

# The red-brown influencers now boosting the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement

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**In late April Yuri Sheliashenko, Executive Secretary of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement (UPM), was listed as a speaker at an online meeting organised by the Socialist Labour Network (SLN).**

The title of the meeting was: “Ukraine: Truth and Lies. Was the massacre of over 700 civilians at Bucha perpetrated by the Ukrainian National Police and the Safari Unit and Azov Battalion?”

The three other speakers at the meeting were:

Tony Greenstein: A man whose mission in life has been to promote left antisemitism at every opportunity and in no matter how crude a form, including fully-baked conspiracy theories and Nazi-Zionist amalgams.

David Miller: Another left-antisemitic conspiracy-theory fantasist with a speciality in particularly convoluted forms of conspiratorialism (including, more recently, Nazi-Zionist collaboration in Ukraine) and apologetics for the Assad regime in Syria.

Chris Williamson: The former Labour MP who now resides at the red-brown-alliance end of the political spectrum. Promotes, in a particularly virulent form, left antisemitism, apologetics for the Assad regime, and now apologetics for Putin’s invasion of Ukraine.

The SLN meeting was not the first time Greenstein and Miller have shared a platform. In March they spoke at a Resistance TV meeting on “Zionism in Ukraine” hosted by Sian Bloor. Bloor has argued that Corbyn fell victim to the “Rothschild-Zionist agenda”, agrees that “Zionists control world events”, and has blamed Jews for 9/11.

Maybe Sheliashenko knew nothing of the political record of the other speakers at the meeting – although the meeting’s title should surely have given him pause for thought.

Maybe Sheliashenko pulled out of the meeting – although the absence of any online recording or report of the meeting means that this cannot be confirmed one way or the other.

Even so, Sheliashenko’s inclusion on the list of speakers for the SLN meeting does raise questions about the UPM, especially given the way in which the Stop the War Coalition (STW) promotes Sheliashenko and the UPM as the ‘true’ voice of Ukrainian opposition to the war.

Founded in 2019, the UPM consists of three people. The membership figure of three is confirmed by the magazine of the German pacifist organisation DFG-VK (issue number 3 of 2020): “Although the UPM has only three members it has now become a section of War Resisters International.”

The fact that the UPM has just three members does not necessarily mean that it has nothing of political value to say (although that is in fact the case). But it certainly does mean that the UPM does not represent anything on the ground.

The three UPM members (although the UPM sometimes attracts a further two people to its Zoom public meetings) are Sheliazhenko himself, Ruslan Kotsaba and Ihor Skrypnyk.

Ihor Skrypnyk is the UPM's vice-president: "A video blogger and administrator of a Facebook group of protestors against conscription." His role in the UPM can only be described as invisible. The number of UPM activists is therefore two rather than three.

UPM President Ruslan Kotsaba has a chequered history. In 2019 he was due to be awarded the Aachen Peace Prize. But the prize was withdrawn after social media activists highlighted antisemitic material which he had posted:

"The Jews probably remember this period with sadness, how they ran like sheep and were shot in their thousands, although they were guarded by just one or two guards, and although they could have used their body mass to crush every convoy.

"But they felt that they had a penalty to pay, for the fact that they bred Nazism, the fact that they bred Communism. They bred Lenin, Marx, Engels, all these Blanks [reference to name of Lenin's Jewish grandmother], these Trotskys, Kamenevs, Zinovievs, Stalins, Hitlers, etc." They deserved a severe penalty because of the Ukrainian Holodomor, and now we see that they have the misfortune that wherever there are Arabs they want to carry out these attacks on them."

In another social media post Kotsaba was asked his views of a number of Ukrainian politicians. He replied: "I don't have any problem with half-Jews. I am of the opinion that that the half-bloods should not suffer any disadvantages because of their non-Ukrainian origins."

The antisemitic material in question dates from 2011, over a decade ago. Maybe Kotsaba's opinion of Jews has changed in the meantime. There is certainly no evidence of more recent antisemitic material being posted by him.

But Kotsaba's (past?) antisemitism is part of a larger problem, one that has continued down to the present. As the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group (KHRPG) put it at the time of the Aachen Peace Prize controversy:

"The (antisemitic) video contains deeply offensive hate speech. But it is by no means the only reason why the choice of Kotsaba seems bafflingly inappropriate. ... He is certainly entitled to his own opinion on the conflict (in Ukraine). But his claim that he is objectively presenting two sides of the story is simply untrue."

Specific examples cited by the KHRPG include:

- "He pushes toxic lies which are known to have prompted young men to go and fight in the Donbas. He invariably follows Russia's lead in claiming that [victims of the Odesa Trade Union Building fire of 2014] were deliberately burnt to death by 'Ukrainian radicals'. ... It is impossible to believe that Kotsaba is not aware that he is presenting a story that has been debunked."
- "Kotsaba has repeatedly asserted that the conflict in Donbas is a civil war and denied Russia's and Russians' active role. ... By the time he said this [on a Russian state-controlled TV channel in June, 2014] there was ample video footage and witness accounts making it quite clear that there were a suspiciously large number of Chechens and other Russian citizens fighting in this

alleged 'civil war'."

- "Kotsaba does not mention or try to challenge any of the above-mentioned facts [about Russia's involvement in the creation of the 'People's Republics']. His narrative about civil war and the need for 'dialogue' is, accordingly, based on manipulation and deceit."

According to Kotsaba, in an interview conducted on Russian television, there were "virtually no regular Russian troops in the Donbas [in late 2014], just local guys who want to live separately." The war in the Donbas, he said, was not the result of Russian aggression but rather "a civil war and fratricide."

In a later programme broadcast on Russia's Channel One in November of 2019 Kotsaba described the Maidan protests as "a group of conspirators who - under the guise of thousands of protestors, some of whom, by the way, were paid - illegally seized power."

"It was the Kiev conspirators and, let's call them by their name, traitors," Kotsaba continued, "who illegally proclaimed an Anti-Terrorist Operation there (in Donetsk/Lugansk) on 14<sup>th</sup> April." In response, "Donetsk and Lugansk answered on 12<sup>th</sup> May - almost a month later, I would point out - with the creation of the so-called Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics."

(In fact, the 'People's Republics' were declared in early April. It was their declaration which was the trigger for the Ukrainian government's launch of the Anti-Terrorist Operation.)

Kotsaba was nominated for the 2019 Aachen peace Prize by Andrey Hunko, a member of the Die Linke political party who sits in the German Parliament.

Hunko has a long record of collaborating with earlier leaders of the Lugansk and Donetsk 'People's Republics' and with the fake-left antisemitic, homophobic and Putin-apologist Borotba organisation (which is now known, thanks to hackers, to have been on the Kremlin payroll).

But Hunko's links with Kotsaba go beyond nominating him for a peace prize. Just as Hunko elevated the Borotbist Sergei Kiritshchuk to being the 'expert' on Ukraine for Die Linke, so too in June of 2018 Kotsaba was invited, at Hunko's initiative, by Die Linke to the German Parliament to speak as a Ukrainian human rights expert.

Kotsaba has been physically attacked by right-wing thugs. He has repeatedly been put on trial and has served time in prison in Ukraine. Rightly, the KHRPG and other human rights organisations have defended him on those counts. As the KHRPG put it in 2016:

"Kotsaba's willingness to collaborate, whether for remuneration or for free, with Russian (television) channels whose warmongering propaganda and distortion of the facts have finally led western countries to agree to countermeasures, may be viewed by many of us as reprehensible. That does not make them state treason."

Defending Kotsaba against 'vigilante' and state repression is one thing. Giving credence, as STW does, to an organisation where he counts for 50% of the membership, and (mis)representing that organisation as a meaningful and purely pacifist political organisation is quite another.

But Kotsaba has an obvious political attraction for the STW. Interviewed at the time Poroshenko was still in power, he said:

"All this fuss about geopolitics around Ukraine is a competition that has been going on for over a hundred years, maybe even more. This is a geopolitical competition between the American and Russian empires. And this is happening before the eyes of a confused Europe that really suffers as a

result of this confrontation between Russia and America.

"It is in the interests of Ukraine that the EU, the United States, and Russia sit at the negotiating table and decide on the fate of Ukraine. Unfortunately, Ukraine is not a subject of geopolitics, unfortunately, it is its object. And that's why Poroshenko should do whatever he's told."

Yuri Sheliazhenko, the UPM's other member, churns out large amounts of tedious, verbose and meaningless (but relatively harmless) written material, not just for the UPM but also for the online journal *The Truth Seeker*.

Apart from re-posts, virtually all articles on UPM and *Truth Seeker* social media emanate from Sheliazhenko. All video clips on their social media feature Sheliazhenko, and Sheliazhenko alone. And (perhaps for good reason) the only UPM member ever to be interviewed is Sheliazhenko, not Kotsaba.

Insofar as Sheliazhenko's writings have any substance other than platitudes (infinite variations of the formulation: War is bad, peace is good), that substance has no political credence, and often no factual credence.

A week before Putin's invasion Sheliazhenko wrote: "Western media predict imminent war. Fail in predicting. [Presumably means: The predictions are wrong.] My friend David Swanson even put a counter to these lies about imminent Russian invasion at the website [WorldBeyondWar.org](http://WorldBeyondWar.org)."

Sheliazhenko's response to the invasion was to put an 'equals' sign between Putin and Zelensky: "Putin and Zelensky are killers if they do not immediately agree to a meeting for peace talks in the immediate future."

In an interview conducted a week later Sheliazhenko appeared to put the blame on Zelensky for the failure to open peace talks: "He (Zelensky) pursues a military solution, and he fails to call Putin and ask him directly to stop the war."

As if all that was needed to secure withdrawal of the Russian forces was a phone call. But in Sheliazhenko's strange political universe, that's actually all that is needed.

Sheliazhenko has also backed the suggestion of the Europe for Peace campaign for what amounts to a suicidal proposal for human shields (although he has failed to give a lead himself):

"European non-violent pacifists will issue an ultimatum to Putin and Zelensky: Stop the war immediately, or people will organize caravans of non-violent pacifists from all over Europe, using all possible means to travel to the conflict zones, unarmed, to act as peacekeepers among the combatants."

Sheliazhenko defines Zelensky's aims in the war as: "(Acceptance of) the Euro-Atlantic choice of Ukraine; her sovereignty over the Donbas and the Crimea; and the cessation of ties with Russia, following her punishment for imperialism and war crimes."

He defines Putin's aims as: "Multi-polarity; (recognition of) Russian security concerns in the post-Soviet region; demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine, including non-alignment with military alliances; absence of nuclear weapons; recognition of Russian sovereignty over Crimea; independence of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics; non-discrimination of Russian people and culture in Ukraine; punishment of anti-Russian far-righters."

There is clearly a gap, and a major contradiction, between these two sets of aims. But Sheliazhenko

has the answer: “To assist the peace process I propose to create an independent public commission of experts for peaceful resolution of the crisis in and around Ukraine.”

Sheliazhenko’s attraction for STW (which turns a blind eye to his enthusiasm for Ukrainian membership of the EU) is his portrayal of the conflict in Ukraine as a conflict between two rival imperialisms, with NATO bearing rather more blame for the conflict than Russia:

“Above all, it is a matter of the continuation of the Cold War between the former Soviet Union and the USA. After the collapse of the Soviet Union NATO was not dismantled but spread to post-Soviet territories for the purposes of military control.”

“Military politicisation between East and West went too far, with reckless military operations, NATO expansion, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, nuclear threats to the world, militarisation of Ukraine, exclusion of Russia from international institutions, and expulsions of Russian diplomats, literally pushing Putin from diplomacy to escalation of war.”

As with Kotsaba, Sheliazhenko should be defended by socialists were he to be attacked by right-wing thugs or pursued by the state. But Sheliazhenko himself thinks such a prospect unlikely. In his own words, when asked if he might face state repression: “I am seen maybe more as a freak, a clown.”

At least Sheliazhenko gets something right.

But taking part in a meeting with Greenstein, Miller and Williamson, assuming that Sheliazhenko did so, is not clowning around. And when the STW gives Sheliazhenko a platform, that too deserves condemnation – in both directions.

Condemnation of STW for presenting the Kotsaba-Sheliazhenko partnership as a meaningful political organisation, and for turning a blind eye to Kotsaba’s record of promoting the Putin version of events in Ukraine. (Sheliazhenko himself is better defined as a simple buffoon rather than an apologist.)

And condemnation of Sheliazhenko for speaking at meetings of an organisation which, like Sheliazhenko’s partner in the UPM, has a record of antisemitic statements and apologetics for Putin.

Compared with the host of other reasons for disaffiliation from STW, the fact that STW, in its desperation to find a Ukrainian to put on the platform at its meetings, has nothing better to offer than the two-men-but-no-dog ‘organisation’ of the UPM is small beer.

But it does underline the fact that STW has nothing of any political value to say about the war in Ukraine; that STW cannot find a meaningful political force in Ukraine to endorse its political line; and that any organisation with a commitment to anti-imperialism and international solidarity should end all links with STW.

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