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Ukraine and the Rebirth of Fascism in Europe

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The violence on the streets of Ukraine is far more than an expression of popular anger against a government. Instead, it is merely the latest example of the rise of the most insidious form of fascism that Europe has seen since the fall of the Third Reich.

Recent months have seen regular protests by the Ukrainian political opposition and its supporters – protests ostensibly in response to Ukrainian President Yanukovich's refusal to sign a trade agreement with the European Union that was seen by many political observers as the first step towards European integration. The protests remained largely peaceful until January 17th when protesters armed with clubs, helmets, and improvised bombs unleashed brutal violence on the police, storming government buildings, beating anyone suspected of pro-government sympathies, and generally wreaking havoc on the streets of Kiev. But who are these violent extremists and what is their ideology?

The political formation is known as "Pravy Sektor" (Right Sector), which is essentially an umbrella organization for a number of ultra-nationalist (read fascist) right wing groups including supporters of the "Svoboda" (Freedom) Party, "Patriots of Ukraine", "Ukrainian National Assembly – Ukrainian National Self Defense" (UNA-UNSO), and "Trizub". All of these organizations share a common ideology that is vehemently anti-Russian, anti-immigrant, and anti-Jewish among other things. In addition they share a common reverence for the so called "Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists" led by Stepan Bandera, the infamous Nazi collaborators who actively fought against the Soviet Union and engaged in some of the worst atrocities committed by any side in World War II.

While Ukrainian political forces, opposition and government, continue to negotiate, a very different battle is being waged in the streets. Using intimidation and brute force more typical of Hitler's "Brownshirts" or Mussolini's "Blackshirts" than a contemporary political movement, these groups have managed to turn a conflict over economic policy and the political allegiances of the country into an existential struggle for the very survival of the nation that these so called "nationalists" claim to love so dearly. The images of Kiev burning, Lviv streets filled with thugs, and other chilling examples of the chaos in the country, illustrate beyond a shadow of a doubt that the political negotiation with the Maidan (Kiev's central square and center of the protests) opposition is now no longer the central issue. Rather, it is the question of Ukrainian fascism and whether it is to be supported or rejected.

For its part, the United States has strongly come down on the side of the opposition, regardless of its political character. In early December, members of the US ruling establishment such as John McCain and Victoria Nuland were seen at Maidan lending their support to the protesters. However, as the character of the opposition has become

apparent in recent days, the US and Western ruling class and its media machine have done little to condemn the fascist upsurge. Instead, their representatives have met with representatives of Right Sector and deemed them to be "no threat." In other words, the US and its allies have given their tacit approval for the continuation and proliferation of the violence in the name of their ultimate goal: regime change.

In an attempt to pry Ukraine out of the Russian sphere of influence, the US-EU-NATO alliance has, not for the first time, allied itself with fascists. Of course, for decades, millions in Latin America were disappeared or murdered by fascist paramilitary forces armed and supported by the United States. The mujahideen of Afghanistan, which later transmogrified into Al Qaeda, also extreme ideological reactionaries, were created and financed by the United States for the purposes of destabilizing Russia. And of course, there is the painful reality of Libya and, most recently Syria, where the United States and its allies finance and support extremist jihadis against a government that has refused to align with the US and Israel. There is a disturbing pattern here that has never been lost on keen political observers: the United States always makes common cause with right wing extremists and fascists for geopolitical gain.

The situation in Ukraine is deeply troubling because it represents a political conflagration that could very easily tear the country apart less than 25 years after it gained independence from the Soviet Union. However, there is another equally disturbing aspect to the rise of fascism in that country – it is not alone.

The Fascist Menace Across the Continent

Ukraine and the rise of right wing extremism there cannot be seen, let alone understood, in isolation. Rather, it must be examined as part of a growing trend throughout Europe (and indeed the world) – a trend which threatens the very foundations of democracy.

In Greece, savage austerity imposed by the troika (IMF, ECB, and European Commission) has crippled the country's economy, leading to a depression as bad, if not worse, than the Great Depression in the United States. It is against this backdrop of economic collapse that the Golden Dawn party has grown to become the third most popular political party in the country. Espousing an ideology of hate, the Golden Dawn – in effect a Nazi party that promotes anti-Jewish, anti-immigrant, anti-women chauvinism – is a political force that the government in Athens has understood to be a serious threat to the very fabric of society. It is this threat which led the government to arrest the party's leadership after a Golden Dawn Nazi fatally stabbed an anti-fascist rapper. Athens has launched an investigation into the party, though the results of this investigation and trial remain somewhat unclear.

What makes Golden Dawn such an insidious threat is the fact that, despite their central ideology of Nazism, their anti-EU, anti-austerity rhetoric appeals to many in the economically devastated Greece. As with many fascist movements in the 20th Century, Golden Dawn scapegoats immigrants, Muslim and African primarily, for many of the problems facing Greeks. In dire economic circumstances, such irrational hate becomes appealing; an answer to the question of how to solve society's problems. Indeed, despite Golden Dawn's leaders being jailed, other party members are still in parliament, still running for major offices including mayor of Athens. Though an electoral victory is unlikely, another strong showing at the polls will make the eradication of fascism in Greece that much harder.

Were this phenomenon confined to Greece and Ukraine, it would not constitute a

continental trend. Sadly however, we see the rise of similar, albeit slightly less overtly fascist, political parties all over Europe. In Spain, the ruling pro-austerity People's Party has moved to establish draconian laws restricting protest and free speech, and empowering and sanctioning repressive police tactics. In France, the National Front Party of Marine Le Pen, which vehemently scapegoats Muslim and African immigrants, won nearly twenty percent of the vote in the first round of presidential elections. Similarly, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands – which promotes anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant policies – has grown to be the third largest in parliament. Throughout Scandinavia, ultra nationalist parties which once toiled in complete irrelevance and obscurity are now significant players in elections. These trends are worrying to say the least.

It should be noted too that, beyond Europe, there are a number of quasi-fascist political formations which are, in one way or another, supported by the United States. The right wing coups that overthrew the governments of Paraguay and Honduras were tacitly and/or overtly supported by Washington in their seemingly endless quest to suppress the Left in Latin America. Of course, one should also remember that the protest movement in Russia was spearheaded by Alexei Navalny and his nationalist followers who espouse a virulently anti-Muslim, racist ideology that views immigrants from the Russian Caucasus and former Soviet republics as beneath "European Russians". These and other examples begin to paint a very ugly portrait of a US foreign policy that attempts to use economic hardship and political upheaval to extend US hegemony around the world.

In Ukraine, the "Right Sector" has taken the fight from the negotiating table to the streets in an attempt to fulfill the dream of Stepan Bandera – a Ukraine free of Russia, Jews, and all other "undesirables" as they see it. Buoyed by the continued support from the US and Europe, these fanatics represent a more serious threat to democracy than Yanukovich and the pro-Russian government ever could. If Europe and the United States don't recognize this threat in its infancy, by the time they finally do, it might just be too late.

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