

# **UKRAINE/ ODESSA: Kidnapping plot targeting MP Goncharenko uncovered**

***Human Rights Without Frontiers* had interviewed him in Odessa in August 2016**

***Separatists intending to kidnap and mutilate Goncharenko detained in Odessa***

Interfax Ukraine (24.02.2014) – <http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/405349.html> – Law enforcement officers of Odesa region prevented the abduction to inflict grievous bodily harm to deputy head of the Petro Poroshenko Bloc parliamentary faction Oleksiy Goncharenko and detained the organizers and perpetrators of this crime.

Odesa region prosecutor Oleg Zhuchenko and head of the SBU in the Odesa region Sergiy Batrakov said at an emergency press briefing in Odesa on Thursday that security forces have found a criminal group which was engaged in the manufacture and distribution of campaign materials of separatist slant.

“Now we are conducting six searches in Odesa. All members of this group have been identified,” Batrakov said, adding that during the searches pamphlets of anti-Ukrainian content were seized aimed at promoting ethnic hatred.

Zhuchenko said that law enforcers have established and documented “involvement of this group to the fact of infringement on life and health of the people’s deputy Oleksiy Goncharenko.”

Batracov said that the kidnapping of the people's deputy was planned with the aim of inflicting bodily harm, not to kill him.

According to Zhuchenko, criminals who organized and tried to carry out the kidnapping of Goncharenko, intended to cause him serious bodily injury, in particular, to blind him on February 23 because they thought such an act is symbolic on this date.

"The father of Kushnariov [who passed away on May 2, 2014 in Odesa] is a deputy of Lymansky Regional Council of Odesa region, and this is he, who is not only the paymaster of the MP's abduction, but he, with two his accomplices went to the scene and had to cause serious bodily injuries to the people's deputy, namely to apply acid to disfigure his face, blind him and break his kneecaps," the prosecutor of Odesa region said.

According to Batracov, lawbreakers were able to implement this kidnapping, but they were detained during their arrival at the crime scene. "During the arrest evidence were seized, namely an acid bottle and a hammer. They personally came to the place designated for the victim's capture wearing balaclavas, so that it would be impossible to identify them," Batracov said.

### ***Who may be behind the abduction plan?***

Odessablog (24.02.2017) – <https://odessablog.wordpress.com/> – Firstly it is necessary to state that Mr Goncharenko is alive and well. His abduction being part of a wider SBU operation that has been on-going for several months.

In short, there was indeed a plot to abduct Mr Goncharenko whereupon he was to be tortured, have his kneecaps shattered and also have his eyesight damaged (or lost). Death was not the desired outcome.

Behind this plot was/is a local politician from Odessa, a Deputy of the Liman District Council, Alexander Krushnarev.

Mr Krushnarev is in fact head of the Opposition Block faction of the Liman Council and the father of the late Gennady Krushnarev who died in the tragic fire of 2nd May in Odessa. Gennady Krushnarev was a member of the pro-Kremlin "Odessa Squad" in 2014 when he died.

It may well be that Mr Krushnarev blames Mr Goncharenko for Odessa rejecting the Novorossiia calling, and perhaps by extension his son's death.

Though generally not acknowledged, it is undoubtedly true that Mr Goncharenko and "his" politically aligned people played a significant role in defeating an attempt by former-Governor (and Opposition Block MP) Mykola Skoryk to follow the playbook of the "Republics" (as detailed in the Glazyev tapes) within the Oblast Rada.

Indeed Odessa became one of the first Oblast's to name Russia an aggressor in a Resolution (unlike City Hall which was among the last) again in no small part due to the efforts of Mr Goncharenko and "his people" then within the Oblast Rada.

Mr Goncharenko also swiftly arrived at the tragic fire of 2nd May together with some of his Dumskaya media outlet, but no active part in events did he play (the blog was also present and saw him there).

Thus the usual business interests behind so many similar kidnapping plots are not present. It would appear to be a mix of personal, political and ideological drivers behind the plotting of Mr Krushnarev. Prima facie – revenge for many perceived injuries.

Yet there is more to this plot than the abduction of Alexie Goncharenko.

The SBU also intercepted 2.5 tonnes of printed material bearing an uncanny resemblance to an existing newspaper produced by one of the parliamentary parties – but with fake

news packed in among genuine articles and opinion from the aforementioned party newspaper.

In short, fake news circulated by a fake newspaper. A natural progression perhaps?

Also seized by the SBU where numerous booklets and leaflets of an anti-Semitic, and anti-Ukrainian (presumably anti-nationalist) nature judging by the titles of the seized material – “The Servants of Evil – Ukrainian Nationalism” and the “Odessa Khatyn Bells” etc.

Clearly the intention was to attempt to raise the temperature within and/or the social discontent of society in Odessa. How successful it would have been will now not be known – although it is extremely unlikely to have provoked anything remotely powerful enough to turn Odessa from Ukraine, or alternatively to embrace The Kremlin as an alternative or friendly entity – thus perhaps it’s intent was to politically return the City and the Oblast to the Opposition Block fold.

What is unclear is whether the two individuals known to have been involved in, and tasked with the Goncharenko abduction (and torture that was to follow) are the same two individuals that are responsible with Mr Krushnarev in the production and distribution of a fraudulent newspaper peddling fake news and material that will surely fall foul of Ukrainian legislation relating to national security, terrorism, incitement etc.

(One of the unnamed detained with Mr Krushnarev is a Russian citizen, but a reader perhaps should not give that too much weight at this stage as there are a large number of Russian citizens resident in Odessa. More information upon both unnamed also arrested is required.)

Aside from Mr Krushmarev and the two unnamed co-conspirators and/or partners in crime, is anybody else involved?

Obvious questions relate to the where and who created the

content, printed and published the material seized?

Who arranged a distribution network?

Was Mr Krushnarev the only financier, or was he a part financier of these deeds?

Who else within the Opposition Block was aware of the plot – if anybody.?

(Little happens within the Opposition Block of Odessa without the knowledge and approval (official or tacit) of Mykola Skoryk – who himself has no love for Mr Goncharenko since he officially requested Mr Skoryk be investigated for his treasonous acts as Governor.)

Would Mr Skoryk, if he was aware, entertain the abduction plot without informing those that control him – Sergei Liovochkin and Dmitry Firtash. It seems unlikely (though not impossible) that Mr Liovochkin would entertain such an idea (even if Mr Firtash might and Mr Skoryk would).

Nevertheless, this does not seem to be an entirely “local production”. There is more to this incident – starting with how the seized material came to exit, from its writing to publication.

***Reminder: Oleksii Goncharenko, a young Ukrainian MP from Odessa looks westwards...***

***HRWF held an interview with Oleksii Goncharenko in August in Odessa. Topics discussed included his opinion on:***

- ***The fight against corruption***
- ***Tax decentralization as a tool against corruption***
- ***Reforming the police force as an anti-corruption initiative***
- ***The 2nd May 2014 tragedy in Odessa***
- ***Gay pride in Odessa***
- ***Bringing Odessa closer to the EU***

## ▪ *Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*

**HRWF:** Mr Goncharenko, you were the chairman of the Odessa oblast administration council. You are now a member of the Ukrainian Parliament and of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. What sort of reforms do you prioritize in your political agenda?

**Goncharenko:** One of my priorities is to fight against corruption; a necessity for the current and future development of the country, as well as for gaining financial aid from the European Union and international institutions. A whole range of laws have already been adopted by our parliament to achieve this objective and a number of institutions are involved in this fight at the national level, such as: the SBU, the Police, and the NABU. Though, measures can also be taken at the local level and it is quite often easier to be more effective here than at the national level where MPs enjoy parliamentary immunity.

Let me tell you an anecdote that will explain some of my political choices. Some years ago, I went to Texas for an exchange program and I found that quite a number of leading figures in that state are elected: the judges of first instance courts, the mayor, the police chief, even the public library head, the director of the control department of the coal mines, and so on. Due to these elections the corruption started to dramatically decrease in that state, which in the past was known to be very corrupt. Why such success? Because the local civil society could check the honesty, the dedication, the efficiency and the achievements of these public figures more easily than at the national level and decide whether to support them or not through a regular election process. I am in favor of this sort of direct democracy in Ukraine, it could sanction or reward representatives and those in charge of the daily well-being on the local level. It would be a concrete measure against inefficiency and corruption. Elections for positions similar

to the ones in Texas, or other US states, and freedom of investigation for the local media is key to stable and sustainable development. This should be introduced in Ukraine.

Tax decentralization is another tool to fight against corruption.

**HRWF: How can tax decentralization impact corruption?**

**Goncharenko:** I am in favor of the decentralization of a number of national powers, including the tax decentralization that has been put in place. In the case of Odessa, this has generated a supplementary income of 1.2 billion Hry (about 50 million EUR) and has therefore provided more possibilities of investment in public infrastructures. This has contributed to a substantial decrease in corruption in Odessa for local deputies and counselors can be easily scrutinized via the election process; being either sanctioned or rewarded for their success with an elected position.

**HRWF: Could decentralization of national powers go so far as federalism, a controversial issue in Ukraine?**

**Goncharenko:** No, not so far. Looking westwards again, I would take the EU model of subsidiarity to draw the line between decentralization and federalization. What can be best done at the national level, such as security or foreign policy, must remain in the hands of the legislative and executive powers in Kyiv but what can be done more efficiently at the local level must be removed from the national level. More taxation power transfers to local entities would be welcome.

**HRWF: In an effort to fight corruption, one strategy has been to sort-of purge the police force. Opinions are divided about the success of this operation. What is yours?**

**Goncharenko:** The traffic police had a bad reputation of bribing drivers. The reshuffling of the personnel was based on the competences of the candidates – whether new or in place –

and not on other dubious criteria. The police forces are now better paid,—which should discourage the bribing temptation. However the newcomers have lacked sufficient training because the reform was implemented in a hurry as an emergency. Before, surveys showed that only 5-6% of the local population trusted the police. Now, the percentage of satisfaction is about 50%.

However, investigative police remain a problem. Experienced officials have left or were dismissed and the younger ones are less efficient. Their salaries are now lower than that of traffic police, which makes them unhappy. A number of adjustments are urgently needed.

**HRWF: On 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2014 more than 40 people died in a clash between pro-unity and pro-federalism demonstrators in Odessa. Two years later, nobody has yet been indicted. Why?**

**Goncharenko:** On that tragic day I was in the centre of the city where the first pro-unity demonstrators were killed by pro-federalism protesters in the afternoon. I was also at the Trade Union building in the evening when around 40 pro-federalism activists died in a huge fire. I was the first to go inside and try to save people. I was also at the so-called Jewish hospital where the victims had been transported. Though, I had to wait until a few weeks ago to be heard for the first time by the police. However, the questioning was very thorough and very detailed – to my surprise. The interrogator was well informed about the sequence of events and his questions were rightly targeted.

**HRWF: Isn't it too late to identify and prosecute those that are responsible for the tragedy? We know some decision makers and puppeteers have long since fled Ukraine to a neighboring country. Considering the Ukrainian justice system, others that currently remain will be able to easily flee by the time their arrest is sanctioned – if that ever comes to pass. Impunity is not acceptable for the population.**



**Goncharenko:** WWII criminals have been arrested and tried even decades after the war. Those that have been, and subsequently will be formally identified as suspects, must be prosecuted; whoever they are and whatever the delay. One must also remember that Ukraine has adopted a law providing for trial “in *absentia*”, which will be a useful tool. European and international warrants are other tools that will be used as well. It will be interesting to see who will be the first absent defendant and for what offences”.

**HRWF:** Last year a gay pride in Odessa was forbidden by a court decision for security reasons. Another one is planned to take place in a few days[i]. Right Sector nationalists and all local Churches are opposed to it. Representatives of the Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate, Kyiv Patriarchate – two groups who are usually at loggerheads with one another – the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Greek Catholic Church and the Church of Evangelical Christians held a joint press conference and sent a joint appeal to the mayor and the governor to prevent the march.

**Goncharenko:** Ordinary people are not really interested in those issues. They are neither for or against. It is mainly a battlefield for Churches and international media. In Kyiv, the gay pride event could take place this year – this is progress.

**HRWF:** Do you support other projects to bring Odessa closer to the EU?

**Goncharenko:** Yes, the four-lane motorway that could connect our city to Romania, and the cycling track that would follow the same itinerary to join the trans-European cycling track that starts in Brussels. We are in contact with a partner organization working on this in Brussels.

**HRWF:** What is your position on the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea by Putin?

**Goncharenko:** The war in Eastern Ukraine, with the support of

Russia, is becoming a frozen conflict as in Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria and South Ossetia. Minsk is not a solution. There must be a controlled disarmament on both sides under international supervision, but Moscow does not want this.

Concerning Crimea, you must know that I am a member of the Committee of the interfactional group on Crimea at the Ukrainian Parliament. Putin will not allow Crimea to return to Ukraine and neither will his successor because it would be political suicide. It will only happen with the collapse of the Russian Federation, and that will happen sooner than one might think.

*Oleksii Goncharenko is a member of the Petro Poroshenko Bloc and a deputy of the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament). He has been a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe since 26<sup>th</sup> January 2015. He is a full member of the Sub-Committee on Public Health and a substitute in the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development.*

[i] More than 50 local community members and activists showed up for the first-ever LGBTQ Pride march in Odessa on 14 August. The process to authorize such an event, however, was not easy. The day before the event, local authorities in Odessa banned the event on the grounds that there was a high probability of conflict; far-right activists were also scheduled to gather at the same time and place. Organizers of the Pride march told NBC OUT that this is a popular tactic used to cancel public events in the city. However, the 2nd May 2014 tragedy does also partly explain the official decision. Authorities had prohibited all outdoor events in Odessa during the period that the Pride march was supposed to take place; and as a result, a number of hotels, including the popular Reikartz Hotel Group, refused to provide space for LGBTQ events.

However, organizers eventually managed to convince authorities

to allow the Pride march, and the police agreed to protect the safety of those who participated. As a result, an area near the historic Potemkin Stairs was cordoned off by a few hundred police officers and special forces.

For more details, pictures and video, see <http://nbcnews.to/2c3gfYG>