

# Ukraine: Man of War. The Political Trajectory of Anatoly Shariy

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**After 2014, much has changed in the political landscape of Ukraine. The main reasons for the changes were, of course, the Maidan, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in Donbass. However, the growing influence of the Internet media and Ukrainians' long-standing demand for new faces in politics also played a role. It is these factors that caused the popularity of the former Ukrainian journalist, current Youtube-blogger, and unofficial head of the party named after himself - Anatoly Shariy.**

Using the Internet for caustic and unrestrained criticism of the government, Maidan participants and supporters, the Ukrainian media, the army and the state, Shariy became an opinion leader among those Ukrainians who are pro-Russian and/or sharply opposed to the dominant patriotic discourse. This position has made Shariy popular not only in Ukraine but also in Russia, where he is a frequent guest on state channels. He is also interviewed by the European media. Especially after Shariy created a party, and the Ukrainian authorities accused the blogger of high treason and imposed sanctions against him. Who is Anatoly Shariy and why is he "toxic" to many in Ukraine?

## Journalistic activities

Anatoly Shariy became popular as an investigative journalist in the mid-2000s. Despite his merits in exposing the corruption of state bodies, mainly the police, he already had a peculiar reputation. There were accusations that some of his materials were ordered and published as part of an interdepartmental war between the leadership of the law enforcement agencies. The journalist himself did not hide the fact that he had connections in this environment, received an award from the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs for "covering the work of the Interior Ministry," and in some articles defended representatives of the power structures from attacks by other journalists.

As a member of the right-wing conservative organization Love Against Homosexuality, Shariy published articles that explicitly used hate speech against various minorities.

However, in June 2011, Shariy's relationship with the Interior Ministry seriously deteriorated. A criminal case was opened against him after a conflict in a Kiev McDonalds. At the time, Shariy shot several times with a traumatic gun at another customer. The journalist himself claims that the visitor was a provocateur, insulting and harassing him and his wife, and the shooting was self-defense. According to Shariy, the entire incident was planned by the police leadership and took place a few days after another publication, in which the journalist accused a number of high-ranking security officials in Kyiv of "roofing" the drug trade.

Then, in July 2011, after new accusations against the leadership of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, unidentified people shot at Shariy's car. The journalist stated that it was related to his professional activities, but the investigation opened a criminal case against Shariy himself, accusing him of staging the attack. A number of journalistic organizations published a joint statement in support of

their colleague, but in the same statement journalists drew attention to “violations of the rules of professional ethics and standards” by Shariy.

Among such violations are extremely intolerant views on LGBT, Roma, and Muslims. In particular, as a member of the right-wing organization Love Against Homosexuality, Shariy published articles that explicitly used hate speech against various minorities. Roma in particular suffered.

“This passion for crime is in the blood. The desire to commit crimes and NEVER work is in the genes. So is the willingness to go to jail. By the way, in the Roma language, which is extremely poor in synonyms, there are many words for the word ‘prison’ - xīnd’á, bešibé, beštó, barunó, baro khér and others. This nation has given the world outstanding singers and dancers, innumerable choirs, a couple of circus artists and actors. And also - thieves, robbers, rapists, dealers in stolen goods, drug dealers and pimps. There is no middle ground,” wrote Shariy in his article “The most useful nation.”

After moving to Europe and becoming a political refugee there, Shariy moved on to more “respectable” talk about the “threat” posed by migrants, criticism of the BLM movement and other topics of the European right-wing mainstream. On his previous articles and statements, Sharii spoke out in March 2021.

“It’s funny when the Office of the President (Zelensky - author’s note) tries to throw in my statements from 11 years ago (generously diluting them with fakes, concocted at short notice) about gays or Gypsies. Like, look, he’s a Nazi, what’s more, he’s a real fascist. I never apologized for those remarks. Because I “apologized” with a good couple hundred quality investigations on Nazis, not with idle chatter. I “apologized” when I covered the looting of the tabor or the murder of a Gypsy at the train station,” Shariy wrote.

For his stance on migrants, Shariy is in no hurry to “apologize. He often raises issues of “bums” and even “terrorists” who infiltrate Europe and undermine its economy and values.” “German-style tolerance has become a shameful label even in Europe,” Shariy wrote on his Twitter in 2020.

However, the blogger, according to his wife Olga Shariy, agrees that he makes overly broad generalizations about groups of people and is allegedly not a racist on a personal level.

## **Departure from Ukraine**

Shortly after the car bombing incident, Anatoliy Shariy left Ukraine. In February 2012, he was put on the wanted list. By that time, the journalist was already on the territory of the European Union and was granted asylum in Lithuania. During 2012-2013, Sharii continued to write articles for Ukrainian publications, lived mainly in the Netherlands, where he was arrested at the request of Ukraine, but then released.

In articles from this period, despite his conflict with the authorities and statements that he would return to the country when “Yanukovych’s brotherhood will be hung on poles”, Sharii continued to actively criticize opposition politicians and media, as well as to speak out on high-profile events in Ukraine. In particular, in March 2012 the country was rocked by a horrible crime - the rape and murder of 18-year-old Oksana Makar in Nikolaev. Sharii, of course, also reacted to these events, but he did so in an unusual way. In his publications, he focused readers’ attention on the contradictory details of the press coverage of the crime, criticized the protesters, and engaged in outright slatshaming and misogyny, directly insulting the murdered girl.

“Oksana Makar would not have been raped if the custom of blood feud and other “customs” and notions of honor had been prevalent in our country. She would not have been raped because her relatives would have buried her themselves for blatant f\*\*\*ing long before March 8, 2012,” stated

Sharii.

In another article titled "The drooling oligophrenic Ukrainian government," published in May 2013, Sharii spoke out about the protests in Ukraine and the actions of security forces against protesters. He compared the reaction to the protests in Ukraine and Europe and noted that in European countries the authorities allegedly react more harshly to similar actions. He also lashed out at European officials who criticize Yanukovych and his security forces but pay no attention to violations in their own countries. Overall, it can be noted that despite his flight from the country due to persecution by the Yanukovych regime, Anatoly Shariy devoted a surprising amount of time to defending him and manipulating information in his favor.

### **Blogging, post-Maidan popularity**

The real fame came to Shariy in 2014. In May of that year, after the Maidan and in the midst of the escalating conflict in Donbas, the journalist became a blogger and started a channel on YouTube. The first video published there was an eyewitness recording of May 2 near the House of Trade Unions in Odessa. At the time, 48 people were killed in the streets of the city, most of them pro-Russian protesters who died in a fire in the building of the House of Trade Unions.

Many pro-Ukrainian opinion leaders and politicians, amid the ongoing escalation of separatism in Donbass, called the event "a victory and a triumph over Russian aggression," and called the pro-Russian activists who died "traitors, enemies, and Coloradans. In his sensational second video, Shariy harshly criticized such statements, pointed out the unacceptability of insults to the victims, and as a rhetorical device, started the video with harsh insults to the protesters who died on Maidan, and then apologized and called these words just as unacceptable.

This seemingly neutral video was perceived unequivocally, especially given Shariy's scandalous reputation. For the pro-Russian and anti-Maidan camp, he became a defender and a "truth-teller," while for the nationalist pro-Ukrainian camp he became an enemy and a "propagandist. All of the new blogger's subsequent activities continued in the same vein. He regularly published videos in which he commented on events in Ukraine and especially the war in Donbass. He posted videos from the front, exposed fakes and propaganda publications in the Ukrainian media, harshly criticized the actions of the Ukrainian army and volunteer battalions, and sometimes debunked Russian fakes, the most vivid and sensational ones.

Shariy's caustic, flamboyant style, including the use of direct insults and coarse language, attracted many radicals from the conventionally pro-Russian camp. In addition, his high-quality work with documents and sources sometimes contrasted favorably with the work of news sites, which prioritize the timeliness of publications over their accuracy. Shariy also refused to position himself as a supporter of a particular political camp, unlike many Ukrainian journalists, who openly called themselves "soldiers of the information war.

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However, these "soldiers" sometimes managed to catch Shariy himself making factual mistakes, and the mistakes mostly concerned his denial of the role of Russian military and equipment from Russia in the conflict in Donbass. The blogger later admitted some of his mistakes, but in general he denied all accusations of engagement and involvement in Russian propaganda, claiming that his direct statements in support of Vladimir Putin, Russia or the separatists in Donbass were not available online. As proof of his objectivity, Shariy recalled his condemnation of the so-called Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, which he sharply criticizes for their low quality of life.

But mostly they accuse Shariy not of outright fakes, but of competent information manipulation, focusing the audience's attention on certain aspects of the problems and silencing others, tendentious presentation of material, diluting facts with his own generalizations, conjectures, and "assumptions. Sharyia was often reminded of his coverage of the Boeing MH17 crash in Donbas.

Unlike many other pro-Russian commentators, the blogger immediately admitted that the passenger airliner was most likely shot down by militants, not the AFU, and did not repeat the initial Russian version that the plane was allegedly shot down by a Ukrainian fighter. At the same time, Sharii published a video in which he suggested that the Boeing MH17, with the assistance of the "third overseas force," was allegedly directed to a dangerous area, and information about it as a military plane, not a passenger airliner, was leaked to militants and thus, the separatists became a "victim" of a planned provocation by the special services.

Despite all the accusations from Ukrainian "hawks," and partly thanks to them, Anatoly Shariy's blog's audience grew. Along with the Youtube blog, he developed other social networks and soon opened his own website, sharij.net, which grew into a full-fledged news publication. As of the end of January 2021, the number of subscribers to his Youtube channel is 2.61 million, new videos are published every day, rarely do they reach 500 thousand views, some more than a million.

Shary covered Russia and its domestic topics in his blogs mainly in the context of his criticism of the Russian opposition.

Sharyi's coverage of international topics is worth mentioning separately. His videos contain harsh criticism of U.S. and European policies, exposing double standards of Western politicians, but at the same time one can notice almost complete silence about Russia's actions. The statements of Russian politicians and diplomats are often presented uncritically. Russia and its internal topics were covered by Sharii in his blogs mainly in the context of criticism of the Russian opposition. A whole series of videos in the traditional offensive-eating manner were devoted to Alexei Navalny and his supporters. Shary explained such attention to a seemingly extraneous topic for the Ukrainian blogger by the fact that Navalny allegedly spoke negatively about him.

## **Party Formation and Elections**

After Zelensky's confident victory in the presidential election, many opponents of militarist "patriotism" had hopes for a general change in state policy. Anatoly Shariy supported Zelensky before the second round of the election and actively attacked Poroshenko, venting his anger not only in videos, but also by sending activists with provocative questions to his meetings with voters. Under these circumstances, the popular blogger with a loyal fanbase decided to join the trends and go into politics.

"Shariya's party" was founded in June 2019. Libertarianism was declared the ideological basis of the new party. At the same time in the program of the party it was noted that the implementation of ideas about reducing the role of the state to a minimum in modern Ukraine is impossible, so as an ideology for the party will serve "a kind of mix of ... conservatism, liberalism and socialism." It is argued quite frankly that this mix serves the purpose of attracting as many supporters as possible. The party was also positioned as an organization for young, successful, and educated people-primarily from the middle class. Shariy reminded us that one of the main goals of the party was to punish the Poroshenko-era authorities.

"I will not tell you that we will write some supernatural laws, that we will come - and you will get European pensions... We are going to punish with fire and sword," Shariy wrote.

In the 2019 parliamentary elections, the Central Election Commission deregistered the party leader because he had not lived in Ukraine for the past five years. At that time, Shariy's wife, Olga Bondarenko (Shariy), headed the party list. The rest of the seats were taken by journalists who worked for Shariy and local activists. The list also included people from the Katsuba family of Kharkiv businessmen with whom Shariy was friends. According to some reports, they allegedly provided financial support to the party, but Sergei Katsuba denies this, calling participation in the elections solely "help to a friend."

According to the election results, the "Shariy party" received 2,23% of votes and did not pass the 5% barrier to enter the parliament. The result allowed the party to receive state funding, but in October 2019, the new parliament voted to cancel funding for parties that failed to pass the five percent threshold.

Subsequently, the "Shariya Party" managed to get representation in a number of councils in the south and east of Ukraine in 2020 - Odessa, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhya, Mykolaiv, and Mariupol (a total of 9 city councils).

### **Splits, Betrayals, and Scandals**

The success of the party was followed by a series of scandals involving deputies elected to the city councils. In particular, in Odessa, the leader of the local organization, Alexei Nagatkin, was expelled from the faction. Shariy accused him of deviating from the "party line" and taking bribes from local authorities. Together with Nagatkin, Anna Shabanova, a deputy of the city council who supported him, was also ostracized. Shortly after the conflict, unknown persons set fire to the store belonging to Shabanova. Shariy responded in his Telegram channel with a short video in which he called the arson a provocation and expressed support for the deputy. But as the main reason for the arson, he pointed out exactly the cooperation with the "traitor" Nagatkin, and warned about the likelihood of subsequent attacks with a possible threat to life.

The split also occurred in the Kharkiv City Council, where Nikita Rozhenko, who had been severely beaten before the election, allegedly by members of the far-right National Corps party, opposed the party leadership. The attack on Rozhenko was an important element of the party's election campaign; he was number one on the electoral list for the Kharkiv City Council elections and practically the most prominent member of the party, besides its leaders, Anatoly and Olga Shariy. Rozhenko and his friend, Kharkiv faction leader Sergei Sirota, were also accused of taking bribes and collaborating with local authorities. Both were expelled from the party. After this, Rozhenko recorded a series of videos in which he accused Shariy of lying, manipulation, and later even stated that the party's security service was headed by Oleg "Malezha" Zangiyev, a former member of the Azov regiment. Rozhenko accused Zangiyev of spying on party members and organizing various provocations.

Smaller scale scandals and splits occurred before and after the elections in Dnipro, Mariupol and even in the central headquarters of the party. What all the scandals had in common was that the "schismatics" accused Anatoly and Olga Shariy of authoritarian management of the party, indifference to the opinions of individual members, "selling out" of individual cells and the party as a whole to the people of one of the leaders of the Opposition Platform for Life Party, "Putin's godfather" Viktor Medvedchuk. In response, Shariy called all those who disagreed "traitors", accused them of taking bribes, working for the Office of President Zelensky and / or local authorities, threatened, published hidden camera footage in which the "traitors" negotiated bribes and attacks on the party (themselves participants in the filming called them a provocation and editing). A year after the elections, when, according to Ukrainian laws, deputies can be recalled, the "schismatics" from the Odessa, Kharkov and Mariupol city councils were expelled from the Shariya

Party.

“Raskolniki” accused Anatoly and Olga Shariy of authoritarian management of the party and indifference to the opinions of individual members.

“They are not betraying me or the Party. They are betraying the voter and my IDEA that life in the country can be changed. There is no forgiveness for such a thing. To betray a voter is not to be a rat, it is to be lower than a rat, a rotter, a microbe, a stinking cloud. I promised this and I will keep it. And those who are with me will follow my ideas and instructions. Call it a “cult,” “I don’t care. I call it ‘real politics,’” Shariy said in his Telegram channel.

In addition to scandals within the organization, the blogger has also had conflicts with his potential allies from the “pro-Russian” camp outside the party. In particular, a violent conflict began in 2021 between him and lawyer Andriy Portnov, the deputy head of the administration of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych. Shariy, in his own words, cooperated with Portnov for several years, but then accused him of trying to take over the “Party of Shariy,” attacks through the courts, and plans to deport the blogger from Spain to Ukraine or even kill him. In response with a long list of accusations against Shariy on the air of the TV channel “Nash” Portnov’s colleague, former Minister of Justice of Yanukovych’s time, Elena Lukash. Portnov himself responded to the blogger with insults and denial of all accusations. By the way, with the owner of the TV channel “Nash”, politician Yevgeny Muraev, Shariy also has a conflict, although not so brightly. When the major opposition publication Strana interviewed “traitor” Nikita Rozhenko, it was added to the list of enemies.

Despite all the scandals, the “Party of Shariya” continues to work, although it receives noticeably less attention in Anatoly Shariya’s blogs than it did in the pre-election period. Separate videos devoted to the actions of deputies and activists of the party are released, mostly when it is possible to vividly accuse the authorities or local opponents of Shariy in parallel. Sometimes at the end of the video you can see brief reports of the deputies of the city council on the work done, which seems to consist mainly of appeals to the public utilities to meet the demands of the citizens. The video also advertises a “party” store, where one can buy merchandise with Sharya’s catchphrases and motivational slogans in the spirit of training for success.

It is also worth noting that there is little news about the party’s activities other than from major cities, where the party managed to get into city councils in local elections. The party’s pages in social networks are noticeably less popular than those of Shariy himself. Overall, one might get the impression that the party has become more of a tool for the blogger to cooperate with local political forces, at the moment mainly with the OPZJ party and Viktor Medvedchuk. At the same time, sometimes city councilors from Shariy’s party raise important social topics related to utility tariffs, education and health care financing, corruption of local authorities

### **Harassment of the party and sanctions against Shariy**

However, the low activity of the party can be explained not only by internal reasons. Shariy’s media activities and his personal “war” first with Poroshenko and then with Zelensky provoked a harsh reaction from the Ukrainian authorities.

During the presidency of Petro Poroshenko, Shariy accused the Ukrainian authorities of waging an implicit information war against him. According to the blogger, Poroshenko allegedly hired a Russian lawyer Mark Feygin to harass Shariy. Feygin, in turn, accused the blogger of alleged crimes committed on the territory of the European Union, even pedophilia, and tried to deprive him of his political refugee status. Feygin referred to the words of Shariy’s half-sister, Elena Marchenko, who lives in the Netherlands. After leaving Ukraine, Shariy lived with her for some time, and then there

was a conflict between them, as a result of which the relatives exchanged high-profile accusations. Shariy responded to these accusations with a slew of lawsuits against both his sister and Feygin. A Russian court stripped Feygin of his attorney status, and a court in the Netherlands sentenced Marchenko to a large monetary fine and ordered him to publicly deny the charges.

After Poroshenko stepped down as president, Shariy succeeded in the Ukrainian courts. In April 2020, after a corresponding court decision, he was taken off the wanted list by the Interior Ministry for the old cases of shooting at McDonalds and staging an assassination attempt. However, Zelensky soon began an active struggle with “pro-Russian” and opposition to him publications. On February 2, 2021, the SNBO sanctions were introduced against a number of channels that belonged to Taras Kozak, an MP associated with Viktor Medvedchuk. Just a couple of weeks later, the Security Service of Ukraine announced Shariy, who frequently appeared on subsanctioned channels, on suspicion of committing a crime under two articles of the Criminal Code, namely Article 111 Part 1 (High Treason) and Article 161 Part 1 (Violation of equality of citizens based on their race, nationality, religious beliefs, disability and other grounds). On February 25<sup>th</sup>, Shariy was again put on the wanted list, and on August 20<sup>th</sup> of the same year, the National Security and Defense Council imposed sanctions against him, his wife Olga and her mother Alla Bondarenko (who according to the documents was involved in the re-registration of the party).

In addition, a number of other criminal cases were initiated against Shariy and his party beginning in the summer of 2020, in particular under the articles on forgery of documents and encroachment on the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Shariy denied all of the accusations and called them persecution by President Zelensky personally.

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It is worth noting that there are no court decisions confirming the charges in any of the cases against Shariy. Sanctions imposed by the National Security and Defense Council, which bypass the judicial system, raise serious questions and concerns among Ukrainian human rights activists, even those who belong to the conditional “patriotic” camp. They are also criticized by former representatives of the authorities, such as former parliamentary speaker Dmytro Razumkov and former Interior Minister (under whom the sanctions were introduced) Arsen Avakov. In their opinion, the tool of sanctions can be applied to foreign nationals or citizens of Ukraine who are accused of terrorist activity and are beyond the reach of the law enforcement system. The introduction of sanctions against citizens who are on the territory of Ukraine or whose involvement in terrorism has not been proven in court is illegal.

In addition to persecution by state authorities, it is also necessary to mention the attacks on activists of Shariy’s Party by street fighters of far-right organizations. Anatoly Shariy is considered a “traitor,” a “propagandist,” and a “Ukrainophobe. Naturally, the appearance of an organized force of his supporters in the country caused quite unequivocal emotions in many of them. Journalists of sharij.net and activists of the party were attacked by representatives of various right-wing forces, and public actions of Shariy’s supporters were also accompanied by provocations and attacks. In June 2020, there were high-profile clashes in Kiev during a large-scale march of the Shariy Party, in which those who attacked the march were injured as well. A “safari” was then declared on the party activists. Ukrainian law enforcement agencies did not react too actively to the crimes. The campaign caused concern among representatives of international human rights organizations, the OSCE, and some European politicians.

The attacks by the far-right and the retaliatory information war launched by Shariy have attracted the sympathy of some on the Ukrainian left. Despite his scandalous reputation and his distance from

leftist ideas, some saw him as a loud and influential ally in the fight against far-right street violence, of which leftist activists are often the victims. The blogger has responded in the same way, highlighting and condemning attacks on left-wing actions in his videos, as well as paying much attention to the actions of far-right organizations in general. On the title image of his Youtube page, Shariy posted a large caption ANTINAZI. In turn, left-wing human rights activists and activists actively spoke out against the persecution of Shariy and his party by law enforcement agencies.

For other representatives of the leftist camp, however, cooperation with Shariy is questionable, to say the least. The question remains open as to whether fighting the Ukrainian far-right is a staunch position for Shariy rather than an opportunistic action driven by the current political agenda. In particular, representatives of the conditionally “pro-Russian” camp in Ukraine accuse Shariy of maintaining quite friendly relations with the “National Corps” in 2019, on the eve of the presidential election, because they had a common goal of fighting against then-President Petro Poroshenko. Shariy himself responded to these accusations by saying that “peace” with the “National Corps” during the fight against Poroshenko was politically justified. Shariy also said that hints that the party leadership was involved in the attacks on its own activists for international and domestic PR was an idea spread by the far-right and President Zelensky’s Office to absolve themselves of responsibility and discredit Shariy.

## **Conclusions**

Anatoly Shariy has always been a controversial and scandalous figure in the Ukrainian media space. The emergence of his own party and his growing popularity as a blogger have not changed this. Although Shariy has abandoned his early most unacceptable views, Shariy’s own position has remained very close to those of the European right, given his attitude toward migrants.

Shariy is persecuted by the current Ukrainian leadership for questionable reasons, but this can hardly justify some aspects of his media activity. Criticism of President Zelensky, the Ukrainian government, the media, opponents from the opposition camp and “renegades” from his party too often turns into a caustic stream of insults, personal attacks, publication of private information, and sometimes outright harassment. Along with qualitative investigations, one encounters blatant manipulations, statements taken out of context, and inappropriate generalizations of information. Indiscriminant choice of temporary allies and silence about their miscalculations is replaced by a fierce fight with former friends and high-profile exposés.

Also unconvincing are the ideas that his activities are capable of changing the overall political landscape in Ukraine for the better. It is not only about Shariy’s personal views or his real and imaginary ties to pro-Russian and Russian politicians. Shariy’s inconsistency, manipulation of information, aggression toward all dissenters, and deliberately provocative style make his figure toxic to too many people in Ukraine. Shariy is a “man of war,” and with whom and against whom he is “at war” depends on many, little predictable factors.

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