

After Maidan Protests, Ukraine Nationalist Group Eyes Power

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A masked man believed to be a member of Right Sector guarding the entrance to a building in central Kiev.

KIEV — Shoppers in the center of Kiev were out of luck one recent afternoon: A clothing store and a cell phone shop were occupied by black-clad men in masks and bulletproof vests. Not far away, toughs from the same group patrolled a major Kiev hotel, spooking visitors with their baseball bats, handguns and balaclavas.

Several weeks after mass protests ousted Russian-leaning President Viktor Yanukovich, hundreds of members of ultranationalist group Right Sector continue to patrol central streets and occupy buildings in Kiev, while some more radical members have burst into regional government offices, brandishing rifles, harassing bureaucrats and even punching a prosecutor.

The group is not stopping at controlling the street: They want real power in government.

To achieve that aim the group is trying to turn itself into a political party. And its leader, Dmytro Yarosh, plans to run for president in May.

Demonized by Russian state propaganda as fascists and accused of staging attacks against Russian speakers and Jews, Right Sector has been used by Moscow as the main reason it has sent troops into Crimea and warned about the need to protect Russian-speakers in the east.

But many here downplay the group's importance — and the threat it represents. The group has not received any posts in the new government and observers say it has little real clout or support in the polls.

International news organizations have found no evidence of hate crimes. Ukraine's Jewish leaders have also spoken in support of the Maidan protests and the new government they have brought to power, and some Jews have served in the Maidan's self-defense units side-by-side with Right Sector.

Yet the rightist organization still presents a headache for the new Ukrainian leadership with its armed presence in the streets, the antics of some of its members, its far-right rhetoric and symbols that some say are Nazi-inspired — amid Kiev's push to embrace Western values and integrate quickly with the European Union.

At the same time, the group stands ready to provide fiercely patriotic men to counter Russia's military incursion. The group is recruiting volunteers ready to fight against Russia as the Crimean peninsula remains occupied by Russian troops.

"We are Ukrainian nationalists. A nationalist is a person who is ready to sacrifice their time, their freedom and even their life for the sake of Ukraine and Ukrainians," Andrei Tarasenko, a top member of the group, said in an interview. "If Ukraine is not for Ukrainians, then who is it for?"

Tarasenko hastened to add that all other ethnic groups living in Ukraine, such as ethnic Russians or Jews, should enjoy the same rights as Ukrainians. He and other members also deny that some of the group's symbols harken back to the swastika.

At the same time, he described ethnic Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars as the only indigenous people of Ukraine.

"They do not have a land of their own anywhere else. All other states have their mother countries, states that must care about their people. The French have France to care about them; the Irish, Ireland," Tarasenko said. "It is normal and in the same way Ukrainians must take care of Ukraine. No one else in the world will do that."

Tarasenko spoke on the sixth floor of the Dnipro hotel in the center of Kiev. The floor was occupied entirely by the group. Two heavily armed men in military-style uniforms, one of them with a shaved head, thoroughly checked a crew of journalists and wrote down their names before letting them in. Other visitors entering the floor, mostly Right Sector members, were made to hand over their weapons and scribble the weapons' names — "knife," "pistol holster," "Makarov pistol" — on small pieces of paper in order to collect them on the way out.

A prominent member of Right Sector, Oleksandr Muzychko, recently stirred turmoil

by storming into a local parliament building in the city of Rivne, brandishing a Kalashnikov rifle. Muzychko threatened to confiscate the property of regional lawmakers affiliated with Yanukovich's party if they did not pay compensation to the families of the killed protesters.

He also used a highly derogatory word to describe protest leader Arseny Yatsenyuk, who later became Ukraine's prime minister, and suggested that Yatsenyuk belonged in a pig farm. "The one whose hand holds the Kalashnikov will be calling the shots," Muzychko said, clutching his weapon. During a separate incident, Muzychko stormed into a judicial office, insulted a prosecutor, pulled him by his tie and slapped him in the face.

Asked to comment on the incident, Tarasenko said Muzychko was merely trying to protect that prosecutor from an angry mob that had gathered outside.

Right Sector is an umbrella group that unites several right-wing organizations. It appeared practically out of nowhere in late November, when Kiev was rocked by mass protests against Yanukovich's decision to embrace Russia and freeze ties with the EU.

The organization was key in keeping the protests going for more than three months and in staging violent confrontations with police, which eventually culminated in bloody clashes that prompted Yanukovich to flee to Russia. Nearly 100 people died in the clashes, the overwhelming majority of them protesters.

Some experts dismiss the notion of Right Sector being a powerful force that could inflict real harm.

"The Right Sector is marginal," said Andreas Umland, assistant professor of European studies at the Kyiv Mohyla Academy, who studies nationalist groups. "It is an umbrella organization of extra-parliamentary lunatic fringe groups that has now come to this big prominence largely because of the media. ... Its importance is certainly overstated."

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