

Kiev Right Wing Violence: Time for Poroshenko to Look in the Mirror?

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Amidst the emergence of politically-right-wing forces in Kiev, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko claims to be shocked and outraged by recent violence. Speaking in reference to an explosion which killed three members of the national guard outside parliament and left another officer in a coma, Poroshenko called the attack “an anti-Ukrainian action” and demanded that “all organizers, all representatives of political forces... must carry full responsibility.” More than a whopping 140 were also wounded in the attack, which was apparently caused by a grenade. All three guardsmen were young, in their twenties.

The incident occurred in the midst of a demonstration against a plan to provide more autonomy to separatist enclaves in the Ukrainian east where Russian-backed rebels hold sway. Authorities have blamed the explosion on a fighter in the so-called Sich volunteer battalion, which is linked in turn to far right-wing [Svoboda or Freedom Party](#) [in Ukraine, “Sich” refers to historic Cossack homelands. Though Cossack is a loaded term and carries unpleasant historic meaning for some, nationalists recently revived the word by referring to a protest area in Kiev which launched the 2013-14 EuroMaidan revolution as a “Cossack Sich.” Svoboda meanwhile loves [“Cossack rock” music](#)]. Rather questionably, the government itself has ties to the Sich battalion which falls under the official control of the Ministry of the Interior.

Svoboda’s Role

Svoboda was highly represented at the demonstration outside of parliament, and most protesters participating in subsequent violence and clashes with the police were Svoboda members. Later, the Minister of the Interior claimed that that party was “directly” responsible for clashes and the government has charged senior Svoboda members with rioting. Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk has declared that right wing-nationalists were “worse” than Russian-backed separatists in the east, because they were “trying to open another front” in Ukraine “under the guise of patriotism.”



Ismail Akin Bostanci via Getty Images

Svoboda on the other hand denies any responsibility and claims the authorities are out on a witch hunt to deface the party. Whatever the case, it's a little odd that the authorities have only now woken up to the ominous threat of right wing groups. Indeed, the attack in front of the parliament building follows close on the heels of another incident in south-west Ukraine, in which members of Right Sektor battalion got into a shootout with local police. Perhaps, high-ups at the Ministry of Interior and elsewhere are finally paying the price for coddling the nationalist right and its backward political and social agenda.

Waking Up to Far Right

It's only now, when extremists pose a threat to the government itself, that the international media has woken up to the rise of the political right. For years now, however, the nationalist right has posed a risk to independent leftists on the ground. [Denis Pilash](#), one such activist who I interviewed in Kiev, is no stranger to Svoboda. Even before the EuroMaidan revolution which toppled Viktor Yanukovich from power, Pilash observed Svoboda trying to stir up "anti-migrant hysteria" by holding hostile rallies. Eventually, however, Svoboda and the right may have realized that anti-immigrant messaging wasn't resonating so well, so they turned to [opposing anarchists, feminists, and the LGBT](#) community.

As if such developments weren't concerning enough, Svoboda also has a peculiar habit of resuscitating dubious World War II icons. Svoboda leaders, in fact, admire "proto-Nazis" such as Ernst Jünger, and are "understanding" of Goebbels. They moreover talk about "purity of blood" and refer to Ukraine as "one race, one nation, one fatherland." Svoboda meanwhile idolizes the [Ukrainian Insurgent Army or UPA](#), an outfit which fought against the Soviets in World War II but also collaborated with the Nazis at one point. During unrest at Maidan square, Svoboda brandished the traditional UPA flag. In addition, Svoboda has defended extremists' right to brandish this flag at [local soccer matches](#).

Problematic Police

Pilash adds that rightists dress up in military-style outfits with red and black insignia and some paramilitaries are "linked to the most notorious figures in Svoboda." [Pilash is particularly disturbed](#) by one case last year in which Vasyl Cherepanyn, a lecturer at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and editor of leftist [Political Critique](#) magazine, was brazenly attacked in broad daylight in crowded Kontraktova Square. Cherepanyn was assaulted by a group of

men dressed in camouflage paramilitary uniforms. As they proceeded to pummel their victim, the thugs shouted “communist” and “separatist.” Unfortunately, police arrived late to the scene and failed to catch the assailants. Pilash says the attackers had no clear insignia on their uniforms, but he suspects they may have belonged to local battalions which assist the police.

There are other disturbing indications that the police may have been penetrated by right wing zealots. Azov Battalion is a military outfit fighting Russian separatists in the east which advocates right-wing nationalism and anti-Semitism. One infamous Azov commander is Andriy Biletsky, who has been promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel in the police. The military figure has openly admitted that some men in his unit “are interested in their historical roots,” though this may be difficult to understand for more modern, “uprooted” nations such as the United States.

Looking the Other Way?

As if it wasn’t disturbing enough that bad apples are caught up in the police, high up politicians have also gotten into the habit of appeasing the far right. To be sure, Petro Poroshenko is a far cry from such violent street toughs. Unfortunately, however, the authorities have either turned the other way or sought to incorporate far right messaging, thus perpetuating a chilling climate in which fringe ideas are allowed to thrive.

Take, for example, Poroshenko’s comment that the “timing is good” to define the status of the UPA. The politician then signed a decree establishing a “Day of Ukrainian Defenders” on October 14. The date is significant as it marks the anniversary of the UPA’s formation. [Taking to Twitter](#), Poroshenko added “UPA soldiers – an example of heroism and patriotism to Ukraine.”

Then, for good measure, Poroshenko provided a Ukrainian passport to a Belarusian neo-Nazi. The man, Serhiy Korotkykh, served as a fighter in the eastern conflict zone and helped to defend Donetsk airport from Russian separatists. During a ceremony, Poroshenko awarded a medal to Korotkykh and praised the Belarusian as “courageous and selfless.” Experts however claim that Korotkykh was a founder of a neo-Nazi group in Russia and point out the Belarusian had been charged for involvement in a Moscow bombing and was also detained in Minsk for allegedly stabbing an anti-fascist organizer. Needless to say, top Ukrainian authorities reject such claims as defamatory. Like Biletsky, Korotkykh is a member of the Azov Battalion.

As if all of this wasn’t enough already, Poroshenko has also praised Andrey Sheptytsky, a priest who worked in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. Though Sheptytsky harbored some Jews during World War II, he initially supported the Nazis during their invasion of Ukraine, favored the UPA and endorsed the creation of a Ukrainian division with the Nazi SS. Rather questionably, Poroshenko recently unveiled a monument to Sheptytsky in the western city of Lviv where Svoboda and the political right enjoy a degree of popularity. During a ceremony attended by 10,000 people, Poroshenko praised the priest.

The Ricochet Effect

Terrified at the prospect of being overrun by separatists or even that the nation itself might implode or collapse, Poroshenko and the political establishment have engaged in a kind of Faustian bargain with the far right. This mindset is at least partially due to Poroshenko’s

nervousness about upcoming local elections in the fall and the prospect of being [overwhelmed by radical populists](#). Such firebrand politics could shock the establishment, which has failed to revive the economy or even break the [power of the oligarchs](#) for that matter. Reportedly, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk's party has plummeted in popularity to such a degree that he is now joining forces with Poroshenko so as to avoid an electoral rout.

Tying one's sails to the far right, however, has constituted a serious mistake. While extreme nationalists still might not command an electoral majority, the Ukrainian political class has historically displayed an alarmingly high level of tolerance and acquiescence towards right wing antics. Though certainly horrific, recent riots in Kiev will hopefully serve to highlight the real danger of the far right and the need to take a firm stand against such elements.

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