

Ukraine's Ministry of Veterans Affairs Embraced the Far Right - With Consequences to the U.S.

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Ukraine's President conferred with, and the Prime Minister of Ukraine partied with, known far-right figures as leaders of the country's veterans. Additionally, the top U.S. diplomat in Ukraine, William Taylor, rubbed shoulders with a far-right figure embraced by Ukraine's veterans ministry. We explain why these events happened.

The heads of Ukraine's new government, led by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Prime Minister Oleksiy Honcharuk, have elevated dangerous far-right organizations Azov and C14 by working with their leaders as partners in addressing issues faced by millions of Ukrainians affected by the war against Russian aggression, particularly issues faced by Ukraine's veterans. This partnership has been formed despite the fact that Azov and C14 [are considered extremist far-right organizations](#), and "a threat to Ukrainian democracy" by human rights watchdog Freedom House and other observers.

This boosting of Ukrainian extremist groups stems from the far right's outsized role in Ukraine's Ministry of Veterans Affairs. This ministry was created in November 2018 under Zelenskyy's predecessor Petro Poroshenko, when far-right groups and their leaders were prominently involved in its shaping. Under Zelenskyy, the far right helped preserve the ministry. Currently, the "Veterans Movement of Ukraine" (VMU) holds key positions in the ministry and entirely controls its advisory public councils. The VMU is a coalition of veterans organizations co-founded by the far-right Azov movement, and far-right figures continue to play a leading role in the VMU. There is also a paper-trail reflecting how the ministry funds projects of organizations that are linked to notorious far-right groups.

In particular, the far-right [Azov movement](#) holds notable influence in Ukraine's veterans' ministry. This influence allows them to reach American diplomats, as a member of the Azov movement who leads the Public Council in the ministry spoke at an August 23rd event sponsored by [USAID](#), with America's top diplomat in Ukraine, William Taylor, listening from the front row of the audience.

This is far from the first time that the United States and the Azov movement have crossed paths, as the Ukrainian organization has [actively sought to co-opt parts of the American far right movement](#) for years. While mostly known for their military arm (the Azov Regiment within the Ukrainian National Guard), the Azov movement also has a political party (the National Corps) and a range of other groups, including its own veterans organization "Veterans Brotherhood". In October, a group of Democratic lawmakers in the House of Representatives [asked the U.S. State Department to designate Azov](#) as a foreign terrorist organization due to their outreach activities to American extremists; additionally, U.S. Homeland Security Acting Secretary Kevin McAleenan [told](#) Congress last month that his agency is tracking American white nationalist extremists that go [go to Ukraine to](#)

[train with Azov](#). Previously, the U.S. State Department [described Azov's National Corps](#) and C14 as a "nationalist hate groups", and Congress [banned](#) American weapons from going to the Azov Regiment.

The extreme, embraced by Ukraine's mainstream

In the most high-profile, but far from isolated, incident showing how Ukraine's far-right movement is being mainstreamed by government leaders, Ukrainian Prime Minister Honcharuk and the Minister of Veterans Affairs Oksana Koliada [appeared at an October 2019 event](#) organized by a far-right figure on trial for murder. The event, called "Veterans Strong", was headlined by the neo-Nazi band Sokyra Peruna, well known for its white supremacist, Holocaust-denying, and anti-Semitic lyrics.

However, this investigation demonstrates that no one should have been surprised by this incident. Ukraine's far right has navigated its way into positions of influence at Ukraine's Ministry of Veterans Affairs — which the far right helped create last year.

Meanwhile, other veterans of Ukraine's ongoing war with Russia and Russian-led forces warn that Ukraine's far right and their allies are taking advantage of the ministry to pursue their own agenda, and are not representative of Ukrainian veterans as a whole. One prominent veteran and activist told Bellingcat that the ministry was "hijacked". These developments all come as international leaders and backers of Ukraine, including the United States, continue to work closely with the newly-created ministry.

Despite the fact that they lack any popular support or electoral power, the far-right organizations of Azov and C14 have been elevated to a mainstream force in Ukraine's government. Representatives of these groups have been tapped by Ukraine's top officials as partners due to their role as leaders with the Veterans Movement of Ukraine [VMU] (Рух Ветеранів України). Moreover, the VMU is an organization officially co-founded by the Azov movement's Veterans Brotherhood, and the VMU currently holds a virtual monopoly on representing Ukrainian veterans as a whole to the government. While we do not suggest that all VMU members are far-right, the organization's and Minister Koliada's role in normalizing far-right groups is evident.

The VMU's members lead all public advisory and oversight bodies of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs – the Veterans Council (Рада Ветеранів) and the Public Council (Громадська Рада) – and hold the absolute majority of seats in these bodies. One of these bodies, the ministry's public oversight council (Public Council, Громадська Рада), is led by Dmytro Shatrovsky, head of the Veterans Brotherhood, an organization that is part of the Azov movement. Shatrovsky is also one of the public leaders of the VMU. The Ministry's Veterans Council is led by Volodymyr Lahuta (Володимир Лягура), also a member of the VMU. The VMU's hold on the Ministry of Veterans Affairs is also reflected in [the fact that 2 out of 3 deputies of Minister Koliada](#) are members of VMU, including the first deputy minister [Anton Kolumbet](#), member of the board of the VMU, and deputy minister [Oleksandr Tereshchenko](#), a co-founder of the VMU.

Organizations that currently constitute the VMU, including Azov's Veteran Brotherhood, previously played a crucial role in shaping and the launch of the veterans ministry under the Poroshenko administration in late 2018. In fact, the current configuration at the top of the ministry was set under Poroshenko, and has remained intact under Zelenskyy. Current veterans' minister Oksana Koliada previously served as an advisor to and then the deputy of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs' first head Iryna Friz, a member of Poroshenko's political party.

The "Veterans Strong" event that Honcharuk and Koliada attended was organized by the VMU. That organization's role and ownership of the event was reflected [in promotional materials](#) prior to the

event. A particular role in organization of the event was also played by a far-right figure on trial for murder, Andriy Medvedko, who has become somewhat of a public face of the VMU in recent months. This event was where Ukraine's prime minister rubbed shoulders with various leaders of the VMU, including Azov's Dmytro Shatrovsky, and others, next to minister Koliada and her first deputy, Anton Kolumbet. It is of little surprise that neither Honcharuk nor Koliada have expressed regret for appearing at the event.

In the wake of the scandal, Honcharuk explicitly [stated](#) via Facebook that he does not "share any hateful ideology - neither Nazism, nor fascism, nor communism", and wrote that "some media" covered the incident "with rather ambiguous theses". "The society must treat veterans with respect and honor!" Honcharuk wrote in the statement, in which he also remarked that "It's not up to the head of the Government to dictate our defenders what songs to sing", in an apparent reference to the neo-Nazi band "Sokyra Peruna".

Ukraine's Prime Minister also stressed that he "met representatives of the Veterans Movement of Ukraine, and veterans community" at the event, and was accompanied by the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

In another public occurrence, on October 9th Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy engaged with leaders of the VMU, including Azov's Dmytro Shatrovsky, and leader of far-right organization C14 Yevhen Karas, at a meeting that was apparently facilitated by veterans minister Oksana Koliada, and her deputy, member of the VMU, Anton Kolumbet. Zelenskyy [described](#) the event as a meeting with "veterans", and stated that it included "the National Corps, Azov, and everyone else".

As we detail later in this investigation, over the summer of 2019, the VMU played an important role in ensuring the very existence of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs under Zelenskyy, and securing the appointment of the current minister Oksana Koliada, an earlier ally of organizations that formed the VMU.

A meeting of veterans organizers, VMU members in Azov's "social center"

Oksana Koliada, along with other key veterans organizers and members of the VMU, directly cooperated with Azov's Veterans Brotherhood prior to the ministry's launch. Apparently, the current head of the ministry and members of its advisory public bodies even met in the past on Azov's turf, at their "Cossack House" venue in central Kyiv, before they assumed roles in the government.

A three-story social center for the Azov movement, the Cossack House is home to a number of facilities. For example, it houses a library and book club (the Plomin Club) that [promotes Nazi-era figures](#). Within the Cossack House is also a record label and shop that promotes neo-Nazi concerts and has sold [swastika jewelry](#). Along with these shops is a mixed-martial arts facility and venue for concerts and movies. Lastly, and most importantly for this investigation, the Cossack House serves as the headquarters for the Azov movement's Veterans Brotherhood organization.

The Cossack House has also hosted American and European far-right figures, including American white supremacist Greg Johnson, who [lectured in the Cossack House](#) on the invitation of Azov's National Corps just weeks after Koliada and other veterans' activists gathered there. Incidentally, Johnson was [arrested](#) in Norway on November 3rd while on his way to a far-right conference, and deported from the country; National Corps international secretary Olena Semenyaka was a scheduled speaker at [a previous iteration](#) of the same conference alongside Johnson in March 2019. Leader of the Azov movement Andriy Biletsky [described](#) Cossack House, which is apparently owned by the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, as "the pearl of the Azov movement".

Current minister Koliada, current member of Ukraine's Parliament with the "Voice Party", Lesya Vasylenko (also a current VMU member, and member of veterans' ministry advisory public council), current senior official of the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine Oleksandra Tarasova, current member of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs' advisory council Vitaliy Kuzmenko (also a current VMU member, and member of veterans' ministry advisory Public council), and Svetlana Shepovalova, head of veterans-oriented "Clear Sky" NGO, apparently held at least one [working session with Dmytro Shatrovsky](#) in the [Cossack House](#) in August 2018. A Facebook post by the Veterans Brotherhood lists, and tags, the aforementioned individuals as participants of a working meeting held in the Plomin Club, the book club of the Cossack House. That meeting was dedicated to linking veterans to career opportunities in the government of Ukraine. The Veterans Brotherhood post that includes a photo of a group of individuals taken inside of the "Plomin Club" states that "representative of our organization Dmitry Matros [Shatrovsky's moniker, meaning "sailor" in Ukrainian] reviewed candidates for the second wave of state classes "From the front to the ministry" as part of a commission that included Aleksandra Tarasova, Lessia Vassylenko, Svetlana Shepovalova, Vitaliy Kuzmenko, Oksana Gavrilyuk [Koliada's earlier official last name]". It should be mentioned that the photo in the Veterans Brotherhood post doesn't seem to show Koliada on-location.

At least part of the Veterans Brotherhood account is corroborated by a contemporaneous Facebook [post](#) about the meeting by Lesya Vasylenko, current member of Ukraine's Parliament ("Voice Party"). Vasylenko's post described the same meeting and featured the image used by Veterans Brotherhood, though Vasylenko's post didn't mention Koliada as a participant of the meeting. Koliada [shared](#) Vasylenko's post on her Facebook page.

Numerous Facebook posts by Koliada confirm that she took an active part in the project "From the front to the ministry" that, according to Veterans Brotherhood, also brought her to Azov's "Cossack House". Other posts by Koliada [show her with Shatrovsky](#) before her appointment as the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

Head of the Ministry's public oversight council

Shatrovsky's political leanings, especially given his role in the Azov movement, are not hard to decipher. As one could expect, the Veterans Brotherhood is completely aligned with the Azov movement's political wing, the National Corps party. His ideology becomes even clearer when one sees the patch that he wore on his arm during a May 2019 meeting of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs' public oversight council.

During this meeting that included then-minister Iryna Friz and her deputy (and current minister) Oksana Koliada, Shatrovsky was photographed [wearing a patch](#) featuring a wolf's head bearing its teeth, and a [wolfsangel](#) — symbols associated with Nazism and the Waffen-SS plan to resist Allied forces in Europe during World War II. In 2014, this patch was used by an Azov reconnaissance unit, as detailed in a [2014 Vice article](#) and a [tweet](#) from a former foreign volunteer of the Azov Regiment, Mikael Skillt. Skillt's own views were described in a [2014 BBC report](#) as "typical of a neo-Nazi".

Shatrovsky did not respond to Bellingcat's request to comment on the patch, and the reason why he chose to wear it to a meeting where he represented Ukrainian veterans to the government of Ukraine.

Shatrovsky himself has personally taken part in Azov's international outreach. In March 2018, he [visited Lithuania](#) to promote Azov's international agenda and network with local far-right groups. Shatrovsky was also part of a large Azov delegation that included senior leaders of National Corps and [Olena Semenyaka](#), the party's international secretary. Semenyaka specifically described the Veterans Brotherhood as one of the "structures within the [Azov] movement" on par with National

Corps and National Militia. In a [report](#) on “Interregnum,” Azov’s online resource documenting the movement’s international projects, she detailed a “diplomatic visit” to Lithuania in March 2018. Remarkably, Azov’s leaders, including Shatrovsky, were accompanied during the “diplomatic visit” to Lithuania by the lead singer of neo-Nazi band Sokyra Peruna, Arseniy Bilodub, a fixture for two decades on Ukraine’s far-right scene. Bilodub’s band is the same one that headlined the “Veterans Strong” event attended by Honcharuk and Koliada. Bilodub also helps run a clothing line that [sells a number of clothing articles](#) with neo-Nazi and white supremacist slogans and symbols.

Azov’s man on a USAID-funded stage, with the US Chargé d’Affaires William Taylor listening

Ukraine’s president and prime minister aren’t the only ones coming into contact with notorious far-right figures via the country’s Ministry of Veterans Affairs. In August 2019, Shatrovsky spoke from the main stage of a [Ministry for Veterans Affairs Forum](#) (II Міжнародний ветеранський та волонтерський форум “Там, де ми – там Україна”) that was attended by top officials from Ukraine, including president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, then-National Security Secretary of Ukraine Oleksandr Danylyuk, then-Minister of Veterans Affairs Friz, and others.

The event was officially sponsored by United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and Washington’s top diplomat in Ukraine, Chargé d’Affaires William Taylor, [delivered an address](#) during the event. The event saw Taylor declare “full support for the efforts to help those veterans who have served Ukraine.” At the same event, Azov’s Shatrovsky [spoke as part of a panel that also included then-Minister of Veterans Affairs Friz](#), as well as Ulana Suprun, former Acting Minister of Health in Ukraine, and then-National Security Secretary of Ukraine Oleksandr Danylyuk. Current veterans’ minister Koliada served as deputy minister at the time of the event. A video stream of the event by the Ministry of Veterans Affairs shows Chargé d’Affaires William Taylor [in the front row listening](#) to the panel that included Shatrovsky.

A U.S. diplomat told Bellingcat on background that the Ministry of Veterans Affairs added Shatrovsky as a participant on the day of the event. That U.S. diplomat didn’t answer if William Taylor communicated with Dmytro Shatrovsky during the event. According to that diplomat, the U.S. Embassy, through USAID funding, sponsored the event “to promote engagement between the Ministry and veterans on the range of services available”. Per this same diplomat, the forum, its agenda, and list of participants were organized by the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, under the prior Ukrainian government.

Shatrovsky’s participation, and his speaking role, in a USAID-sponsored event alongside top American diplomat is not without irony. In March 2019, a State Department human rights practices [report](#) described Azov’s National Corps, as well as C14, as “nationalist hate groups.” A February 2019 [“special report”](#) by the United States Institute of Peace – led at the time by none other than William Taylor – warned readers that “wide swaths of Ukrainian society either tolerate or ignore the violence and hate speech perpetrated by veterans and far-right extremists.”

The participation of an Azov figure at a USAID-sponsored event in Kyiv attended by a senior American official is an alarming example of how engaging with Ukraine’s Ministry of Veterans Affairs, in its current configuration, may mean that the United States and other countries will have no choice but to work with far-right leaders. This also means there is a possibility that U.S. government support to Ukraine’s veterans, when delivered through the ministry or the VMU, will likely also boost the far right in Ukraine.

The United States steadily supports Ukraine’s Ministry of Veterans Affairs. Denise Natali, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, met Minister Koliada in

Kyiv in October and discussed ongoing American support for Ukrainian veterans.

Earlier in March 2019, then-Minister Friz and now-Minister Oksana Koliada visited Washington, DC, where, according to Facebook posts by [Koliada](#) and [Friz](#), they met figures like Laura K. Cooper, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine, Eurasia, Robert Wilkie, United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, and others. Per Koliada, cooperation between the two countries about veterans affairs was discussed during meetings. Taylor's predecessor in Kyiv, Marie Yovanovitch, has also actively engaged with the ministry.

Ukrainian state funding for far right

Ukraine's government has received hundreds of millions of dollars in assistance from the United States, European Union, Canada, and other countries, while Ukrainian far-right groups linked to the Azov movement and C14 receive funding from the government of Ukraine. As Bellingcat and Hromadske [reported](#) previously, branches of the far-right Azov and C14 have received tens of thousands of dollars from Ukraine's now-defunct Ministry of Youth and Sports to carry out "national-patriotic education" (NPE) programs aimed at young Ukrainians.

Now, Bellingcat reports that the State Service for Veterans Affairs (Державна служба України у справах ветеранів), a predecessor of the new Ministry of Veterans Affairs, has allocated project funding for both the Veterans Brotherhood and the "Union of Veterans of the War with Russia," associated with C14. In 2019 alone, the State Service for Veterans Affairs [allocated](#) approximately \$69,000 (USD) in project funding for Veterans Brotherhood, and just shy of \$37,000 for "Union of Veterans of the War With Russia," while in 2018 approximately \$27,000 [was allocated](#) for "Union of Veterans of the War with Russia". It should be noted that while projects by Veterans Brotherhood and "Union of Veterans of the War with Russia" [were approved](#) for financing in March 2019 by the State Service for Veterans Affairs, only the project of the "Union of Veterans of the War with Russia" is listed in the calendar schedule of state-funded projects [published](#) on the site of the State Service for Veterans Affairs. Now, the Ministry of Veterans Affairs is delivering on its predecessor's commitments.

Far-right organizations embraced by the VMU and Ukraine's new veterans' ministry are positioned to further benefit from state funding. 2020 draft budget legislation currently under review in Ukraine's Parliament suggests approximately \$50 million to fund the ministry, with just under \$800,000 dollars that can be allocated specifically for funding projects by veterans organizations – a spending line that has been used by Ukrainian far-right groups in the past.

The office of Ukraine's Prime Minister Oleksiy Honcharuk didn't respond to Bellingcat's request to comment if United States' financial help to Ukraine was used to fund the Ministry of Veterans Affairs.

A U.S. diplomat told Bellingcat on background that **the Department of State and USAID rigorously screen grantees to ensure they are good stewards of U.S. funding, use it responsibly, and do not engage in discriminatory practices or advocate violence.**

While it is alarming that Ukraine's far right, through the VMU, are positioned to engage with the government of Ukraine, critics of the ministry say the current situation is a product of machinations rather than a democratic process, and the ministry doesn't reflect Ukrainian veterans as a whole.

Critics claim that Ministry of Veterans Affairs was "hijacked"

Vitaliy Baranov is currently a reserve lieutenant colonel of Ukraine's Armed Forces, and was a

commander of the famed defenders of Donetsk Airport, known in Ukraine as the “Cyborgs.” As he told Bellingcat, he believes that the Ministry of Veterans Affairs has been “hijacked.”

“As far as I’m concerned, and that’s an opinion shared by most veterans,” Baranov told Bellingcat, “the [veterans’] ministry isn’t representative of the veterans’ movement as a whole [...] The ministry has been hijacked by people who have little relation to the veterans’ movement.”

In fact, the VMU’s hold on the ministry stems from the fact that that government body was shaped – under Ukraine’s previous president and government – by organizations, including Azov’s Veterans Brotherhood, and figures that eventually formed the VMU.

When in late November 2018 then-prime-minister of Ukraine Volodymyr Groysman signed off on the creation of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, the Azov movement claimed it had played a role in this decision. The website of the National Corps ran an [article](#) titled “How the veterans forced the Cabinet of Ministers to create a dedicated ministry”, stressing that pressure exerted by that party, its veterans’ organization Veterans Brotherhood, and their allies was central to the launch of the ministry. Azov also acknowledged that to get things done, it had to engage in a balancing act with then-President Petro Poroshenko, and had to accept the appointment of Poroshenko’s former spokesperson and party figure Iryna Friz as the first Minister of Veterans Affairs. The article cited expectations by Shatrovsky that the ministry would grant important positions to “combat veterans”, and promised to maintain pressure on the ministry in order to achieve “victory”.

Immediately after Ukraine’s government established the veterans ministry on November 28, the ministry and its head Iryna Friz gave a shout-out, via their respective Facebook pages, to Azov’s Veterans Brotherhood. Friz and the ministry’s statements acknowledged a press-conference held by organizations – including Veterans Brotherhood – that were soon to officially form the Veterans Movement of Ukraine. During that press-conference future leaders of the VMU – including Shatrovsky, and current first deputy minister Kolumbet – demanded veterans ministry to listen to them, and talked themselves up as representatives of all of Ukraine’s veterans. “All the recommendations and demands voiced today will be prioritized by the ministry”, Friz responded.

Ensuing fast-paced events indicated that the newly-formed ministry was giving these groups preferential treatment. On 4 December 2018 the VMU was formally registered by Ukraine’s Ministry of Justice, and Azov’s Veterans Brotherhood was listed as a co-founder. Within weeks, on December 21 Minister Friz [issued an order](#) appointing a number of leaders of veterans groups – including a representative of Veterans Brotherhood – to the Veterans Council, a public advisory and oversight body, of the ministry. Volodymyr Lahuta, member of the VMU, was appointed head of the Veterans Council. A month later on January 20th, the VMU held a [public launch](#). A side-by-side comparison of the list of [founding members](#) of the Veterans Movement of Ukraine and the list of Friz appointees to the Veterans Council suggest that both bodies relied on the same organizations.

The VMU’s hold on the ministry was solidified in February and March of this year when the VMU won 34 out of 35 seats on the ministry’s other civic oversight and advisory body, the Civic Council, in an online vote. That vote saw the VMU [push forward a single list of candidates](#) with National Corps, C14, and their branches. Half a dozen individuals delegated by the Azov movement made it on the Public Council, as part of VMU’s “team,” as did Andriy Medvedko, member of C14 and accused murderer of Ukrainian reporter Oles Buzina.

Although the results of the vote were [initially dismissed](#) by the commission elected to certify it, in the end then-minister Friz [signed off on the results](#) despite protests by other veterans’ groups. The latter questioned both the decision to shape an important oversight body using an online voting procedure, and the way that vote was carried out.

“Final victory,” VMU [cheered](#) in a March statement when the result of the disputed online vote [was embraced](#) by Friz. The statement acknowledged that VMU took 34 out of 35 seats, and called the victory a “great responsibility”. Members of VMU publicly dismissed allegations of impropriety during the online election. Koliada was officially appointed deputy to Minister Friz in March, the month when VMU’s takeover of veterans ministry’s public advisory bodies was complete.

Baranov who told Bellingcat that the ministry was “hijacked” leads the “United by the War. 90th Battalion” veterans NGO. “I’m 200% certain that the vote was rigged,” Baranov says about the online vote.

Until late September, he was the only one out of 35 members of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs’ public oversight council who wasn’t a member of the VMU’s team. Baranov resigned from the Public Council (Громадська рада) in a public move in late September, when he issued a [statement](#) effectively denouncing Koliada (a freshly appointed minister at the time of his resignation) and the VMU as hijackers.

“The appointed minister, Koliada, was suggested by a single veterans organization, her candidacy wasn’t agreed upon and discussed by the majority of the veterans movement, and other categories of citizens [that fall under the purview of the ministry]”, Baranov wrote in his September 27 resignation [statement](#) that also claimed Koliada wasn’t the minister who “could unite veterans and take care of their problems”.

Baranov’s criticism is echoed [in an open letter](#) by “Stronger Together”, a coalition of NGOs that represent Ukrainian veterans, displaced persons, and other stakeholders of the ministry. The letter stressed that “although the minister was introduced to the public as elected by veterans, in fact she was nominated by a single organization [...] There was no discussion, and wishes of other stakeholders weren’t taken into consideration.”

Liliia Virovkina, who leads “Stronger Together,” told Bellingcat that the far right’s highly public role in the new ministry adversely affected the public image of all Ukrainian veterans. “It damages the image of veterans,” Virovkina said. “The ideology that’s associated with them impacts how other veterans are perceived.”

The claim that the Ministry of Veterans Affairs relies on a preferred organization for backing and advances that organization’s interests has been publicly voiced by a number of veterans’ leaders in Ukraine.

“It’s a small group of people that provided Koliada with a semblance of being backed by civic groups,” Petro Nedzelsky, a reserve colonel of Ukraine’s Armed Forces, who led intelligence operations in the 92nd Mechanized Brigade, told Bellingcat. “Koliada is backed by a single organization, out of more than a hundred we have in Ukraine, yet she claims that she’s supported by combat veterans of the war against Russian aggression as a whole.”

“Multifaceted levers” and warnings to the President: How far-right figures preserve the ministry

Although the Ministry of Veterans Affairs was formed under Poroshenko’s watch in 2018, far-right elements in the VMU — Azov’s Veterans Brotherhood, C14’s Andriy Medvedko, and others — continue to play a very important, and public, role in ensuring the ministry’s survival under Zelenskyy.

It is noteworthy that the VMU, the veterans organization with a virtual monopoly on veterans’

representation to the government of Ukraine, defines its own mission as far beyond simply representing veterans and the ministry's other stakeholders.

"Our goal is to create a strong, militarized [мілітарний] veterans structure with multifaceted levers of influence on state-building in our country," as stated by the VMU's ["About" section](#) on the organization's Facebook (VMU apparently doesn't have an official site).

That stated willingness to use "multifaceted levers" came to the fore in May 2019. A mere month after Zelenskyy's electoral victory, the VMU published [a video address](#) to Ukraine's new leader demanding that he support the continued existence of the veterans' ministry that had been set up under Poroshenko.

The video includes footage from different cities, and parts of the address were read by various veteran leaders. In one instance, Shatrovsky, whose message opened the video, promised to use "any methods" to influence "the vector of development of Ukraine" in order to "improve Ukraine's defense capacity", and "to fight foreign and domestic enemies." Another speaker suggested that the VMU was speaking on behalf of "hundreds of thousands." Soon, the VMU staged a show of force specifically aimed at Ukraine's newly-elected president.

When Zelenskyy decided to cancel the military parade on Ukraine's Independence Day, August 24, a portion of Ukrainian public, and many in veterans' communities, saw the president's decision as an insult. The VMU, and its far-right elements in particular, took the lead in organizing an alternative, unofficial "March of Ukraine's Defenders" (Марш захисників України). In the lead-up to the event, one that was eventually embraced by Zelenskyy's administration, C14's Medvedko and Azov's Shatrovsky stepped up as both behind-the-scenes and public faces of the march. Both spoke alongside other leaders of the VMU during a [August 12 press-conference](#). Medvedko was apparently [assigned the role of coordinator](#) of the march in Kyiv by the VMU, while another C14 member provided general information to those willing to join the event. Then-minister Friz immediately backed the event once it was announced by the VMU.

The importance of the event, and the pressure on Zelenskyy, grew on August 14, when a member of Parliament with Zelenskyy's party "Servant of the People", Galina Tretyakova, [suggested](#) that the Ministry of Veterans Affairs could be on the chopping block. "We will defend the rights of the veterans, but doing so isn't contingent on further spawning of bureaucracy in the form of separate committees and whole ministries". That statement was denounced by the VMU.

Zelenskyy soon signaled a different stance. On August 23, a day prior to the march, the president attended the [Ministry for Veterans Affairs Forum](#) (II Міжнародний ветеранський та волонтерський форум "Там, де ми - там Україна"), a brainchild of Koliada, and [announced that the ministry was to be preserved](#). Zelenskyy also asked Ukraine's veterans to suggest a candidate. The "March of Ukraine's Defenders" [the next day](#) was a huge success. Led by the VMU and Azov's Veterans Brotherhood, it apparently sealed the fate of both the ministry and the VMU and prompted the appointment of Koliada as the new minister. The VMU's statement [released on August 27](#) stated exactly that, and underscored the movement's connection to Koliada.

"Due to VMU's fruitful work aimed to preserve the veterans ministry, the stance of the leaders of our country regarding the ministry has changed. That's good." The VMU relished in its success. In the same statement, answering Zelenskyy's request, the organization endorsed Koliada for the Ministry of Veterans Affairs.

"Currently there's no one better than the current deputy minister Oksana Koliada," the VMU stated, noting that Koliada "stood at the ministry's origins" and "understood the importance of connection

to the veterans community.” Koliada was appointed minister the next day.

Zelenskyy’s government essentially accepted the architecture of the ministry established under his predecessor: a minister backed by an allied veterans organization, co-founded by the far-right Azov movement. In the [statement](#) regarding the appointment, the VMU bluntly took credit for Koliada’s appointment.

“For the first time in Ukraine’s history a civic movement managed to independently successfully lobby appointment of a minister”. The new minister also [tipped her proverbial hat](#) off to veterans’ support in a statement.

“I know one thing for sure, I’m the candidate of the movement of veterans,” Koliada wrote on Facebook.

Neither the head of the VMU Yevhen Turchak, nor the head of Veterans Brotherhood Dmytro Shatrovsky, nor the Prime Minister of Ukraine Oleksiy Honcharuk responded to Bellingcat’s requests for comment.

Critics praise Azov’s role in the war against Russia, but say its politics damage Ukraine

As Koliada was appointed minister, the mandate of the ministry was widened to include internally displaced persons and occupied territories. Despite its new mandate, the ministry’s advisory public bodies (Veterans Council, Public Council) haven’t been revamped, as Liliia Virovkina, leader of “Stronger Together”, a coalition of NGOs, pointed out to Bellingcat.

Some leaders of Ukrainian veterans feel cheated by the VMU. Vitaliy Baranov told Bellingcat that the VMU appropriated the success of August 24 march and other events to solidify its own hold on the ministry.

“They were the first to proclaim themselves as organizers of rallies, take credit for drawing people,” Baranov said about the independence day march. The famed commander of Ukraine’s “Cyborgs” also believes that the VMU and its member organizations, including those from the far right, hold a monopoly on interpreting veterans events to the government.

“They [veterans rallies] weren’t illustrative of VMU’s proficiency as organizers,” Baranov says about massive August 24 and October 14 veterans rallies. “They were illustrative of Ukraine’s veterans as a whole (...) I also led a column on both dates, but I wasn’t marching in support of the direction currently taken by the ministry of Veterans Affairs,” Baranov added.

Meanwhile, Petro Nedzelsky, a reserve colonel of Ukraine’s Armed Forces who led intelligence operations in the 92nd Mechanized Brigade, told Bellingcat that VMU’s monopoly on veterans’ representation in the ministry and Ukraine’s government could lead to a visible conflict with other veterans. According to Nedzelsky, rejection of the VMU’s leadership by other veterans organizations has little to do with the VMU’s embrace of far right. He says that this rejection is a reaction to how undemocratically the VMU seized ministerial leadership, and to what he describes as the “unfitness” of the VMU, its members, and Minister of Veterans Affairs herself, to work on behalf of all veterans.

“They lack intellect, knowledge, upbringing. They’re assertive smart alics who got into the office to secure access to finance, and use it to pursue their own agenda,” Nedzelsky told Bellingcat.

The feeling that the VMU’s leaders use their position to advance the organizations they represent and not Ukraine’s veterans as a whole is seconded by Baranov, who points at Azov’s Shatrovsky as a specific example.

“Shatrovsky presents himself publicly first and foremost not as the head of the Public Council, but as a veteran of the Azov Regiment,” Baranov told Bellingcat. “He uses his status of the head of the veterans ministry’s Public Council to get into offices where important decisions are made, but once he’s there he acts to benefit Azov.”

While critics of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs who talked to Bellingcat spoke highly of the role of Azov movement’s military wing (Azov Regiment) in the war against Russian aggression, they point out that on the political front Azov could be doing damage to Ukraine.

“Folks in Azov believe there are two points of view,” Baranov told Bellingcat. “There’s their view, and there’s the wrong one. ‘You’re either with us or you’re our enemy,’ nothing else is accepted.”

“I have immense respect for Azov fighters. They’re heroes,” Nedzelsky told Bellingcat. “Their patriotism can’t be questioned but a good warrior doesn’t always translate into a good politician, a leader. These are completely different things.”

“It’s only with certain caution that they can be allowed to shape state policies”, - he added.

Separately Nedzelsky also notes that far right’s actions pave way for instability that Russia can take advantage of.

In a similar vein, Virovkina stresses that the positions taken by the far right are radically different from what she considers the brand of “nationalism” shared by most in the veterans community and Ukraine as a whole.

“One must differentiate between nationalistic views, defense of Ukraine [shared by everyone],” Virovkina said, “and these neo-nationalists who don’t want to work with other stakeholders of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, and are hostile to internally displaced persons, and other vulnerable groups in Ukraine, like Ukrainian Roma, LGBT, and others.”

Critics hope that the government will hear them, but are doubtful this can happen. The VMU may just have an edge over their critics as far as the ability to stage show-of-force rallies, and attract the attention of the government, according to Vitaliy Baranov. He says this is because organizations in the VMU can rely on funding that is not available to others.

Criticism of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs will likely be treated by its minister as an attack, says Lilia Virovkina. She believes that by reacting to criticism defensively instead of looking into the situation that troubles critics, Ukraine’s leaders set authorities as a whole - President, Government, and Rada - up for future problems.

“The more they shield themselves from inconvenient information the more damage will be done by Koliada and others. That’s not the first or the last setup. Can you imagine what may be happening behind the scenes?” said Virokivna.

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