

Far-right Extremism as a Threat to Ukrainian Democracy

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Photo by Aleksandr Volchanskiy

- Far-right political forces present a real threat to the democratic development of Ukrainian society. This brief seeks to provide an overview of the nature and extent of their activities, without overstating the threat they pose. To this end, the brief differentiates between radical groups, which by and large express their ideas through peaceful participation in democratic processes, and extremist groups, which use physical violence as a means to influence society.
- For the first 20 years of Ukrainian independence, far-right groups had been undisputedly marginal elements in society. But over the last few years, the situation has changed. After Ukraine's 2014 Euro-maidan Revolution and Russia's subsequent aggression, extreme nationalist views and groups, along with their preachers and propagandists, have been granted significant legitimacy by the wider society.
- Nevertheless, current polling data indicates that the far right has no real chance of being elected in the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in 2019. Similarly, despite the fact that several of these groups have real life combat experience, paramilitary structures, and even access to arms, they are not ready or able to challenge the state.
- Extremist groups are, however, aggressively trying to impose their agenda on Ukrainian society, including by using force against those with opposite political and cultural views. They are a real physical threat to left-wing, feminist, liberal, and LGBT activists, human rights defenders, as well as ethnic and religious minorities.
- In the last few months, extremist groups have become increasingly active. The most disturbing element of their recent show of force is that so far it has gone fully unpunished by the authorities. Their activities challenge the legitimacy of the state, undermine its democratic institutions, and discredit the country's law enforcement agencies.
- Given the increasingly worrying situation, Ukrainian society, law enforcement agencies, and other state bodies as well as the international community should take effective measures to counter far-right extremism in Ukraine.

Introduction

Over the last few years, Ukrainian far-right groups have become a subject of attention in the media and the international community. The interest partly originates in the dramatic events the country has undergone, namely the 2014 revolution and the ongoing war. But it has also been bolstered by the scandals surrounding the presence of these groups in public spaces and that of members of the armed forces who propagate radical views and use radical symbols. Russian propaganda exaggerating ultranationalist tendencies in modern Ukraine has also had an impact on the perception of these trends.

Despite the abundance of articles and television dispatches, the field lacks high-quality analytical research on the Ukrainian far right, making it difficult for foreign observers to understand the place of these groups in Ukraine's political system, the threat they pose, and the future of such movements. This brief will attempt to define what we mean by far-right extremist and radical groups in the modern Ukrainian context; list the main groups belonging to this field, summarize the specifics of their ideology, political strategies, and future prospects; and formulate a general picture of the threat they pose to the democratic development of Ukrainian society.

Definitions of radicalism in Ukraine

The borders of right-wing radicalism in modern Ukraine are blurred because it exists within a political system where party lines fail to neatly follow ideologies. They are also blurred because of current historical events, which have compelled a turn to the legacy of the early 20th century Ukrainian nationalist movement. After the war began in 2014, Ukrainians felt a genuine threat to Ukrainian sovereignty and the existence of the Ukrainian state. This prompted a return to the symbols and rhetoric used by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) in the first half of the 20th century, which were previously exclusively associated with far-right and extremist groups. These symbols have become acceptable recently and are being used by a wider portion of society, including people in positions of authority and the elite. At the same time, attempts

to revive the ideology of the historical OUN in a modernized form are extremely rare. Instead, this revival materializes in the use of symbolic elements such as the red-and-black flag and individual slogans. A significant part of the population (if not the majority) today associates these with the struggle for independence, rather than with a radical ethnocentric or xenophobic ideology.¹

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Out of the wide spectrum of political forces that can be described as nationalist, this brief will focus on groups that are defined not only as right-wing radicals but also as extremists.² The brief thus separates groups that express radical views on the reorganization of society, which can nonetheless be peaceful in nature and expressed through law-abiding participation in democratic processes, and extremist groups, which reject democratic principles and resort to force to influence society and political processes. The main way to determine if a group is extremist is by its attitude to political violence: groups that systematically direct physical violence against groups they oppose, glorify historical instances of terrorism and ethnic cleansing, and openly and aggressively propagate hate are included among the extremist ones.

Based on the above criteria, the following *political parties* qualify as extremist nationwide: the All-Ukrainian Union Party 'Svoboda' (led by Oleh Tyahnybok, the party achieved 4.71 percent of the vote during the last parliamentary elections and has six MPs in the Verkhovna Rada); the National Corps (headed by Andriy Belitsky, who during the last elections participated as an independent candidate and became an MP); and the Right Sector (led by Andriy Stempitsky, the party received 1.8 percent in the last elections; its one representative in the Rada, Dmytro Yarosh, has already left the party). These three parties are currently in negotiations to run together ahead of the upcoming elections. All are nationwide parties with representation in almost every region of the country, and with youth and sports groups as well paramilitary and cultural

movements connected to party structures. Sometimes these groups and movements attract members who are more radical than the party's mainstream, activists who specifically focus on the use of force.

Besides the parties, significant number of *extremist groupings*, with a few dozen to a few hundred activists, also exist. In some cases, they do not have recorded membership, reflecting a sort of subculture environment. These small groups do not seek to participate in elections but remain visible in the public sphere because of their aggressive propaganda and illegal actions. According to our definitions, they include the OUN Volunteer Movement (Волонтерський Рух ОУН), the Brotherhood (Братство), С14, the Carpathian Sich (Карпатська Січ), the Social-National Assembly (Соціал-національна асамблея), the UNA-UNSO (УНА-УНСО), Tradition and Order (Традиція і порядок), Revenge (Реванш), the Revolutionary Right Forces (Револьюційні праві сили), and others.

Political representation or street politics

Due to the far right's limited success and in some cases unwillingness to participate in official politics, it has recently taken to focusing on strengthening its organizational structures, propaganda, and "street politics." This latter often consists of violent actions and aims to aggressively impose these groups' political and cultural agenda on society. In its overwhelming majority and with the exception of right-wing political parties, these activities are not connected with elections, but with the forceful imposition of their views on a number of topics—including on the role of LGBTI, ethnic, and religious groups, and cultural movements—on society.



Photo by Aleksandr Volchanskiy

Extremist groups perpetrate ideologically motivated violence to suppress and eliminate any force that they believe does not have the right to public representation in society. Their actions are aimed at "cleaning" the public space of everything that they regard as harmful to the nation or unacceptable in the context of the ongoing war. The targets of their aggression are organizations that defend the rights of the LGBT community as well as political opponents, who for the most part support left-wing politics. Far-right as well as radical groups accuse them of being pro-Russian or of supporting separatism. The obviously hypocritical nature of their accusations is evidenced by numerous cases where nationalist extremists have attacked war volunteers and fighters under the pretext of "separatism."

Violence (usually in the symbolic form of vandalism) has less frequently been directed at institutions and monuments associated with national minorities. Recently, however, additional targets have been added to the list of objects that inspire right-wing xenophobic attacks. In addition to memorials to the victims of the

Holocaust, which have been targeted in the past as well, these include objects associated with recent political debates or conflicts such as the Polish military cemeteries in Volhynia, memorials of Hungarian national and cultural heritage in Transcarpathia and, of course, buildings belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Nowadays, such attacks occur much more often³ than five or ten years ago, as shown in the data on antisemitic vandalism attacks gathered by the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine. According to incomplete calculations, in the first three months of 2018, extremist groups tried to disrupt 12 different events (this is aside from individual attacks they carried out against political and/or cultural opponents) and attacked a variety of objects and events.

Among the incidents that have occurred since the beginning of 2018 are:

- The disruption of a lecture on the Holocaust in Lviv in January, which involved throwing a smoke bomb into the room;
- A homophobic attack on visitors to the office of the Queer Home Kryvbas in Kryvyi Rih in February, as well as disrupting a lecture on the LGBT movement in Kharkiv;
- Also in February, an attempt to disrupt the presentation of a project aimed at overcoming discrimination against the Roma community in Lviv;
- Several attacks on demonstrators on March 8 marches devoted to gender equality in Kyiv, Lviv and Uzhgorod;
- An attempt to disrupt events held in conjunction with Docudays, a human rights film initiative in Kyiv in March, and subsequent attacks on event participants;
- In April, a number of violent incidents involving the Roma community in Kyiv, including physical and arson attacks.⁴

While direct physical violence was not deployed in all of the above-mentioned cases, extremist groups have managed to restrict the rights and freedoms of Ukraine's citizens; in particular, the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of speech. Law enforcement agencies have either failed to stop the attackers or banned the event on the grounds that they cannot guarantee the security of its participants. In some instances, they detained the participants themselves attacked at the event. Hence, wide swathes of society and the media generally either tolerate or do not notice the violence perpetrated by these far-right, extremist groups, who are actively undermining the government's monopoly on violence.

The increasing use of street politics by the right-wing groups, including illegal activity, can be interpreted, in part, as an attempt to influence the sociopolitical climate in Ukraine by those who do not have sufficient and legitimate tools to do this. After unsuccessfully competing in the 2014 parliamentary elections, the ultranationalists are extremely poorly represented in the Ukraine's parliament, particularly when compared to the previous parliament where Svoboda held 37 seats. Moreover, those elected in majority districts, such as Andriy Biletsky and Dmytro Yarosh, pay almost no attention to the task of law-making and rarely attend parliamentary sessions.

Current polls show that the far right is unlikely to win more seats in the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections. According to the latest data gathered by the authoritative Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, out of all far-right parties, only Svoboda has any chance of passing the 5 percent barrier required to gain seats.⁵ As of February, the party was supported by 2.3 percent of all respondents (and 5.8 percent among those with a party preference). This represented a drop in Svoboda's ratings—in September 2017, 7.1 percent of those certain to vote had said they would vote for Svoboda. Other right-wing radical parties register even less support. The Right Sector polls at around 0.5 percent and the National Corpus at 0.2 percent. Although a hypothetical bloc of nationalist parties could claim some kind of representation in parliament, at present it is difficult to imagine that the right-wing radicals are capable of uniting. Their ideological differences are too great, as are the ambitions of their individual leaders.

Thus, it can be assumed that the ideological violence and the radicalization of attitudes toward the current government—which, for example, the Right Sector officially regards as a “regime of internal occupation”⁶—is

to some degree a consequence of the lack of effective and, in the far right's opinion, legitimate means available to them to influence the processes taking place in society. From this premise, it follows that the defeat of the far right in next year's elections will only exacerbate the street violence currently carried out by extremists.

A threat to the democratic development of society

There is no doubt that right-wing nationalism and extremism in modern-day Ukraine poses a threat to the democratic development of society. Organizations that hold far-right views reject democratic values (such as freedom of expression, freedom of assemblies, equality, etc.), yet actively use the opportunities that democracy offers. Aside from the transformations society is undergoing, the actions of Ukraine's far right are particularly concerning for several reasons.

First, the place of right-wing organizations in society has changed after the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution. Despite not having decisive influence on the events of the revolution and the defense of the country in the face of Russian aggression,⁷ the far right has managed to achieve a certain degree of success by "riding" the patriotic wave. Nationalist-radical symbolism and rhetoric in the public sphere has become legitimized. In the absence of alternative traditions, society used the symbolic language of nationalist organizations of the mid-20th century to express their desire for independence, both during the protests, and following the outbreak of the war. Furthermore, as a result of an aggressive PR campaign executed in the context of Russia's aggression, the far right has ceased to be perceived as marginal groups consisting of largely antisocial adolescents. The members of these groups have taken advantage of the opportunity provided by the war and created a new, attractive image for themselves as "true patriots" and "defenders of the fatherland."⁸

The place of violence in Ukrainian society has changed, and right-wing radicals have played an important part in this transformation.

With a few exceptions, this legitimization has failed to convert to electoral popularity and successes for nationalist and radical groups. Yet, the presence of radical leaders in the media has sharply increased and their societal perception has changed. Far-right activists actively use social networks, which makes it possible for them to freely disseminate the most radical demands and aggressive language. Right-wing public events enjoy considerable media attention thanks to the participation of a few but well-disciplined and motivated activists as well as the use of fireworks. The public legitimization of nationalist symbolism and rhetoric has provided even the most radical groups with a largely benevolent or at least neutral media reception.⁹ Before the war, the leaders of these marginal groups received little interest, while today they comment on a wide range of issues in mainstream media.

Second, partly due to this legitimization by society, and in part because of their participation in the war, a gradual rapprochement has taken place between some far-right forces and the state, and primarily Ukraine's law enforcement bodies. This rapprochement has been bolstered by the need to integrate the volunteer military formations—set up by nationalists at the start of the war—into the country's existing structures. There has also been a degree of mutual interest between the two sides and the entente has not been confined to the war zone. One of the most striking appointments—though not the only such example—was that of a former neo-Nazi activist from Patriot of Ukraine Vadym Troyan, who received a high-ranking position in Ukraine's national police in March 2016. Previously known for his racist statements, Andriy Biletsky, the head of the Azov battalion, has also been promoted to lieutenant colonel. Although media assertions that Interior Minister Arsen Avakov is closely linked to the National Corps and its paramilitary wing, National Druzhina, are exaggerated, there is no doubt that that Biletsky had used Avakov's patronage and had been elected to parliament in a single-mandate district with his support.

During confrontations between right-wing groups and law enforcement bodies, the police show unacceptable passivity when it comes to preventing or suppressing unlawful activities, investigating incidents, and bringing perpetrators to justice. For example, the Svoboda party activists who threw grenades during a rally outside parliament in 2015, killing four national guardsmen, have not yet been convicted. One of the latest examples of the authorities' tolerant attitude was on display in February 2018, during clashes in Kyiv following a hearing of a case involving Odessa's mayor, Gennadiy Trukhanov. After the hearing, National Druzhina activists and members of other radical groups attacked police officers using gas cartridges and

even firearms. The officers reacted rather passively; one activist, who shot and wounded a police officer, has yet to be taken into custody.

Finally, the place of violence in Ukrainian society has changed, and right-wing radicals have played an important part in this transformation. The idea of what is permissible and acceptable has completely transformed. Tens of thousands of people have personally suffered trauma from the events of the revolution and the war, and currently suffer from PTSD. Hearing about the war in the news and its social consequences on the streets of cities throughout Ukraine has become part of the everyday reality for the whole country. Easy access to weapons has changed and increased the nature and extent of illegal business seizures and other violent actions in Ukraine's general economic and political struggle. The far right has found a home for themselves in this context. Moreover, they have a competitive advantage in the market of paid-for thugs. Known popularly as "titushki," these people often come from sports clubs and are used to attend protests, to protect commercial interests, or to seize properties sometimes under the guise of being genuine activists. Unlike regular thugs, they can mobilize additional support with the help of radical propaganda and lend an ideological purpose to an exclusively commercial dispute.

This atmosphere has created favorable conditions for right-wing radicals and extremists, despite not being attractive as an electoral option. It has also left the state and society very vulnerable to their expansion. Radical groups no longer have to worry about societal or government reactions when it comes to recruiting members, they also face few restrictions when it comes to spreading their ideas. Effectively, they exist in an environment characterized by lack of accountability and impunity.

Conclusion

Far-right radicals and extremists at present can claim neither significant parliamentary representation nor any plausible path to power in Ukraine. However, their street activities are having a serious impact on everyday life and societal development in the country. Particularly worrying is their use of violence in an attempt to restrict the expression of views they consider unacceptable in Ukraine.

This danger should be soberly assessed. The first step is to establish better monitoring of illegal and extremist activities of the far right on an ongoing basis. It would also be extremely useful to undertake an in-depth mapping of ultranationalist groups.

Additionally, those interested in the democratic development of Ukraine, including human rights activists and experts, should draw public and media attention to the real and existing problem of far-right extremism. Civil society should form a broad coalition in support of groups and activists who are being attacked by the far right. Regardless of people's attitudes toward the ideologies of groups attacked by radicals, they have the right to freely express their opinions.

At the same time, society and the state should make significant efforts to ensure that the activity of extremist groups does not circumscribe the rights of other Ukrainians to peacefully assemble, associate, and express themselves freely. The state and law enforcement bodies need to genuinely ensure freedom of assembly and effectively prevent attempts by far-right groups to disrupt public events. In cases where they commit extremist acts, it is essential to investigate the incidents and bring the perpetrators to justice. This also needs to be applied to those who have already committed violence.

Finally, it would be counterproductive to repress these groups and drive radical ideas underground. Past experience demonstrates that for many a gradual deradicalization and evolution towards more moderate right-wing views is a real option.

- ¹ Poll conducted by the sociological group Rating in September 2017 http://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/ko_dnyu_zaschitni-ka_ukrainy.html
- ² Radicalisation, extremism and terrorism: Words matter, EPRS, 12 July 2016 <https://epthinktank.eu/2016/07/12/radicalisation-extremism-and-terrorism-words-matter/>
- ³ Association of Jewish Organizations and communities of Ukraine <http://www.vaadua.org/elektronnyy-informacionnyy-byulleten-antisemitizm-ksenofobiya-i-prava-nacionalnyh-menshinstv-v>
- ⁴ A significant portion of these incidents is highlighted in: Гриценко А. «Зиг хайль, смерть п..рам»// UPDATE. 22 марта 2018 http://update.com.ua/istorii_tag924/zig-khail-smert-pram-10-pravoradikalnykh-napadenii-s-nachala-2018-goda_n3948
- ⁵ Support of political parties and leaders: февраль 2018// Киевский международный институт социологии. 19 марта 2018 <http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=rus&cat=reports&id=753&page=1&t=2>
- ⁶ The national program of Right Sector: <https://pravyysektor.info/novyny/programu-nvr-pravogo-sektora-zatverdzheno>
- ⁷ Likhachev V. The “Right Sector” and others: The behavior and role of radical nationalists in the Ukrainian political crisis of late 2013 – early 2014// *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*. Volume 48, Issues 2–3, June–September 2015. P. 257-271; Likhachev V. The Far Right in the Conflict between Russia and Ukraine – Russie.Nei.Visions, No 95, Ifri, July 2016. https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rnv95_uk_likhachev_far-right_radicals_final.pdf
- ⁸ “Люди, які вразили Україну,” [“People who amazed Ukraine”], ТСН, 2014: <http://tsn.ua/special-projects/people2014/>
- ⁹ “Ukraine underplays role of far right in conflict,” BBC News, 13 December 2014 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30414955>

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