

# Silence won't make the Ukrainian far right go away

Tuesday 22 February 2022, by [COLBORNE Michael](#) (Date first published: 22 February 2022).

**Acting like any mention of the problem feeds Kremlin propaganda is only making it worse.**

I don't think this is a controversial thing to say: yes, the far right is a problem in Ukraine, but it doesn't in any way justify the actions of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, as he threatens Ukraine with military intervention.

The best known, though not best understood, name on Ukraine's far right — the Azov movement, the subject of my latest book — is being more frequently dropped online by people who want to give Putin a free pass to do what he wants in Ukraine.

The basics: Ukraine's far right, particularly the Azov movement, has long been able to operate with a degree of impunity and openness that makes it the envy of its international peers. The movement grew out of the Azov Regiment (originally a Battalion), formed in the chaos of war in early 2014 by a ragtag group of far-right thugs, football hooligans and international hangers-on — including dozens of Russian citizens — becoming an official unit of Ukraine's National Guard.

With estimates of membership as high as 10,000 members — thankfully nothing near the numbers of fascist parties of the 1930s, with whom it shares more ideological affinity than it will publicly admit — the Azov movement has been able to take advantage of a general "patriotic" turn in Ukrainian mainstream discourse since Russian aggression began in 2014. The movement's leaders have been adept at playing up their own status as veterans, insulating themselves from criticism as mere "patriots" who voluntarily took up arms in the earliest days of the war when Ukraine's military was a shambles. Still, they're not invincible; Azov's alleged longtime patron, the former interior minister Arsen Avakov, left office in July 2021. Since then at least some of the impunity the movement had enjoyed has appeared to fall by the wayside.

What even makes up the Azov movement can depend on who you ask. In 2019 the movement's former international spokesperson publicly described the Azov Regiment as the "military wing" of the Azov movement. These days the regiment and its defenders act like it's a totally unrelated entity, but one that still openly recruits at movement events; witness the Azov movement leader Andriy Biletsky, the regiment's first commander, at its [cultlike](#) yearly honouring of its fallen.

The movement's most public face is the National Corps political party, which won barely 2 per cent of the vote in a coalition with other far-right parties in parliamentary elections in 2019. It's more a brand than a party, a polished PR-focused outfit that isn't above coyly referencing the so-called "14 words", a white supremacist slogan. From Centuria, the black-clad paramilitary that's been part of the movement's civil defence training sessions, to youth camps, book clubs and sports classes, the Azov movement tries to be a one-stop shop for all things far right. There's also a bevy of loosely affiliated but more extreme subgroups under its umbrella as well, including open neo-Nazis who

praise and promote violence.

The Azov movement has used the current crisis to try and make itself appear more mainstream, hosting public civil defence training sessions and positioning itself as *the* force that can best protect Ukraine from its enemies, particularly in the case of a full-scale invasion.

There's long been a real fear in Ukraine of feeding into Kremlin propaganda by talking about the far right; I expect to get heat online for this article, not because of what I've said here, but because I've said anything about the far right at all. It's a fear that, understandably, isn't helped by Putin and company's nonsensical claims about "genocide" in Donbas and its obvious willingness now more than ever to fabricate pretexts for further intervention in Ukraine.

But pretending the far right isn't an issue won't make it go away, and it won't stop people outside Ukraine from talking about it. I know that policymakers in Washington, DC, Berlin, London and Brussels, to name a few capitals, are more concerned about the issue of the far right in Ukraine than a lot of people might realise, even if these concerns don't always percolate out into public. The existence of a well armed, well trained, committed group of far-right extremists and friends is a factor in Ukraine's future, no matter what Putin decides to do in the next few weeks. When the most extreme fringes, for example, muse openly about making lists of "internal enemies" to be killed during the chaos of the first days of a full Russian invasion, refusing to pay attention shouldn't be an option.

As we creep close to the bloodiest of outcomes thanks to Vladimir Putin — the ultimate *causa prima* of the current situation — there's a question I'd pose to Ukrainians and their international defenders. Are these guys from the far right *really* on your side? After all, these guys don't like the European Union or Nato; many see the West as just as big an enemy as the Kremlin.

There are also, ironically enough, a few curious, if unproven, Russia connections. Some in the Azov movement, such as Sergei Korotkikh, have been publicly accused of being agents of Russian security services in one form or another. They've appeared to be OK working with Vladimir Putin's friends when it suits them. From Biletsky on down, in 2019 and 2020 senior Azov movement figures flocked en masse to appear on television channels associated with the pro-Kremlin politician Viktor Medvedchuk (Putin is godfather to his daughter). They happily made appearances on channels whose closure by President Volodymyr Zelensky they'd later cheer.

Still, it has to be stressed — and it's sad that it has to be — none of this justifies or merits Russian intervention in Ukraine. As the scenarios that I considered impossible weeks ago become reality, I'm struck by the dismissiveness from some elements of the compulsively online left about the current situation, as if somehow Ukraine deserves to be invaded, occupied and sectioned up because of the existence of the far right.

I'll ask this, then: is your attitude to Ukraine's current situation, and to Ukrainians as a whole, to abandon them to the whims of a former imperial power simply because there's a far-right problem in the country? It's really not that hard to be critical of the issue of the far-right in Ukraine, and recognise it as a real issue, without justifying a paranoid authoritarian's grasps at the last remnants of a dying empire.

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The New Statesman

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