

“Russia is giving carte blanche to the far right”

Tuesday 21 March 2023, by [MOVCHAN Sergey](#), [TUSHKIN Alexander](#) (Date first published: 24 February 2023).

A year ago, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a war against Ukraine on the pretext of “denazification”. A year after the outbreak of war, IRGAC member Alexander Tushkin from Russia spoke to Sergey Movchan, left-wing activist and participant in the Marker project which tracks far-right violence in Ukraine, about Ukrainian nationalism, the far right and antifascists in the Ukrainian army, and how the war has affected their position in society.

It’s been a year since the war began. How has Ukrainian society changed over this time?

Ukrainian society is very united, at least on the surface. It’s very tired. It is very traumatized, but it is ready to go on fighting and not ready to make any concessions. The readiness to resist further, no matter what, is the public consensus, and the support for the actions of the authorities exceeds 90 percent. Society is very angry, first of all with the Russians.

What is your project doing now in the context of war?

Our focus was originally on monitoring far-right street violence in Ukraine. However, it has disappeared in Ukraine as everyone has gone to the front, so we are working on other things. Our group tracks the discursive element and monitors their narratives — roughly speaking, we look at what the far right write about in their social media when they are not writing about war. It’s not just the total dehumanization of the enemy — everyone in Ukraine, including the left, is doing it now. First and foremost we are interested in what the far right sees as a problem in Ukrainian society and how they write about it.

The vast majority of the far right, when they speak out on public issues, are still focused on criticism of the LGBTQ+ community. They say “we are fighting here and yet there are some others just sitting there”. They have even coined the special term “Munich territorial defence battalion”, suggesting that all members of the LGBTQ+ community in Ukraine have fled. That said, there are public LGBTQ+ members of the defence forces in Ukraine. The Ukrainian LGBTQ+ community invests a lot in the visibility of its representatives. One of the most famous is volunteer [Viktor Pilipenko](#). Our collective also [supports](#) the non-binary person and anarcho-feminist [Klema](#), who returned from Berlin to go to the front. The far right sees LGBTQ+ as part of the liberal agenda, who are also identified as mainstream opponents. By “liberals” I mean a wide layer of civil society, NGOs, and various organizations which transformed themselves into volunteer activism during the war. The Ukrainian far right hardly mention us, the radical left.

How has the situation regarding far-right groups changed since the war began?

The far-right groups in Ukraine have been doing quite well over the last few years, although many of them have come under increasing criticism.

They have tried to integrate into various projects, such as the Miska Varta [municipal guard], or created their own paramilitary structures. They were elected to public councils at ministries, took grants from the state or local authorities for their cultural and patriotic projects. In general, some far-right groups were normalized at the level of society, but did not enter the political mainstream. Their low electoral successes are well known: in the parliamentary elections of 2020, the Right Sector coalition managed to get only 2.17 percent of the vote with a barrier of 5 percent. Right-wing party Svoboda only managed to get one deputy into the Verkhovna Rada [parliament], under the majoritarian system, as well as four mayors in Western Ukraine, where Svoboda traditionally has strong support.

At the same time, despite their electoral weakness, the far right was actively present in the streets and engaged in street violence. Thus in the year 2021 our monitoring recorded 177 cases of far-right violence or confrontation. However, it was not excessively violent — usually they were limited to disrupting events or damaging property. Only 58 of these were cases of violence against people. The main targets for attack by the far right were representatives of the pro-Russian opposition. Feminists and LGBTQ+ persons were in second place, followed by leftists, liberals, and Roma.

It was the fight against the LGBTQ+ community and liberals that gave the far right a bad reputation. And liberals began to identify the far right as Kremlin agents, saying that real nationalists are acceptable and don't do such things. And those who [attacked the clubs in Podol](#) are provocateurs. There was even an investigation that proved the Kremlin's roots in the anti-gender far-right rhetoric in Ukraine and that it was an information special operation. Now, of course, there is almost nothing left of this narrative. With very few exceptions, like [Sergei Korotkih](#), the far right is now normalized again. Now in Ukraine, the far right is infiltrating the army, where their position has clearly strengthened. There they are also fully normalized as well-motivated fighters.

How are the far right represented in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU)?

When I talk about infiltration, it is difficult to speak with names, because there are no visible far right in important state or military positions. On the other hand, when our leftist comrades tried to join various units of the AFU, they regularly bumped into far-right activists who were involved in selection. We can see that units with a far-right background are growing and integrating into the army. Of course, the Ukrainian army today needs all kinds of fighters, be they nationalists or anarchists, and the question of political views recedes into the background. But the risks of such integration in the future are obvious. On the other hand, once in the army, far-right units lose their independence, as happened, for example, with the [Right Sector Volunteer Corps](#). Whereas in 2014 these units fought as volunteers, they are now fully integrated into the AFU. They have strict command and army protocols, and in the media field it will be more difficult for them to speak with a political agenda. The independence of such units cannot be even close to the same as [Wagner PMC](#) on the other side of the front line, which is essentially a private army.

If we are talking about that National Guard Azov Regiment in Mariupol, it has never completely lost all contact with the Azov political party and its leader, the leader of the far-right National Corps party Andriy Biletsky. At the same time, every year they drifted more and more from politics to a more professional military unit. Therefore, many people joined Azov as a badass battalion with a name, rather than as a far-right unit. This led to the percentage of the far right in Azov decreasing dramatically and its political positioning almost disappearing. Therefore I would not label it as „Nazi“, as Russian propaganda has repeatedly done, at present. It is not the same as it was in 2014.

But since the beginning of the war, a number of units have been created — with a basis in the National Corps party — which also carry the Azov brand. For example, the separate special-purpose Azov, or Kraken, headed by the head of the party's Kharkiv branch, Konstantin Nemichev. The

Kraken is most likely subordinate to the Main Directorate of Intelligence (GUR). As our observations show, many far-right units are oriented precisely towards the GUR. Others have become part of the [International Legion](#) of the AFU. Among them are outspoken Nazis from the [Russian Volunteer Corps](#) of Russian Nazi Denis “WhiteRex” Kapustin and the Belarusian Volunteer Corps.

There is also the Revanche Battalion, founded by members of the far-right organization Tradition and Order. The classic street skinheads went there. Just before the war they tried to organize a conservative party, but ended up going to the front as part of their own unit. As part of the Revanche, there is the Clear Sky unit of Alexei “Stalker” Svinarenko. These were the men who were engaged in street terror and actively attacked leftists, feminists, LGBTQ+, and antifascists.

And what is the position of Ukrainian antifascists now?

A huge number of our antifascists have gone to war. On the front they cross paths with Ukrainian fascists, but they have a truce. We really have a people’s war, when even sworn enemies can fight shoulder to shoulder in the same trench. Others have started doing volunteer work. This enabled us to establish a huge number of contacts with the Western antifascist movement, the left, and anarchists.

But the war will one day be over, and the confrontation will begin again with renewed vigour. The main question in post-war Ukraine, it seems to me, will be, “where were you during the war?” Of course, veterans will have the primary right to ask such questions — but every political force, including liberals, leftists, and the LGBTQ+ community, has them now. I am therefore cautiously optimistic that the far right will not be able to monopolize the topic of sacrifice and heroism in war, as they did after 2014. Back then, the volunteer battalions were the main heroes, but now the AFU as a whole.

Now, for the Ukrainian left, participation in the war, of course, apart from directly defending against invasion, is part of the future political struggle for the post-war arrangement of the country. Without this, leftists and anarchists, like any political movement, simply have no chance.

Left-wing parties have been banned in Ukraine. What could be a new leftist project in Ukraine?

All these parties were not leftist in their essence. No more than the Russian LDPR are liberals. Politics in Ukraine is depoliticized as much as possible, we have parties not of ideologies, but of names and oligarchs. Or both. If a party with a leftist ideology is created in Ukraine, it will not fall under any ban, unless it will be called the Communist Party of Ukraine and will take one of the Soviet symbols as a logo. Such a new leftist party is wanted by comrades from the [Social Movement](#), which is now pushing for the abolition of Ukraine’s foreign debt.

Accusations of fascism are heard from both sides. Maybe an antifascist lens is not appropriate for the analysis of this war?

First we have to come to a consensus on what we understand by the word “fascism”. Is it a set of ideas, a form of political regime, a collective term for all right-wing conservatives? The term “authoritarianism” seems to me much better suited to describe Putin’s regime, which has no clear ideology of its own. After all, the so-called “special military operation” in Russia is supported by outright Nazis and conservatives as well as communists who are nostalgic for the USSR. It is an ideological cocktail. I do see serious differences between Putinism and fascism, which of course does not make Putin’s regime any better. In Russia, people don’t enrol en masse in United Russia, and the ideology rather works to depoliticize and disengage society from active participation. But I won’t

protest against using the word “fascism” in its broadest sense to describe where the Russian state is heading either.

For me, antifascism is not just about being against the Nazis in the streets. It’s a broader ideology that involves resistance to various forms of oppression. So if we look at antifascism in that vein, then yes, I believe that antifascism is an appropriate ideology on which to base my resistance to invasion and my radical rejection of Putin’s regime. In my view, anyone who associates themselves with antifascism should come to such conclusions.

The fact that denazification was the [purported] reason for the invasion and the justification for the war gives carte blanche to the far right. It is clear that Ukrainian fascism and Nazis in power in Ukraine are the Kremlin’s fabrications. But now the real, not invented, Nazis in Ukraine can say without hesitation that the swastika on their shoulder is their way of trolling Russians. No one takes the subject of the far-right threat in Ukraine seriously anymore. It is perceived as Russian propaganda. The very raising of the issue will immediately put you on a par with Russian propagandists.

How do you then monitor the far right during a war?

At the moment it is not a priority for me. My main activity is focused on something else entirely — volunteer work. At the start of the war, we decided that we would not publish an annual report. The subject of antifascism and the fight against the far right was so hijacked by Putin and distorted by Russian propaganda that it was just impossible to talk about it then.

Now it seems to me that our research helps to speak objectively about the problem of the presence of the far right in Ukraine and assess its real scale. The absolute fakeness of Russian propaganda which describes Ukraine as a “Nazi country with a Nazi president”. My knowledge allows, without whitewashing Ukraine, which I consider as a losing strategy, to also show the general insignificance of far-right violence in comparison to the war Putin has unleashed. But if the far right is a problem in our country, you have to be honest about it.

Is what you are doing now in Ukraine dangerous?

Not in the sense that they will come and beat me up. I am not afraid of anything. There is a truce now [between the Ukrainian far right and far left]. Recently I even met in the street an old acquaintance of mine who is a far-right activist. We had a nice chat and he even offered to help me in some matters.

It’s more a question of reputational danger: it’s just that you will very quickly be labelled as a Kremlin agent and cancelled. Say the wrong thing, use the wrong wording in conversation with the wrong people — and it will be very difficult to clear your name. You won’t be able to engage in your other constructive activities anymore.

That’s why you have to be very careful when talking about this topic. Every time before I start to say something about the far right, I make sure to add that this is really not the main problem in Ukraine right now. And right now the threat from the far right is not comparable to Russian aggression.

If the far right do not pose a threat, then what is nationalism in Ukraine?

In Ukraine, we are dealing with a very strange and rather radical form of civic nationalism united around a common enemy. “Ukrainianness” is not perceived ethnically by many people now. The line of demarcation rather runs along the theme of supporting or not supporting Ukraine in the war. Although there is a problem with this, it is indeed something that unites the country. It is primarily

Russians who are dehumanized and excluded from the nation, those who somehow justify the war, dilute responsibility or, at times, do not make their position clear enough. Aggressive nationalism primarily targets Russians in uniform: "There are no good Russians. Russian means guilty". This hatred has taken hold of Ukrainian society in its entirety. The figures of Bandera, OUN-UPA, and other nationalist figures, whose images are associated with the fight against Russia, have become extremely popular. Other classic conservative ideas, such as antifeminism, antisemitism, authoritarian leadership and the like, are not very popular.

What about demonstrative anti-communism?

Indeed, it's the sort of thing that always sticks to nationalism. And many nationalists work to equate Russia with the Soviet Union and Marx and Engels with "chief Bolshevik" Putin. Sometimes quite successfully. Take, for example, the [law on decommunization](#) [in 2015, Ukraine passed the first laws on decommunization, resulting in many Soviet monuments being destroyed and street and town names being changed — ed.]. Or the proposal to abolish 8 March and 1 May because they are "Soviet".

But none of this would have been feasible if Russia itself had not used Soviet symbols in this war. The mythology of "grandfathers" who fought, the red flags on Russian tanks, the restoration of monuments to Soviet leaders, the St. George ribbons on uniforms — all this is more than enough to generate hatred for these already quite discredited symbols here. As I said before, Russia is giving carte blanche to the far right.

At the same time there is a reverse trend. We often have people saying that Putin is Hitler. Some far-right activists have even taken offence and asked not to call Russians fascists, because fascists were "normal guys, and we are at war with Bolsheviks". The Ukrainian state also sometimes tries to use World War II mythology in its propaganda. But Russia, which has fully appropriated this myth, plays an incomparably bigger role in this field.

What is the position of the far right in the project of civil nationalism in Ukraine?

This is a project of cultural nationalism, which is more actively promoted by the government and the liberal-minded public than the extreme right. It is about the need for everyone to switch to the Ukrainian language, throw out Russian culture, and consume only Ukrainian or Western content. It is all very popular, and these ideas are even promoted by some leftists. Only they conceptualize it in a different way: through anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism.

Although, from my point of view, it was the nationalists who introduced those themes. Before 2004, issues of language, culture, or historical politics were marginal. But it was the presidential campaign of 2003 and the ensuing [Orange Revolution](#) that instrumentalized these topics to mobilize their supporters. And the victory of Viktor Yushchenko, who issued the maximum number of decrees on political history topics, cemented these issues in the political mainstream. I partly attribute the low success of the far right in the elections to the fact that their demands for culture and language were once exclusively taken over and appropriated by the political mainstream as a result. Remember, for example, Poroshenko's pre-election slogan "Army! Language! Faith!" The question is, why would anyone want to vote for the far more marginal Right Sector after that? And the already more radical demands of the far right are less appealing to the public.

Although today the voices of the far right are again being heard. Some of them have become prominent bloggers and have collected hundreds of thousands of subscribers and views on their videos since the war began. For example, the head of the far-right [S14](#) (now Foundation of the Future) Yevhen Karas, the same odious neo-Nazi Sergei "Botsman" Korotkih, or the leader of the

Belarusian Volunteer Corps, Igor „Yankee“ Noman.

There are other voices with a slightly different agenda. For example, the Ukrainian writer, veteran, and AFU master sergeant Valerii Markus, who speaks from liberal-patriotic positions. Or former presidential advisor Oleksiy Arestovych, who advocated the idea of a multicultural Ukraine. True, he has already been banished.

Arestovych also criticized Ukraine's nation-building project, called for the integration of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine's south-eastern regions, and opposed the abolition of the Russian language. What will happen to this initiative now?

There is no long-term policy on this at the moment. When this same question was asked to the head of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, Oleksiy Danilov, he replied: “and why should we think how we should live with them? They should be the ones thinking about how they should live with us!” Although of course we should not draw global conclusions from this statement, since Danilov is known for such attacks, it is a very characteristic sign that there are no special projects.

And the hegemonic discourse does work in Ukraine. A huge number of people have recently switched to Ukrainian on their own or have given up consuming Russian-language content. Many did it quite consciously, others did it because it is kind of habitual right now. At the same time, the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine itself is not ready to fight for their rights, there is no one to articulate this agenda and therefore they are not represented in the political sphere in any way. Perhaps soon the rejection of the Russian language will become the norm. Everyone will speak Ukrainian and that will be it. The question will disappear by itself.

Is Zelensky a nationalist?

No. Zelensky is rather a compromise figure. Those slogans with which he went to elections in 2019 were aimed at the whole country. It is precisely the multiculturalism of Ukraine and peace in Donbas. The phrases “[who cares what the name of the street will be](#)” or “near which monument will you wait for your girlfriend” are still associated with him. Of course, since then there has been a significant shift in his rhetoric to a much more patriotic direction. However, the mood of the president of a country at war could be far more hawkish than it actually is. That is, Zelensky periodically shows that he still wants to be president of the whole country, not just the ardent patriots.

I think a win for Ukraine would mean a triumph for Zelensky. And that's a good thing. Because if Ukraine signs the peace treaty on disadvantageous conditions, the opportunities for far-right revenge will appear and here the Azov can recall its political roots. And for the first time the far right will be able to get real support from a population that does not accept concessions. The idea that a Ukrainian victory will strengthen the far right is deeply mistaken. It will temporarily strengthen Zelensky as a compromise figure, after which he, like all Ukrainian presidents of all times, will squander his popularity because of a pile of unresolved social and economic issues, and Ukrainians will choose someone else.

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