

The Far Right in Ukraine

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An Interview with Taras Bilous

Taras Bilous is a Ukrainian historian, an editor of *Commons: Journal of Social Criticism*, and an activist in Sotsialniy Rukh (Social Movement). He is currently serving in the Ukrainian army. He was interviewed by Stephen R. Shalom, a member of the *New Politics* editorial board. Denys Pilash helped with the translation.

New Politics (NP): How would you assess the influence of far-right forces in Ukraine? We have seen claims that, on the one hand, suggest that Ukraine is a Nazi state, or, on the other hand, that the far right is an insignificant factor in Ukrainian life. What is your assessment?

Taras Bilous (TB): Basically, their electoral influence is abysmal, it is small, but they use their strengths in other fields, like on the streets, to try to influence policies. Their extra-parliamentary influence should be neither diminished nor exaggerated.

NP: Is it the case that the far right has the ability to block policies it doesn't like by threatening violence?

TB: The most significant example of this was the so-called "protest against capitulation," the protest against peace initiatives in late 2019 after Zelensky was elected president. This was an effort by the nationalist right to stop the initiation of the peace process. There had been an agreement that there would be a troop disengagement at three points of what was then the line between Ukrainian forces and Russian/separatist forces in Donbas. Then people from around the Azov movement, and from the National Corps Party, staged a campaign there, at one of these points, presenting this disengagement as if it represented some kind of gain for the Kremlin, as if Ukrainian troops alone were called upon to withdraw and leave their positions. But this wasn't what the disengagement required; it required both sides to pull back.

But even in this case, which was so crucial for the right, where they tried to achieve their maximum mobilization for this activity, they didn't succeed in achieving their point of view because Zelensky intervened personally. He traveled to that line of forces and engaged in heated discussions with some Azov members, and eventually Ukraine did carry out this disengagement, which was a prerequisite for resuming the meeting in the "Normandy Format" with France and Germany as mediators between Ukraine and Russia. So even in this case the right was unable to block governmental policy.

It's not only a matter of how much effort the far right puts into their campaigns that determines whether they succeed. It's especially a question of how their positions align with the broader position of Ukrainian society in general, because when their demands contradict the position of the majority of the society, it's much harder for them to push them through; on the other hand, when they support the position of the broader population, then they have more chance of influencing government decisions.

Some of the Western leftist press made it seem as if Zelensky retreated on his policies under the pressure of the far right. But they didn't succeed in thwarting his peace initiatives, which were favored by the majority of the Ukrainian population and for which Zelensky felt he had a popular mandate. On the other hand, the polls showed that the majority of Ukrainians, while supporting the peace process, rejected some specific political demands pushed by the Russian side. And here Zelensky had to backtrack.

In those policy areas where the positions of the far right did not coincide with the views of liberals and national liberals, the far right wasn't successful in fulfilling their pressure on the government. For instance, on gender policies or LGBTQ issues, where the right found itself in the minority, it wasn't able to influence governmental decisions

NP: Could you say a bit more about the behavior of the far right towards feminists and LGBTQ people? And what is the role of the Ukrainian police and security forces in dealing with this?

TB: Far-right groups before the war actively tried to disrupt different events promoting women's and LGBTQ rights. Here we could see that the reaction of the State and the police was heavily dependent on whether the event had a lot of international coverage, like for instance, the Pride parade in Kyiv or the 8th of March women's demos. In which case the authorities and the police tried to prevent these far-right attacks. However, at lesser-known events in the provinces, in some smaller cities and towns, they were also actively attacked by the far right, and then the police were usually quite inactive, standing by and doing nothing. So in these cases the far right was more successful in attacking and disrupting these events.

There was a general phenomenon of the far right infiltrating the security services and law enforcement, but it's hard to measure to what extent this occurred. We know some prime examples, for instance, the local head of the Kyiv police came from an Azov background. When we had confrontations between leftist and far-right activists, we often saw the police greeting some from the far right, showing that they were familiar with each other. This again implied that there were some connections. But actually it seems that this wasn't so widespread.

Even in those cases where the police do nothing to prevent attacks on feminist and other progressive events, it doesn't automatically mean that they do this because they feel affinity for the attackers or that they have some connections to them. The police are not doing their primary job, which is to protect peaceful gatherings, but not so much because they are on the side of attacks, but because abstaining and doing nothing cause them fewer problems. Defending an LGBT event (for example) can lead to far-right attacks on the police, which can lead to police injuries. Therefore, to avoid a fight with the far right, it is easier for them to simply do nothing. The arrest of the far right will lead to other far-right mobilizing, organizing a picket outside the police station, and generally putting pressure on the police. The police want less trouble, so it's often easier for them to insist that the organizers cancel their event, than to fight the far right. Of course, this is the failure of the police to fulfill its duty to protect freedom of assembly. They behave similarly in cases of conflicts with high-ranking officials or other persons who may create problems for them.

The situation was improving, however, after the removal of Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, who was widely seen as a patron of the National Corps and other far-right groups. After he left office in 2021, there was a series of arrests of far-right activists, and we could feel a general improvement in the situation, and there were trends showing that far-right influence in the security services was shrinking.

But the situation might be different in the case of the so-called municipal guards. These are

paramilitary structures that were created in some cities as assistants to police law enforcement, in many cases with rather dubious legal status. The far right tried to present this as a way to employ veterans of the war.

The far right infiltrated the municipal guard in Kyiv and some other places, and actually played major roles. They were accountable to the local authorities, to the municipal leadership, to the mayors, but at the same time they had this very questionable legal status. So this was an opportunity for the far right to gain more influence. In other cities, though, the far right wasn't present in creating the municipal guards. Instead they were usually comprised of some kind of athletes and were just loyal servants to the local elites, almost in a feudal way.

NP: What was the relationship between the Ukrainian left and the Ukrainian far right before the war?

TB: Well, obviously, our attitude was directly opposed to them, and we were in perpetual confrontation with them. But we can say that the war in Donbas, when it started in 2014, contributed to the decline of the strength of leftist movements, and in the streets the far right grew more powerful, while the left was in decline. Actually in these confrontations with the far right, the best outcome was usually a draw. But in recent years there was some reversal of these trends, and there was a revival of the street antifa movement and some anti-fascist victories on the side of the left. So there were some signs that the situation was reversing direction.

NP: Turning to February 2022, how has the full-scale war affected the influence of the far right?

TB: It is not an easy task to answer this question, because with the war political life in Ukraine has been put on pause. It's quite complicated to predict what the situation will be after the war given that it's so dependent on the war's outcome.

So what changed with the war? Lots of the far right, the majority of them, went into the military. Some remained, and sometimes they did some controversial things behind the lines — but they were usually criticized for this by general public opinion. So, for instance, when the far right did its usual stuff and tried to attack and discredit a feminist protest in Lviv against domestic violence, it actually rather backfired because they didn't find some huge popular support for the activity. On the contrary, the coverage was favorable to the feminist activists and to supporting organizations, including ours, including from one popular YouTube blogger, and in some mainstream media. So we can say that far-right activity of this sort isn't very much tolerated behind the lines.

This is actually very important, because it was precisely the weakness of resistance to the far right, the uncritical attitude towards them in the mainstream media and from a significant part of the moderate public, that was one of the main advantages of the Ukrainian far right. They skillfully used the halo of "heroes" they had won on the Maidan in 2014 and in the war in Donbas to protect themselves from criticism.

In fact, if you evaluate the power of the Ukrainian far right in absolute terms, it has never set a record. Everyone knows about their electoral weakness, but even if we talk about street mobilizations, the Polish far right is definitely stronger than their Ukrainian "colleagues" in this regard. It's enough to compare each year the largest street marches — [October 14](#) in Ukraine and [November 11](#) in Poland — to understand this. In terms of the scale of violence, the Ukrainian far right also pales in comparison to what the [Russian far right did in the 2000s](#), often under the cover of the Russian special services. In fact, Ukrainian neo-Nazis acted before the Maidan in the shadow and under the great influence of Russian neo-Nazis. The main difference in the Ukrainian situation

after the Maidan is not in the absolute power of the far right, but in its relative power compared to other political actors, as well as in the uncritical attitude of the mainstream moderate public towards them.

But in recent years, public opinion about them has changed, and this was one of the reasons why the anti-racist and anti-fascist antifa group Arsenal (Kyiv) dared to come out of the deep underground and challenge the far right again. In 2014-2018, in the case of clashes between the left and the right, public opinion was not on our side. But during the struggle in the summer of 2021, the far right became the “bad guys” in the media. And it seems that after the war this trend will continue because the far right will no longer be able to defend themselves from criticism as before.

NP: But why won't their war-time heroism, for example at Mariupol, enable them to deflect criticisms?

TB: It protects them. But only as a military unit. This does not transfer to the far right as a political actor.

Over the past years, Ukrainian society has come a long way in establishing the position that heroism at the front cannot be an indulgence for those who commit crimes and human rights violations in the rear. And although on some other issues during the full-scale war there was a worsening of the situation, on this issue I do not see a rollback.

Also, after this war, there will be veterans from all sectors of the population and on both sides of political conflicts. Now there are military volunteers even among the Roma, the most discriminated-against group in Ukrainian society — despite the fact that participation in the war goes against their own traditions. If in 2018 the far right managed to stage a series of pogroms against Roma without serious consequences for themselves, now this will no longer be the case.

But there is one category of people who will not be able to protect themselves in this way — the pro-Russian residents of Donbas and Crimea. Therefore, it is necessary that international organizations take an active part in the protection of human rights in these territories.

NP: Let's turn to the question of the Azov regiment. How significant are they? Are they an independent military force? Do they have their own far-right symbols? And, to ask about an issue that's been raised on the US left, is US military aid to Ukraine actually arming neo-Nazi units?

TB: The Azov regiment was integrated inside the National Guard and inside the official structures, but it still retained some level of autonomy. There were some steps to control it by Ukrainian officials, like to change its leadership, but it still retained its links with its founders like Andriy Biletsky, and it even had its own Sergeant School.

The majority of original Azov regiment were in Mariupol, and lots of them were taken prisoner. Some were exchanged in prisoner swaps, but the majority are still in Russian captivity, and the commanders are interned in Turkey. Nevertheless, the regiment has been replenished with new people and continues recruiting. I don't know how much they managed to restore the structure.

What is more important after the full-scale invasion, the people associated with the Azov movement also set up a number of other units, like territorial defense units, for instance, which were connected to the Azov movement, using the Azov brand. The largest of them, the Kyiv Azov Special Operations Forces unit, was turned into an assault brigade at the end of January. So in general, compared to 2014 or 2021, in absolute numbers now far more far-right individuals have joined the military, and

far more people are serving in the units they created. But at the same time, in relative terms, they play a smaller role in the war than in 2014, because the army in general has grown and modernized much more.

But it's important to understand that not only far-right individuals serve in the units created by the far right. (On the other hand, you can also find the far right in "regular" units). It's difficult to determine the percentages, but apolitical or centrist people often serve in far-right units, motivated by the high level of training and discipline in these units. When you join a fighting army, you first think about your chances of survival, the conditions of service, the competence of the officers, and the reliability of your fellow soldiers. Political views recede into the background. What will happen to these units and the people who serve in them after the war depends on the results of the war and the general political situation in Ukraine.

What I see with my own eyes is that the situation today is not comparable with 2014. Back then the level of State control over the military units that were created was minimal. Everything was very chaotic. I even know the story of how in 2014 one volunteer stole an entire armored personnel carrier and took it from Donbas to Western Ukraine. Today, however, there is strict control over the distribution of weapons, more control over these separate units, and from what I know, none of the recently founded smaller units enjoys a level of autonomy comparable with Azov in previous years. So actually, the situation is qualitatively quite different from what it was eight or nine years ago.

To illustrate this stricter state control over military units and over arms distribution, let me refer to my own experience. My previous battalion was disbanded, and I was transferred to some other one in our brigade. When the battalion was disbanded, it was discovered that several Kalashnikovs were missing. This triggered an immediate reaction from law enforcement. The military prosecutors office started an investigation and opened criminal cases against the officers who were responsible for the control of weapons in that battalion. This shows that the State tries to control very strictly where all the armaments and equipment goes, and that it's not going to some unauthorized individuals. This is one of aspect of the stricter state control over different armed units.

Regarding this notion of the West arming Nazis, and so on, the weapons are distributed more or less evenly among different units. So there might be some far-right people, people with far-right beliefs, in some units, but they are not specifically given this weaponry. Moreover, given the stricter control I described, this means that the weapons are going to be confiscated after the war, taken back by the State.

So more or less all the people who joined the armed forces are more or less equal in their access to different weapons. And obviously it's not the case that heavy weaponry from the West is being directed to far-right units. It's that ordinary units are getting the weapons, and maybe they have some people with far-right views, as well as people with all other beliefs, in their ranks. So there's no specific arming of the right.

Regarding the right-wing symbols, back in 2015, under pressure from the authorities, Azov removed the Black Sun from its insignia and tipped the emblem at an angle to distance itself from the far-right symbols. Last year, the departure from far-right symbols continued - the newly created Azov units [use three swords](#) instead of the symbol of the Azov regiment. The [new brigade uses a symbol](#) created on the basis of the previous emblem, but it has almost no resemblance to the Wolfsangel.

On the other hand, in the army now many soldiers and even lower-ranking officers wear various non-statutory military patches. It's a popular kind of merch that people buy at the military shops, it's not controlled in any way. They are often humorous, or have inscriptions on them like "[Russian warship, go fuck yourself](#)." But sometimes there are far-right symbols on these patches, like the Wolfsangel or

Totenkopf. I have encountered cases where people wore patches with far-right symbols but had absolutely no understanding of its origin and meaning. One guy took off the Black Sun symbol when an anarchist from my former unit explained to him what it signified and showed him the Wikipedia article. Of course, those who started using these symbols in Ukraine understood well what they meant. But now if you see a guy with a Totenkopf, he might think it's just a skull and bones. So just because people use such symbols doesn't indicate that people are supporting their far-right meaning.

NP: Volodymyr Ishchenko, in a recent [article](#) in *New Left Review*, has argued that Ukraine in wartime, unlike other anti-colonial struggles, has become increasingly neoliberal, not more democratic, not more state interventionist, and not less corrupt. Do you think he is correct, and are these indications of the growing strength of the far right?

TB: Starting with the latter question, I don't see any relevance of the far right to this question. But regarding the first question, there are two separate aspects: one is about anti-democratic and authoritarian tendencies and the other is about social and economic policies. Regarding anti-democratic trends, actually we can't say that all previous national liberation movements were immune to that. On the contrary, war usually evokes more authoritarian and less democratic tendencies, and this applied to many of the liberation movements in Asia and Africa, just dictated by conditions. So, yes, obviously the war creates possibilities for authoritarian trends, and it can be used by the State authorities, by the government. But whether this will lead to more authoritarianism will heavily depend on the course and outcome of the war. And it's unclear how the far right will react to this, whether they will, in a way, try to adapt to this, to support it, or whether they will, on the contrary, fall victim to confrontation with the government. So actually there's a lot that is unspecified, due to the unclear outcome of the war.

Regarding social and the economic policies, again, we can't say that we have a clear picture, because on the one hand you have neo-liberal mantras and the liberalization of labor relations and labor markets. But on the other hand, there are objective reasons that push the Ukrainian Government – even though it speaks about privatization – to have undertaken a number of nationalizations in strategic sectors, nationalizing some big enterprises, factories that link to the military, to the energy sector, and so on. In addition, in the course of postwar reconstruction funds will be distributed via the State. So the percentage of the GDP that is concentrated in the hands of the State will clearly rise, both because of these nationalizations and the control of the reconstruction funds. So we cannot say that there is some very clear and one-sided tendency.

I have a [thread on twitter](#) about the class nature of the Zelensky government and I argue that it represents primarily the interests of middle bourgeoisie, or the classic bourgeoisie as opposed to both the working class and oligarchic capital. So on the one hand they are very eager and highly active in pushing neoliberal anti-labor legislation. But at the same time they are also interested in subduing the power of the oligarchs. Actually the war has already disrupted the level of oligarchic influence. So again, the outcome of the war will heavily influence both politics and the economy. And despite their neo-liberal ideology, they have been forced to carry out some steps that are contrary to their ideological positions in order to create a war economy.

NP: Finally, I'd like to ask you this. There is broad support in Ukraine for resisting the Russian invasion, from left to right. But in what ways does the left position on the war differ from that of the right in terms of goals and strategy?

TB: There are some pretty obvious distinctions in our and their visions of the future of postwar Ukraine. Obviously, the left wants a more socially-oriented, more pluralistic, more democratic, more inclusive country, while the far right, libertarians, and conservatives, stand for some opposite

positions.

And then we have the question of self-determination, and it becomes a bit more complicated. When we go on to consider the issues of Crimea and Donbas, in the left camp there isn't a single position, but a spectrum of visions. We also do not have a consensus on the European Union and NATO.

The full-scale Russian invasion partially smoothed over the former conflicts between the various leftists in Ukraine, because on the most important issue, the absolute majority of the Ukrainian left took the same position — support and participation in the resistance. But the issues that divided the Ukrainian left in the past still haven't disappeared.

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