-the-downing-of-mh17/>

“Nekhoroshiy” (Bad), as has been confirmed by Strelkov and Khalif.¹⁸⁸ On 19 September 2015, Khalif posted screenshots on the Glav.su forum of a private chat between him and Nekhoroshiy (Dubinsky), in which Dubinsky refers to Khalif by his first name “Oleg” (Khalif would post another screenshot of this chat on the Antikvariat forum in 2017, which shows that the two “Khalif” accounts belong to the same Oleg). That same day, information about Oleg Pulatov, including statements that he is known as Gyurza, first appeared on the Rusbalt forum from where it quickly spread to the Antikvariat and Glav.su forums.¹⁸⁹

It is difficult to say who was behind the outing of Pulatov. On the Antikvariat and Glav.su forums any mention of the name Pulatov has been deleted by the site moderators, but it is still apparent that Pulatov’s information was first shared on the Rusbalt forum from where it spread to Antikvariat and Glav.su. On Rusbalt his information was first shared by a forum administrator with the username “Ursus”. However, several days before the outing took place, his personal information was already mentioned in a private chat on VK between a known campaigner and recruiter for the DNR named Mikhail Polynkov and one of his contacts, a certain Aleksey Krivobok, which was later leaked by a Ukrainian hacker group as part of a larger breach.¹⁹⁰ In this conversation, Polynkov first stated his belief that Gyurza came from Russia’s 45th Guards Independent Spetsnaz Brigade — a Moscow-based Airborne Forces unit which has been linked before to Russian covert operations in Crimea and the Donbas region.¹⁹¹ Other than that, Polynkov had mostly bad things to say about Gyurza:

As far as I know, Gyurza is a very bad person. Prapor¹⁹² says he only saw him inside the headquarters. He was never seen in combat. Even though he was always well-equipped. During the assault on Stepanivka [on the frontline south of Snizhne], it was not him who led the battle, but his deputy. He is also described as an envious and vengeful person.

Krivobok then responded with information on Pulatov, whom he believed was both Khalif and Gyurza, which he dug up from the website of the M.V. Frunze Military Academy in Kyiv

¹⁸⁸ For example see the posts from Strelkov (Kotych) from 7 September 2015 in which he calls Nekhoroshiy Sergey Nikolaevich Petrovsky: <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/216540-zapad-vs-vostok-territorii-ukraina-7/?p=2640686> (archived: <https://archive.fo/7ksYJ>) as well as the screenshots of the private chat between Pulatov and Dubinsky (as shown in this paragraph).

¹⁸⁹ On the Rusbalt forum, the first bits of information (his monikers and the diploma signed by Putin) were revealed by site admin known as Ursus: <http://rusbalt.flyboard.ru/topic480-100.html> (archived: <http://archive.fo/v7gPc>). This information was also shared on Antikvariat (see the post from user p.p. 22630, archived at: <http://archive.fo/Lf99b>

¹⁹⁰ <http://facebook-ua.info/2017/02/18/sean-townsend-gyurza-xrustalnaya-spiski-nayomnikov-ili-kak-possorit-terroristov-mezhdu-soboj/> and http://archive.fo/http://ruh8.info/* For information on Polynkov, see: <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/polynkov-mixail-vladimirovich/> For information on his follower, Aleksey Krivobok, as well as excerpts from the leak, see: <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/krivobok-aleksej/> For a full copy of the leaked conversation: <https://www.docdroid.net/X03S4Cy/polynkov-krivobok.pdf>

¹⁹¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20150330124704/http://www.suomensotilas.fi/en/artikkelit/cremea-invaded-high-readiness-forces-russian-federation>; https://i.tyzhden.ua/content/photoalbum/2014/10_2014/17/26-42.pdf; <https://twitter.com/askai707/status/877948941232472068>; <http://news.liga.net/news/politics/10365071-razvedka-opredelila-novye-podrazdeleniya-armii-ri-v-donbasse.htm>; <https://twitter.com/askai707/status/759820928104722432>; <https://informnapalm.org/?s=28337>

¹⁹² This most likely concerns Evgeny Vladimirovich “Prapor” Skripnik, a volunteer from Russia who was a militia commander in Snizhne and close to Strelkov in the summer of 2014: <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/skripnik-evgenij-vladimirovich/>; <https://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/1828653.html>

(KVOKU) — information that later also appeared on the Russian message boards. Where Krivobok got Khalif/Gyurza’s real name from remains unclear, but it is perhaps telling that in the same leaked conversation he also mentioned the real name of Khmury (Dubinsky), which back then also constituted inside information.

The information from the website of the M.V. Frunze Military Academy reveals that Pulatov graduated from the academy in 1990, having served in the 2nd platoon of the 8th company in the Soviet Armed Forces. On June 2010, the website also shared pictures from what appears to be Pulatov’s personal album with photos from his service in Afghanistan in the 1980s; a letter of gratitude from 22 February 2002 for service in the Russian Armed Forces signed by President Vladimir Putin (such letters were commonly awarded to servicemen); and a patent in his name for a proposed “information security system” from 16 February 2007.¹⁹³ One indication that this patent-holder concerns the same Oleg Pulatov is that his name is also found under a petition from March 2011 signed by (self-acclaimed) scientists who called for the release of Vladimir Kvachkov (an infamous ultra-nationalist former GRU colonel who was doing a prison term for terrorism), which was signed by “O.Yu. Pulatov, war veteran, author of the Global Safety Information System project, Moscow”.¹⁹⁴



Figure 23. Left: An undated photograph of Oleg Yuldashevich Pulatov taken while he was serving in the Russian Armed Forces, which was shared on the website of the M.V. Frunze Military Academy. Right: A more recent photograph of Pulatov that was posted on the Antikvariat forum during his outing as the man behind the monikers Khalif and Gyurza.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ <http://www.kvoku.org/dalbum2/index.php?folder=/1990/02-pulatov/> (archived: <http://archive.fo/zgIwn>)

¹⁹⁴ <https://yablor.ru/blogs/iz-pochti-nomp-pb-pismo-uchenih-v-zaschitu-polkovn/1356590> (archived: <https://archive.fo/pxnep>)

¹⁹⁵ A copy of this image was uploaded to Twitter on 20 September 2015 (when the outing took place), with the uploader stating that it came from a closed forum. The watermark that is visible in the background of the image is from Antikvariat and reveals that it was first uploaded there: https://twitter.com/Kuznecova_TA/status/645611565417406465 (archived: <https://archive.fo/vnBfd>)

Further details on Pulatov’s career and whereabouts before the conflict in the Donbas can be found in multiple online sources, which is made easy by his somewhat unique name (his surname and patronym are of Uzbek origin). On what appears to be his Professional.ru profile, Pulatov’s residence is set to Moscow, and it is indicated that he had completed the Moscow-based Vystrel officer training course back in 1997.¹⁹⁶ Public Russian court records from the city of Ulyanovsk indicate that Pulatov was discharged from military service in an Airborne Forces unit for health reasons on 30 July 2008.¹⁹⁷ His name also comes up in the Nomer.org traffic police database, concerning a car accident in Moscow on 15 January 2004, with the license plate of his vehicle coming from Ulyanovsk Oblast.¹⁹⁸ Pulatov was also registered as living at a friend’s apartment in Ulyanovsk from 17 October 2012 until 9 October 2014 when the district court decided to deregister him at the request of his flatmate. The claimant explained this decision by stating that “O. Yu. Pulatov is liable for military service and is located in a combat area, [and therefore] does not have the opportunity to come and withdraw [himself] from the register” — a circumstance which clearly fits with his supposed military activities in Ukraine.¹⁹⁹

According to Dubinsky, forum user Khalif used to serve in the Russian Armed Forces with the rank of lieutenant colonel. He was initially stationed in Donetsk in May 2014 as part of an 8-men strong platoon under the command of the DNR commander with the call sign “Abver” (Sergey Zdrilyuk), but joined up with Dubinsky’s special forces after arriving in Kramatorsk in early June. Dubinsky stated that Khalif became the head of the 2nd Department (reconnaissance and special operations) of the GRU DNR and received the rank of colonel in the ranks of the DNR.²⁰⁰ Khalif himself also stated that he used to be the head of the 2nd Department.²⁰¹ He explained that he had first arrived in the Donbas on 14 April 2014 and joined a Donetsk-based militia as a volunteer on 2 May.²⁰²

In the writings of Dubinsky and Khalif himself it is not explicitly stated that Gyurza and Khalif are the same person, but in Dubinsky’s descriptions of Gyurza, whom he describes as decorated member of the GRU DNR, he does mention details that match what is known about Khalif. For example, on 9 June 2018, Dubinsky mentioned on his verified VK profile that Gyurza had been arrested in Luhansk one month prior and that he was actively working on his release, and on 15 July 2018,

¹⁹⁶ One of the reasons that the profile appears to be his is because it is also indicated that he studied at the KVOKU from 1986 to 1990, which matches with his year of graduation: <http://archive.fo/wai0P>

¹⁹⁷ <https://archive.fo/JhdSx> (note: these were first found by Necro Mancer)

¹⁹⁸ <http://archive.fo/bSaH9> and http://a777aa.net/07_11_2016

¹⁹⁹ <https://archive.fo/fzXKW>

²⁰⁰ See the posts by Dubinsky on Antikvariat from 10 July 2017 and 27–28 February 2018: <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/243740-blog-kamrada-buratina-kotych-strelkov-ii-girki/page-69> and <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/240447-logvinovo-i-ne-tolko-bojtsy-vspominayut-minuvshi/page-20> (archived: <http://archive.fo/ovS3R>; <http://archive.fo/QhhC5>)

²⁰¹ See Khalif’s post from 28 September 2015: <http://archive.fo/qfZUF>

²⁰² See his posts from 15 April 2017 and 18 August 2016: <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/234726-zapad-vs-vostok-territorii-ukraina-10/page-813> (archived: <https://archive.fo/JUEk5>); <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/224949-zapad-vs-vostok-territorii-ukraina-9/page-970> (archived: <https://archive.fo/cGfPP>)

Khalif announced on Antikvariat that he had been released after 80 days of captivity.²⁰³ An early reference to Gyurza as a senior figure within the GRU DNR can be found in article from 1 August 2014 written by Russian DNR volunteer Vasily Sakharov who mentions a deputy of Khmury (Dubinsky) with the call sign Gyurza during the retreat from Slovyansk on 4–5 July 2014.²⁰⁴ In the end, the clearest confirmation that Khalif is also known as Gyurza can be found in Strelkov's writings. On 7 March 2016, Strelkov mentioned on the Antikvariat forum that Khalif headed the spetsnaz "at the height of the hostilities" (i.e. the summer of 2014), and on 13 February 2017, he mentioned on his verified VK profile that Khalif is indeed another nickname for special forces commander Gyurza.²⁰⁵

Dubinsky's writings also contain further snippets of information about Khalif/Gyurza that clearly fit with the postulation that he is Oleg Pulatov. For example, on 15 April 2017 during another brief confrontation between Dubinsky and Khalif in which Khalif called Dubinsky a drunkard, Dubinsky responded by saying that Khalif was himself a drunkard who got fired from the Russian Armed Forces and became homeless after losing his apartment — a scenario which at least partially matches the earlier mentioned information on Pulatov from the Russian court documents.²⁰⁶

Perhaps the clearest confirmation from open sources that Oleg Pulatov is the real identity of Khalif/Gyurza has been accidentally released by Pulatov himself on the Antikvariat forum. On 11 February 2019, Khalif/Pulatov posted a screenshot of an e-mail correspondence from 23 July 2014 (six days after the downing of MH17) in which he gives an update on his unit's involvement in fighting near Kozhevnyia, a village southeast of Snizhne right next to the border with Russia.²⁰⁷ Although Pulatov made an effort to blur out personal information in the correspondence, the message still contains a link to a recent video of the fighting on Odnoklassniki. This video was uploaded by a certain "Svyatoy Stalin" (Saint Stalin),²⁰⁸ which turns out to be one of at least two anonymous profiles of Pulatov on Odnoklassniki. This is mostly apparent from the following:

²⁰³ <https://donetsksite.wordpress.com/2017/04/16/khalif/>

²⁰⁴ http://samlib.ru/s/saharow_w_i/otstuplenie.shtml (archived: <http://archive.fo/VxaHb>) For more info on Sakharov: <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/sakharov-vasilij-ivanovich/>

²⁰⁵ In the first post, Strelkov uses the abbreviation ORSN to designate the special forces, which is short for *otdel'naya rota spetsial'nogo naznacheniya* (Independent Spetsnaz Company): <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/224949-zapad-vs-vostok-territorii-ukraina-9/page-332> (archived: <https://archive.fo/tFy5h>). In the second post he simply uses the abbreviation OSN (i.e. Independent Spetsnaz): https://vk.com/wall347260249_100318?reply=100417 (archived: <http://archive.fo/ik6nP>) For the video in which Strelkov verifies his VK account: <https://youtu.be/3hC5zmyggik>

²⁰⁶ <http://archive.fo/JUEk5>

²⁰⁷ <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/240666-zapad-vs-vostok-territorii-ukraina-11/?view=findpost&p=3324156>; (archived: <https://archive.fo/NMRmO>); <https://ok.ru/video/62727660230106-1> (archived: <https://archive.fo/qj6Ty>)

²⁰⁸ <https://ok.ru/profile/563317634010> (archived: <http://archive.fo/7t1xB>)

1. Svyatoy Stalin's birthday is set to 24 July 1966, which is also the birthday of Oleg Pulatov.²⁰⁹
2. Already since June 2014, Svyatoy Stalin was posting photos and videos of the DNR's intelligence agency (including the only video in which a masked Dubinsky made an appearance).²¹⁰
3. Svyatoy Stalin has a total of 40 people in his friends list, many of whom have their home residence set to Ulyanovsk, Moscow, or cities in separatist-held territory of Ukraine.²¹¹
4. At one point, he subscribed to a profile that can be identified as another fake profile of Pulatov: on this profile he calls himself "The Caliphate of the Saint Stalin" in Arabic (Pulatov also uses Arabic in his signature on the Antikvariat forum); his birthday is again set to 24 July 1966; and his avatar is a photo of a masked soldier with a sniper rifle — the same exact photo that Pulatov also uses as his avatar on the Glav.su forum. His last login to this account was on 4 March 2015.²¹²

It was also noticeable that Pulatov often logged in and out on the same dates as on his personal Odnoklassniki profile as on the Svyatoy Stalin profile. This personal profile was previously already posted on the Myrotvorets website — it is easy to find because it has his real name and birthday. For quite some time his profile photo has been a photo of Park Shcherbakova in Donetsk.²¹³ Although the profile is currently closed off to the public, it has been possible to determine that many of Pulatov's friends were also from Ulyanovsk, Moscow, and cities in separatist-held territory of Ukraine, and that part of his family hails from a city in western Tajikistan that is largely populated by Uzbeks. Some of the people in Oleg Pulatov's friends list are also in Svyatoy Stalin's friends list, which further confirms that both profiles belong to him.

On 18 July 2014, just one day after the downing of MH17, Pulatov added a new profile photo of himself on his anonymous Svyatoy Stalin profile. The photo was cut out from a still of a *LifeNews* video from 16 July 2014 about the situation at the frontline south of Snizhne near the border with Russia:

²⁰⁹ <http://archive.fo/q0UqF>

²¹⁰ See for example this photo and the video links in the description: <http://archive.fo/sm8Go> The video with a masked Dubinsky was uploaded on 12 June 2014: <https://youtu.be/x1cJGxO414Y> Dubinsky admitted that this was him in a post on the Glav.su forum from 13 July 2015: <https://glav.su/forum/1/2664/messages/3202286/#message3202286> (archived: <http://archive.fo/dBfzt>) Furthermore, despite the mask, Dubinsky can also be recognized by a wrinkle that is visible near his left eye: <https://i.imgur.com/AmIXnmp.jpg>

²¹¹ <http://archive.fo/EDJBA>

²¹² <https://ok.ru/profile/566501425049>; <http://archive.fo/AKvFd>; <http://archive.fo/AzXEj>; <http://archive.fo/lGhaq>

²¹³ <http://archive.fo/gLXvH>

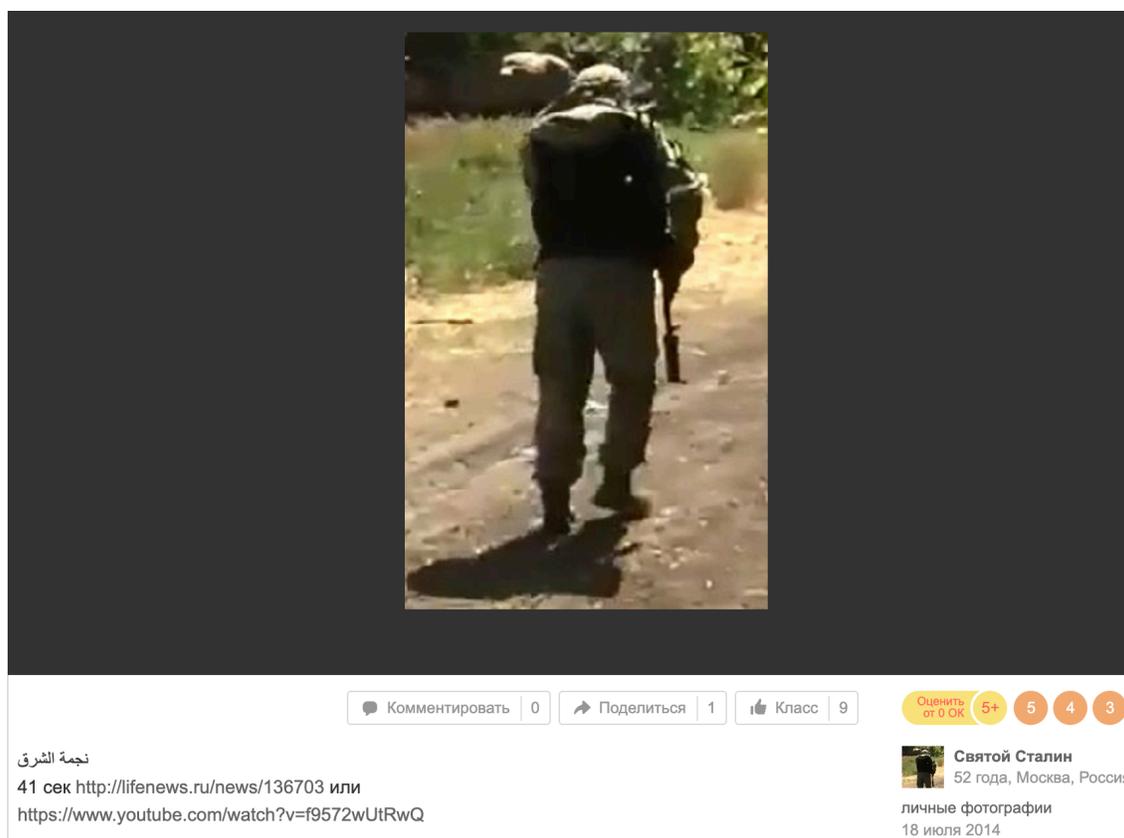


Figure 24. Pulatov’s new profile photo and its description from 18 July 2014. The Arabic translates to “The star of east”.

The *LifeNews* video from 16 July features DNR commander Strelkov being interviewed about the assault on Marynivka which was taken by separatists that same day.²¹⁴ Other individuals who can be recognized in this video are the then-Prime Minister of the DNR Aleksandr Boroday and one of his bodyguards Nikolay Medvedev (both citizens of Russia).²¹⁵ One of the vehicles in the background is a Strela-10 low-altitude anti-aircraft missile launcher. The video was geolocated to a field northwest of Stepanivka, just 3.3 kilometers from the field from where the next day the Buk would launch the missile that struck MH17.²¹⁶ In the video, Pulatov can be heard answering a phone and receiving intelligence about enemy positions, responding with: “Wait a minute ... A mortar battery ... spotted ... in the corn”, to which Strelkov responds with: “Where? Destroy! Destroy. Surround and destroy. Throw your own recon there.” Pulatov’s role in this exchange matches with his rank as the head of the GRU DNR’s 2nd Department which included the reconnaissance battalions.

²¹⁴ <https://youtu.be/DSmsFnawsUw>

²¹⁵ Nikolay Medvedev also appeared next to Boroday at the press conference in which they handed over the black boxes to the Malaysian authorities. His VK profile was found via facial recognition software (Findclone): <https://vk.com/id56682200>. On 8 February 2015, Medvedev shared a photo of himself with Boroday as printed on the frontpage of the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* from 19 July 2014 with the inscription “Murderers” (in reference to the MH17 downing): https://vk.com/photo56682200_353237522 (archived: <http://archive.fo/2MZaQ>)

²¹⁶ The video was geolocated to 47.945760, 38.780044: <https://www.facebook.com/bellingcat/posts/504820833039706>



Figure 25. Left: Strelkov speaking to LifeNews on 16 July 2014 with Boroday in the background (on the phone). Right: The moment that Oleg “Gyurza” Pulatov (on the phone) walks off after receiving instructions from Strelkov to take out a freshly-spotted mortar battery. Behind him stands a Strela-10 low-altitude anti-aircraft missile launcher.

In a post from 25 April 2017 on the Antikvariat Forum, Pulatov confirmed that he was also in the Stepanivka area on 17 July 2014 and that he arrived at the MH17-crash site shortly after the passenger plane got downed (he made this post in response to a forum user who linked Dubinsky to MH17).²¹⁷ Pulatov’s presence in the Stepanivka area fits the narrative that he traveled to Pervomayske several hours before the fatal missile attack, as the phone intercept between Dubinsky and “DNR terrorist” from 9:54am indicates. In the first part of this post, Pulatov shares Russian news items in favour of the conspiracy theory that a Ukrainian Su-25 downed MH17. In the second part of his post he describes his arrival at the crash site shortly after the downing:

I arrived to the Hrabove area within literally 20 minutes after the Boeing fell (witnesses will confirm, [I was in a] black Mitsubishi Pajero Sport)...

At the crash site, after what I saw, I ordered the arriving police to secure the area of the tragedy, not having even figured out their allegiance yet (they were wearing uniforms of the 404 MVD [i.e. Ukrainian Ministry of Interior Affairs²¹⁸]), as I already realized the scope of the tragedy and the importance to preserve evidence for a future unbiased investigation, and [also because] the local population began looting (scrap metal, luggage, etc)...

I found an orange “black box” and took it out of the area of the tragedy to keep it safe and transfer it to the appropriate authorities (whoever may tell me that I use too much “I” and “me”)...

It was I who was there when they found the passenger documents (passports and tickets to the flight) which were kept in one package (plastic bag)...

It was me who reported the bloated bodies at the site of the tragedy (by the way, none of that was seen in the Sinai [in the aftermath of the 2015 Metrojet Flight 9268 crash])...

So... if this tragedy was the militia’s fault, would we take actions like these???

²¹⁷ For this post, which was first noticed by Necro Mancer, see: <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/234726-zapad-vs-vostok-territorii-ukraina-10/page-833#entry3084711>; (archived: <https://archive.fo/sDmGm>)

²¹⁸ The number “404” is derogatory for Ukraine, meaning “country not found”, it implies it doesn't exist anymore.

When Pulatov mentions that he “reported the bloated bodies”, he may have meant that he was the first to report such a message to Strelkov. The latter made a post on the Antikvariat forum on 18 July claiming that he had been told by two people “from Shakhtarsk” who had arrived at the crash-site within half an hour after the downing that many of the corpses were “completely bloodless” and that stench from the dead bodies was at the time too strong given the circumstances that they were in.²¹⁹ The suggestion that MH17 was flying with dead bodies before it crashes became one of the many conspiracy theories that floated around on the internet in the aftermath of the downing.

In the third part of his post, Pulatov mentions that his unit was generally in the Stepanivka area on the day of the MH17 downing, and that they had a Strela-10 missile launcher — just like on 16 July as the *LifeNews* video showed. He also gives further details about the downing of the aircraft:

P.s.: at that moment we were generally in the Stepanivka area and we [only] had a Strela-10... we did not see any missile-launch trails from Snizhne... spotters observing enemy aircraft reported two high-altitude air targets... later, they reported one plane attacked the other and shot it down... we figured out the exact crash site on the go...

Although this part of the post is filled with more conspiracy theories propagated by Pulatov, the fact that he states that MH17 was spotted by airplane spotters is interesting because this is also what has happened according to the phone intercept between Bezler and Stelmakh (as explained in the first chapter). Maybe this is a clue that right after Bezler ordered Stelmakh to report the spotting of the plane to “higher up”, the message indeed arrived to the GRU DNR who then could have relayed it to the Buk crew.

According to his own words, Pulatov left the Donbas for Russia’s Rostov Oblast at the start of April 2015 (like Dubinsky before him) out of fear of being assassinated by his rivals. He then moved back to the Donbas and settled in the LNR where he set up two new spetsnaz units — 35 and 10-men strong each.²²⁰ His arrest and imprisonment in Luhansk in April–July 2018 suggest that he may have remained in LNR-territory until then. Shortly after his release, he cryptically announced that he had moved back to Russia, stating that “I am already on our territory ... in the legal zone (not a young and proud banana republic)”.²²¹ His current whereabouts, in Russia or elsewhere, are unknown.

4.2 Leonid “Krot” Kharchenko

Another intercepted conversation released by the JIT concerns a call between a person who is called Oleg and a certain Lyonya. This recording was released by the JIT on 28 September 2016 during the

²¹⁹ <http://archive.fo/g5k7d>

²²⁰ <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/234726-zapad-vs-vostok-territorii-ukraina-10/?p=3079225> (archived: <http://archive.fo/jrGVy>)

²²¹ <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/240666-zapad-vs-vostok-territorii-ukraina-11/?p=3278053> (archived: <http://archive.fo/BjpUY>)

presentation of their main findings, and according to them it was one of the intercepts in their possession that confirmed that the launch location was in a farmland west of Pervomayskyy. The conversation took place at 1:09pm on the day of the downing:

Lyonya: Yes, Oleg!

Oleg: Yes, Lyon?! Listen, so, If I get this right, it is the last checkpoint leaving Snizhne before Stepanivka... to the left. Is my sense of direction correct?

Lyonya: You have to go rightwards in Stepanivka and across the field to... what's its fucking name... right, fucking Snizhne.

Oleg: Yes.

Lyonya: So, go to Snizhne. I'll give you further directions there.

Oleg: Got it. OK.²²²

The JIT noted that one of the participants' mobile phone was connected to a telephone tower in-between Pervomayske and Pervomayskyy, which was the closest telephone tower to the eventual launch site. They did not specify which of the two persons this was, but considering that Lyonya is the one giving directions, it seems that he was already close to the launch location while Oleg was heading his way. The directions that Lyonya gives suggest that Oleg is approaching him from the frontlines near Marynivka/Dmytrivka, southeast of Stepanivka. In Ukraine's application concerning their case against Russia, submitted to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague on 12 June 2018, the call between Lyonya and Oleg is also mentioned, but the two men are instead referred to by the call signs "Krot" (Mole) and "Zmey" (Serpant).²²³

²²² <https://youtu.be/Sf6gJ8NDhYA?t=454>

²²³ Ukraine, *Case concerning: Ukraine v. Russian Federation* (12 June 2018) p. 91 and Annex. 397,



Figure 26. The Buk missile launcher photographed (left) and filmed (right, cropped version) in Snizhne while driving southwards towards a checkpoint near the village of Pervomaysky, next to the eventual launch site, in the early afternoon of 17 July 2014. The video shows that the Buk missile launcher was escorted by a dark-coloured vehicle.

A person with the call sign “Krot” can also be heard on an intercepted phone call between him and Strelkov from 23 July 2014, in which he clearly has the same voice as Lyonya. The recording was released by the SBU on 25 July 2014 as part of evidence that the Russian Armed Forces were conducting cross-border artillery strikes on Ukrainian positions.²²⁴ In the recording, Krot can be heard requesting artillery strikes on heights 198.3 and 185, as well as in-between height 185 and a summer camp — all of which can be geolocated to areas around Dibrivka, a village southeast of Snizhe and close to the border with Russia.²²⁵ Strelkov then announces he will make a request for such an attack.

²²⁴ <https://youtu.be/i-NoNjNdb7c>

²²⁵ The heights are indicated on a Soviet army map from 1986, available at: <http://loadmap.net/> The heights and the summer camp are also flagged on Wikimapia: <http://wikimapia.org/31065234/ru/Высота-185>; <http://wikimapia.org/31166853/ru/Курган-Высота-198-3>; <http://wikimapia.org/3701764/ru/Пионерлагерь-Голубые-скалы>

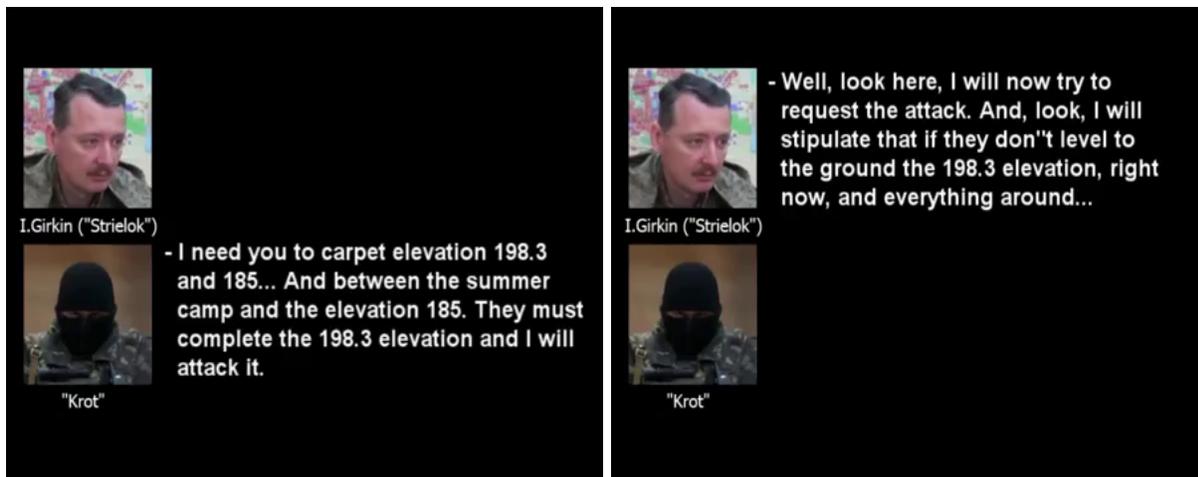


Figure 27. English version of the intercepted conversation between Strelkov and Krot.²²⁶

The video uploaded by the SBU also includes a conversation between Strelkov and a commander with the call sign “Siniy” (most likely a separatist named Denis Sinenkov²²⁷) in which they discuss “Russian artillery” strikes on Ukrainian troops near the village of Hryhorivka. Furthermore, a Previous Bellingcat investigation has proven that Russian cross-border artillery strikes on Ukrainian forces were a frequent occurrence in the summer of 2014. For example, there were many strikes that targeted army positions northeast of Dibrivka — i.e. height 185 and surroundings — in the period from 20 to 26 July.²²⁸ Satellite imagery available on Google Earth shows that height 198.3 had also been shelled during the same period.²²⁹ This means that it is a possibility that the attacks requested by Krot and Strelkov came through that day.

On 23 June 2015, Strelkov added further details about the taking of Marynivka and Dibrivka in a post on the Antikvariat forum, in which he mentions both Krot and Gyurza:

... Marynivka (the village and the surrounding dominant heights) were, after heavy fighting and with heavy losses (from both sides), taken by storm by the units of the Krot and Tor battalions, as well as the company of Gyurza. A few days later, the Krot battalion, supported by a company of Kalmius, managed to take Dibrivka and punch through to create a corridor to the Russian border, thereby also sealing the encirclement of the southern group of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The overall command of this operation was personally carried out by me.²³⁰

Dubinsky talks more about Krot and the capture of Dibrivka in a post on the Glav.su forum from 6 August 2015, in which he also mentions Krot’s real name:

²²⁶ <https://youtu.be/KqKaoUIdNvo?t=73>

²²⁷ For a comparison of his voice: <https://youtu.be/iyepuz91UJA>

²²⁸ <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2015/02/17/origin-of-artillery-attacks/>; <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2016/12/21/russian-artillery-strikes-against-ukraine/>

²²⁹ Based on a comparison of satellite imagery from 23 and 26 July 2014 of the area 47.872011, 39.071654 in Google Earth Pro.

²³⁰ <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/216540-zapad-vs-vostok-territorii-ukraina-7/page-204#entry2571734>; (archived: <https://archive.fo/1AEDZ>)

After the retreat from Slovyansk [on 5 July 2014], an ORB [Separate Reconnaissance Battalion] was formed based on the Kramatorsk and Kostyantynivka garrisons — it was headed by the former militia commandant of Kostyantynivka, Major Leonid Vladimirovich Kharchenko (“Krot”). It was him that took Dibrivka and punched through to create a corridor to height 193.0.²³¹ At that moment, the commander of the 1st reconnaissance company of this ORB was “Ryazan”. At the end of August, the ORB was reorganized into the 2nd ooSpN [Separate Special Forces Unit], known to you in particular from [the battles at] Vuhlehirsk and Lohvynove [part of the battle for Debaltseve in the winter of 2015].²³²

The name Lyonya is a diminutive of the first name Leonid, which adds to the evidence that Leonid “Krot” Kharchenko is the same person as the Lyonya heard on the intercept with Oleg.

Furthermore, Leonid “Krot” Kharchenko and Pulatov were close colleagues in the summer of 2014, which fits with the evidence that both were at the frontline south of Snizhne on 17 July.²³³

Dubinsky’s willingness to mention Krot’s real name might have to do with the fact that Kharchenko had by then abandoned his anonymity. On 11 April 2015, Kharchenko featured in a video interview for the now-defunct separatist news outlet *Icorpus* in which he introduced himself by his full name.²³⁴ The interview reveals that his voice sounds similar to that of the Krot that we hear on the intercepted conversations. Since this is the only known interview with Kharchenko, this video is also a valuable source of information on his persona.

²³¹ The location of height 193.0 is unknown. Given the context, it is possible that Dubinsky made a mistake and actually meant height 198.3.

²³² <https://glav.su/forum/1/2664/messages/3245985/#message3245985> (archived: <https://archive.fo/ik45I>)

²³³ This is also apparent from writings by Pulatov. See for example his post from 14 August 2015 in which he explains that Krot was not his friend but only his comrade-in-arms: <https://glav.su/forum/1/2664/messages/3260017/#message3260017> (archived: <http://archive.fo/5dZsd>)

²³⁴ <https://youtu.be/7a2WJGvADPY>



Figure 28. GRU DNR commander Leonid “Krot” Kharchenko during the interview with Icorpus from 11 April 2015.

Further information about Kharchenko can be found in writings by Dubinsky, Pulatov, and Strelkov, as well as in the Ukrainian court documents since Kharchenko was also one of the eight alleged GRU DNR officers indicted for alleged acts of terrorism in late 2017. This was not the first time that the Ukrainian law enforcement showed interest in Kharchenko, as Kharchenko was already announced as wanted by the National Police of Ukraine on 16 August 2014, with his photo even featuring on billboards with wanted notices for DNR separatists in his hometown of Kostyantynivka.²³⁵

Leonid Vladimirovich Kharchenko was born on 10 January 1972 in the town of Kostyantynivka in Soviet Ukraine and holds Ukrainian citizenship. He was most likely still living in Kostyantynivka before the outbreak of the conflict in the Donbas.²³⁶ His profession before the conflict is unknown. There have been rumours that he was deeply involved in organized crime during the conflict. For example, in an anonymous but detailed letter from July 2015 about alleged corruption among GRU DNR officers that was shared on the Odnoklassniki community page for residents of Kostyantynivka, Krot was described as a person with “no previous military experience” who was engaged in the “illegal sale of weapons” and the “cash-in-transit vehicles”.²³⁷ Similar allegations were

²³⁵ <http://archive.fo/HNvds>; <https://inforesist.org/v-konstantinovke-na-bilbordax-povesili-separatistov/>

²³⁶ Kharchenko was still registered as living in Kostyantynivka as of 16 January 2019, according to a court summon: <https://ksm.dn.court.gov.ua/sud0527/gromadyanam/1/627129> He was also registered as living at this address in the Nomer.org database:

http://nomer.center/allukraina/lastName_ХАРЧЕНКО_firstName_ЛЕОНИД_middleName_ВЛАДИМИРОВИЧ_pageNumber_0.html

²³⁷ <https://ok.ru/group/52184570593354/topic/64084611142986> (archived: <https://archive.fo/kSbhW>)

repeated in an article by Ukrainian journalist Oleksandr Nikonorov from 4 December 2015.²³⁸ Furthermore, on 28 September 2015, Krot's colleague Pulatov referred to him as a "huckster" on the Antikvariat forum.²³⁹

Kharchenko became active in the separatist movement at an early stage of the conflict by becoming the militia commandant in his hometown of Kostyantynivka (first taken by armed protestors in mid-April 2014). According to Dubinsky, he was already part of his intelligence agency since May 2014. After the withdrawal from Kostyantynivka on 5 July, he moved to Donetsk and became the commander of a GRU DNR unit that was named the "Kramatorsk–Kostyantynivka Separate Reconnaissance Battalion" — informally also known simply as the "Krot Reconnaissance Battalion" (*razvedbat Krota*). In late August 2014, the unit was redubbed the "2nd Separate Special Forces Unit".²⁴⁰ Since Kharchenko's unit was part of the 2nd Department of the GRU DNR, he was a subordinate to both Pulatov and Dubinsky throughout 2014.²⁴¹

УВАГА! РОЗШУКУЄТЬСЯ ХАРЧЕНКО ЛЕОНІД ВОЛОДИМИРОВИЧ

19.08.2014 | 12:06



Харченко Леонід Володимирович, 10.01.1972 р.н., уродженець м. Костянтинівка Донецької області, громадянин України, не працюючий, зареєстрований в м. Костянтинівка Донецької області, вул. Космонавтів, буд. 9 кв. 92.

Комендант міста Костянтинівка

Постанова про оголошення розшуку підозрюваного Харченка Л.В. від 16.08. 2014.

Figure 29. Kharchenko listed as a wanted on the official website of the National Police of Ukraine on 19 August 2014.

Kharchenko's voice can also be recognized on two intercepted conversations with Dubinsky from the morning of 18 July that were released by the JIT, in which the removal of the Buk to Russia is

²³⁸ <https://www.depo.ua/rus/war/konflikti-v-lavah-separativ-ropad-gru-dnr--03102015180000>

²³⁹ <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/219507-zapad-vs-vostok-territorii-ukraina-8/page-179#entry2658359> (archived: <https://archive.fo/11RvY>)

²⁴⁰ As early as 22 July 2014, Strelkov wrote on Antikvariat that the "5th Kramatorsk-Konstantinovsky Reconnaissance Battalion" had participated in the capture of Kozhevnyia and Chervona Zorya: <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/204348-voennye-svodki-s-yugo-zapadnogo-fronta/page-133#entry2191060> Further information about Krot's unit is contained in posts by Dubinsky from 26 March 2015, 6 August 2015, and 2 September 2015, available at: <http://archive.fo/eo4DQ>; <https://glav.su/forum/1/2664/messages/3245985/#message3245985> (archived: <https://archive.fo/ik45J>) <https://glav.su/forum/1/2664/messages/3300947/#message3300947> (archived: <https://archive.fo/dSXQL>)

²⁴¹ This is also mentioned in the court decision concerning criminal proceedings against Kharchenko: Ukraine Court Records, Case 185/9535/17, Proceeding 1-ks/185/1975/17, available at: <http://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/71006045>

discussed. This clearly did not go according to plan, and Dubinsky sounds agitated and emotional in both recordings. In the JIT videos their names have been censored, but in the documents submitted by Ukraine to the ICJ it is indicated that the first call, which was recorded at 7:41am, concerns a conversation between “Krot” (Kharchenko) and “Khmury” (Dubinsky). In the conversation, Kharchenko tells Dubinsky that the Buk and its crew already arrived in the Russian Federation. We also hear for the first time Strelkov’s name mentioned on the intercepts:

Krot: Good morning ***.

Khmury: Good morning ***, yesterday was... a mess, I have nothing to say.

Krot: What’s up?

Khmury: Where is, whatshisname... err... Why did your... comrade... return..., incomprehensible such movements... I don’t know... what was going on yesterday, tell me!

Krot: They brought the vehicle up to the crossroad, left it there, the lads went on themselves. So, the vehicle was going in the correct direction and arrived successfully. That’s it. It’s just that there were strange incoming calls which began suddenly, from ten persons.

Khmury: Who were those ten?

Krot: Err. There were different incoming calls to this phone from people who begun to introduce themselves... err... one and then the second, then the third, then the fourth... he told that he was fucking done... later, Strelkov himself began to phone up. He introduced himself.

Khmury: And he turned off his fucking telephone just like that. Fucking shit... and we don’t know at all where the vehicle is.

Krot: The vehicle is in Russia.

Khmury: Fucking shit... err... I say, yesterday we didn’t know... [where the vehicle was].²⁴²

The second intercepted conversation between Kharchenko and Dubinsky was supposedly recorded at approximately 8:00am:

Krot: Yes, ***?

Khmury: ***, you should take *** and come to my place, there is no... vehicle, no one saw it. That one, which had gone to meet it... returned back without the vehicle, you know what I mean, ...of a mess. Where? To whom? Which way did he bring it? ...disaster, you know...

Krot: And what about Bibliotekar? This is that group of people that transported it.

Khmury: Well...

Krot: On the low-loader... I have just made a contact with them, they are all in Russia, they will bring a new vehicle from Russia.

Khmury: Ahaa... but that... err... Did he give it to Bibliotekar?

Krot: For sure!

Khmury: Well, I got it.²⁴³

²⁴² <https://youtu.be/Sf6gJ8NDhYA?t=648>; <https://youtu.be/olQNpTxSnTo?t=455>

²⁴³ <https://youtu.be/olQNpTxSnTo?t=522>

It is notable that Kharchenko mentions that “the vehicle” was transported back to Russia on a low-loader by the person with the call sign “Bibliotekar” — a clear indication that they were indeed talking about the Buk missile launcher. Bibliotekar was also involved in the Buk transport in Donetsk (as mentioned in chapter 4.1). Furthermore, one video from the early morning of 18 July recorded in Luhansk shows that the Buk was being transported on top of the same low-loader as the one that had brought it to Snizhne the day before. The video also shows that the Buk missile launcher was by then missing one of its four missiles — the one that had struck MH17.



Figure 30. A still from a video from the early morning of 18 July which shows the Buk being transported on top of the low-loader in Luhansk in the direction of the Russian border.

Leonid Kharchenko’s presence at the launch site near Pervomayskyy in the afternoon of 17 July and his involvement in the removal of the Buk to Russia suggests that he was an important figure linked to the downing of MH17. As such, it is possible that he is also the person dubbed “DNR terrorist” on the intercepted conversation from 9:54am who is instructed by Dubinsky to escort the Buk from Donetsk to Pervomayskyy and to secure it once it arrives (with “Gyurza” expected to join him there). The voice of “DNR terrorist” sounds similar to that of Kharchenko’s voice on the other intercepts, but because “DNR terrorist” does not speak much it remains difficult to tell if they are the same person.²⁴⁴

²⁴⁴ For a comparison of the voice of “DNR terrorist” and all the identified intercepts with Krot: <https://youtu.be/iPbN5roAvug>

Kharchenko continued his career as a separatist commander in 2014–2015, though he remained a member of the GRU DNR even after Dubinsky had returned to Russia. In the video interview from 11 April 2015, Kharchenko introduced himself as the head of the 2nd Department of the GRU DNR in the Republican Guard with the rank of lieutenant colonel, which suggests he had by then been promoted to the position previously held by Oleg Pulatov (who had left the Donbas earlier than month). Since he previously held the rank of major (according to Dubinsky) he may have also received promotion in rank. In the same video interview, Kharchenko also mentioned that by then half of the members in the department consisted of “volunteers” from Russia and other parts of the world.

Kharchenko’s whereabouts after 2015 are unknown. It is notable, however, that one anonymous self-described former separatist made several comments on Strelkov’s VK profile in early 2017 in which he claimed that Krot may have been killed after settling in Russia’s Rostov Oblast, and possibly due to knowledge about the downing of MH17. Whether true or not, the person does seem to have inside knowledge. For example, he stated that Krot was a famous criminal who sold off expensive stolen vehicles, and that it was Krot who guarded the Buk missile launcher for Khmury (Dubinsky) on the day of the downing.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ See the posts from Andrey Kamchatov from 16 February and 3 March 2017: https://vk.com/wall347260249_101323?reply=101447; https://vk.com/wall347260249_101323?reply=101451 (archived: <http://archive.fo/DpOjK>); https://vk.com/wall347260249_108598?reply=108975 (archived: <http://archive.fo/2U32H>)



Figure 31: A possible sighting of Kharchenko (standing with the fatigue cap) on an undated photograph found on the website of a Donetsk-based organization for special forces veterans. The person standing on the right can be recognized as another GRU DNR officer named Evgeny “Nemets” Ryadnov.²⁴⁶

4.3 Eduard “Ryazan” Gilazov and Oleg “Zmey” Sharpov

Further evidence that suggests Kharchenko was close to the launch site on 17 July is contained in another intercept that was released by the JIT as part of a call for witnesses on 30 March 2015. This concerns a conversation recorded at 9:32pm in which a man with the same recorded voice as Lyonya and Krot is informed by one of his subordinates, who sounds clearly panicked, that a member of the Buk crew showed up who lost his fellow crew members. In Ukraine’s documents submitted to the ICJ, it is mentioned that the recorded conversation was between people with the call signs “Krot” (Kharchenko) and “Ryazan”.²⁴⁷ Since the conversation took place more than five hours after MH17 was downed, the incident was probably related to the transportation of the Buk missile launcher and its crew from Snizhne towards the Russian border (according to the JIT, the removal of the Buk from Snizhne began late in the evening):

Krot: Yes, ***!

Ryazan: Hello, commander. Have you left already!?

Krot: Me? Yes. I went on my task, you went on yours.

²⁴⁶ For the uncropped version of the photo: <http://Ветераны-спецназа.рф/ветеранское-движение-2> (archived: <https://archive.fo/Bcfmq>)

²⁴⁷ Ukraine, *Case concerning: Ukraine v. Russian Federation*, p. 95 and Annex 395.

Ryazan: No, I got that part. Are you in that... in that area or not!?

Krot: No, I'm not in that area. I [am going] in another direction.

Ryazan: There [*inaudible*] a fighter²⁴⁸ got lost, from that, from the anti-aircraft launcher, he lost his fucking crew!

Krot: From what launcher?

Ryazan: Well, from the Buk.

Krot: From the Buk?

Ryazan: Yes.

Krot: Where the fuck is he now!?

Ryazan: Here, standing at the checkpoint.

Krot: Take him and drive his ass here! I'm gonna wait for him in Snizhne... near the gas station...

Ryazan: OK.²⁴⁹

It turns out that the person with the call sign “Ryazan” is one of Kharchenko’s subordinates, namely Eduard Gilazov, who was at the time the head of a reconnaissance company in the Krot Reconnaissance Battalion, and who has been presumed dead since his disappearance in July 2015.²⁵⁰ Gilazov is easy to identify due to his distinctive deep voice which can be heard on multiple video interviews that he has given. He has also appeared in videos from the frontline south of Snizhne, including footage recorded in the Marynivka–Stepanivka area from 16 July 2014 — one day before the downing of MH17.²⁵¹

²⁴⁸ In the original recording the Russian word *boets* is used, which can mean “fighter” or “soldier”.

²⁴⁹ <https://youtu.be/olQNPtXSnTo?t=332>

²⁵⁰ See the post by Dubinsky from 6 August 2015, available at: <http://archive.fo/eo4DO>

²⁵¹ One video featuring Gilazov was uploaded on 16 July 2014 on the YouTube channel of *Icorpus* with the added description that it was recorded in Marynivka: <https://youtu.be/wLI2tX1FrQk> The video appears to have been recorded by DNR separatist Genady Dubovoy, who uploaded a longer video from the same day on 21 July 2014 with the description “fighting in Stepanivka”. At 00:28 in the recording, the cameraman can be heard saying “waiting for battle, July 16”: <https://youtu.be/07zswouXsQg?t=28>



Figure 32. Eduard “Ryazan” Gilazov (with the scarf) at the frontline south of Snizhne on 16 July 2014.²⁵² The man standing can be recognized as another Russian DNR commander named Evgeny Skripnik, call sign “Prapor” — at the time a Snizhne-based battalion commander and close ally of Strelkov.

Eduard Maskhutovich Gilazov was born on 27 March 1984 in Yekaterinburg (then Sverdlovsk), Soviet Russia, and holds Russian citizenship. It appears he lived most of his adult life in the Russian city of Ryazan, which is also where his call sign derives from. He reportedly first traveled to eastern Ukraine to support the Russian-backed rebellion in the spring of 2014.²⁵³ By July 2014, Gilazov was the commander of the “Ryazan” Sabotage Reconnaissance Group (abbreviated as DRG “Ryazan”) within the 2nd Department of the GRU DNR.²⁵⁴ In an interview from 25 December 2014 for *Komsomolskaya Pravda* conducted in Novosibirsk, Russia (where he was undergoing eye surgery), Gilazov admitted that 70 percent of his troops were volunteers from outside of Ukraine in the early stage of the conflict.²⁵⁵ Other sources have also indicated that his unit mainly consisted of Russian

²⁵² For the uncropped version of the photo by Genady Dubovoy: https://vk.com/album362481393_232555552

²⁵³ http://deniskazansky.com.ua/razborki_v_dnr_kto_ubil_eduarda_gilazova/; <https://www.nsk.kp.ru/daily/26325/3206768/>

²⁵⁴ This is also stated in the Ukrainian court documents concerning criminal proceedings against Gilazov: Ukraine Court Records, Case 761/39263/17, Proceeding 1-ks/761/24963/2017, available at: <http://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/70274137>

²⁵⁵ <https://www.nsk.kp.ru/daily/26325/3206768/>

citizens, but also “volunteers” from other countries.²⁵⁶ For example, a Serbian sniper named Dejan Berich, who is visible in the 16 July footage on the taking of Marynivka, was also part of his unit.²⁵⁷

The retrieval of the Buk crew member suggests that both Kharchenko and Gilazov were involved in the removal of the Buk and its crew from Ukraine to Russia in the aftermath of the MH17 downing. Gilazov’s presence that evening on the frontline south of Snizhne as a subordinate to Kharchenko also suggests that he may have participated in the securing of the Buk when it was stationed at the launch site around the time of the downing, but without additional sources this cannot be stated with certainty.

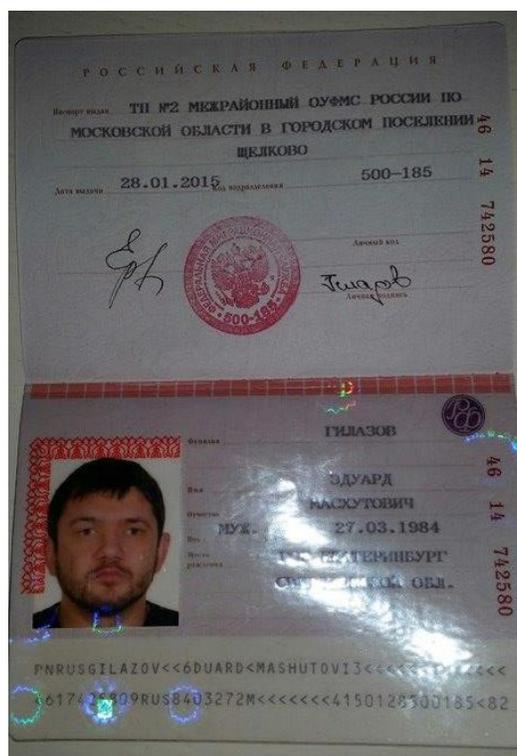


Figure 33. A photograph of Gilazov’s Russian passport, uploaded to VK.

Following the downing of MH17, Gilazov continued to lead the “Ryazan” Sabotage Reconnaissance Group at the frontlines, though according to Dubinsky this unit was no longer part of the GRU DNR from the end of August 2014 onwards.²⁵⁸ In early April 2015, he announced that the group was officially disbanded and that almost all of its members wanted to return home.²⁵⁹ However,

²⁵⁶ <http://ukraineatwar.blogspot.com/2014/09/russian-terrorist-group-ryazan.html>; <https://informnapalm.org/28076-gai-shnik-v-ryadah-nvf-ryazan/>

²⁵⁷ <https://www.ridus.ru/news/171496>

²⁵⁸ https://vk.com/wall-163104776_2936?reply=2966&thread=2960&w=wall-163104776_2936_r2966 (archived: <https://archive.fo/h5d5g>)

²⁵⁹ <https://uapress.info/ru/news/show/69924>

Gilazov disappeared in separatist-held territory on 27 July 2015 and has been presumed dead ever since, also by his friends and family who had set up a community page on VK in an attempt to solve the case.²⁶⁰ Around the same time as Gilazov's disappearance, a violent power struggle between the new DNR leadership under Aleksandr Zakharchenko and Dubinsky loyalists reportedly took place. It ended with Dubinsky loyalists being purged from the GRU DNR.²⁶¹ On 28 July 2016, the managers of the community page for Gilazov officially accused Strelkov and Dubinsky of having ordered the murder of Gilazov.²⁶² Strelkov reacted to the accusations with cynicism by stating "Yes, and I also killed Kennedy".²⁶³ Dubinsky also denied any involvement in the disappearance, stating that he had good contact with Gilazov who regularly visited him in Russia. He further claimed that he had last spoken with Gilazov over the phone on 21 or 22 July, and was informed a few days later that Gilazov had been kidnapped either on the outskirts of Makiivka or near a border crossing.²⁶⁴

Another person whose identity was hitherto unknown is the person with first name Oleg and the call sign "Zmey" that Kharchenko talks to on the intercept from 1:09pm. He can possibly be identified as Oleg Anatolevich Sharpov (b. 30 May 1972), a separatist who reportedly died on 3 November 2014 from his war wounds (sustained that same autumn).²⁶⁵ Like Kharchenko, Sharpov's hometown was Kostyantynivka. When his death was announced in the pro-DNR newspaper *Makeevskiy Rabochiy*, Sharpov was described as a platoon commander in a reconnaissance company who joined up with the separatists at the start of the conflict. The article also cites a separatist commander with the call sign "Nemets" (the German) who describes Sharpov as his beloved former colleague.²⁶⁶ Nemets is the call sign of a former GRU DNR officer named Evgeny Ryadnov who is also from Kostyantynivka (for his photo, see figure 31), and who, according to Dubinsky, became a member of the GRU DNR's "Ryazan" Group in June 2014.²⁶⁷ This might indicate that Sharpov was possibly a subordinate of Gilazov in the summer of 2014. Another GRU DNR officer from Kostyantynivka who was close to Sharpov was special forces commander Andrey Tenkov, call sign "Khanter" (Hunter), as evidenced by a memorial photo of Sharpov seen inside his apartment during a video

²⁶⁰ https://vk.com/drg_ryazan (archived: <https://archive.fo/jcV3d>)

²⁶¹ Details about the purges and the power struggle are contained in leaked documents that have been analysed by InformNapalm: <http://archive.fo/ndLnd> Dubinsky also mentioned the purges in a post on VK from 7 June 2018: https://vk.com/wall-163104776_1383?reply=1388 (archived: <https://archive.fo/O1bzt>)

²⁶² https://vk.com/wall-100777204_3901 (archived: <https://archive.fo/IhCKw>)

²⁶³ http://deniskazansky.com.ua/razborki_v_dnr_kto_ubil_eduarda_gilazova/

²⁶⁴ https://vk.com/wall-100777204_3901?reply=3925 (archived: <https://archive.fo/75OQj>)

²⁶⁵ <https://ok.ru/knigapamyas2108110004436/topic/68922771723732> (archived: <http://archive.fo/O1n3j>)

²⁶⁶ https://vk.com/wall-46558227_4967 (archived: <https://archive.fo/L5SW2>)

²⁶⁷ See the post by Dubinsky from 6 June 2018: https://vk.com/wall-163104776_1383?reply=1388&cw=wall-163104776_1383_r1388 (archived: <http://archive.fo/IV1Wl>) For more information about Ryadnov: <https://myrotvoretz.center/criminal/ryadnov-evgenij-anatolevich/>

interview.²⁶⁸ Sharpov's affiliation with the GRU DNR is further apparent from the fact that he was commemorated on the VK community page for the GRU DNR (where Dubinsky posts).²⁶⁹



Figure 34. A photo of Oleg “Zmey” Sharpov.

Given that Kharchenko was a battalion commander, this makes it plausible that Kharchenko was Sharpov's acting commander in July 2014, and that it was Sharpov whom is heard on the intercepted phone call receiving directions from Kharchenko regarding the route towards the launch site. Due to his early death, however, his involvement might remain unexplained.

4.4 Dubinsky, Strelkov, “Botsman”, and the aftermath of the downing

Sergey Dubinsky features in several more intercepts that were recorded after the downing of MH17. One concerns a conversation with a person with the call sign “Botsman” (Boatswain) that was uploaded by the SBU to YouTube on 18 July. The original file is without a timestamp.²⁷⁰ Based on

²⁶⁸ <https://youtu.be/ybKRBs2oD-k?t=1466>; <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/tenkov-andrej-viktorovich/>

²⁶⁹ https://vk.com/wall-163104776_2776 (archived: <http://archive.fo/R76B1>)

²⁷⁰ In the English version of the intercept, the time of the call is given as 9:08am and Dubinsky is described as in Donetsk — both of which are clearly incorrect statements. In a previous Bellingcat article it was explained that the editors had carelessly copied the top

the content of the conversation, however, it is clear that it was recorded shortly after the MH17 downing, as Dubinsky mentions that a Buk missile launcher had arrived in the morning and that his forces had just struck an aircraft. Since he had not yet been informed that the downed aircraft was a passenger plane — Flight MH17 — we can estimate that the conversation took place between 4:20 and 5:00pm:

Khmury: Yes Botsman, I'm listening to you.

Botsman: Hello big brother. How are you?

Khmury: Greetings. Well, not that great. We are in Marynivka, that's why it's not that great... how should I tell you... we are holding on.

Botsman: What is it?

Khmury: What do you think? Grads are hitting all the time, only now there is a lull. We also just struck an aircraft — a Sushka. We have a Buk-M, we received it. So... Well, they are trying to break out from [the village of] Zelenopillya, and they have only one passage — via me, see? Yesterday two Sushkas were shot down, today the second. Thank god, at least the Buk-M arrived this morning. Things became easier. But in general, of course, [the situation is] difficult.

Botsman: Well what can I say? If you need anything, call me, and I'll come at once.

Khmury: No, thanks, thank you, brother. I'm going here in about two hours, it seems that there is a lull. I'll go to Donetsk in two hours, because there is another delivery for me there — three Gvozdikas [Soviet self-propelled howitzers]. I'll bring the Gvozdikas here because it's really fucking hard for us to hold on.

Botsman: Listen, can't they be shelled with Grads?

Khmury: The thing is, firstly, we have Grads, but no fucking spotter. And secondly, we are now waiting, as Russia should now fuck up [i.e. strike] their positions from the other side [of the Russia-Ukraine border].²⁷¹

Dubinsky's comment that one/two Sukhoi aircraft got downed the day before is consistent with the fact that one Ukrainian Su-25 jet was hit and another shot down over the frontlines south of Snizhne on 16 July (see chapter 1.3 of this report). His comment about cross-border shelling by Russia also matches with the evidence that showed such attacks were a frequent occurrence in the summer of 2014 (as explained in the previous chapter).

The identity of the man behind the call sign Botsman, which is very popular among separatists, has not been revealed. The SBU initially described Botsman as a Russian GRU officer whose identity they had not yet established, but this may have been an early assumption on their behalf. There is anyway little doubt that Botsman was stationed in separatist-held territory at the time of the call since the SBU video shows that Botsman is calling Dubinsky with a Ukrainian phone number, and

part of the call between Khmury and Buryat (part of the same video file) for this call, thereby only replacing "Buryatik" with "Botsman": <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/02/the-role-of-sergey-dubinsky-in-the-downing-of-mh17/>

²⁷¹ <https://youtu.be/YgdqdklrqDA?t=259>

also because Botsman can be heard offering Dubinsky to join him at the frontline south of Snizhne (Marynivka).

There are two clues that suggest that Botsman was a senior officer in the Bezler Group. The first is contained in an intercepted phone call between Bezler and Botsman that was uploaded to YouTube on 10 July 2014 with the added description that it was recorded one day prior. Although the recording was uploaded by an anonymous YouTube user, it has all the characteristics of an intercept from the SBU, which was by then already regularly uploading such files to its YouTube channel.²⁷² In the recording, Botsman's voice sounds similar to the Botsman from the conversation with Dubinsky. Bezler's voice on record also sounds the same as on the other intercepts, which suggests that the recording is authentic. Both men can be heard discussing whether they should or should not carry out an attack on a specific Ukrainian checkpoint, with Botsman referring to Bezler as his commander.²⁷³

The second clue was found by searching for Botsman's phone number in the database on the official web-portal of the judiciary of Ukraine. This brought up the case of Volodymyr Rybak, a member of Horlivka's city council who was found murdered after being abducted by a DNR militia in Horlivka on 17 April 2014 after he tried to remove a DNR flag (footage of the arrest can be found on YouTube).²⁷⁴ The public court record is censored, which makes it difficult to establish how Botsman could have been involved. Nevertheless, a few days after the murder, the SBU accused Bezler of organizing the kidnapping and released their first intercepts with Bezler to the public in an attempt to prove his guilty.²⁷⁵ Botsman's alleged involvement suggests that he was one of Bezler's close associates. His phone number is also found in a court document from 4 July 2014 in which he is accused of having participated in the creation of a terrorist organization, which is another indication that the phone number is associated with a senior officer within the ranks of the DNR.²⁷⁶

It turns out that Bezler's deputy in the summer of 2014 was known by the call sign Botsman. In early writings by Strelkov, Botsman was described as a veteran of the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya who led the defense of Horlivka in the summer of 2014. Before then, he had participated in the Battle of Slovyansk, where he lost an eye.²⁷⁷ This Botsman reportedly died of pneumonia in Russia on 6 January 2016, after which some of his former colleagues announced that his name was Sergey Sergeevich Povalyaev (b. 10 November 1976). Povalyaev was born in Kaliningrad, and

²⁷² <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCRxyjhmvBewJIRb2yku5EuQ/videos?view=0&sort=da&flow=grid>

²⁷³ <https://youtu.be/8lKiOgRxEQ>

²⁷⁴ Ukraine Court Records, Case 757/30660/17-k, available at: <http://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/67131669> For the footage: https://youtu.be/_6wyOipI9gs

²⁷⁵ <https://youtu.be/sA8Co1SgIgs>; <http://web.archive.org/web/20160922164539/https://www.npu.gov.ua/uk/publish/article/1033123>

²⁷⁶ Ukraine Court Records, Case 668/9490/14-k, Proceeding 1-ks/668/3093/14, available at: <http://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/48481584>

²⁷⁷ See the posts by Strelkov on Antikvariat from 11 November 2014 and 11 January 2016: <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/208168-igorstrelkovru-predlozheniya-po-sajtu-i-komentarii-k-statya/page-41#entry2320353> and <https://forum-antikvariat.ru/index.php/topic/219507-zapad-vs-vostok-territorii-ukraina-8/page-881#entry2753651>

before the conflict he had also been living in Moscow Region.²⁷⁸ One former colleague described him as a GRU special forces officer whose career record included service in North Ossetia, Chechnya (twice), and Africa. Since his identity became known, Povalyaev has been spotted in a video from 30 October 2014 in which he is awarded a medal by Strelkov during an award ceremony for separatists in Moscow. One of the medals worn by Povalyaev during this ceremony has been identified as a Russian medal for service during the 12 June 1999 stand-off at Pristina airport during the Kosovo War.²⁷⁹ Based on the available sources, Sergey “Botsman” Povalyaev is most likely the same Botsman as the one who called up Dubinsky shortly after the downing of MH17. Nevertheless, without a comparison of Povalyaev’s voice this cannot be fully confirmed based on open sources alone.



Figure 35. The moment that Sergey “Botsman” Povalyaev is awarded a medal by Igor Strelkov on 30 October 2014.

The intercepted call between Dubinsky and Botsman contains important information about the downing of MH17. One important detail is that Dubinsky tells Botsman that they are stationed in Marynivka, a village on the frontline south of Snizhne less than ten kilometers away from the launch site near Pervomayskyy. During the call, Dubinsky also sounds way more stressed compared to the other recordings from the morning of 17 July when he was reportedly still in Donetsk (where there

²⁷⁸ A business in Povalyaev’s name in Korolyov was announced as ceased due to his death: <https://sbis.ru/contragents/501808122654> Povalyaev’s name also comes up in the Nomer.org database as living in Korolyov, Moscow Oblast in 2002: http://nomer.center/mosgibdd/lastName_ПОВАЛЯЕВ_firstname_СЕРГЕЙ_pageNUMBER_7.html His birthplace Kaliningrad was confirmed in a leaked Moscow Oblast database. Kaliningrad is also set as the hometown on the VK of his brother, Mikhail, who also received an award from Strelkov during the same award ceremony for separatist activities in eastern Ukraine.

²⁷⁹ <https://donetsksite.wordpress.com/2016/01/11/botsman-gruz200/> For the video: <https://youtu.be/xfQmlG9-3Xk?t=210>

was no fighting).²⁸⁰ Dubinsky's presence at the frontline also suggests that, unless Dubinsky drove to Marynivka right after witnessing the missile launch, he himself was not physically present at the launch location near Pervomaysky when the fatal attack occurred.

Another important detail in the call is that Dubinsky seems convinced that they had just downed a Sukhoi aircraft rather than a passenger plane. Such information also reached other rebel groups stationed in the region, possibly after the GRU DNR had shared it with their colleagues. This is apparent from the fact that members of the Oplot Battalion who arrived at the crash site near Hrabove shortly after the downing also believed that a Sukhoi jet had been downed.²⁸¹ A video of their arrival was recorded by an Oplot commander with the call sign "Zhuk" (Beagle), who can be identified as Vladimir Ustyantsev.²⁸² Some scenes of this footage were shown by the *BBC* on 21 July 2014, and other parts of the recording were published by both the *BBC* and *Australia News Corp* on the first anniversary of the downing.²⁸³ The original video lasts for 17 minutes and has never been released to the public, but a full transcript is available online. It reveals that even after the men realized that a civilian aircraft had crashed, they were still convinced that their side had also downed a Ukrainian Sukhoi jet, and as such continued a search for pilots. One commander can be heard saying: "they say the Sukhoi [fighter jet] downed the civilian aircraft and ours brought down the fighter [jet]". Later, another militant at the crash site says: "the fighter jet brought down this one, and our people brought down the fighter [jet]. They decided to do it this way, to look like we have brought down the [civilian] aircraft".²⁸⁴

The fact that Dubinsky believed that his side had downed a Sukhoi jet might indicate that the Buk crew most likely made an incorrect assessment of their own when they targeted MH17. When Valery Stelmakh transferred the spotting message to Igor Bezler, he mentioned that an unidentified aircraft — "a birdie" — was flying in the direction of Horlivka, and added that he was unsure what type of aircraft it was because it was not visible due to cloud cover. Considering that thereafter MH17 flew in the direction of the frontline south of Snizhne, the Buk crew was probably mistaken in thinking that this was a Sukhoi ground-attack aircraft, which could also target them, and neglected to consider the possibility that they were about to shoot down a passenger plane. Without further evidence, however, the exact decision-making process that led to the downing of MH17 remains unclear.

²⁸⁰ See the description that came with the intercept: <https://youtu.be/YgdqdklrqDA?t=91>

²⁸¹ For a full reconstruction of the arrival of separatists at the crash site, see the article by citizen journalist Arnold Greidanus from 14 September 2016: <http://www.arnoldg.xyz/reconstructing-arrival-of-the-separatists/>

²⁸² <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-28396638/mh17-air-crash-fears-crash-site-evidence-could-be-lost> One day after the downing, Ustyantsev posted a photo of himself wearing a shirt with Oplot written on it; https://vk.com/wall230266182_92 For more information about Ustyantsev: <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/ustyancev-vladimir-viktorovich/>

²⁸³ <https://www.news.com.au/travel/travel-updates/incidents/never-before-seen-footage-reveals-russian-backed-rebels-arriving-at-the-wreckage-of-mh17/news-story/c5f6bc5e9629a22d17fe2680bfbd61a5>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-33549848/mh17-anniversary-aftermath-of-crash-filmed-by-rebels>

²⁸⁴ For a copy: <https://www.pressreader.com/australia/herald-sun/20150717/281509339869326>

Dubinsky also features in an intercepted conversation that was recorded at 7:44am on 18 July, which is right after his conversation with Kharchenko from 7:41am (see chapter 4.2) in which he was told that the Buk has arrived in Russia. In the recording from 7:44am, Dubinsky can be heard informing a superior that the Buk has arrived in Russia. The superior can be recognized as Igor Strelkov, who has the exact same recorded voice as on all of the previous SBU recordings:

Khmury: I have just returned in whatsit... everything was going well, there... eight different persons have called him, fuck! He handed over the vehicle, [but] eight fucking people called him, fucking shit! And that's why he switched off his fucking phone! And he wasn't taking it back, fucking shit!

Strelkov: Err... so, couldn't you [then] report to me what happened?

Khmury: Like I had a fucking thing to report! While I...

Strelkov: Where...? Where...? Where is the vehicle now?

Khmury: The vehicle has been in Russia for a long time! He has fucking handed it over at once, to those fucking people who were meeting...

Strelkov: To whom?²⁸⁵

The conversation indicates that Strelkov knew about the removal of the Buk missile launcher from separatist-held territory in the aftermath of the disaster. This is, of course, not surprising considering the hierarchy of the DNR at the time. Since Strelkov was the commander of the DNR forces, and also particularly close to his subordinate Dubinsky, he most likely also knew about the arrival of the Buk missile launcher the day before. There is also good chance that Strelkov had more involvement in the Buk operation that led to the downing of MH17 than can be determined from open sources alone, as he was at the frontline south of Snizhne on 16 July with Boroday, Pulatov and a Strela-10 missile launcher, and he oversaw other special GRU DNR operations led by Kharchenko in the same area during the same period.

²⁸⁵ <https://youtu.be/Sf6gJ8NDhYA?t=693>

Conclusion

Having established the identities of most of the individuals heard or mentioned on the intercepted conversations released by the SBU and the JIT, this research has revealed that on the side of the separatists it was mainly the GRU DNR and the Bezler Group which can be linked to the downing of MH17, while the involvement of other separatist groups such as the Vostok Brigade was largely limited to facilitating the transport of the missile launcher as it drove through the separatist-held areas of eastern Ukraine.

The GRU DNR led by Sergey Dubinsky was chiefly responsible for the procurement of the Buk missile launcher that was used to shoot down MH17. Furthermore, the GRU DNR was also found to be responsible for guarding the Buk at the launch site south of Snizhne around the time when the missile attack occurred, a task which was carried out by the agency's 2nd Department. A key role in this effort appears to have been played by special forces officer Leonid Kharchenko, the commander of a reconnaissance battalion, though the intercepts also indicate involvement of other GRU DNR figures, namely Oleg Pulatov, the head of the 2nd Department; Eduard Gilazov, the commander of a reconnaissance company; and platoon commander Oleg Sharpov. The available evidence indicates that the Bezler Group was the first to spot and misidentify MH17 as a potential target. This information was first reported by Valery Stelmakh to his commander, Igor Bezler, shortly before the downing. It remains unclear if it was also members of the GRU DNR who channelled this message to the Buk crew, which, according to the intercepts, consisted came from Russia. The intercepted conversations also indicate that Dubinsky's group oversaw the removal of the missile launcher back to Russia in the aftermath of the downing in an attempt to hide all evidence of its deployment, something which was seemingly approved by the DNR's most senior commander — Igor Strelkov.

This investigation has limited itself to open sources, with digital sources providing a wealth amount of information that has allowed positive identifications. By trawling through social networks and forums, reading leaked messages, utilizing newly-developed facial recognition tools, finding obscure interviews of separatist soldiers, and closely listening to published telephone conversations, it has been possible to establish the hierarchy and organization of the involved DNR forces in the summer of 2014. While this information gleaned from digital sources greatly informs our understanding of the persons of interest around the downing of MH17, there is more to discover and understand, as digital sources can only shed light on what can be found online.

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