The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Ukraine Nationalist Leader Faces Terrorism Charges

By Oleg Sukhov

March 03, 2014



Right Sector’s Dmitry Yarosh addressing a rally in central Kiev in February.

Russia's Investigative Committee has opened a criminal case on terrorism-related charges against the leader of a Ukrainian nationalist group widely seen as the driving force behind former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych's ouster.

Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin on Monday said Dmitry Yarosh, the leader of the ultranationalist group Right Sector, was wanted for "public appeals to commit acts of terrorism" on Russian soil and acts of extremism, charges that carry up to seven and five years in prison, respectively.

Investigators say Yarosh posted a statement on the group's Vkontakte page urging the Islamist insurgent leader Doku Umarov — often referred to as Russia's equivalent of Bin Laden — to join Ukraine in fighting the Kremlin. The Right Sector has denied the charges, however, saying that people hired by the Kremlin had hacked the group's official Vkontakte

page and written a fake appeal to Umarov that was falsely attributed to Yarosh.

The Right Sector was widely seen as the driving force behind the protests in Kiev that led to a violent uprising against the government and heightened tensions with Russia. The group gained prominence when the protests became more radical in January and February, after the mainstream opposition and Svoboda, a more moderate nationalist party, began to lose their appeal.

Yarosh rose in popularity for his role in the protests and was appointed a deputy chairman of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council last month.

It is for this reason that the group believes Yarosh has been accused of colluding with a terrorist — to villainize him and eliminate any influence he may have had among Ukrainians.

In the Vkontakte message that prompted criminal charges by Russian investigators, the author said that many Ukrainians had participated in the same "liberation war" being waged by Chechens and other North Caucasus peoples. Members of UNA-UNSO, one of the groups constituting the Right Sector, reportedly fought against Russians in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and first Chechen War in the 1990s.

"As the leader of the Right Sector, I am calling on you to step up your struggle," the message read. "Russia is not as strong as it seems. You have a unique opportunity to win. Use this opportunity!"

Artyom Skoropadsky, the Right Sector's spokesman, dismissed the message and the criminal case as a ploy by the Kremlin to smear the group.

"I think this was organized by the Kremlin to paint us as terrorists," he said by phone.

Russia's telecommunications watchdog has also recently banned the Right Sector's page and several other pages related to the Ukrainian revolution on Vkontakte.

The Right Sector, set up last year, is an umbrella organization that unites the Patriots of Ukraine, Trizub, SNA, UNA-UNSO and White Hammer nationalist groups.

The organization has often been portrayed as more radical and militant than any other nationalist groups in Ukraine, with a a more negative attitude toward the Kremlin and a reputation for dressing in full military gear during the Maidan protests, complete with ski masks that rarely came off.

The group has made it clear that it sees itself as a well-organized military organization.

After troops identified by Ukrainian authorities as Russian occupied much of Crimea and Russia's Federation Council authorized the use of Russian forces in Ukraine last week, the group announced urgent military mobilization.

Russian journalist Arkady Babchenko said on Facebook on Monday that the Right Sector might ignore recent agreements between President Vladimir Putin and German Chancellor Angela Merkel on a potential peaceful solution in Crimea, just as it ignored the opposition's

agreements with Yanukovych in February.

After other opposition leaders and European Union mediators signed a deal with Yanukovych that many believed would end the crisis, it was the Right Sector that refused to back down and demanded Yanukovych's resignation.

"They see the Russian forces for what they are — an occupation army," Babchenko said, adding that the Right Sector could launch a guerilla war if Russian troops did not leave Crimea.

The Right Sector has been routinely accused of being a "fascist" organization by both Russian state-controlled media and some Western media.

Skoropadsky said these accusations were "absurd" and "nonsensical," however, arguing that the Right Sector had a "very negative" attitude towards Nazism and Hitler. The organization treats all ethnicities as equal, he said, adding that the group is also in favor of monuments to Jews killed during the Holocaust. The groups members say it is Putin who is "fascist and authoritarian."

The group has also been accused of being anti-Russian — another claim that the group denies.

Skoropadsky said such a charge was an example of Kremlin propaganda.

"We are not an anti-Russian organization," Skoropadsky said. "We are against Putin's imperialism and chauvinism."

On Saturday, the Right Sector published an address on its Vkontakte page, emphasizing that it was not anti-Russian and urging Russians to overthrow Putin's regime.

"Russians and all other enslaved peoples of Russia!" the group wrote. "Now your fate is being determined in Ukraine. We have been fighting not only for our freedom but also for yours! Now you also have a chance to fight for your liberty against Putin's KGB regime!"

Despite being wary of Russian imperialism, the Right Sector is not eager to embrace the EU either, however.

Yarosh has said that the group was in favor of an association deal with the EU but had a "cautious" attitude toward Europe, arguing that Brussels was pursuing a policy hostile to national identity, traditional values and Christianity.

"Europe would be death for the state and for Christianity," Andrei Tarasenko, a high-ranking member of the Right Sector, said in January. "We want a Ukraine for Ukrainians that is run by Ukrainians and does not serve the interests of others."

The group's opposition both to Russian imperialism and European social liberalism stems from the legacy of Stepan Bandera's Ukrainian Insurgent Army, a guerilla group active in the 1940s and 1950s.

The army, whose slogan "Long live Ukraine — Long live the heroes!" resurfaced during

the 2014 Ukrainian revolution, fought against Soviet, Nazi and Polish armies.

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