

Two tweets, a 'Phoenix' fable and a hatchet to the bud of left solidarity with Ukraine

Saturday 22 October 2022, by [DERWIN Des](#) (Date first published: 13 October 2022).

The *Phoenix* [piece](#) from 5th May 2022- re-posted in the 'Left Links' Facebook group on 3rd October 2022 - is a case of accusation through association, and association through juxtaposition, seeking to identify Ukrainian activist and academic Nadia Dobrianska with the far right.

In the Facebook group 'Left Links' the *Phoenix* piece was re-posted (3rd October 2022) with the demand for *"some kind of explanation why socialists in Dublin would be hosting an event with Nadia Dobrianska who, if not a fascist, would certainly appear to be aligned with them"*. There is no evidence provided for these innuendos and claims. There is possibly ground for a case of defamation from Nadia Dobrianska.

Two tweets referring to Russian refugees from Nadia Dobrianska were also posted on 'Left Links' (29th September). If these tweets are genuine they – or one in particular – are problematic for her and for a speaker at a left public meeting on Ukraine. These will be discussed later but for now it should be noted that they do not offer evidence that she is fascist, or far right or even has an anti-immigrant position *in general*.

The general political background to a piece on Ukraine in the *Phoenix* is that the magazine tends, like much 'left-leaning' commentary in Ireland on Ukraine, to blame the US and NATO for the invasion and to portray the Zelensky government as oppressive, right wing and particularly objectionable.

The *Phoenix* piece is headed "Azov Human Rights". Azov is a sea to the South of Ukraine. It is also a signal for the imputation of fascist politics to Ukraine's resistance to the invasion, extrapolated from the common propaganda claim that the far right Azov paramilitary organisation reflects the viewpoint of the Ukrainian government. The claim usually denies that Azov has been depoliticised and incorporated into the Ukrainian National Guard engendering the departure of its leaders to found new independent political organisations. Indeed the claim is exactly repeated later in this *Phoenix* article where it says: *"The Azov Battalion is a unit of the National Guard of Ukraine which has as its core white supremacist and neo-Nazi members and ideology."*

The first sentence in 'Azov Human Rights' contains a gratuitous claim that Nadia Dobrianska *"has become quite the Irish media darling"*. This is another signal to those who object to the mainstream media's support for Ukrainian defence and who would see it as the same as the usual media bias and misrepresentation in favour of the West on Palestine, Iraq, Julian Assange, etc.

The *Phoenix* article begins:

"Irish-speaking Nadia Dobrianska works for a human rights organisation in her native Kyiv and has become quite the Irish media darling. Dobrianska works for ZMINA, which

‘aims to promote human rights, the rule of law and the ideas of civil society in Ukraine’ ... one of the high profile cases is that of Serhiy Sternenko... “former head of the regional branch of the Right Sector’ [which] has been widely described as neo-fascist [and] has been linked to attacks on journalists, left-wing party members and offices.”

A second case of ZMINA support for a rightist is then offered. Note she *works for* ZMINA. That is, she does some of the work that ZMINA does and would not presumably be involved at all in every case that ZMINA takes up, such as for instance the two cases cited by *Phoenix*.

ZMINA

What is ZMINA, that it might be so awful to work for? It’s a reputable human rights organisation. It has a bright and extensive website with an unusually accessible and comprehensive amount of information about the organisation and its activities.

ZMINA campaigns and advocates on or about cases in Ukraine, in the Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine and in former Soviet countries such as Belarus and Kazakhstan. It has received donations from the US government. Among the issues it has adopted and made statements about are the following.

On 20 August 2021 ZMINA jointly with other NGOs urged the police to investigate [threats to Odessa Pride](#). Their statement said:

“Equality March is an important human rights event in support of LGBTIQ people... the safety of the march itself is under threat as the right-wing radical group “Tradition and Order” openly threatens the participants with physical violence”

Far from being a rightist ‘*hang ‘em’ and flog ‘em’*’ gang, ZMINA, as part of the 5.00 am Coalition, made a [call](#) on 22nd March 2022 for “*No to lynching. Human rights defenders call on law enforcement to respond appropriately to humiliation of ‘looters’*” The call included these very liberal sentiments, perhaps even going too far against popular justice:

“While in no way justifying looting or other attempts to seize property illegally... Committing violence against perpetrators, beating, undressing, painting faces, tying to poles and other manifestations of so-called public condemnation have much in common with torture and are therefore inherently criminal.”

The painting of ZMINA as a far right or even fascist outfit is absurd for any viewpoint also painting Zelensky and the Ukrainian government as far right or ‘nazi’. Many of ZMINA’s causes are directed against decisions of the Ukrainian government and authorities with civil liberties consequences. For example, together with many other NGOs, on 20th May 2021, ZMINA made a [statement](#) against prospective violations of human rights at the Security Service of Ukraine. It called for: “...international standards on protection of privacy and freedom of expression.. .”

The two tweets from Nadia Dobrianska, discussed below, appear to express prejudice against Russian refugees. If she discriminates against Russian refugees, ZMINA certainly doesn’t discriminate against non-Ukrainian refugees from Ukraine who have been finding obstacles, racist ones, at the borders. On 1st March 2022 , ZMINA led twelve human and civil rights organisations in a statement headed *Human rights defenders call on Ukraine’s neighbouring countries to open borders to nationals of all countries who are forced to flee the war*. It said:

“We call on Ukraine’s neighbouring countries to open borders to nationals of all countries who are forced to leave Ukraine due to Russian invasion. We call on all parties

involved... to counter any instances of personal or institutional discrimination, xenophobia or racism amidst this crisis,."

So now to the only two ZMINA cases instanced by *Phoenix*, where ZMINA apparently came to the aid of rightists. We are told by *Phoenix* that according to a recent ZMINA report, "*one of the high profile cases is that of Serhiy Sternenko. The detailed case report describes how he was beaten and stabbed in February 2018; hit in the neck with a rubber bullet in May 2018; and attacked again the same month. A cause celebre then?*" Sternenko appears to be piece of work and a major far right activist, including in the fascist Right Sector. The ZMINA [report](#) (on the year 2020) referenced by *Phoenix* does mention that Sternenko is "*a former head of the regional branch of the Right Sector*".

Glide

The *Phoenix* piece then goes into a description of the Right Sector and one of its leaders, Dmytro Yarosh, which takes up a considerable proportion of the short *Phoenix* article:

Right Sector is a coalition of radical right-wing groups that emerged during the Maidan Uprising in Ukraine and has been widely described as neo-fascist in its political ideology and practice. It has been linked to attacks on journalists, left-wing political party members and offices. Right Sector leaders Dmytro Yarosh described the 'Equality March' organised for LGBT rights thus: "It's not only aimed at causing the moral decay of the Ukrainian people, it also amount to spitting on the graves of those who died in the fight for Ukraine."

Well, OK. But what has this got to do with Nadia Dobrianska? We have been brought on a glide from Nadia Dobrianska working for ZMINA through ZMINA taking up Sternenko's case, through Sternenko's involvement with a neo-fascist organisation, through that organisation's actions, through a leader of that organisation's comments, to virulent homophobia mixed with a dubious form of nationalism. Most readers, reading at the speed in which most articles in *Phoenix* are given a casual moment of amusement, will probably not have registered too impactfully that there is nothing to link the first clause, Nadia Dobrianska working for ZMINA, with any of the rest of the passage through fascist violence to fascist homophobia.

Phoenix takes up yet more of the short article with a paragraph on Sternenko's violent activism. So interesting. So nothing to do with Dobrianska. Followed by another paragraph saying: "*So it is hardly surprising then that this fascist bootboy might become involved in street confrontations and face charges in the Ukrainian courts.*" And it is hardly surprising that when these attacks and charges include very questionable moves by the state – copiously set out in ZMINA's reports – that a liberal, by-the-law, bourgeois civil liberties body, who are not, like us, for running violent nazis off the streets, should research and publicise the case. It wouldn't make that civil liberties body far right or fascist.

From a later [report](#) by ZMINA and **fifteen other** "civil society organisations" (25th February 2021), it also appears that Sternenko's pursuit by the state, trial and sentence were extra-legal, political and especially harsh. Sternenko's prosecution in the high-profile "case of Shcherbych" is the kind of thing a mainstream 'by the book' civil liberties group would be likely to take up. A [balanced account](#) was published in *Emerging Europe* on 4th March 2021.

Where?

The second case, from the dozens featured in ZMINA's reports and website, instanced in *Phoenix* is:

“Another ‘human rights’ case taken up by ZMINA is that of Ihor Movenko. Based in Sevastopol, Crimea, Movenko was involved in September 2016 in a violent confrontation with police who took offence at the fact that he had the Azov Battalion emblem displayed on his bicycle frame. The Azov battalion is a unit in the National Guard of Ukraine that has at its core white supremacist and neo-Nazi members and ideology. Movenko was, later that month, fined for the confrontation before a further trial related to social media posts for which he was imprisoned.”

The first thing to notice about this case – though naturally it is not emphasised for the *Phoenix* reader by *Phoenix* – is that Ihor Movenko was “*Based in Sevastopol, Crimea*”... “*in September 2016*”. The ‘police’ who took offence at the Azov Battalion emblem on Ihor Movenko’s bicycle would not have been your Ukrainian community bobby conscious enough to challenge a cyclist for a fascist sticker on the frame of his bike. In February and March 2014, *Russia* [invaded and subsequently annexed](#) the Crimean Peninsula. Russia formally incorporated Crimea on *18 March 2014*. The police stopping Ihor Movenko would have been occupation troops or collaborating police. They would have been reacting to a very small expression of defiance and of Ukrainian independence. And the author of the *Phoenix* piece appears to have no problem with that aspect of the ‘human rights’ [the author’s scare quotes] case.

Radio Free Europe (perhaps not the purest source for our purposes here, but bear with us) reported on the Movenko case on 5th May 2018:

A Crimean activist has been sentenced to two years in prison over pro-Ukrainian comments made on social media, a ruling that activists say is unprecedented. Darya Sviridova of the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union [said], “Obviously, a Ukrainian citizen is being persecuted for taking a pro-Ukrainian position on occupied territory...”

Movenko was beaten in Sevastopol in September 2016 while riding a bicycle that displayed a sticker with the symbol of the far-right Azov battalion. Movenko suffered serious injuries in the attack, but police never investigated the incident. Following the assault, Movenko was detained in December 2016 by Russia-installed security authorities in Crimea and charged with extremism on social media.

Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the human rights situation has reportedly deteriorated on the Ukrainian Peninsula. Human Rights Watch has [called Crimea](#) a “black hole” for human rights.

Human Rights Watch is an agency of the Council of Europe which has 46 member states and included Russia at the time. A post by the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group on [27th June 2018](#) had more details to tell about Movenko’s “*violent confrontation with police*”

Movenko [was attacked](#) on 7 September, 2016, after he stopped to get money out of a cash machine and then returned to his bike....The man who brutally assaulted him openly said that he was from the police, though he did not show any ID...This was an unmotivated attack, which left Movenko needing to be hospitalized. The doctors found an open head injury, concussion, a skull fracture, a broken jaw, broken nose, eye injury and more.

It was quite evident that he had been attacked, yet it was Movenko who had his hands bound after the police appeared...The officers even tried to stop Valentina Movenko, who

had come as soon as somebody phoned her, from giving her husband some water as he lay on the ground, handcuffed and in obvious need of medical treatment.

In May 2018 Movenko got two-years over the social media comment. This was reduced to a one-year suspended sentence in June 2018 and he was freed. The above reports put a different complexion on Movenko's *"violent confrontation with police"* (Phoenix).

On the other hand

In the [report](#) from which Phoenix picked the Sternenko case there are long lists of human rights and civil activists who have been attacked in Ukraine, including many defended by ZMINA. For example:

[On] December 10, 2020, in Kryvyi Rih...two unidentified individuals attacked Serhiy Barabashuk, the head of the Union of Miners of the PJSC Sukha Balka, with a knife and brass knuckles... this was not the first case of pressure on Serhiy Barabashuk as a part of his civil activism and of creating obstacles to interaction with workers by PJSC Sukha Balka...Sukha Balka specializes in underground mining of iron ore. It includes two mines. About 3,000 workers are employed there.

A last instance, from the same ZMINA report of 2020 cases:

On January 19, 2020...in Kyiv, there was a protest demonstration against far-right violence...The demonstration was organized by the anti-fascist initiative January 19th Committee. There was also a counter-protest nearby "in the memory of victims of leftist terror," organized by the far-right...

At the same time, some participants of the demonstration faced intimidation after the event. In particular, Taras Bilous, an editor of the Commons magazine, who was holding a banner reading "Disband the Azov Regiment," [sic] reported a phone call two hours after the demonstration advising him "not to do anything stupid." In addition, the activist also received threats in social media posts and direct messages, ... Bilous also reported that someone searched for him at the university dormitory where he used to live, asking dormitory employees about his current whereabouts.

ZMINA were clearly championing an anti-fascist against the threat of fascist violence. The anti-fascist is Taras Bilous, the author of the famous [A Letter to the Western Left from Kiev](#), calling for solidarity with Ukraine.

AZOV

The final paragraph of the Phoenix piece, says, *"Interestingly too, on April 23rd of this year, Dobrianska re-tweeted links to an article on euromaidenpress.com, 'What is the Azov regiment? Honest answers to the most common questions', which attempts to debunk the links of the Azov Battalion to Nazi members and ideology."* It is meant to establish Dobrianska's interest in the far right that she would supply a link on euromaidenpress.com (shock, horror!) which would "attempt" to debunk the Nazi character of the Azov Battalion, that great pro-Putin propagandist talking point. [Euromaidenpress.com](#) actually engages reasonably with readers and can be visited quite easily. The article, *'What is the Azov regiment?'*, makes a very good attempt indeed at debunking that talking point, which any reader, not thrown by the suggestion that the site is "interestingly" suspect, can study for themselves. There is plenty more debunking on the internet too. A very recent and

detailed one is on the site of the Australian university Monash, dated [19th August 2022](#) : ***‘Much Azov about nothing: How the ‘Ukrainian neo-Nazis’ canard fooled the world’.***

ZMINA have taken up the defence of some far right individuals and there is of course a problem of the far right in Ukraine (though, unlike Ukraine with a 2% far right vote in the last Presidential election, France with a 32% far right vote or Italy with a fascist prime minister are not being invaded at the moment). Like ‘Western’ civil liberties and human rights groups, ZMINA are liberal enough to adopt cases where far right militants have been subjected to illegal or brutal treatment. Radical socialists might be more inclined to think, ‘to hell with them’. When they are not themselves bemoaning laws against hate speech or the enforcement of lockdowns on the grounds that the strengthened state might be used against the left.

A puzzle to chew over in all this of course is how or why a far right or fascist ‘human rights’ organisation, and its tainted workers, would organise so effectively, so professionally, so widely (allying with a range of Ukrainian organisations and even, remotely, with the US and the EU) against transgressions of the Ukrainian government, and lately the Zelensky administration, if this government and administration were themselves far right or outright fascist – as claimed or constantly implied by the same geopolitical viewpoint as this article and its author. Claimed even in this very article: *“The Azov battalion is a unit in the National Guard of Ukraine that has at its core white supremacist and neo-Nazi members and ideology”*. They brought a nazi battalion into the national army?!

WHY?

Earlier we said that the *Phoenix* magazine had a particular view of the war in Ukraine, one that might be labeled ‘it’s the West!’ We can go a little further because we are reliably informed that the anonymous author of the *Phoenix* article, later used as a bludgeon against the handful of leftists organising a public meeting to express solidarity with Ukraine, is a well-known journalist associated with a certain ‘left’ politics who has long espoused an ‘it’s the West!’ characterization of the war with a definite extra pro-Russian angle.

The motivation is to produce a hatchet job on an articulate spokesperson for the Ukrainian case, and the method of the *Phoenix* piece, “Azov Human Rights”, sets out to crudely achieve that. Without evidence, reference or mechanism, but with impression and association, the incidental championing by ZMINA of certain cases for some fascists is framed as ZMINA being somehow fascist, and the employment of Nadia Dobrianska in ZMINA, without a word to indicate that she had any connection with any one of these cases, is framed as Dobrianska being somehow fascist or compromised by fascist connections.

The whole splash of mud upon the wall is encapsulated in the title, “Azov Human Rights”. There is no evidence. It is not so much that there are falsehoods in the article; it’s that there are no facts. Or rather the falsehoods are implied, triggered, and the facts don’t support the thesis at all.

So, the passage: *“Interestingly too, on April 23rd of this year, Dobrianska retweeted links to an article on euromaidenpress.com, ‘What is the Azov regiment? Honest answers to the most common questions’, which attempts to debunk the links of the Azov Battalion to Nazi members and ideology.”* Fact: she (probably) re-tweeted those links to that article. The falsehood implied is that there is something fishy about the site and the article, which actually does debunk *“the links of the Azov Battalion to Nazi members and ideology”* or, rather, that the Azov regiment of the Ukrainian National Guard is a Nazi paramilitary force.

The *Phoenix* piece and the two tweets from Nadia Dobrianska were posted on ‘Left Links’ as a

challenge to a public meeting (postponed) being organised for 4th October in Dublin by Irish Left for Ukraine. The meeting would have been – apart from two leaflets and social media posts – a first effort by a few socialists to call for solidarity with Ukraine in contrast to the position, or studied inactivity, on Ukraine of the entire rest of the left. The ‘Left Links’ posters demanded to know how socialists could invite Nadia Dobrianska to speak at a public meeting.

The tweets

While the *Phoenix* piece had no substance, the two tweets from Nadia Dobrianska – especially the second- were unacceptable and, if stood over, disqualified her from the platform of a left public meeting on Ukraine. They needed to be authenticated, and a delay in this allowed some time for the issue to grow legs. The question (from an organiser of the public meeting) to Nadia Dobrianska received no definite ‘yes or no’, but the content was indirectly defended by her. There can be no doubt the tweets were hers. Like the *Phoenix* piece the tweets deserve to be examined in detail.

The tweets were re-posted on ‘Left Links’ immediately after the notice of the public meeting was put up. The two tweets said

The Russians in Tbilisi are already planning to organise a Z-rally in support of annexation of Ukrainian territories. Imagine what will happen when there are more of them. <https://t.co/Ie0WNwX3ZH>

— Nadia Dobrianska (@NadiaDobryanska) [September 29, 2022](#)

As mentioned already they do not offer evidence that she is fascist, or far right or even has an anti-immigrant position in general. But in their attitudes to Russian refugees, and by implication to Russian draft dodgers and Russians in general they are objectionable and politically illiterate, especially for a highly-qualified human rights worker. Yet there is mitigation – not forgiveness – in so far as they apply to Russians only. Following the brutal and murderous invasion of their homes and lives by Russia, displacing millions of Ukrainians, and the pacific and even patriotic greeting of the invasion by most Russian (who of course could neither know the facts nor do much about them in the crushed circumstances of the Russian state), it would be expected – and you can bet it is the case across most of Ukraine – that many Ukrainians would wrongly blame and hate all or most Russians. There can be no shock or mystery about this to an Irish political activist of any experience of the Troubles in the North, where the atrocities of the RUC, the British army and loyalists engendered a hatred among some Catholics of all ‘Brits’ and even Protestants.

The context, let it be kept in mind, for this social media assault is not so much simple mistakes by the organisers of the public meeting. It is the determination of some on the left to damage the public meeting and any efforts to campaign for solidarity with Ukraine, or to challenge the dominant left narrative on the war. A narrative of complete focus on ‘US/NATO’ for all war, and either sneaking support for Russia or an evasive ‘proxy war by both imperialisms’ abdication of solidarity with a people subjected to Russian imperialist aggression.

So who is Nadia Dobrianska then?

On the [ZMINA](#) website she is a Project Coordinator with 10 years of experience in public policy analysis, legislative drafting and analysis of public opinion polls. She co-authored two laws on *migration and the freedom of movement*. In 2015-2016, she served as a Deputy Chief of Law of the political party ‘[Samopomich Union](#)’ (the **Union “Self Reliance”**) in the Parliament of Ukraine.

[The Samopomich Union is a 'liberal conservative' and Christian democratic political party. It identifies with the ideology of "Christian morality and common sense." According to former party leader [Andriy Sadovyi](#), Self Reliance shares the 'liberal conservatism' ideology, but Timofey Milovanov of the University of Pittsburgh disagrees, claiming, "They have no ideology. Some of their laws are conservative, some are populist, and some are liberal". In the 2014 parliamentary election it won 11% of the popular vote and 33 out of 450 seats, and was part of the coalition government until 2016. In the 2019 election it nosedived to 0.6% of the vote with one seat out of 450! It went into opposition. Cf. Wikipedia.]

In 2018, she worked as a policy analyst on the reform of the place of residence for ZMINA. In 2020-2021, she analysed a public opinion survey on Irish unification referendums. She was also a research assistant to the Northern Ireland's Office Centenary Historical Advisory Panel. In 2020, she graduated with an MA in Irish Studies from Queen's University of Belfast. The ZMINA entry adds: "She enjoys travelling, cooking, baking bread and playing the flute."

The *Irish Times* based an article on an interview with Nadia Dobrianska on 23rd February 2022, the day before the main Russian invasion of Ukraine. In *The secret shared history of Ireland and Ukraine: Kyiv native and fluent Irish speaker on the struggle for independence* Naomi O'Leary [wrote](#) about Nadia Dobrianska singing at O'Briens pub in Kiev:

'Independent media were destroyed by Russia, since the occupation,' Dobrianska says...

Dobrianska says that her experience living in Belfast for her studies in 2019 inspired her to do such [human rights]work. [She] discovered profound similarities with the experience of Ukraine, going back to the time of the United Irishmen. In the same era, Ukraine was also experiencing its Ukrainian National Revival, only to be subsumed into the Russian Empire in an echo of Ireland's induction's by the Act of Union in 1801.

Another striking link is the experience of famine...Ukraine's Holodomar or Great Famine of the 1930s was caused by forced collectivisation of small farms... *'The famine is also featuring in our debate about why Ukraine never, ever wants to be under Russian rule'...*

In a long lecture to the Russian nation this week...President Vladimir Putin laid out his alternative version of history, which claims Ukraine is a rightful part of Russia with no case for independence. But the heavy-handed tactics of Moscow and years of suspected interference in local politics as young people led movements to align more closely to the European Union have backfired, in Dobrianska's view.

"Previously, some Ukrainians had this certain 'unionist' sentiment. They were nostalgic about this big Soviet Union that they were part of. Now, though, they see Russia as an aggressor." she says.

End note

Before the 'Left Links' interventions the public meeting had been postponed anyway due to the illness of Yuliya Yurchenko. On the basis of clarity sought from Nadia Dobrianska on the two tweets, Irish Left With Ukraine decided that her position was not compatible with full support for all refugees and asylum seekers, and the invitation to speak at the postponed meeting was, with respect for her general work for Ukrainians, not renewed. The public meeting will take place on a new date in November.

Des Derwin

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P.S.

Tomás Ó Flatharta

<https://tomasoflatharta.com/2022/10/14/two-tweets-a-phoenix-fable-and-a-hatchet-to-the-bud-of-left-solidarity-with-ukraine/>