The Far Right in the Conflict between Russia and Ukraine

Vyacheslav LIKHACHEV

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Ifri

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE

Tel.: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 – Fax : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: accueil@ifri.org

Ifri-Bruxelles

Rue Marie-Thérèse, 21 1000 – Brussels – BELGIUM

Tel.: +32 (0)2 238 51 10 – Fax : +32 (0)2 238 51 15

Email: bruxelles@ifri.org

Website: Ifri.org

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Author

Vyacheslav Likhachev is an historian and a political scientist. A graduate of the Jewish University in Moscow, he leads the National Minority Rights Monitoring Group. His area of interest includes right-wing radicalism in Russia and Ukraine, as well as hate-crimes and xenophobia. Since 2003, he has edited and compiled the yearly reports of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress on anti-Semitism in the post-Soviet space.

His last publications include:

- "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, No 2-3, June-September 2015, p. 257-271.

- "Majdan i cherez sto let budet privlekat' vnimanie issledovatelej" [A Century from Now, the Maidan will still be of Interest to Researchers], *Ab Imperio*, No 3, 2014, p. 63-74.

- "Mesto antisemitizma v ideologii i propagande VO 'Svoboda'" [The Role of anti-Semitism in the Ideology and Propaganda of the all-Ukrainian Union "Svoboda"], *Forum noveyshey vostochnoevropeyskoy istorii i kul'tury*, No. 1, 2013, p. 111-134.

Abstract

From the very beginning, the armed conflict that broke out in the Donbass in the spring of 2014 drew in right-wing radicals, on the Ukrainian as well as on the Russian side. Organised ultra-nationalist groups and individual activists established their own units of volunteers or joined existing ones. The ideology, political traditions and general track record of these right-wing extremists meant that it was both natural and inevitable that they would take an active part in the conflict. Yet the role of right-wing radicals on both sides has on the whole been exaggerated in the media and in public discussion. This article demonstrates that Russia's use of right-wing radicals on the side of the "separatists" in Donetsk and Lugansk provinces had greater military and political repercussions than the involvement of Ukrainian far-right groups in the "anti-terrorist operation". The general course of the conflict, meanwhile, caused the importance of far right-groups on both sides to decline.

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Introduction

One of the most resonant and controversial issues to emerge from the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which followed the victory of the protest movement in Kiev in February 2014, concerns the role of far-right activists (ultranationalists) in the fighting on both sides. In the media, these people are often simply called "fascists" or "neo-Nazis".

Stigmatising one's enemies as "fascists" became an important way of discrediting them and mobilising one's "own" audience from the very beginning of the conflict.[1] In the context of a "hybrid war" in which the information campaign does not simply accompany and justify violence but also contributes to producing it, the importance of such labels in intensifying the confrontation shouldn't be taken lightly.[2] By engaging in propaganda or simply failing to do their jobs properly at times, the media spread false narratives, blow things out of proportion and paint a picture of events that leaves a lot to be desired. Meanwhile, it is important to understand what role far-right radicals really did play in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Military operations were at their most active for just a year, from spring 2014 to spring 2015. Yet the situation in the conflict zone has

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Translated from Russian by Cameron Johnston.

1. On 18 March 2014, during his address to the Federation Council about the annexation of Crimea, the Russian President Vladimir Putin interpreted what was happening in Kiev in the following way: "Nationalists, neo-Nazis, russophobes and anti-Semites were the main executors of this coup. They continue to set the tone in Ukraine to this day". See "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federatsii" [Address of the president of the Russian Federation], *Rossijskaia Gazeta*, 18 March 2014, http://rg.ru.

2. On the meaning of the concept of "hybrid war" in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, see for instance: V. Horbulin, "Hibrydna vijna» yak klyuchovyj instrument rosijskoyi heostratehiyi revanshu ["Hybrid warfare" as a key instrument of the Russian revenge geostrategy], *Dzerkalo Tizhnya*, No 2, 23 January 2015, http://gazeta.dt.ua; Ł. Wójcik . "Ukraińska wojna hybrydowa" [Hybrid war in Ukraine], Polityka, 13 May 2016, http://polityka.pl. The Chief of the Russian General Staff defined this understanding of war (without using the term "hybrid") a year before the invasion of Ukraine began: see V. Gerasimov, "Tsennost' nauki v predvidenii" [The value of science in prediction], *Voenno-Promyshlennyj Kur'er* No 8(476), 27 February 2013, http://vpk-news.ru. On the subtleties of information policy in the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, see: P. Pomerantsev, M. Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money", The Interpreter, a project of the Institute of Modern Russia, 2015, http://interpretermag.com.

affected and continues to affect society and politics in Russia and, even more so, in Ukraine. By participating in the conflict, ultra-nationalist groups and their adherents receive weapons and experience, grow more organised and build up social capital. Whatever public support they now enjoy is clearly attributable to them being perceived as "defenders" of their homeland, not bearers of a far-right ideology. Nevertheless, lionising individual ideologues indirectly helps to legitimise their ideology in public discourse as a whole, which naturally arouses fear among observers. Have far-right groups been able to take what they won at the front, namely prominence in the media and a degree of public support, and convert it into political support in "the rear"? In Russia, where there is no free political process and the Kremlin suppresses competition by monopolising imperial and revanchist language, this question is less relevant. In Ukraine, however, it is of much more immediate consequence.

Ukrainian radical-nationalists

Political weakness of the far right on the eve of the Maidan

For the first two decades of Ukraine's history as an independent state, radical nationalist parties and movements were by no means central to Ukrainian society. They proved unable to win any significant electoral support and failed to exert any sizeable ideological influence over society and the ruling elites[3].

To a certain extent, the marginal position of Ukrainian far-right groups can be explained in terms of human factor: they had no inspiring leaders or talented ideologues. Structural political factors also played their part though: for instance, the very fact that an independent Ukraine had appeared on the map meant that the goal pursued by Ukrainian nationalists throughout the twentieth century had been attained.[4] What is more, statehood was not achieved thanks to the nationalists' efforts. They were even unable to implant their representatives in the political elite and seemed doomed to a marginal existence. The inability to offer society a programme that moved with the times made the crisis among far-right radicals even worse.

With its appeals to strengthen the role of the Ukrainian language and to separate the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Moscow patriarchate, the ideological platform of most Ukrainian ultranationalists gave the impression of being outdated. Classic nationalist prescriptions appropriate to the birth of an independent state were their stock in trade. The spectre of Russian imperialism, which far-right activists used to scare Ukrainians, did

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3. For possible explanations of this phenomenon, see, for instance: A. Umland, "Krajne slabye" [Weaklings], *Korrespondent*, 21 June 2008; A. Umland, A. Shekhovtsov, "Pravoradikal'naia partijnaia politika v postsovetskoj Ukraine I zagadka elektoralnoj marginal'nosti ukrainskikh ul'tranatsionalistov v 1994-2009gg." [Far-right party policy in post-soviet Ukraine and the puzzlingly marginal position of Ukrainian ultranationalists, 1994-2009], *Ab Imperio* No 2, 2010, http://abimperio.net.

4. The first and principal thesis of the "Decalogue of a Ukrainian Nationalist" (the short founding text of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists, drafted after internal discussions between 1929 and 1936) reads: "Achieve the Foundation of a Ukrainian State or Die Fighting for it". See: O. Zaytsev, *Ukrayins'kyy integral'nyy* natsionalizm (1920-1930-ti roky): Narysy *intelektual'noyi istoriyi* [Ukrainian integral nationalism (1920s-1930s): studies in intellectual history], Kyiv, Kritika, 2013, p. 282-283.

not look in the least frightening in the 1990s. On the basis of an ethnocentric and exclusive understanding of nationhood, the radical right demanded changes to the linguistic, cultural and religious status quo that had emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Claiming descent from the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN, 1920s – 1940s)[5] might have won the sympathy of some people in Ukraine's Western regions but by slavishly repeating the slogans of last century's independence fighters, Ukrainian far-right activists showed all too clearly that they were out of date. Attempts to use these slogans to fire up a population that was intent on surviving in difficult economic conditions proved unsuccessful.

Efforts to update the stock of nationalist clichés fared even worse. Borrowing anti-immigrant slogans from Western Europe and applying them to Ukraine just would not do. The aggressive xenophobia of these radical nationalists was also a turn-off for the population, as was their predilection for violence (approach to political violence might be considered the main criterion for characterising nationalist organisations as "radical"). Violence and street scuffles with the police and political opponents might have attracted a racist teenage subculture, which was trying to imitate Western and especially Russian Nazi-skinheads, but they did not win over voters.

However, after Viktor Yanukovych came to power in 2010, the situation changed rapidly. The "Kharkhov agreements" (which, among other things, provided for the lease of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol to be extended), as well as other steps taken by V. Yanukovych, led many people to fear for Ukraine's national security and sovereignty. Before, the radical-nationalist idea that the fight for real independence was still happening appeared to be an anachronism, but as the context changed, it became topical again. At a time when the confrontation between society and the authorities was escalating quickly, many saw the radical nationalists as uncompromising, thus credible opponents. This is what explains the unprecedented success of Oleh Tyahnybok's radical right-wing party "All-Ukrainian Union Svoboda" in the elections to the Ukrainian parliament (*Verkhovna Rada*) at the end of 2012. With 10.44% of the vote, Svoboda easily surpassed the election threshold and formed its own parliamentary faction. In the run-up to the Maidan, it became the main

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5. On ideological continuity, see: M. Kravchenko, "Ideolohichna spadkoyemnist' v ukrayins'komu nacionalistychnomu rusi u II-ij polovyni XX stolittya" [Ideological continuity in the Ukrainian nationalist movement in the second half of the 20th century], Ukrayins'kyj nacionalizm: istoriya ta ideyi [Ukrainian nationalism, history and ideas], *Науковий збірник,* [Scientific journal]*,* 2014, Vol. 2, p. 22-34, Scientific-ideological center Dmytro Dontsov, http://dontsov-nic.com.ua.

radical right-wing political force in Ukraine, although it was soon to lose its monopoly on ultra-nationalism.

Far-right parties and the Revolution

On 21 November 2013, a mass popular protest movement began in Kiev under the name "Euromaidan" (or simply "Maidan"). It began as a reaction to the government issuing a public statement announcing that it would not sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. The "Revolution of Dignity", as these events are called in Ukraine, ended with victory for the Maidan. The latter was achieved three months after the dramatic confrontation which reached its climax with the widespread killing of a hundred of anti-government demonstrators on 18-20 February 2014. The political opposition literally went from the streets into the offices of executive power. That resulted in a period of administrative chaos and created the impression, among some Ukrainians, that there was a power vacuum. This impression was only deepened by the resistance of regional elites.

When the Maidan broke out, Svoboda was one of three opposition parties in parliament and it was only natural that it took its place within the protest movement. It would be wrong to say that, confronted with the authorities, Svoboda's leaders or members acted more radically than others. Oleh Tyahnybok was no more decisive than the leaders of the liberal opposition, nor was he controlling the Maidan, on which Svoboda activists were simply part of the mass of protesters[6]. Three members of the party were counted among the "heavenly hundred heroes" who were killed by the police when they fired on protesters on 20 February 2014.

After the Maidan's victory, Svoboda played its part in creating the first post-revolutionary government alongside other opposition forces in parliament. Party representatives received three ministerial posts and the position of General Prosecutor. Nevertheless, Svoboda was unable to drive home its success. In early elections to the *Verkhovna Rada* in 2014, the party did not surpass the election threshold and lost its representation in the executive.

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6. See: "Maidan 2013: kto stoit, pochemu i za chto?" [Maidan 2013: who stands in the movement, why and what for?], Kiev International Institute of Sociology, 10 December 2013, http://www.kiis.com.ua.

Another prominent radical right-wing movement was formed during the Maidan itself, "Right Sector".[7] It had first appeared in November 2013 as a motley coalition of radical nationalist groups essentially based on the "Stepan Bandera All-Ukrainian Organization 'Tryzub'"[8] movement which was led by Dmytro Yarosh. Right Sector became notorious when it took responsibility for clashes with the police on Grushevsky Street in January 2014. Likewise, an activist belonging to the Ukrainian National Assembly (UNA), one of the oldest far-right organisations in the country (which became part of Right Sector), was one of the first among those who died in the protests.

Right Sector transformed into a political party in spring 2014, received widespread attention in the Ukrainian and Russian media,[9] both positive and negative, although it remained an extremely weak association, riddled with internal conflicts and scandals. The party's attitude towards the new, post-revolutionary, authorities was among the most disputed issues, as well as the question of the party's working practices which also caused serious disagreements.[10] In addition, several leaders of the groups that had initially joined Right Sector had their own strong political ambitions and never accepted D. Yarosh's leadership.

As early as the spring of 2014, one of the most radical groups in the initial informal coalition, the Social-National Assembly (S.N.A.) under the leadership of Andriy Biletsky, broke away from Right Sector. The UNA followed suit a short time later and in August 2015 it was officially registered as a political party, led by Konstantin Fushtey under the name "UNA-UNSO" (the second abbreviation is taken from the name of the militarised wing of the party, Ukrainian National Self-Defence). At the end of 2015, Dmytro Yarosh himself left Right Sector. He was, for his part, ready to set up a constructive dialogue with the authorities and support them against external aggression. Unlike D. Yarosh, most members of the conflict-riven party had ended up very willing to switch to radical

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7. On the role of right-wing radical on the Maidan, see: V. Likhachev, "'Right Sector' and Others: The Behaviour and Role of Radical Nationalists in the Ukrainian Political Crisis of Late 2013 – Early 2014", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 48, No 2-3, June-September 2015, p. 271.

8. In 1940-1950 Stepan Bandera lead the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). To be noted, in Soviet propaganda, all supporters of Ukrainian independence were called "Banderians" and the OUN was demonized.

9. In April 2014, according to a study by the company Public.ru, Right Sector had almost caught up with the ruling United Russia party in the number of times it was mentioned in the media— 19.05 thousand and 18.9 thousand points respectively, far surpassing any other parties. See: "V RF 'Pravy Sektor' dognal 'Edinuyu Rossiyu' po populyarnosti" [In Russia, Right Sector has caught up with United Russia in terms of popularity], Polittech, 6 May 2014. http://polittech.org.

10. "Zakat Pravogo Sektora. Iz geroev na svalky istorii" [The sunset of Right Sector. From heroes to the dustbin of history], *Korrespondent*, 29 December 2015, http://korrespondent.net.

opposition against Ukrainian authorities. In their eyes, it was nothing short of a "regime of internal occupation". In February 2016, Dmytro Yarosh announced plans to create a new movement.

Therefore, Ukrainian far right proved generally incapable of creating a common platform. Their failure was due to personal ambitions taking over; competition inside a narrow segment of society and struggle for influence, popularity and funding; as well as disagreement on the attitude to be taken towards new Ukrainian authorities formed after the revolution's victory and the following parliamentary and presidential elections.

With the outbreak of war in Eastern Ukraine, Right Sector, S.N.A., UNA, Svoboda and some of the other radical far-right groups established formations of armed volunteers.

Military Operations

"I feel quite comfortable being at war because I have prepared for it for twenty years, physically and psychologically", said D. Yarosh in an interview.[11] For years, many far-right activists had devoted much more effort to military training and sport than to political activity per se.[12] They had been waiting for a war and the war duly came.[13]

Immediately after the triumph of the revolution in Kiev, pro-Russian opponents of the new government began to stage street protests in several Eastern and Southern provinces of Ukraine. In part, these followed on from the "anti-Maidan" demonstrations that Yanukovych's government had assembled with the help of administrative resources in order to feign public support and suppress the protests. Several far-right activists, for different reasons, joined the gunmen gathered by the government in order to forcefully suppress the protests. However, unlike national radicals/far-right radicals fighting for the Maidan, they didn't act as one united protesting force. Most of those who opposed the Maidan and were capable of preaching a certain ideology were affiliated either to different degrees of

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11. See P. Sheremet, D. Yarosh: "Ya na vijni komfortno sebe pochuvayu, bo hotuvavsya do neyi 20 rokiv" [I feel quite comfortable being at war because I have prepared for it for twenty years], *Ukrayinska Pravda*, 22 September 2015, http://pravda.com.ua.

12. Military and sports training for personnel was virtually the only thing that Yarosh's "Tryzub" and Biletsky's "Patriot of Ukraine" movements did.

13. The far right's forecasts were sometimes surprisingly prescient. In 2008, for instance, following Russia's acts of aggression against Georgia, several Ukrainian radical nationalist leaders, including D. Korchynsky and A. Biletsky, carried out command and staff exercises devoted to the subject of "Opposing Russia after it has annexed Crimea". See "Pidhotovka do vijny v Krymu" [Preparing for war in Crimea], Olena Bilozerska's blog, 21 December 2008, http://bilozerska.livejournal.com.

radical Russian nationalism, or to some kind of eclectic Neo-Soviet patriotism.[14] "Anti-Maidan" demonstrations in the regions were also spurred on by infighting between local oligarchs and apparatchiks, who were fearful of investigations launched into the abuses and crimes of the Yanukovych regime and who wanted to recast their relations with the centre on more favourable terms.

Almost from the very beginning, Russians citizens took part in the protests and in violent demonstrations against the new "revolutionary" government in Ukrainian cities. On 12 April 2014, armed detachments of Russians, who had earlier taken part in the occupation of Crimea, began to seize the capitals of districts in Donetsk province. Igor Girkin ("Strelkov"), a Russian militant who had taken control over the city of Sloviansk on 12 April 2014, claimed being the one who "had pulled the trigger of war": "If our unit hadn't crossed the border, everything would have eventually ended in the same way as it did in Kharkiv or in Odessa. [...] It was in fact our unit that had launched the flywheel of the very war that is still going on."[15] Two days later, the acting President of Ukraine, Oleksandr Turchynov, signed an executive order launching the anti-terror operation. In the spring and summer of 2014, the anti-terror operation forces liberated more than two thirds of the provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk. But as a result of the Russian army's intervention and cross-border shelling (expressly disclaimed by Russia itself)[16], Ukraine lost control of a long stretch of its state border. At the end of August 2014, an invasion by Russian army subunits halted the Ukrainian armed forces' advance and the demarcation line stabilised.[17] From the spring of 2015 onwards, the clashes lost much of their intensity and full-blown military operations had almost ceased by autumn, although isolated skirmishes persist.

In the first weeks after the triumph of the revolution, Ukrainian radical nationalists had been prominent in street clashes with "Anti-Maidan" demonstrators and pro-Russian or "separatist" groups. But once military operations began in earnest, many of them took whatever chance they could get to rush to the front, without paying much attention to which

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14. V. Likhachev, "Ukrainskie ul'trapravye protiv 'russkoj vesny': Khar'kovskij rubezh i odesskaia tragediia" [Ukrainian far-right extremists against the "Russian spring": the Kharkov frontier and the Odessa tragedy], Forum natsij No 3(160), March 2016, http://www.forumn.kiev.ua.

15. Interview of Strelkov by I. Prokhanov, "Kto ty, 'Strelok'"? [Who are you, Strelkov?], *Zavtra* No 47(1096), 20 November 2014, http://zavtra.ru.

16. See, for instance: "Origin of Artillery Attacks on Ukrainian Military Positions in Eastern Ukraine between 14 July 2014 and 8 August 2014", Bellingcat Report, 17 February 2015, https://bellingcat.com.

17. See, for instance*:* M. Czuperski, J. Herbst, E. Herbst, A. Polyakova*,* "Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin's War in Ukraine", Atlantic Council, 15 October 2015, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org.

precise unit they would fight in.[18] Several organisations, however, set about establishing their own volunteer formations. Doing so allowed them to remain relatively independent, fight as pre-prepared units and make use of their presence in the rear to raise money and equip the detachment. Lastly, it allowed them to win a name for themselves.

There were three main ways in which such military units could be established: 1) as territorial defence battalions (BTD) subordinate to the Ministry of Defence, 2) as part of the National Guard set up as a result of reforms to the Internal Troops of Ukraine, subordinate to the Interior Ministry, or 3) as special purpose units of the Interior Ministry. Lastly, you could simply start fighting without receiving legal status. Right Sector took this path by setting up the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps, several battalions of which are still not officially recognised two years after the beginning of the war. The integration of several far-right formations into the structure of Ukrainian military forces was hampered by these formations' reluctance to lose their autonomy and independence, their distrust in both military command and the country's authorities in general, as well as their overall lack of structure and organisation.

The mere fact that these volunteer formations materialised had a propaganda value in the first weeks of the conflict but, on the whole, the media has seriously exaggerated the role of volunteers in the anti-terrorist operation. They did not actually play a significant role during the military operations.[19] It was the regular army and special police units that bore the brunt of the war, which was only natural given the scale of the hostilities, involving rocket artillery batteries and hundreds of armoured vehicles.[20]

Far-right groups founded the following armed formations, which participated in the anti-terror operation: the "Azov" battalion under the

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18. For example, the famous radical right-wing activist Dmytro Reznichenko, who had earlier been convicted of taking part in clashes with members of the security services outside "Ukrainian House" on 4 July 2012, went to fight in the Donbass Territorial Defence Battalion instead of waiting for the leadership of the Svoboda-aligned youth group C14, which he had been involved in previously, to agree to establish its own unit. See: "Poyidu na vijnu" [I am going to war], Dmytro Reznichenko's blog, 20 May 2014, http://reznichenko-d.livejournal.com. D. Korchinsky and his followers went to fight in the Shakhtyorsk Territorial Defence Battalion and so on.
19. See, for instance: "Chto delat's s dobrobatami?" [What is to be done with the volunteer battalions?], Liniya Oborony, 13 August 2015, http://defence-line.org; "Interv'iu nachal'nika shtaba ATO generala Nazarova" [Interview with chief of the ATO staff, Nazarov], Tsenzor.net, 26 December 2014, http://ua.censor.net.ua; "Dve storony dovrovol'cheskikh batal'onov" [The two sides of the volunteer battalions], Informator, 19 September 2015, http://informator.lg.ua; "Dobrovol'tsy: ikh rol' i podvig v rossijsko-ukrainskoj vojne" [Volunteers: their role and feats in the Russian-Ukrainian war], Uainfo.org, 2 October 2015, http://uainfo.org/blognews.
20. For instance, according to reports from the Anti-terror Operation Information Center, on 1 June 2015, the complement of Ukrainian troops near Slaviansk numbered around 5,500 men, of whom 300 were volunteers from the National Guard's first battalion.

Interior Ministry, Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps, "Kiev-2", the OUN battalion (Combined battalion for the territorial defence of the city of Nizhyn), the UNSO battalion (131st separate reconnaissance battalion within the armed forces), "Sich", "Carpathian Sich", "Sokol". Radical nationalists were also present at an individual level in the "Aidar", "Shakhtyorsk" and "Tornado" battalions, as well as in a number of National Guard subunits.

It is notable that fighters with party experience constituted a tiny minority, even in units set up by far-right activists themselves. [21] The core of leaders and activists was immediately surrounded by a wider circle of newcomers who sympathised with their nationalist ideology and were attracted by the extremists' robust rhetoric while still on the Maidan. Finally, a third and still wider circle of support coalesced around those who, once the war began, came to see the nationalists as a resolute force ready to repel the invaders. This last group did not hold far right views, at least in the beginning. In their mind, joining "Azov" or Right Sector's Ukrainian Volunteer Corps was simply a way to fight for their country and make the biggest impact.[22] There is even evidence that some left-wing activists went to fight in these units.[23] On the other hand, newcomers to these units were indoctrinated with radical nationalist views, including xenophobia.[24]

The most successful of all the Ukrainian right-wing radicals in the anti-terror operation turned out to be the "Azov" battalion, created by Andriy Biletsky in May 2014 with members from the Social-National Assembly.[25] As early as March to April, supporters of Biletsky clashed with pro-Russian protesters, mostly on the streets of Kharkiv. Having been taken under the wing of the Interior Ministry and rebranded as a special purpose unit, Azov then helped to liberate Mariupol from the separatists. Towards the autumn of 2014, Azov became a regiment and was reassigned

21. A. Umland, "Dobrovol'cheskie vooruzhionnye formirovaniia i radikal'nyj natsionalizm v poslemaidannoi Ukraine" [Armed volunteer formations and radical nationalism in post-Maidan Ukraine], Politychna krytyka, 15 March 2016, http://ukraine.politicalcritique.org.

22. "Peremohty i vyzhyty, shhob poboduvaty novu krayinu" [Win and survive to build a new country: who will do it if not us?], *Chorne Sonce* No 3, 26 September 2015, http://blacksun.org.ua.

23. V. Mal'tsev, "'Chiernaia gvardiia' kievskikh ul'tra" [The "black guard" of Kiev ultras], *Svobodnaia Pressa*, 21 March 2015, http://svpressa.ru.

24. V. Likhachev, "Kak delaiut antisemitom" [How people are turned into anti-Semites], Vyacheslav Likhachev's blog, 19 November 2015, http://vyacheslav-likhachev.blogspot.co.il.

25. For more details on Azov, see: A. Umland, T. Bezruck, "Der Fall Azov: Freiwilligenbataillone in der Ukraine", *Osteuropa*, No 1-2, January-February 2015, p. 33-42. Also see: A. Umland, "Dobrovol'cheskie vooruzhionnye formirovaniia i radikal'nyj natsionalizm v poslemajdannoj Ukraine" [Armed volunteer formations and radical nationalism in post-Maidan Ukraine], Politychna krytyka, 15 March 2016, http://ukraine.politicalcritique.org.

to the Interior Ministry's National Guard. Rather professional military operations, high standards for training troops, strict discipline, extensive PR and good logistics, funded by donations, made Azov the best volunteer unit in the eyes of the leadership of the Interior Ministry.[26] It ought to be stressed, however, that the regiment carried on using the old symbol of the S.N.A, the "wolfsangel" displayed by neo-Nazis around the world. The regiment's emblems also feature the occult Nazi symbol, the "black sun" (*Schwarze Sonne*), a circular swastika radiating multiple beams. Old S.N.A activists occupy the main leadership positions in the unit.

"Azov" stands as a prime example of how ultra-nationalism was "legalised" and even lionised in the Ukrainian public discourse. However, not all far right groups were that successful: several of them, like the UNA, were unable to attract the media's attention to their role in the anti-terror operation and ended up failing to build up any significant social capital. Others, like Right Sector's Ukrainian Volunteer Corps, despite attracting numerous volunteers, boasting many members and winning public recognition for fighting on difficult sectors of the front, did not even manage to legalise their status within the armed forces. This failure was mostly due to the lack of management skills in the group. In addition, some fighters and small subunits within Right Sector's Ukrainian Volunteer Corps won fame not for their heroism at the front, but for banditry and extremist behaviour in other parts of Ukraine, discrediting the organisation as a whole.

Political Struggle

On the front, then, far-right groups were able to present themselves as separate players worthy of significance in their own right. The anti-terror operation allowed them to shape their image as defenders of Ukraine. Rare individual exceptions aside, however, the radical nationalists failed utterly to convert their hard-won social capital into electoral support.

In the Presidential elections of 25 May 2015, the two radical nationalist candidates, Oleh Tyahnybok and Dmytro Yarosh, took tenth and eleventh place respectively with 1.16% and 0.7% of the popular vote. In fact, neither Tyahnybok nor Yarosh was able to convince voters that they were "defenders of the homeland in the face of armed aggression" while campaigning. The example of the populist politician Oleh Lyashko showed that such image could help candidates to win votes. It seems, however, that

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26. A. Avakov, "U mene v MVS na Kolomojskoho kryminalnoyi spravy nemaye" [I have no criminal proceedings on Kolomojskoho at the ministry of Interior], *Ukrains'ka Pravda*, 10 November 2015, http://pravda.com.ua.

voters simply did not associate radical nationalists with the anti-terror operation.

The war witnessed no rise in popularity for radical nationalist political forces. Oleh Tyahnybok had fared better in the elections of 2010, when he won 1.43% of the vote, and this was even before Svoboda had gained support for opposing the Yanukovych regime. After democratic forces carried the day on the Maidan, ultra right-wing groups stopped being regarded as a necessary "counterweight" to the "anti-national" Yanukovych regime, as they had been in 2010-2013.

In the elections to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, which took place on 26 October 2014, Svoboda failed to exceed the election threshold with 4.71% of the vote and lost its standing as a parliamentary fraction.[27] Meanwhile, Right Sector garnered a mere 1.8% of the vote in these elections, though Dmytro Yarosh was duly elected in a single mandate electoral district decided by majority vote. A. Biletsky was elected in the same way.

Trends in electoral preferences after the elections show that Svoboda continued to lose support,[28] whereas Right Sector has strengthened its position. As far as one can judge, their fortunes have differed because the population more often associates Right Sector with fighting in the anti-terror operation than it does Svoboda. A. Biletsky is regularly exploiting the name of the Azov regiment as he is setting up branches of his civic organisation across the country to engage the public and has broadcast his intention to form a political party around Azov. Thanks to strong discipline, good management and its leaders' authority, Azov has, unlike its competitors Right Sector and Svoboda, managed to steer clear of division and reputational damage linked with its fighters' behaviour.

The radical right's taste for unbounded extremism or simple criminality discredits it in the eyes of society. A host of crimes committed by the far-right activists graphically illustrates just how dangerous they are in the current circumstances: a Svoboda activist threw a grenade outside the Verkhovna Rada and Right Sector activists staged a fire-fight with police in Mukacheve. That adds up to many cases of other crimes that were committed by far-right activists that did not receive such close attention. Right-wing radicals now have military experience and weapons, not to

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27. For possible reasons why the party lost support, see: A. Shekhovtsov, "From Electoral Success to Revolutionary Failure: The Ukrainian Svoboda Party", *Eurozine*, 15 October 2014, http://eurozine.com.

28. V. Likhachev, "'Zhidobanderovtsy' stali pozitivnym simvolom" ["Jewish banderites" have become a positive symbol], *Khadashot*, No 9(220), September 2015, http://hadashot.kiev.ua.

mention the ideology underpinning their struggle with external and internal enemies, from pro-Russian publicists to "the regime of internal occupation" headed by a President who many ultra-nationalists consider to be a Jew. Together, these factors mean that far-right groups are a serious problem for Ukraine's fledgling democracy, despite their paltry levels of support.

Russian Radical Nationalists

Imperial revanche directed by the secret services

From the early 1990s, Russian national radicals typically denied Ukraine's right to exist as independant state. For instance, the National-Bolshevik newspaper "Limonka" explained to its readers how they should interpret a transport-related accident in Dniprodzerzhynsk, Dnipropetrovsk oblast: "It is easy to understand. The *khokhols* [a derogatory term for Ukrainians, Editor's note] are not the sort of people to have their own government: their trams don't even run properly".[29] The National-Bolshevik party programme for 1994 looked forward first to a "unification of territories in the former Soviet republics inhabited by Russians" and then "the creation of a vast continental empire". The influential neo-Eurasianist thinker Aleksandr Dugin has stated that "as an independent state, Ukraine [...] represents a grave danger for the whole of Eurasia and without solving the Ukrainian problem, talking about continental geopolitics at all is pointless".[30] Many ethno-nationalist parties, such as the Russian All-National Union, have also proclaimed that it is necessary to unite Russia, Ukraine and Belarus into a single state. It was a commonplace among Russian far-right figures that Ukrainians, Belorussians and Russians are in fact one nation. This claim was repeated consistently in the programmes of the Russian National Unity movement.

Russian nationalists regularly exploited the post-imperial thesis of Russian people being "divided" by the new borders. In 1998, one of the more prominent thinkers in post-Soviet Russian nationalism, Alexander Sevastyanov, called to "recognize the right to unify the (ethnic) divided Russian nation" in the brochure "The Russian Project". Later, in 2003, this demand reappeared unaltered in the programme of the National Sovereignty Party of Russia, one of the last attempts to create a united radical-nationalist political force.[31] The claim that Russians are a "divided

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29. "Kak nado ponimat" [How you should understand (them)], *Limonka*, No 43, July 1996.
30. A. Dugin, *The Foundations of Geopolitics*, Moscow, Arktogeya, 1997, p. 199.
31. Published in the newspaper *Russkij Front*, No 3, 2003.

nation" is also present in the ideology of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, represented in Parliament.[32]

An important place in the activity of Russian national radicals was given to staking territorial claims and taking steps designed to stir up pro-Russian activism in Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine, activism, frequently in an illegal way. Between 2006 and 2009, for instance, activists from the Donetsk Republic movement took part in training camps run by the Eurasian Youth Union (EYU). They propagated the ideology of pro-Russian separatism in the Donbass and as early as 2005, invented the symbolism that would later gain "official" status in the Donetsk People's Republic. Participants in EYU events learned to handle weapons, among other things. EYU stated in 2008 that its goal was "to carry out a people's revolution in Ukraine".[33] In Ukraine, EYU activists have been accused of abusing state symbols and were suspected of carrying out a range of other crimes.[34]

In this, the actions of the young Russian Federation bore an uncanny resemblance to Germany after the First World War and this partly lay behind the spread of a "Weimar Russia" metaphor.[35]

For Russian radical nationalists, the ideology of imperial restoration was not an abstract theory. The National Bolshevik Party (NBP), the Russian National Unity (RNU), the Eurasian Youth Union, newly-formed armed Cossack units and other groups were active in opening branches in the majority Russian-speaking regions of neighbouring republics. For years, these organisations symbolically rejected the geopolitical status quo that had emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union and readied their supporters to act in Russia's interests. The inner logic of events around the turn of the year 2014 and the annexation of Crimea spurred these groups to change their modus operandi from periodically desecrating Ukrainian state symbols to taking violent action.

The active involvement of "The Other Russia" ("descendants" of the outlawed National Bolshevik Party) supporters in the war against Ukraine is entirely consistent with the party's activities over the past twenty years. In the mid-1990s, the party's leader Eduard Limonov was expelled from

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32. See, for instance, the party brochure "Russians" published under the editorship of the party's leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky.

33. Resolution III of the Eurasian Youth Union's Congress, Rossiya-3, 2 August 2008, http://rossia3.ru.

34. "SBU ustanovila lits, unichtozhivshikh Gerb na Goverle" [The SBU has determined who destroyed the coat of arms on the Hoverla], 20 October 2007, *Korrespondent*, http://korrespondent.net.

35. A. Ianov, *Posle El'tsina. Vejmarskaja Rossiia* [After Yeltsin. Weimar Russia], Moscow, Kruk, 1995.

Ukraine for inciting the Crimean authorities to rebel against Kiev. In an article entitled "Scenarios for an armed uprising", published in the party newspaper "Limonka" in 1998, the National Bolshevik Leader outlined a plan describing with surprising accuracy the events that would kick-start the so-called 'Russian spring' fifteen years later, as well as Russia's intervention in the conflict in Ukraine. It is no surprise that around 2,000 people used "Other Russia" structures to go to fight in the Donbass in 2014-2015, at least if the party's press secretary Aleksandr Averin is to be believed.[36] The party set up its own units, "international brigades", which earned their stripes in the summer of 2014.

As far as one can judge, "The Other Russia" probably joined the separatist uprising after it had already begun due to ideological motivation and political habit. We might cautiously hypothesise, however, that other groups were cooperating closely with the Russian secret services and were used from the very beginning to spark off the conflict,[37] mimicking revolts by Ukrainian citizens themselves.

Perhaps the prime example here is the RNU party, which played a very particular role in exacerbating the conflict in its first weeks and months.[38] The leader of the movement, Alexander Barkashov, a former military who founded the RNU in 1990, and a group of comrades-in-arms performed an "inspection" of several Ukrainian provinces in late February and early March 2014.[39] The first "separatist people's governor" of Donetsk province, Pavel Gubarev, had also been a member of the RNU and, by his own admission, received military training in the party.[40] In May 2014, A. Barkashov also instructed the local activists, including one of the founders of the Russian Orthodox Army, D. Boitsov, about how and when they should carry out a "referendum" on independence (the RNU's leaders instructions were followed to the letter).[41]

36. A. Averin, "Grazhdanskaya voyna po balkanskomu tipu" [Civil war on the Balkan model], *Svobodnaia Pressa*, 19 May 2015, http://svpressa.ru.

37. D. Voltchek, "Eto byla zamanukha" [It was a lure] (interview with A. Raevski), Radio Svoboda, 4 March 2016, http://www.svoboda.org.

38. V. Likhachev, "Kto provodit t.n. 'referendum' na Donbasse?" [Who conducts the so-called "referendum" in the Donbass?], Euro-Asian Jewish congress, 11 May 2014, www.eajc.org.

39. A. Barkashov, "Soobshchenie dlia soratnikov RNE" [Announcement for the RNU brothers], Russkoe natsional'noe edinstvo, 6 March 2014, http://soratnik.com.

40. P. Gubarev, "Mnogie sporiat o tom, nado li delit' byvshuiu Ukrainu ili mozhno ostavit', unichtozhiv bandero-fashizm?" [Many people are arguing about whether the former Ukraine should be divided or whether we can preserve it, destroying bandero-fascism], Russkaia Vesna, 7 June 2014, http://rusvesna.su.

41. V. Likhachev, "Russkij neonatsistskij lider instruktiruet separatistov v Donetske" [Russian neo-Nazi leader instructs separatists in Donetsk], 7 May 2014, http://eajc.org.

The confessions of Alexander Valov[42], who fled to Ukraine in autumn 2014 to claim asylum, may shed some light on how the long-forgotten, dwindling and marginal RNU could become one of the organisations involved in creating the logistics for recruiting fighters and sending them to Ukraine. Before the crisis, Valov was a far-right activist in Murmansk, occupied a position in the nationalist party "New Force" and organised ethnic "Russian marches". In 2013, he was charged with beating up an Uzbek man as well as establishing an extremist group. In the summer of 2014, Valov was invited into the FSB's investigative department and presented with a choice: either he agreed to set up and lead a provincial branch of the RNU and send volunteers to the Donbass or he would face additional charges for "inciting inter-national hatred" and "publicly calling for extremist activity". If he agreed, the FSB promised that the existing charges would be dropped and he would receive financial aid and political backing. Valov refused, fled to Ukraine and later participated in the anti-terror operation as part of the Azov battalion. Others, however, apparently accepted the secret services' generous offer when placed in similar circumstances.[43]

It is known that many Russian far-right activists ended up in Ukraine despite a warrant having been issued for their arrest in Russia or after being released early [from prison]. Others, for reasons that remain obscure to outsiders, were never punished for crimes that they had committed. These figures began to appear among the pro-Russian activists as early as the end of February-beginning of March 2014. On 5 March, for instance, the former leader of the organisation "Moscow Shield", Aleksei Khudyakov, was spotted in Donetsk. He had recently appeared in Russia on criminal charges of conducting an armed raid on a migrant workers' hostel but was amnestied.[44]

During the war in the Donbass, RNU altered the symbol on its chevrons, dispensing with the modified swastika that it had always used in the past. Other Russian neo-Nazi groups were less careful, however. The round eight-pronged swastika—"kolovrat" (a neo-pagan swastika) appeared on the badges of the neo-Nazi "Rusich" and "Ratibor" sabotage-reconnaissance units within the "Batman" Rapid Response Group, and the "Svarozhichi" battalion within the "Oplot" brigade. Many local and Russian

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42. A. Valov, "Ob"iazan pokinut' territoriiu Ukrainy": ukrainskoe 'spasibo' russkomu dobrovol'tsu ATO' [Obliged to leave the Ukrainian territory: a thank you from Ukraine to a Russian ATO volunteer], Vkontakte, 21 October 2015, https://vk.com.

43. For the story of cooperation between RNU and the Russian secret services, see: V. Likhachev, *Natsizm v Rossii* [Nazism in Russia], Moscow, РОО «Panorama», 2002, p. 43-50.

44. See: I. Azar, "Russkij i bessmyslennyj" [Russian and pointless], Lenta.ru, 6 March 2014, http://lenta.ru.

far right activists from the RNU and other groups joined the RPA (Russian Rebel Army), acting independently at first before merging into the "Oplot" brigade.

The fact that many far-right fighters were serving in the military shortly before the conflict began also supports the supposition that the radical nationalists' activities on Ukrainian territory were coordinated with the Russian secret services. Anton Raevsky, a member of the Black Hundreds, may serve as a prime example. In March 2014, he was working with his brothers-in-arms to prepare a pro-Russian armed uprising in Odessa, before joining up with other fighters in the Donbass.[45] The neo-Nazi from St Petersburg, Alexei Milchakov, known for his brutal reprisals against injured Ukrainian servicemen, might also serve as an example. Although Milchakov got involved in the conflict once military operations had already begun, he apparently entered the Ukrainian territory at the head of the pre-formed and armed "Rusich" assault sabotage-reconnaissance unit, the backbone of which was composed of professional soldiers with far-right views.[46]

On the whole, members of far-right groups played a much greater role on the Russian side of the conflict than on the Ukrainian side, especially at the beginning. Whether this role was decisive is difficult to say. At the very least, it was noticeable. We might speculate that the anti-terror operation would have proceeded at roughly the same speed whether Azov and DUK PS were involved or not. It is hardly likely, however, that the Kremlin-inspired "separatist" rebellion in the Donbass would have played out in the way it did had Russian extreme nationalists not taken part.

With the passage of time, Russian far-right groups became less important in the Donbass. As quasi-state structures took hold in the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics (DNR & LNR), the need for Russian radical nationalists began to disappear.

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45. V. Likhachev, "Anton Raevskij—activist national-radikal'noj gruppirovki 'Chiornaya Sotnia'" [Anton Raevsky—activist of the radical nationalist group "The Black Hundred"], Vaad Ukrainy, April 2014, http://vaadua.org.

46. "Komandir gruppy 'Rusich': 'Kosiak sostavliaiut natsionalisty'" [Commander of the Rusich unit: "Nationalists are the backbone"], Voennoe.rf, 13 October 2014, http://voennoe.rf. A. Milchakov headed to the Donbass immediately after serving in the Pskov assault landing division. His "certificate", issued by the Rapid Reaction Unit of the Lugansk People's Republic, bears the number "1488", a widely-used coded Nazi ("14" stands for "14 words", a white supremacist slogan invented by David Lane and "88" stands for 'Heil Hitler' because "h" is the eighth letter in the Latin alphabet). Fighters from the Russian special unit "Grom" were also identified among the Rusich fighters. See, for instance: "O prichinakh vyvoda DShRG 'Rusich' iz DNR" [On the reasons for "Rusich"'s' withdrawal from the Donetsk People's Republic], Bukvy, 13 July 2015, http://bykvu.com.

Right-wing conservative aspects of the self-proclaimed republics' ideology

With the help of Russian specialists, the "separatists" began to establish more or less controllable armed forces. And by its almost over intervention in the conflict, the Russian army ensured enabled the puppet regimes to survive. From August 2014 onwards, moreover, Kiev failed to show any real willingness to use force to regain control of the occupied territory. The front, which was acting in effect as the border of the "separatist" regions, stabilised and the leadership of the self-proclaimed DNR and LNR was able to calmly go about the business of monopolising power and preserving the status quo.

For holders of a Russian imperial ideology, any ceasefire with Ukraine, even if only temporary and poorly observed, was unwelcome and even unthinkable. At the very least, their goal was to "liberate" "Novorossiya"[47] (eight provinces) from the "Banderites" (i.e. the Ukrainian government)[48] and at their most ambitious, they sought to take Kiev and Lviv. "Defending the right of the people of the Donbass to self-determination" did not come close.[49] After the process of implementing the Minsk Accords began, the radical nationalists became a hindrance to the new elites of the DNR and LNR, as well as to their backers in the Kremlin.

Beginning in late 2014, the centralised structures of the DNR and LNR's armed forces began to impose control on independent detachments or those claiming to be independent.[50] These included units of Russian

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47. The Novorossiysk province (end of the 17th century- beginning of the 19th century) was the region of northern Black Sea coast attached to the Russian Empire as a result of Russian-Turkish wars. In the 2014 pro-Russian speeches, the concept of "Novorossiya" ("New Russia") was used to emphasize, first, the historical membership to Russia of the south-eastern regions of modern Ukraine, and secondly, the necessity to expand the pro-Russian separatist movement beyond the Donbass.

48. "V 'gosudarstvo Novorossiia' vojdut vosem' oblastej Ukrainy" [Eight Ukrainian provinces to make up the "state of Novorossiya"], *Korrespondent*, 24 May 2014, http://korrespondent.net.

49. From the beginning of the war, for instance, RNU's slogan was "We are coming to Kiev and Lviv". See, for instance, the propaganda film of the same name, https://youtu.be, or the poster, https://informnapalm.org, displayed on the organisation's official website in recent months, http://soratnik.com. Vladimir Rogov, head of the "Slaviansk Guard" stated that "So long as Kiev and Lvov are not liberated, there will be no peace", Politikus.ru, 21 October 2014, http://politikus.ru.

50. True, some sources in Donetsk stated that the degree to which the DNR's armed forces are centralised should not be overstated. On the contrary, clashes between detachments which ended in the more centralised and organised ones absorbing or restructuring the less combat-ready ones, were mostly showdowns between field commanders and their men for spheres of influence and resources. See, for instance: "Podrobosti nochnykh razborok v Donetske: boeviki delili sfery vlijania i kontrabandu" [Details on the night shootouts in Donetsk: warriors were fighting for spheres of influence and contraband traffic], Glavred, 31 March 2015, http://glavred.info.

nationalist ideologues and Orthodox fundamentalists, as well as formations composed of members of the Russian neo-Cossack movement. In several cases, imposing control meant killing the detachments' commanders or arresting their leaders and some of the men.[51] In the beginning, however, fighters who publicly refused to answer to the leadership of the self-proclaimed republics were simply removed. The leaders of the DNR and LNR made an effort to centralise the armed units in spring 2015 and by summertime, it was happening across the board.[52] The information available suggests that this centralisation was directed by Russian officers and secret service agents.[53] Independent units were refashioned as separate subunits, lost their autonomy and were merged into the "separatists" regular armed forces. Several high-profile field commanders, such as the "Rusich" leader and neo-Nazi Alexei Milchakov, packed up and returned to Russia.

By taking part in the war against Ukraine, Russian far-right activists have become popular among much of the population at home. Men like Milchakov, who used to be little known outside a small band of neo-Nazis, are now prominent public figures. However, since the political process in Russia is neither free nor competitive, former Donbass fighters have little opportunity to convert their status as "heroes" into anything more substantial. Igor "Strelkov" Girkin is the most prominent of these men and he continues to inspire support for the separatists in Russia. This former FSB Special Forces officer supports the ideology of Russian imperial nationalism and led the first detachment to cross the Russian-Ukrainian border, weapons in hand, which seized Slavyansk on 12 April 2014. He later founded the "Novorossiya" movement after returning to Russia. For now, Novorossiya is mostly a network of activists who help to supply the DNR and LNR with equipment from logistical nodes, although Strelkov has

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51. The most vivid example, of course, was the killing in the LNR on 1 January 2015 of Aleksandr Bednov ("Batman"), leader of the "Batman" rapid reaction unit which contained Russian neo-Nazis. Russian citizens were among Bednov's followers who were killed alongside him. Another notorious example was the killing of the commander of the Prizrak battalion, Aleksey Mozgovoy, on 23 May 2015. It is not entirely clear who was behind these reprisals, yet most commentators tend to believe that the LNR authorities were responsible. Although Bednov and Mozgovoy were Ukrainian citizens, they made ample use of Russian nationalist symbols. "Batman" sat in his office under a black, yellow and white Russian "imperial" flag; a Don Cossack flag hung in Mozgovoy's office, complete with a skull and crossbones and an excerpt from the so-called "creed" (the so-called Baklanov flag, first used as a personal banner by the nineteenth century general Yakov Baklanov, the ruthless operator of the Caucasian War). Prizrak fighters also used the black, yellow and white flag.

52. See, for instance: D. Kirillov, "V Donbasse reformirujut boevye batal'ony" [Combat battalions restructured in the Donbass], Gazeta.ru, 9 October 2015, http://gazeta.ru.

53. See, for instance: S. Dobry, V. Dergachev, "Shla by lesom vasha DNR—valyu v Rossiyu" [Your DNR can go to hell—I go back to Russia], Gazeta.ru, 16 October 2015, http://gazeta.ru.

said himself that it might be used as a base for forming a political party.[54] This party's programme would include not only supporting the separatists in the Donbass, but also traditional ethno-nationalist ideas such as combating the "influx of migrants".[55]

Strelkov is to a large extent the focal point for the peculiar club of anti-liberal, nationalistically inclined Russian political figures, social activists and publicists that calls itself the "Committee of 25 January". This club includes well-known ideologues from the ranks of the modern Russian nationalists, such as Eduard Limonov, Egor Kholmogorov, Konstantin Krylov and others. It is too early to speculate about the Committee's political prospects but the fact that support for "Novorossiya" has been an important factor in the unification of Russia's nationalists is not open to doubt.

Due to the absence of pre-war ties with the local population, as well as psychological peculiarities and behavioural habits, far-right units and Cossacks engaged in exceptional violence, sadism, banditry and looting in the DNR and LNR.[56] This explains why the arrest and killing of extremists was accepted by local people, as well as by Moscow.[57]

By the autumn of 2015, the most radical Russian units had stopped playing a significant role as an independent force on "separatist"-controlled territories. On the other hand, the ideas of Russian imperial (and, to some extent, ethnic) nationalism and Orthodox fundamentalism shaped the official ideology of the DNR and LNR. Declarations about the exceptional role of the Russian Orthodox Church[58] that serve to exclude rather than include, as well as anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western attacks, are an important feature of official documents, public speeches and the puppet regimes' most influential media. Anti-Semitism[59] and homophobia[60] play a

54. A. Pertsev, "Igor' Strelkov khotel by sygrat' svoiu partiiu" [Igor Stelkov would like to create his own party], *Kommersant*, 28 October 2015, http://kommersant.ru.

55. On 28 May 2016, the creation of the Russian national movement based on the 25 January Committee under the leadership of Igor Strelkov was announced. See political declaration of the movement on Novorossiya's website: http://novorossia.pro.

56. A. Belokobyl'skij, "Likvidatsiia 'Betmena' i grazhdanskaia voina v LNR" [The killing of "Batman" and civil war in the LNR], RIA Novosti Ukraina, 6 January 2015, http://rian.com.ua.

57. It is symptomatic that the Russian Interior Ministry officially refuses to try to clarify the circumstances in which Russian citizens died during internal clashes in the DNR and LNR and to help free fighters arrested by the "separatist" leadership. See: V. Dergachev, A. Braterskij, "V podvalakh Donbassa" [In the cellars of the Donbass], Gazeta.ru, 6 July 2015, http://gazeta.ru.

58. The Constitution of the Donetsk People's Republic, Official site of the People's Council of the Donetsk People's Republic, http://dnrsovet.su.

59. T. Bezruk, V. Likhachev, "Ksenofobiia v Ukraine v 2014 g. na fone revoliutsii i interventsii" [Xenophobia in Ukraine in 2014 against the backdrop of revolution and intervention], information-analytical report based on monitoring, Congress of National Communities of Ukraine, 2015, p. 41-44; V. Likhachev, "Vzaimoiskliuchaiushchie paragrafy adeptov 'Russkogo

lesser, though still significant, role in public rhetoric. Religious persecution has become rampant.[61] Evangelical Protestant churches and communities, which before were widespread,[62] had been all but wiped out on DNR territory by 2015.[63] At the beginning of the conflict, the terrorist expelled gypsies from the towns that they had seized in Donetsk province.[64]

It can therefore be argued that the official ideology of the DNR and LNR, which developed under the influence of Russian far-right activists, is largely right wing, conservative and xenophobic in character.

mira'" [Mutually-exclusive paragraphs (among) adherents of the Russian World], Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, 12 February 2015, http://eajc.org; V. Likhachev, "K vlasti v Kieve prishli neonatsisty i zhidy" [neo-Nazis and Jews have come to power in Kiev], *Jewish Panorama*, No 4 (10), April 2015; K. Skorkin, "'Novorossiia' i Evreyskij vopros" ["Novorossiya" and the Jewish question], *Real'naia Gazeta*, 23 July 2015, http://realgazeta.com.ua.

60. "Takie zhe normal'nye muzhiki: Zakharchenko zauvazhal 'Pravy sektor'" [The same normal guys: Zakharchenko has begun to respect Pravyj Sektor], Ruposters, 18 July 2015, http://ruposters.ru.

61. V. Cooper, A. Novitchkova, M. Tomak, S. Valko, "When God Becomes Weapon: Persecution Based on Religious Beliefs in the Armed Conflict in Eastern Ukraine", International Partnership for Human Rights, April 2015, http://iphronline.org.

62. Until the Russia's acts of aggression began, 46% of the religious communities registered in Donetsk province belonged to protestant denominations, more than in any other Ukrainian province.

63. For religious persecution on the territory occupied by the separatists, see, for instance: K. Skorkin, "Vo chto veriat 'LNR' i 'DNR' [What do the "LNR" and "DNR" believe in], *Real'naya Gazeta*, 15 October 2015, http://realgazeta.com.ua. Also see: "Fighting Impunity in Eastern Ukraine: Violations of the International Humanitarian Law and International Crimes in Eastern Ukraine", International Partnership for Human Rights, 2015, p. 99-104. http://iphronline.org. Many Protestants supported the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Ukrainian state and declared that they wanted peace, which explains why they were hounded by the separatists. Persecution of Protestants was also motivated by the Orthodox fundamentalism of the occupiers and by the fact that the Protestants were associated with the West and America. During a press-conference on 16 May 2015, the leading terrorist in Donetsk, Aleksandr Zakharchenko said that only three religions are permitted in the DNR: Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Islam and Judaism. See: "Okkupanty priznali tol'ko 4 religii, vse ostal'nye ob"yavili 'sektami'" [The occupiers have only recognised 4 religions. All the others were declared "sects"], *NEWSru.ua*, 21 May 2015. http://rus.newsru.ua. "I am going to fight tooth and nail with sectarianism", the head of the puppet regime promised. See: V. Mal'tsev, ' "'Dukhovnaia bran' Aleksandra Zakharchenko" [Aleksandr Zakharchenko's spiritual invective], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 1 July 2015, http://ng.ru.

64. "Roma and War in Eastern Ukraine—Refugees, Displaced Persons, Victims of Violence", Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial, 2015, http://adcmemorial.org.

Conclusion

The fact that right-wing radicals, including self-confessed neo-Nazis, took part in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has attracted much attention from the media and in society. But although they did play their part in the first few months of the conflict, in the spring and summer of 2014, their importance has often been exaggerated. Russia's use of right-wing radicals on the side of the "separatists" in Donetsk and Lugansk provinces was more important militarily and politically than the involvement of Ukrainian far-right activists in the anti-terrorist operation. The conflict developed in such a way, moreover, that the importance of far-right groups on both sides has declined over time.

The direction in which politics is moving in Ukraine and in the unrecognised, pro-Russian and "separatist" DNR and LNR has also helped to push far-right groups from the mainstream into the margins. Nevertheless, the DNR and LNR regimes have themselves assumed a conservative, right-wing complexion and different types of xenophobia play a considerable role in their official ideology and rhetoric.
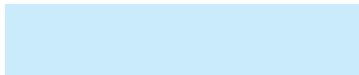
Following the victory of democratic forces in the Revolution of Dignity in winter 2014, radical nationalists, with a few notable exceptions, lost support as elections came and went. The overall situation in Ukraine remains difficult and unstable, however, and disillusionment with the authorities is growing. Against this backdrop, radical nationalists who earned a heroic reputation fighting in the anti-terror operation now have the chance to expand their influence. Azov commander Andriy Biletsky and former leader of Right Sector, Dmytro Yarosh, showed how this might be achieved. Apart from economic difficulties, populists could take advantage of a desire for revenge and they are most likely to do so if the conflict in the Donbass flares up once more.

To prevent far-right forces from expanding their influence in Ukraine, the government must effectively combat the military threat and Russian propaganda, succeed with its reforms, develop the Ukrainian economy and bolster state structures, while European values must take hold in Ukrainian society.

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