

An interview with Bellingcat journalist Michael Colborne on the Azov movement in Ukraine

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An interview with Bellingcat journalist Michael Colborne on his recently published book on Ukraine's Azov movement and the global far right, in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Eviane: Your latest book, *From the Fires of War: Ukraine's Azov Movement and the Global Far Right*, was just published this month by Ibidem-verlag/Columbia University Press. This is no doubt a timely read in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Could you begin by telling us about what motivated you to write this book?

Michael: My motivation was fairly simple, honestly. After several months of covering and researching the Azov movement in late 2018 and early 2019, I felt that there was a lack of insight and knowledge into what this movement really was, despite it being the subject of so much media discussion. My book, of course, is hardly some sort of absolute capital-T Truth on what the Azov movement is, but I felt that it was necessary to peel back the layers, as it were, and share my research, analysis and perspectives.

E: How is your approach to writing the book affected by the type of work you conduct at Bellingcat Monitoring?

M: My approach to the book is hugely impacted by the work I do at Bellingcat and particularly our far-right monitoring project, Bellingcat Monitoring. We use open-source research techniques to research the far right in central and eastern Europe (and, on the less public side of things, provide trainings and seminars on how to use open sources to research the far right). So much of my book, as the reader will quickly learn, is drawn from open sources — social media (especially Telegram), for example — and uses publicly-available information to try and paint a picture of the Azov movement. It seems painfully simple, but there really is so much open-source information about the far right that remains untapped, under-explored, and under-used. The extent to which you can map out relationships, propaganda, ideologies, everything through open sources is really something.

E: There is currently much media visibility of the Azov Battalion but also a great amount of misunderstanding of the group and its involvement with the far-right in Ukraine. How would you characterize the role of the Azov movement?

M: I've said before that the Azov movement, or just that shorthand 'Azov,' is one of the most widely discussed yet poorly understood far-right movements in the world. I'd describe the movement like this: it's a multi-pronged, heterogeneous far-right social movement that grew out of its namesake military unit, the Azov Regiment, and exert at least some influence on Ukrainian politics and society

despite its small numbers (e.g., at most 20,000 members estimated at some points in the past). It continues, even during the current invasion, to evolve and grow and adapt, and is probably one of the most PR-savvy far-right movements I've ever seen. But it's not some invincible far-right force — it's had its struggles, its ups and downs, and isn't about to take over Ukraine in some flight of Russian propaganda fancy or become some mass Fascist movement of hundreds of thousands like the 1930s. Discourse on Azov tends to be black-and-white — it's either nothing to be concerned about and uninfluential, or it's literally the NSDAP redux — but there's all sorts of shades of grey in there that get painted over. And studying it helps us, I'd argue, understand other far-right movements around the world.

E: The book maps out a broad ecosystem of the far-right landscape in Ukraine, not just the Azov movement. How do you think the far-right in Ukraine is being viewed by other far-right movements globally? Or is it more isolated than assumed?

M: This is a much tougher question than people might think! There's generally a split on the global far right in terms of how the Azov movement is seen — and at its core it comes down to how they see not Ukraine, but Russia. Of course, on the one hand, Azov has its allies that it has tried to form networks with in the past — far-right allies see Azov as a movement they should aspire to be like, one that can push back not only the 'neo-Bolshevism' they see coming from Vladimir Putin's Russia (a Russia that, they stress, is too diverse and thus in many ways 'un-European' [read: not 'white']) but against the perceived decadence and decay of the west. But Azov has its haters among the global far right — people who see it as a tool of western influence, people who see Russia as some proper bulwark of right-wing values and thus see Azov fighting wrongly against that. In the context of the current invasion, this kind of rhetoric has come out in some pretty ugly language; given that Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is Jewish, Azov gets accused by some on the global far right as being part of all manner of antisemitic conspiracies.

E: What is the potential for growth of the far-right in Ukraine in the context of the ongoing war? Do you think that it will remain regional or is there potential for it to become transnational?

M: Even in the context of the current invasion, I don't see Azov showing the potential right now to become much more transnational than it already is. Sure, the movement has recruited several dozen foreign fighters — not all of whom could be defined as 'far right,' in my view — and has its support from allies across Europe. But for the most part the movement is concerned, understandably so, with what is happening at home. And whether it grows or not in the wake of this brutal, awful war remains to be seen. Ironically, I think the one person in the world most interested in seeing Azov grow because of the war is Vladimir Putin himself.

Eviane Leidig is a Research Fellow in the Current and Emerging Threats programme at ICCT. Her research focuses on far right extremism, gender, and online recruitment, radicalisation, and propaganda. Her regional expertise includes India, North America, and Europe. She holds a PhD from the University of Oslo (MSc, University of Bristol; BA, University of California, Berkeley).

Michael Colborne is a journalist who focuses on the transnational far-right and leads Bellingcat Monitoring, Bellingcat's project to research and monitor the far-right in central and eastern Europe. Michael's latest book, 'From the Fires of War, Ukraine's Azov Movement and the Global Far Right' (Ibidem-verlag/Columbia University Press, 2022) explains how Azov came to be and continues to

exploit Ukraine's fractured social and political situation – including the only ongoing war on European soil – to build one of the most ambitious and dangerous far-right movements in the world.

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