

Role of Far-Right Nationalists in Ukraine Protests

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The first victim of the current conflict in Ukraine was truth. There has been a flood of unconfirmed, selective, distorted or even incorrect information concerning various aspects of both the protests in Ukraine and of Ukrainian politics in general by both pro-government and pro-opposition media in Ukraine.

The key role of the radical right in turning the conflict from a peaceful protest into an increasingly violent one and putting Ukraine on the brink of a civil war and a breakup has been ignored, downplayed or often misrepresented by the media, politicians and experts in Ukraine and, to a lesser extent, in the West.

Meanwhile, in Russia, much more prevalent attention to the far right includes apparent attempts to associate the mass protests with radical nationalist and neo-Nazi elements and their historical predecessors from the Stepan Bandera faction of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, or OUN.

The protests started at the end of November against the decision by President Viktor Yanukovich to abandon the association and free trade agreement with the European Union. Then, the brutal dispersal of largely peaceful pro-EU sit-ins by special police units sparked more protests. But the radical right played key roles in seizing the Kiev city administration building and in attempts to storm the presidential administration on Dec. 1 and the Ukrainian parliament on Jan. 19.

Much of the Ukrainian media and main opposition leaders initially claimed that the violent attacks on the presidential administration and the parliament were led by agents provocateurs working for the Ukrainian government or Russia. They cited a Russian-language chant by some of the attackers as key evidence for these claims, even though it was used by extremist fans of Ukrainian football teams, such as Dynamo Kiev.

In contrast, the media ignored an admission on the Vkontakte page of Right Sector that their members were the ones who shouted this chant. While the participation of some provocateurs that infiltrated into the leadership and membership of far-right organizations is likely, it is a big stretch to claim that the provocateurs controlled the far right and led these violent attacks.

Groups of football extremists and radical nationalist and neo-Nazi organizations, such as Trident, Patriot of Ukraine, White Hammer and UNA-UNSO, formed Right Sector and participated in the major violent attacks in Kiev and in storming regional administrations. Although the main far-right party, Svoboda, publicly distanced itself from the attacks on the presidential administration and the parliament, there is evidence of the involvement of activists from Svoboda and associated organizations in these attacks.

These far-right groups regard themselves to various extents as heirs of the OUN or glorify the OUN. Some of them are responsible for using neo-Nazi symbols, such as the Celtic cross and 14/88 sign, whose numbers reference a White supremacist statement and "Heil Hitler."

However OUN symbols and statements, such as the red and black flag, the choreographed greeting "Glory to Ukraine — Glory to Heroes," "Glory to the Nation," "Death to Enemies," and "Ukraine Above All," have been much more widely used by the far-right during violent actions. Svoboda held a torch-lit rally in honor of Bandera's birthday on Jan. 1 in front of the Kiev city administration that it occupies.

Many leading media outlets, nationalist politicians and historians in Ukraine present Bandera and his faction of the OUN as national heroes who fought for an independent Ukraine against both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. They deny, justify or even falsify the collaboration of the OUN with Nazi Germany in the beginning and the end of World War II and involvement of the OUN and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in the mass murders of Jews, Poles, Russians and Ukrainians. For instance, some 1,500 Jewish, Ukrainian, and Polish victims of Nazi mass executions, whose remains were exhumed recently in Volodymyr-Volynskyi, were misrepresented as victims of the Soviet NKVD, the predecessor to the KGB.

The same misrepresentation occurs for local police participation in these executions, who were controlled by the OUN, and most of whom joined the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. My study shows that at least 63 percent of top OUN and Ukrainian Insurgent Army leaders in Ukraine served during the Nazi occupation in the police, militias, local administrations, the Nachtigall

and Roland Battalions, the SS Galicia Division, Bergbauern-Hilfe or otherwise collaborated with intelligence and security agencies of Nazi Germany, primarily at the beginning and the end of the war.

But it would be incorrect to associate the protests in Ukraine with the far-right. The violent far-right protesters represent a relatively small minority. Public opinion polls show that Svoboda and its leader, Oleh Tyahnybok, are much less popular among Ukrainians compared to such non-nationalist opposition leaders as Vitali Klitschko and Arseny Yatsenyuk and their parties.

Similarly, polls conducted by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology show that the OUN, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, Stepan Bandera, and Roman Shukhevych are only popular among a majority of Svoboda voters and among residents in Galicia, a former kingdom in western Ukraine. Positive views are in the minority among voters of all other major parties, all generations and residents of other regions, including Kiev. Just 1 percent of Ukrainians express positive views toward Adolf Hitler.

Nevertheless, leading opposition leaders and many protesters embraced the OUN greeting on Maidan. They cooperate with Svoboda and do not completely distance themselves from the violent far-right attackers. There is even support for the violent attackers, while a few academic researchers point out that the involvement of radical nationalists and neo-Nazi sympathizers face increasing pressure. Such actions are hardly compatible with the liberal and democratic values associated with the EU.

A peaceful resolution of the conflict with intermediation of the Western governments and Russia creates a possibility of removing and choosing the president and the government through elections. For the future of Ukraine as a united country this is a much more preferable option than if the opposition and the government used violence and pursued a winner-take-all strategy that could possibly lead to a civil war and the breakup of a deeply divided Ukraine.

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