

All is Fair in War

Bhaswati Sarkar ¹¹ Professor at the Centre for European Studies (CES), School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India

Corresponding Author: Bhaswati Sarkar
Professor at the Centre for European Studies (CES), School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India.
Email: bhaswatices@gmail.com

Article info

Received: 15 November 2022**Accepted:** 31 December 2022

Keywords: Invasion, Fascist, Far-Right, Human Rights, Azov.

How to cite this article: Bhaswati Sarkar. (2022). All is Fair in War, International Journal of Politics and Media, 1(2), 31-33 Retrieved from <https://ijpmonline.com/index.php/ojs/article/view/27>

Abstract

The Russian invasion in Ukraine last February and the war that rages on continues to be at the centre of focus in Europe with rippling effect across the world. Putin claims that this 'special military operation' was to "de-militarise" and "de-nazify". Taking a step back this paper looks at the presence and activities of right-wing nationalists in Ukraine and the West's reading of them and how it changed post the February invasion.

1.Introduction

The Russian invasion in Ukraine or Putin's special military operation as he calls it, is paradoxically a failure of diplomacy and its triumph. While hectic parleys by European leaders to Moscow failed to deter Kremlin, in the post-invasion scenario diplomatic energy is being spent to formulate common approaches and narratives to isolate Russia, impose sanctions and deal with the fallout of the conflict, the most visible of which is the million plus Ukrainian refugees entering EU member states.

European leaders have repeatedly stated that the Russian invasion was unprovoked while Putin has stressed that he had on numerous occasions articulated Russia's concern about NATO enlargement and Ukraine and Georgia's membership in the organization as a security threat that would not go unanswered. On the eve of the invasion Putin recognized the breakaway regions of Luhansk and Donetsk as independent states, accused Ukraine and the West of failing to implement the Minsk agreement and vowed through military operation to "de-militarise" and "de-nazify" Ukraine. Reporting on this television anchor's covering the developments were quick to point out that President Zelensky was himself a Jew! Who and what then is Putin referring to?

Putin was simply extending the Russian reading of events since "Euromaidan" and the war in Donbas. Highlighting the involvement of far-right groups in the events Russia had characterized "Euromaidan" as a "fascist coup" and the Maidan government as a "fascist junta".

Studies (Katchanovski 2016) show that in February 2014 there were organisations like the Right Sector, Svoboda and other smaller organizations which were actively engaged in violently overthrowing the Viktor Yanukovich government and the Maidan protests. Further on 2 May 2014, the police and the Right Sector, the Social-National Assembly/ Patriot of Ukraine and ultra-football groups were involved in the massacre in Odesa. Following the Odesa events the European Union did call for an independent investigation but to no avail. The Council of Europe in its' November 2015 report too observed that enquiry into the behaviour of the State Emergency Service (SES) staff in response to the fire, lacked "institutional and practical independence" given the structural links between the SES and the Ministry of the Interior (Report 2015:6). In subsequent years, in fact the Right Sector cadres have reportedly commemorated the incidents by marching through Odesa's streets. The failure of Ukraine to conduct impartial investigation play into the hands of Russia to push its' counter narrative and accusations of Ukraine being run by 'fascist.' In 2015 when the Ukrainian parliament was to vote for greater autonomy to the east, members of Radical Party and Svoboda protested inside the parliament and Ukrainian nationalists clashed with security forces outside the building in Kyiv, injuring many (RFE/RL 2015).

Putin has repeatedly since 'Euromaidan' referred to groups that have Neo-nazi leanings. These groups like the Azov battalion gained prominence in 2014 when it was formed to help Ukrainian army ward off the challenge in the East. The battalion was composed of ultra nationalist groups like the

Ultra-nationalist Patriot of Ukraine and the neo-Nazi Social National Assembly who openly espoused Neo-Nazi ideals. They were xenophobic, with little hesitation in physically assaulting all who opposed their views and especially targeted migrants and the Roma community. The military unit subsequently became part of Ukraine's National Guard and is known as the Azov Regiment.

Covering events back in 2014 in Eastern Ukraine in Mariupol which is today in news for intense fighting, The Guardian reported what it found disturbing about this battalion for "many of them to have disturbing political views, and almost all to be intent on 'bringing the fight to Kiev' when the war in the east is over" (The Guardian 2014). The battalion's symbol resembles Wolfsangel a symbol widely used in Nazi Germany. Azov, however, claims that they are letters N and I crossed over each other and the symbol stands for "national idea" (The Guardian 2014).

In 2016 the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in its report on the human rights condition in Ukraine "documented allegations of enforced disappearances, arbitrary and incommunicado detention, and torture and ill-treatment, perpetrated with impunity by Ukrainian law enforcement officials, mainly by elements of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU)" and urged the "Ukrainian authorities to ensure prompt and impartial investigation into each reported case of human rights violations, as well as the prosecution of perpetrators" (OHCHR 2016:8). The Government of Ukraine did adopt a national human rights action plan aimed at realising the human rights strategy it had approved the year before in August. However, without any justification, it restricted its commitment under the ICCPR (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) vis-a-vis the population of many areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk region which it controlled (OHCHR 2016:9).

The report further documented how in Shyrokyne which was a "grey zone" between the Government-controlled city of Mariupol and the town of Novoazovsk under the control of the armed groups, the Ukrainian military and the Azov regiment extensively used civilian buildings and locations and looted civilian property, leading to displacement. Both armed groups and Ukrainian armed forces the report had noted positioned military forces in or near hospitals (OHCHR 2016:11). The OHCHR report thus show that these areas have been far from being conflict free zones for some time with severe repercussions for the civilian population.

The Neo-Nazi leanings of the Azov had until recently solicited a reserved response from western powers who were otherwise engaged in training Ukrainian military. In June 2015, both Canada and the United States announced that they would not support or train the Azov regiment but a year down the line in 2016 under pressure from the Pentagon the US lifted the ban. However, once again in October 2019 the Azov regiment and its activities was in focus when 39 members of the US Congress led by Representative Max Rose signed a letter that demanding that several international far-right movements be officially placed on the foreign terrorist organization list. Along with the Islamic State and al Qaeda, the Azov movement was also identified by the Congressmen to be placed in

this list. The Azov movement Rose writes in the letter, "has been recruiting, radicalizing and training American citizens for years" (Colborne 2019). This met with strong reaction in Ukraine with Azov members brandishing placards, "Azov are heroes". In his meeting with American officials, Ukraine's interior minister Arsen Avakov criticised the American position and defended the Azov. 39 parliamentarians mostly from President Volodymyr Zelensky's, "Servant of the People's" party also wrote to the chair of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs defending Azov (Colborne 2019).

Besides the Azov battalion with strong Nazi leanings, Western Ukraine also has groups like the Karpatska Sich organised as a sports organisation active in the city of Uzhhorod since 2010. The organisation's website sets out its political views in no uncertain terms "We will not allow globalism, liberalism, capitalism, leftism, LGBT and [feminist] activism, and other types of perversions to exist peacefully and reproduce on our land. Our movement educates new Ukrainians—a strong, just people—of Truth, Faith and Honor [sic], without the substandard values of provincial complexes, that is, the real national elite" (Reporting Radicalism, n.d.). In Uzhhorod the group works closely with local branches of the right-wing nationalist political parties like Svaboda, Right Sector, the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Azov Civil Corps. Civil society activists have been frequently attacked, meetings, conferences, rallies disrupted by this group. In 2018 Amnesty International reported the attack by members of Karpatska Sich on a feminist rally on March 8 pouring red paint on the participants (Reporting Radicalism, n.d.). A nationalist battalion the Karpatska Sich, battalion was born out of the 2014 Maidan protest movement which has since been integrated into the Ukrainian army and actively participating in countering the ongoing Russian offensive.

It has over the years also established links with other right wing radicals of the region, from Hungary and Serbia and backs the Greek neo-Nazi party, Golden Dawn; the Italian neo-fascist organization, Casa Pound; and Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad. In October 2018 the Karpatska Sich, nationalist battalion participated in an second "Paneuropa Conference", an event of far-right groups organised in Kyiv. The Reconquista Club where the event was organised belongs to the Azov movement. On 11 November 2018 invited by the Polish far-right group Szturmowcy, Karpatska Sich participated in the "black column" march to commemorate the Polish Independence Day. In April 2019, the group organised its first conference. The stated objective of this conference titled the "Sword of Europe" was to "unite sincere nationalist movements to effectively counter the civilizational threats of our time" (Reporting Radicalism, n.d.). Representatives of several far-right groups from Hungary (Legio Hungaria), Poland (Szturmowcy), the Czech Republic (NSF) and Serbia (Autonomous Nationalists) and even the Russian political émigré community, the Russian Center, participated in the conference (Ibid). A "Radical Alliance March" was organised in Uzhhorod to highlight "European fraternity" ironically by burning the European Union flag. The aim of the conference was to establish contact between the ultra-right organizations in Central and Eastern Europe and question what they termed as "dictatorship of so-called 'political correctness.'" In March 2019 following the Christchurch mosque attacks that the Karpatska Sich's social media platforms highlighted the

manifesto of the shooter clearly mirrored this position. The conference participants also declared that they planned to build a joint online news resource, as well as paramilitary groups and a fund to support “repressed” members. Apart from some occasional brush with authorities the organisation has not had much trouble from authorities and the regional media has refrained from criticising them.

As Ukraine is engaged in a ‘do or die’ battle of existence, nation and nationalism is at the centre stage. Following President Zelensky’s call to people to join Ukraine’s fight a reported 20,000 have responded with many from France, Germany and the UK volunteering (DW February 2022). The Ukrainian government has set up a “International Legion for the Territorial Defense of Ukraine”. The war is being fought as much on Ukrainian soil as in information cyber space. On 24 February when Russia launched its attack, Facebook which in 2016 designated the Azov regiment a “dangerous organisation” like the Ku Klux Klan and ISIL (ISIS) and in 2019 banned it from its’ platforms reversed its ban. It announced that “for the time being, we are making a narrow exception for praise of the Azov regiment strictly in the context of defending Ukraine, or in their role as part of the Ukraine national guard,” (Aljazeera 2022). And in March Facebook and Instagram announced that it would allow posts that call for death to Russian invaders, Russian President Vladimir Putin or Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in its platforms (Reuters 10 March). Putin’s war in Ukraine bringing death, destruction and displacement at its wake has not only shifted the spotlight from these groups that he supposedly set out to uproot but given them wider legitimacy in Europe (and the US) that they already enjoyed at home, the effect of which will be long felt after the war.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Funding : The author has not received any grant or financial support for this research.

The first version of this article was presented at policy brief series of the TOAEP (<https://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/106-bhaumik/>).

References

1. Azov fighters are Ukraine's greatest weapon and may be its greatest threat: The battalion's far-right volunteers' desire to 'bring the fight to Kiev' is a danger to post-conflict stability <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/10/azov-far-right-fighters-ukraine-neo-nazis>
2. Colborne, M. (2019). U.S. Congress Accidentally Boosted Ukraine’s Far-Right: A member of Congress wrote to the State Department calling out Ukraine’s Azov movement as terrorists. It backfired, Foreign Policy, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/01/congress-max-rose-ukraine-azov-terrorism/>
3. Joining the war: Foreign nationals flock to Ukraine, DW, February 2022 <https://www.dw.com/en/joining-the-war-foreign-nationals-flock-to-ukraine/a-61084878>
4. Katchanovski, Ivan (2016), ‘The Far Right in Ukraine

- During the “Euromaidan” and the War in Donbas’, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2832203
5. Levine, D. (2016). Council of Europe issues report on far-right massacre in Odessa. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2016/01/19/odes-j16.html>
 6. Profile: Who are Ukraine’s far-right Azov regiment? March 2022 [aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/1/who-are-the-azov-regiment](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/1/who-are-the-azov-regiment)
 7. Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine 16 November 2015 to 15 February 2016, , Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/Ukraine_13th_HRMMU_Report_3March2016.pdf
 8. Report of the International Advisory Panel on its Review of the Investigations into the Events in Odesa on 2 May 2014, 4 November 2015 <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168048610f>
 9. Reporting Radicalism(nd)<https://reportingradicalism.org/en/dossiers/groups/karpatska-sich-right-wing-anti-gender-lgbt-group-most-active-in-western-ukraine>
 10. ‘Ukrainian National Guardsman Killed At Protest Outside Parliament’ 31 August 2015, RFE/RL,
 11. <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-decentralization-bill-protests/27218087.html>