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Irregular Militias and Radical Nationalism in Post-Euromaydan Ukraine: The Prehistory and Emergence of the “Azov” Battalion in 2014

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ABSTRACT

During and after Ukraine’s celebrated Euromaydan (literally: European Square) Revolution of 2013–2014, a whole number of novel Ukrainian political and societal phenomena emerged. One of the most intriguing was the relatively spontaneous and government-supported emergence of volunteer armed units from late spring 2014 onwards, in connection with the start of Russia’s covert paramilitary intervention in Eastern Ukraine. Among the most widely noted of these initially irregular detachments was the “Azov” battalion or regiment, named after the Azov Sea, created, in May 2014, by an obscure lunatic fringe group of racist activists. This paper briefly sketches the origins of Azov, biographies of some of its founders, and particulars of its creation, without touching upon such issues as Azov’s military performance, later integration into the National Guard under Ukraine’s Ministry of Interior, and political development after 2014.

KEYWORDS

Irregular armed groups;
Ukraine; nationalism;
neo-fascism; Ukraine crisis

The 2013–2014 Ukrainian popular uprising that became internationally known under the abbreviation “Euromaydan” (literally: European Square) was, in Ukraine, christened “The Revolution of Dignity.” As a result of the Euromaydan and of Russia’s following hybrid war (i.e., combined military and non-military attack) against the new regime in Kyiv, Ukrainian politics and society have been fundamentally reshaped and continue, in early 2018, to change rather dynamically. In October of the watershed year of 2014, prominent Kyiv sociologist Mychailo Wynnyckyj (Kyiv-Mohyla Academy) used, in light of the scale and velocity of the Ukrainian transformation, Theda Skocpol’s concept of “social revolution”¹ to describe the simultaneity of sometimes parallel, sometimes interconnected, and sometimes opposing political, societal, cultural, and mental processes at play.² The chaos, ambivalence, and contradictions inherent in all social revolutions, including that happening in Ukraine since late 2013, makes their scientific research a distinctly

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Some observations below were earlier outlined in a brief joint article with Tetyana Bezruk in German, in the journal *Osteuropa* (nos. 1-2 [2015]). Earlier versions of the present paper were completed in November 2014 and published in Russian in *Politychna krytyka* (February 15, 2016) and *Forum noveishei vostochnoevropaiskoi istorii i kultury* (no. 1 [2016]) as well as in Ukrainian in *Krytyka* (nos. 11-12 [2016]). Later developments and discoveries were only partly taken into consideration. The extension, revision, and completion of this English translation, in 2016–2018, was part of a larger research program on irregular armed groups in the Donets Basin (Donbas)—a project jointly implemented by the Bonn International Conversion Center (BICC) as well as Kyiv Institute for Euro-Atlantic Cooperation (IEAC), and supported by the *Volkswagen Stiftung*.

challenging task. Even for social scientists well-versed in Ukraine's post-Soviet history, it has, since the start of 2014, become increasingly difficult to consistently follow, fully document, adequately describe, properly understand, and persuasively evaluate all the ensuing parallel events, trends, and developments in various sectors of Ukrainian society.

The resulting lack or even impossibility of a comprehensive interpretation of the most recent changes in Ukraine is a problem compounded by a general underdevelopment of social monitoring and sciences in all former Soviet countries, including Ukraine.³ The public discourse on different developments not only in Ukraine, but also in the West, is complicated by the conditions of the well-known "information war." Many accounts of the latest events in Ukraine are instantly becoming objects of distortion, mystification, manipulation, and falsification, especially, but not only, by Russian state-controlled media. The Kremlin's orchestrated campaign of disinformation, alongside some Ukrainian counter-propaganda attempts, makes the already daunting task of systematically processing and productively discussing the enormous flux of novel information even more difficult.

Ukrainian right-wing extremism in comparative perspective

Among the previously unknown and, so far, under-researched, yet hotly discussed phenomena of post-Euromaidan Ukrainian politics are the new voluntary, originally informal or semi-informal paramilitary units which, in Ukraine, were or are labelled "Territorial Defense Battalions," "Special Patrol Police Detachments," "Special Operations Regiments," and so on.⁴ This new type of Ukrainian armed forces began to emerge partly spontaneously, partly government-inspired in spring 2014 as a result of the covert Russian military escalation of political conflicts in Eastern Ukraine, and against the background of the manifest impotence of the Ukrainian army, internal troops, and intelligence services in confronting Moscow's intervention adequately. Having been initially independent and without or with only partial governmental backing, the "volunteer battalions" known under the Ukrainian acronym *dobrobaty* participated early on, in Ukraine's conflicts with Kremlin-backed armed separatists, Moscow-controlled paramilitary units, and Russian regular forces in the Donetsk Basin (Donbas).

The surge of Ukrainian irregular or semi-regular armed units alongside a wide network of civilian supporters in 2014 was a reaction to the manifest weakness of the Ukrainian government in the face of Russia's masked aggression after the Euromaidan's victory as well as an unusual manifestation of Ukrainian social capital and civic spirit. In contrast to other permutations of the post-Euromaidan Third Sector, some of Ukraine's new armed volunteer units may, however, have to be classified as not constituting narrowly defined civic organizations, and cannot be seen as unequivocally pro-democratic expressions of Ukrainian civil engagement. There were and partly still are aspects of a number of the new Ukrainian irregular armed structures which make them hybrid social phenomena between civil and uncivil society. The high level of individual commitment and self-organization of some of the more radically nationalist new post-Euromaidan armed and other groups or their subsections could, in certain situations, also pose a problem to Ukrainian democracy rather than consistently support its development—as proper civil society would normally do.⁵ Most of them, to be sure, have now been integrated into state structures; yet many of them still bear traits of non-state actors.

Although they only make up a small part of the Ukrainian armed forces, volunteer units have briefly played an important role in the defense of Ukraine. Along with regular troops of the Ukrainian army and special services, they participated in Ukraine's initial clashes with pro-Russian separatists and Russian troops in the Ukrainian part of the Donbas. As with other Ukrainian political phenomena that emerged for the first time in 2014, the voluntary regiments, battalions, companies, and platoons had no proper precedent in post-Soviet Ukrainian history and are still in need of scholarly analysis. For this and other reasons, it is not surprising that the newly formed military units in Ukraine, both the initially independent volunteer units and the National Guard that soon incorporated some formerly irregular groups, became instantly popular targets of the Russian propaganda campaign against Kyiv's post-Euromaidan political leadership.

This paper does not deal with all the multifaceted and dynamic features of the new Ukrainian armed voluntary movement that emerged in 2014.⁶ Instead, I will focus here on the background and rise of one particular battalion and later regiment that constitutes, as will be illustrated, a somewhat aberrant example of the Ukrainian post-revolutionary volunteer phenomenon⁷—the pre- and early history of one of the most famous of these units, the “Azov” Battalion and now Regiment. The story of this organization is told here from a political rather than military scientific point of view, and approached as a form of (un)civil and political society rather than as a part of the Ukraine's armed forces.⁸ I will focus on certain features of Azov's initial formation and political background, and not on its military activities and achievements. A political researcher and not a military expert, I am not in a position to adequately assess the latter issues although they are, in the view of most Ukrainian observers, far more important than its pre-history and ideological orientation.⁹

In contrast to the regiment's fame within Ukraine, it is less Azov's military performance, but rather the eccentric political views of the unit's founders as well as the various symbols associated with Azov which are the reason for the high media attention in the West.

The latter peculiar traits also became my motives for briefly examining some details of the battalion's background, ideology, leadership, and creation. As briefly illustrated below, the formerly neo-Nazi leanings in the leadership of this group that today controls a relatively large military unit could present several problems. The regiment's key commanders held, in the past, manifestly fascist views and may still hold them to one degree or another today. That would put into question the regiment's public respectability as well as the need for special scrutiny of its further development. It would also pose questions about the post-war future of Azov that go beyond the foci of military science narrowly understood.¹⁰ The political rise and entry into the Verkhovna Rada (Supreme Council, the Ukrainian parliament) of two official founders of Azov with a far-right political background,¹¹ Andriy Bilets'kyi (b. 1979) and Ihor Mosiychuk (b. 1972)—more on them below—and the creation of a political wing of Azov, briefly mentioned in the conclusions, are noteworthy developments making this military unit also of high interest to political researchers.

The alarmism about the rise of Azov in Ukrainian and Western media is thus—as will be further illustrated below—justified.¹² Nevertheless, political evaluations of post-Soviet Ukrainian radical nationalism, including those of Azov, need to be contextualized in historic and comparative terms.¹³ When assessing far-right trends in Ukraine in general¹⁴ and this or that aspect or episode within them in particular,¹⁵ they should be described and evaluated against the background of Ukraine's specifically post-Soviet political

development and juxtaposed with similar non-Ukrainian trends across Eastern Europe.¹⁶ As in the case of the sudden surge of the Ukrainian political party Pravyi sektor (Right Sector), somewhat earlier during the Euromaidan,¹⁷ the emergence of initially irregular or semi-regular volunteer battalions, including those set up by ultra-nationalist activists, would not have occurred without the increasingly destructive Russian interference in Ukrainian internal affairs throughout 2014. The rising social demand for militant patriotism provided previously marginal far right activists with new political space.

Therefore, these developments were only partly a result of endogenous Ukrainian developments and heavily related to the growing external threat to Ukraine and increasing existential concerns, if not panic, especially amongst Ukraine's elite and youth regarding the Kremlin's actions and intentions in Ukraine. As illustrated by the limited success of Ukraine's far right in the presidential, parliamentary, and local elections of 2014–2015, and the low number of ultra-nationalists—no more than 13 out of the current 423 MPs—in the first post-Euromaidan Verkhovna Rada elected in October 2014, public support for right-wing extremism remains relatively weak.

This is remarkable if one takes into account the far-reaching social, mental, and cultural effects of the profound economic crisis and ongoing pseudo-civil war in Eastern Ukraine triggered by Russia's covert intervention since 2014.¹⁸ At least, with regard to the state of affairs by the end of 2017, emphasizing the relative weakness of Ukrainian ultra-nationalism and its popular support remains justified if one takes into account the electoral success of other European far-right parties, for example, during elections to the European Parliament which took place on the same day as Ukraine's presidential elections on May 25, 2014, or when comparing the presence of right-wing extremism in the current Ukrainian Parliament with the strength of radical nationalists in parliaments across Europe, not the least in Russia.¹⁹ In fact, the modest electoral results:

- of the far right All-Ukrainian Union “Svoboda” (Freedom), i.e., 1.16% for Svoboda's leader Oleh Tyahnybok in the presidential elections of May 25, 2014 and 4.71% for the party in the parliamentary elections of October 26, 2014,²⁰ and
- of the Pravyi sektor, i.e. 0.7% for Right Sector's then leader Dmytro Yarosh on May 25, 2014 and 1.81% for the party on October 26, 2014,

are quite striking. That is because, in both 2014 Ukrainian national elections, millions of Crimeans and residents of the Donets Basin, many of whom under normal circumstances would have gone to the polls, did not take part in these polls, due to Russia's covert military intervention. Had this segment of the Ukrainian electorate participated fully in the presidential and parliamentary voting, the overall percentage of nationwide support for the two far-right groups, in the first war year of 2014, would have been even lower than the relatively low support they received in these two national elections, under extreme conditions.

Regarding the circa three dozen Ukrainian irregular or semi-regular armed groups that emerged in 2014, not only the specific historical context of their surge and popularity has to be considered, but also their relative weight within Ukraine's armed forces as a whole. While the volunteer battalions did play some role in the initial phase of the conflict, the soldiers of these new paramilitary units made up only a small amount of the entire Ukrainian assembly of armed forces employed in the so-called Anti-Terror Operation

(ATO), in the East of Ukraine. According to one estimate of September 2014, out of the approximately 50,000 soldiers then taking part in the ATO, around 7,000 were members of semi-regular or irregular volunteer units.²¹ In February 2015, there were, within the Ministry of Interior, 37 volunteer units which then included 6,700 men and women.²²

Only some of these groups grew out of Ukraine's far right scene. They were founded by organizations such as "Svoboda," the UNA-UNSO (Ukrainian National Assembly – Ukrainian People's Self-Defence),²³ the Right Sector, the SNA/PU (Social-National Assembly/Patriot of Ukraine), party "Bratstvo" (Brotherhood), and others.²⁴ This means that the summary share of those Ukrainian ATO soldiers who have served in units with ultra-nationalist roots was seemingly lower than 10%.²⁵ Since 2014, most of the irregular or semi-regular units have been transformed into, or merged with, regular armed detachments (battalions, brigades, regiments, etc.) of Ukraine's Ministries of Defense and Interior, and thus ceased to exist as semi-independent armed groups.

Moreover, it would be premature to automatically classify all volunteers, even in those units that have a far right pre-history, indiscriminately and summarily as radically and ethnically nationalist. Azov commander Andriy Bilets'kyi made the following statement on this issue concerning his battalion and later regiment as compared to others:

[A] specific set of people has assembled with us. And that is not some kind of radical nationalism of which we were accused. This is more a monolithic patriotism. For instance, in the [volunteer battalion] Donbas, I am sure, the majority of the lads see themselves as nationalists. The same goes for the [Ministry of Defense volunteer battalion] Aydar, but they do not have such monolithity as in Azov where 90% of the fighters call themselves, with certainty, Ukrainian nationalists.²⁶

My impression from multiple conversations, occasional observations, and other anecdotal evidence in Kyiv in 2014 was that, at least, some volunteers signing up to the new irregular units did not pay much attention to these formations' ideological background and to the political views of their leaders. Many volunteers were apparently instead driven by other motives to join this or that unit. How intensely and how successfully the far right groups standing behind certain volunteer battalions conduct ideological propaganda among their soldiers has not been researched so far. A significant number of the men and women who joined the new battalions created by ultra-nationalist activists and who did not come from the political groups behind their initial foundation may have to be classified as militant patriots rather than right-wing extremists—a hypothesis that awaits confirmation, modification, or rejection in future polls and in-depth interviews revealing the mind-set of these fighters.

Reasons such as these, alongside the below outlined ambiguous past of some of Azov's founders, mean that the exact role, degree, and kind of narrowly understood right-wing extremist—and not merely liberationist-nationalist—motives for the Azov regiment's staff remain to be established. They can not—in spite of the seemingly clear evidence on Azov's leadership presented below—be simply taken for granted. For example, fieldwork undertaken by Alina Polyakova (Brookings Institution, Washington, DC) in Kyiv and Western Ukraine between 2009–2012 revealed significant differences between the views and degree of radicalization of the leadership of Svoboda, on the one hand, and the ordinary members of the party, on the other.²⁷ It is possible that the situation is similar in Azov. One can also not exclude that the political views of Azov's once clearly racist leaders have, over the last

years, evolved, and that their racism has become less exclusive and radical than documented below. As in the case of other units founded by radical nationalists, only future sociological investigation will be able to provide satisfactory answers to what the actual political outlooks of the soldiers and officers in Azov amount to.

The rise of the volunteer battalions

In spring 2014, the Dnipropetrovs'k regional administration, under its then head Ihor Kolomoys'kyy, played apparently a crucial role in the first spontaneous creation and military usage of voluntary battalions, including Azov. This is worth mentioning here in so far as Dnipropetrovs'k oblast's first post-Euromaydan governor is not only one of the most (in)famous Ukrainian oligarchs, but has also Jewish roots and plays an active role in Ukraine's Jewish community. Apparently inspired by first actions of Kolomoys'kyy, the new Ukrainian Minister of Internal Affairs Arsen Avakov—a Baku-born Russian-speaker of ethnic Armenian background—decided to promote and gradually formalize the creation of voluntary units that would come to be attached to his ministry's regional directorates. Soon, the new Ukrainian National Guard, SBU (Security Service of Ukraine), Ministry of Defense (in the case of the later Aydar Battalion²⁸) and different politicians also started to actively encourage and support the creation of such units and to oversee, finance, or supervise them, to one degree or another. As a result, a whole array of armed volunteer units emerged that were initially more or less separate and independent from the regular structures of Ukraine's police, special services, as well as army, and constituted then a new pillar of power within the transforming post-Euromaydan Ukrainian state.

The newly created semi-formal battalions of Ukraine's various armed forces were initially to be equipped only with light arms and weapons, not heavier than grenade launchers. However, in light of the escalation of violence in the Donetsk Basin, they became increasingly equipped also with heavier artillery and armed vehicle models. In August 2014, leading Ukrainian military expert Yuriy Butusov, in one of the first analyses of the new volunteer troops, estimated that the initial number of their soldiers ranged from 30 and 460 per unit.²⁹ Throughout 2014, the amount, size, and variety of the novel irregular or semi-regular so-called "battalions" (which were often much smaller than a regular battalion) grew rapidly. In October 2014, Ukrainian political analyst Mykhaylo Minakov (Kyiv-Mohyla Academy) counted 38 so-called "battalions" with 13,500 military personnel. At that time, Minakov suggested that between 8 and 10 of these "battalions," with around 5,000 volunteers, were being financed in part or in full by the above-mentioned Ukrainian-Jewish oligarch Kolomoys'kyy.³⁰

Azov's background will be briefly outlined here not only because this initially irregular armed group was one of the first and most famous of its kind. Azov is also, as will be shown below, unusual among Ukraine's new armed units. It is not the only voluntary battalion with a manifestly far right pre-history. Yet, before its foundation, the current regiment's leaders were among those post-Soviet Ukrainian ultra-nationalists who most ostentatiously and unequivocally expressed their racism. Furthermore, those far right organizations—the Social-National Assembly (SNA), Patriot of Ukraine (PU), Misanthropic Division³¹ and Bratstvo—which were, to different degree, involved in the creation of Azov, have a contradictory, if not paradoxical history of cooperation with anti-Euromaydan actors and the Russian neo-Nazi scene, as will be briefly illustrated below.

The track record of some of the regiment's founders includes co-operation with elements of the Yanukovich regime. In the case of Bratstvo, which was apparently involved in the creation of Azov, its prehistory even includes temporary but intense contacts with avid anti-Ukrainian Kremlin-related organizations.

In the foreign media, particularly the Russian propaganda outlets, but at times also in Western reporting, Azov is sometimes presented as the archetypical example of Ukraine's voluntary battalions. Well-informed observers, some of whom are quoted below, in contrast, have highlighted the peculiarity of Azov as well as the difficulty of applying, in general, a single over-arching political classification and interpretation to the volunteers movement. For example, following some journalistic research, Shaun Walker concluded: "The Azov [fighters] are a minority among the Ukrainian forces, and even they, however unpleasant their views may be, are not anti-Russian; in fact the lingua franca of the battalion is Russian, and most have Russian as their first language."³² Some details listed hereinafter illustrate further how unusual the track records and racist views of the regiment's leadership are compared to representatives of other battalions, even to those with ultra-nationalist tendencies.

The origins of the Azov battalion

The history of the emergence of the Azov battalion can be traced to the final phase of the Euromaidan protests. In late February 2014, MP Oleh Lyashko, leader of the then marginal *Radykal'na partiya* (Radical Party) with connections to Serhiy L'ovochkin,³³ former head of President Yanukovich's administration, together with three other prominent deputies of Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada (Volodymyr Lytvyn, Anatoliy Kinakh, Roman Romanyuk) put forward draft bill 4271 on changes to the Ukrainian Law "On the Granting of Amnesty in Ukraine" (regarding the full exoneration of political prisoners).³⁴ After swift adoption of this law, 28 political prisoners were released.³⁵ Among those released were the so-called "Vasyl'kiv terrorists"—called so after the location of their activity, the city of Vasyl'kiv in the Kyiv region—Serhiy Bevz, Ihor Mosiychuk, and Volodymyr Shpara. Also released from prison were their close compatriots from Kharkiv, Andriy Bilets'kyi and Oleh Odnorozhenko, who had been arrested for other reasons. These five men would later form the spine of Azov's initial leadership.³⁶

In 2011, the Vasyl'kiv terrorists had been, in a dubious court case, found guilty of attempting to blow up a statue of Lenin in the city of Boryspil' and, in connection with this, of allegedly preparing a terrorist attack and illegally handling weapons and explosive substances.³⁷ They were also accused of calls to overthrow the constitution.³⁸ The Vasyl'kiv terrorists were members of an association of far-right micro-parties called Social-National Assembly (SNA), a Kyiv-based ultra-nationalist umbrella group, set up in 2008 by the Kharkiv-based groupuscule Patriot of Ukraine (PU) and some even smaller ultra-nationalist grouplets of Ukraine's groupuscular right-wing scenery.³⁹

In its turn, the PU, created in 2006, comprised a radical youth-branch of the former Social-National Party of Ukraine (SNPU), rebranded in 2004 as the All-Ukrainian Union "Svoboda".⁴⁰ A couple of dozen mainly young or very young SNPU activists, who did not agree with the SNPU's rebranding as Svoboda under its new leader Oleh Tyahnybok, defected and became the PU. They later created, together with some other lunatic fringe groups, the SNA.⁴¹ In subsequent years, SNA/PU activists were accused in the Ukrainian

press of taking part in some semi-criminal actions linked to the mayor of Kharkiv Hennadiy Kernes. The social nationalists became notorious among Ukrainian human rights monitoring organizations for their attacks on people of “non-Slavic” appearance, for instance on September 13, 2008 as well as on January 1 and March 31, 2009.⁴²

Leading investigator of post-Soviet right-wing extremism Vyacheslav Likhachev (Euro-Asian Jewish Congress) illustrates the neo-Nazi nature of the SNA/PU, citing its so-called “White Leader” and later Azov commander Andriy Bilets’kyy:

We openly stand on an anti-migrant position. We do not distinguish between legal and illegal migration. Migration is a clearly negative factor for the existence of our people and our country. It undermines the biological, economic and civilizational foundations of the existence of our people... . The migrant issue is essential. Our credo is—destroy everything that destroys our people. As is known, one can restore almost everything: the economy, order on the streets, demographics, a strong army and navy, nuclear weapons, but the only thing that cannot be restored is the purity of blood.⁴³

In the article “Language and Race: The Primacy of the Issue,” Bilets’kyy, according to Likhachev, wrote:

Ukrainian social nationalism believes the Ukrainian Nation [sic] to be a racially and blood-based community... . Race is everything for natiogenesis. Race is the foundation on which a superstructure grows in the form of a national culture which again is derived from the racial nature of the people, and not from language, religion, economics etc.⁴⁴

In the article “Ukrainian Racial Social Nationalism,” Bilets’kyy, according to Likhachev, declared that: “People are, by nature, born with different abilities and capabilities and therefore a human being’s happiness is when he [sic] finds his place in the national hierarchy and conscientiously fulfils his [sic] purpose in life.”⁴⁵

A programmatic article of the PU, signed by Bilets’kyy, stated, according to Likhachev, that:

Healing our national body should begin with the Racial [sic] cleansing of the nation... . And then a Racially [sic] healthy body can translate into a healthy National Spirit [sic], as well as the culture, language and everything else that comes with it. Apart from the question of purity, we must also pay attention to the full value of a Race [sic]. Ukrainians are a part (and, at that, one of the largest and most qualitative) of the European White Race [sic]. [Of] the Race-Creator [sic] of a great civilization [with] the highest human achievements. The historic mission of our Nation [sic] in this crucial century is to lead the White Peoples [sic] of the world in the last crusade for their existence. A crusade against the sub-humanity led by the Semites.⁴⁶

It is worth noting, however, that in summer 2015, the reputed *Hromadske* television station conducted an interview with Bilets’kyy, during which a critique of Azov by the US’s Atlantic Council Senior Fellow Adrian Karatnytsky was brought up regarding Bilets’kyy’s racist statements and actions. The journalist asked, with reference to Karatnytsky, Bilets’kyy: “Do you distance yourself from events that happened in the past?” to which the Azov commander replied:

It is very difficult for me to distance myself from something that never actually happened. Adrian Karatnytsky knows very well that these quotes came about after a statement from [Russian Foreign Minister Sergey] Lavrov where he quotes them directly and which were dreamt up by Russian FSB officers.⁴⁷

Bilets'kyy asserted that he had not written the articles to which *Hromadske* referred, and admitted that only his video and audio statements, available on the world wide web, were genuine. The racist texts under his name were, according to Bilets'kyy, fabricated by Russian propaganda, in early summer 2014 when Azov was starting to take shape.⁴⁸ However, it is inconceivable that Likhachev, as a highly experienced researcher of the post-Soviet far right, would have reproduced the above quotes on his blog, without being certain of their genuine nature. Bilets'skyy's outspoken rejection of his racist statements and their association with Russia's information either were an expression of cognitive dissonance or were designed to cover his pre-Euromaydan political biography.

In 2008–2009, the SNA/PU had become notorious for its involvement in provocative political campaigns alongside Dmytro Korchyns'kyy's Bratstvo (Brotherhood) and Yuriy Zbitnev's Nova Syl'a (New Strength) party.⁴⁹ These still understudied episodes are important not only for a better understanding of Azov, but also for a more in-depth interpretation of the Euromaydan as a whole.⁵⁰ In particular, a protesters' brawl with the police, initiated by Bratstvo and the SNA/PU at the Ukrainian Secret Service building on October 18, 2008, could be seen as a prologue to the infamous clashes as Kyiv's Bankova Street—i. e., in front of the office of the Presidential Administration—on December 1, 2013 which crucially intensified escalation of violence between the Euromaydan protesters and the Yanukovich regime.⁵¹

On December 1, 2013, various mainly masked Euromaydan protesters, amongst whom many were bearing the SNA/PU emblem (a mirror image of the wolf crook, on which more below), attempted to seize the empty Ukrainian Presidential Administration building. Researcher into post-Soviet right-wing extremism Anton Shekhovtsov (Institute for Human Sciences at Vienna), citing an eyewitness, reports how:

The storm of the administrative building was, according to one Right Sector member, instigated by several “men in their forties” who “were egging them on saying, ‘Come on guys, don't be afraid! Now, we'll destroy them! Come on, attack!’ These people were not known to any of the nationalists and incidentally these men did not take part in the fighting itself.” This incident was almost an exact repeat of what had happened on 9th March 2001 when, on the very same Bankova Street, a group of unknown individuals had instigated clashes with the Berkut special police force, which had then been used, by the authorities as a pretext, to arrest several leading members of the “Ukraine without Kuchma” campaign.⁵²

Azov, Korchyns'kyy, and Lyashko

The most infamous participant in the landmark protest of December 1, 2013 was Dmytro Korchyns'kyy, leader of the Bratstvo group⁵³ whose members would go on to later participate in the creation of the Azov battalion,⁵⁴ and appear on the electoral list of Oleh Lyashko's Radical Party in the 2014 Kyiv and national elections. Korchyns'kyy was not only exceptional because he had before regularly participated in various dubious actions⁵⁵ similar to that at the Presidential Administration in December 2013.⁵⁶ Despite the fact that, since the early 1990s, Korchyns'kyy had been one of the most notable figures in Ukraine's ultra-nationalist scene,⁵⁷ the Bratstvo leader was, in 2005, invited to lecture in the infamous “Seliger” Russian youth summer camp⁵⁸ organized by the Kremlin-affiliated movement Nashi (Ours).⁵⁹ Moreover, Putin's most important “political technologist,” Vladislav Surkov, at the time deputy chief of the Russian Presidential Administration,

reportedly met with Korchyn'skyi at the Moscow forum "Europe: Reviewing a Year of Change," at the end of June 2005.⁶⁰ According to a Russian press report, at this forum, Korchyn'skyi announced that Russian public organizations, funds, and institutes should "resist the various orange infiltrations [referring to Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution], both inside the country and across the entire former Soviet space."⁶¹

Moreover, between 2004 and 2007, Korchyn'skyi, together with the leader of the Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine, Nataliya Vitrenko, was a member of the Supreme Council of the International Eurasian Movement, led by the infamous Russian right-wing extremist Aleksandr Dugin.⁶² In the mid-2000s, Korchyn'skyi repeatedly demonstrated his affiliation with Dugin in public,⁶³ in spite of the latter's earlier well-known and numerous anti-Ukrainian comments.⁶⁴ For example, in his seminal book, *The Foundations of Geopolitics*, published in 1997, Dugin had stated:

Ukrainian sovereignty is so negative for Russian geopolitics that it could, in theory, spark an armed conflict... . Ukraine as a state makes no geopolitical sense whatsoever. It has no universal cultural meaning, nor geographical distinctiveness or ethnic exclusiveness. The historical significance of Ukraine can be derived from its name. The word "Ukraine" comes from the Russian word "okraina" [outskirts, periphery] or "border-land."⁶⁵

Nevertheless, as Viktor Shnirel'man (Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Russian Academy of Science) notes, Korchyn'skyi appeared "at [Dugin's] Eurasian Youth Union rally on 21st September 2005 on Slavic Square in Moscow on the 625th anniversary of the Battle of Kulikovo [where he] called for a relentless war against Atlantic civilization declaring that war was closer than ever."⁶⁶

Furthermore, there is the suspicion that, shortly before or after an arrest warrant was issued for Korchyn'skyi following the events of December 1, 2013, the Ukrainian ultra-nationalist temporarily went into hiding, according to different press reports, in Russia and/or Transnistria (controlled by a pro-Russian satellite regime).⁶⁷ He apparently gave a Skype interview, from a Russian asylum shelter to Ukrainian television.⁶⁸ If this episode, which Korchyn'skyi later denied, were to be confirmed this would be remarkable. Korchyn'skyi may have been in Russia between roughly December 2013 and February 2014, at a time when the Kremlin media was conducting a large-scale disinformation campaign about the allegedly deadly threat of radical Ukrainian nationalism to Russian-speakers in Ukraine. Russian state television and newspapers presented the Euromaidan as a fascist, anti-Russian phenomenon and demonized the leader of the Right Sector, Dmytro Yarosh, as an allegedly decisive figure in the events playing out in Kyiv. As one radical Ukrainian nationalist, Yarosh, was wanted with a Russian arrest warrant, it may have been that another Ukrainian ultra-nationalist, Korchyn'skyi, was being given the chance to evade a Ukrainian arrest warrant in Russia and/or Moscow-controlled Transnistria.⁶⁹

Regarding Korchyn'skyi's ties to Russia, it is worth adding the even more bizarre detail that the Bratstvo leader is not only a radical Ukrainian nationalist. From the founding of the UNA/UNSO party in the early 1990s until today, Korchyn'skyi has episodically collaborated with Yuriy Shukhevych, an iconic figure in the Ukrainian nationalist movement. Yuriy Shukhevych is the son of Roman Shukhevych (1907–1950), former chief commander of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and one-time head of the radical Bandera wing of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. Since November 2014, Yuriy

Shukhevych has been, together with two MPs linked to Korchyn'skyy (see below), a member of the faction of Lyashko's Radical Party in the Verkhovna Rada.

Although, in the 1990s, Korchyn'skyy propagated the slogan "Crimea will be either Ukrainian or unpopulated,"⁷⁰ he has since apparently visited Russia several times. According to the late Vladimir Pribylovskiy (Panorama Information and Research Center):

In 1996, [Korchyn'skyy] fought in Chechnya for the Chechen separatists. In his memoirs of the Chechen War, published in 2005 (in his book *Revolution Haute Couture*), [Korchyn'skyy] amongst other things, talks about how he was present as captive Russian soldiers were killed (their throats were slit and then shot to make sure they were dead).⁷¹

These and other dubious episodes in Korchyn'skyy's colorful biography would warrant a separate in-depth investigation.

In his above-quoted article on the "Vasil'kiv terrorists," Shekhovtsov notes some details of the background of another co-founder of Azov, Ihor Mosiychuk who, until August 2014, was the press secretary of the battalion⁷²:

Mosiychuk is not only a former member of the UNA/UNSO ([at that time] led by provocateur Dmytro Korchyn'skyy) and of the [former] Social-National Party of Ukraine (now "Svoboda"), but also the "right-hand man" of Vasil'kiv's "local baron" Serhiy Ivashchenko. In the 2010 local elections in Vasil'kiv, Ivashchenko was re-elected as the city's mayor (put forward by [Yanukovych's] Party of Regions), while Mosiychuk and Bevz⁷³ (both standing on behalf of Vyacheslav Kyrylenko's "For Ukraine!" party) became representatives on the local council... . These elections were completely rigged by Ivashchenko, with the help of fascists, loyal to him from the Social-National Assembly (SNA). Notably, the work of the electoral commission was blocked by gangs of falsifiers who included Mosiychuk and Volodymyr Shpara [- also one of "Azov's" future commanders].⁷⁴

Via the list of Lyashko's Radical Party, Mosiychuk was elected on May 25, 2014 onto the Kyiv City Council. On October 26, 2014, again standing for Lyashko's party, Mosiychuk became a member of Ukraine's national parliament, Verkhovna Rada. On the same day, the aforementioned co-founder of the UNA/UNSO Yuriy Shukhevych, the Bratstvo activist Dmytro Linko and the wife of Dmytro Korchyn'skyy, Oksana Korchyn'ska, were also elected into the Verkhovna Rada, on behalf of Lyashko's Radical Party.⁷⁵

Standing alongside Mosiychuk, on the Radical Party's electoral list for the Kyiv city elections on May 25, 2014, was the chief ideologist of the SNA/PU and of Azov Oleh Ondorozhenko (Dr. sc. in History), who did not, however, make it onto the City Council, and broke with Azov in 2016.⁷⁶ The historian was, alongside Korchyn'skyy, the second relatively well-known participant of the attempted storming of the Presidential Administration building at Bankova Street, on December 1, 2013. After Azov's foundation, Ondorozhenko was for about two years the unofficial "deputy commander for political affairs" of the battalion/regiment.⁷⁷ The following statement can, according to Likhachev, be attributed to him:

Limitation and control will be implemented on all foreign ethno-racial groups and followed by deportation to their historical homelands. Based on the fact that we social nationalists regard the so-called "human races" as separate biological species, and the intelligent human being (Homo Sapiens), in the biological sense, only the White European Race [sic] (not including the notion of so-called "southern Europeanides," i.e. the Mediterranean, Caucasian, Pamir-Fergana or other races who are biologically different from our biological kind) and consider our main

duty to prevent any kind of inter-racial contacts (between species) that leads to inter-racial mixing (between species) and ultimately to the death of the White Race [sic].⁷⁸

From the “black little men” to the National Guard

According to one of Azov’s co-founders, Stepan Bayda:

The story of the Azov battalion and later regiment began in spring 2014 in Kyiv, when several Maydan representatives and their associates from the “Patriot of Ukraine” organization, released after being political prisoners under the Yanukovich regime, began to gather in the old Kozats’kiy hotel building [at Kyiv]. Azov was born out of 30 enthusiasts who in spring [2014] began to gather and organize in that building. The activists managed to establish themselves as a legal entity in this building, so that it did not look like they were seizing the Kozats’kiy hotel. They also had an office in Kharkiv on Rymars’ka Street, which later on 14th March, separatists would attempt to storm.⁷⁹

In March 2014, during street clashes at Kharkiv, there emerged a group calling itself “Right Sector East” and “black little men” consisting of SNA/PU as well as affiliated activists in balaclavas and black uniforms. The Ukrainian press reported that the fighters in Kharkiv were presenting themselves as a counterbalance to Russia’s “green little men” and their ongoing intervention of Southern and Eastern Ukraine. The press quoted a declaration by the new group which stated:

We, Ukrainians of the east, watching the inaction of the authorities and the absolute sabotage of local power structures, feel completely defenseless against the separatists and occupiers. Taking this into account, we ourselves will take on the mission of freeing the entire South-East [of Ukraine] from occupiers in the form of infiltrators or so-called “green little men” (Russian soldiers who occupied Crimea by force) and treasonous separatists.⁸⁰

Likhachev summarizes the following events:

On March 14 [2014], activists from the “Patriot of Ukraine”/SNA/Right Sector, led by Andriy Bilets’kyy in Kharkiv, entered into physical confrontations with members of the separatist movement. During these clashes, two pro-Russian activists were killed by firearms... . Those killed in Kharkiv, the first separatist victims killed at the hands of real Ukrainian nationalists, were used by anti-Ukrainian propaganda to recruit more pro-Russian supporters. In effect, these actions by Bilets’kyy’s group were the only remotely real basis for creating the image of a threat from “Bandera hit squads.”⁸¹

The idea of an existential humanitarian threat allegedly emanating from Ukrainian ultranationalists, indicated here by Likhachev, played a crucial role in Kremlin-controlled and Russia-supported mass media’s preparation of the covert intervention in Eastern Ukraine. Moscow’s propagandists were able to refer to real activities of the SNA/PU, in their public opinion manipulation campaign.

In a televised address made on February 24, 2014, Ihor Mosiychuk, wearing a black T-shirt bearing the emblem of the SNA/PU logo, commented on the imminent annexation of Crimea, at the time in its initial stages, warning that:

Any attempt to cut off a part of Ukraine’s territory will be harshly punished. If the authorities are not capable of doing this, then the Right Sector will form a “friendship train.” We will go into Crimea, as the UNSO did in 1990 when the people ran away like rats from the incoming UNSO entering Sevastopol.⁸²

According to a memoir of this period, by Azov representative Stepan Bayda, there started, in April 2014, a dialogue between the initial volunteers group who would later call themselves Azov, and the new Ukrainian authorities who then offered to formally establish the group as a regular internal troops battalion, at that time to be named “Slobozhanshchina” (after the title of the north eastern landscape of Ukraine). The activists underwent an investigation by the medical commission of the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs. Yet, at the point, this project did not materialize although, according to Bayda, his group continued to have contacts with governmental bodies.⁸³

Although Mosiychuk had announced, in spring 2014, that the “black little men” were not planning to establish a permanent organization, in early May 2014, the Azov battalion began to take shape, with assistance by the leaders of the Radical Party, Oleh Lyashko, and of Bratstvo, Dmytro Korchyns’kyy, and some lesser known nationalist activists. The date of the battalion’s official foundation, in the south-eastern city of Berdyan’sk at the Azov Sea, is May 5, 2014.⁸⁴ Bayda reports that, on May 18, 2014, his group of around 80 volunteers moved, from the aforementioned “Kozats’kiy” (Cossack) hotel in Kyiv, to Berdyan’sk to train on a firing range there.⁸⁵ On May 20, 2014, Azov announced officially that it is drafting new volunteer soldiers.⁸⁶ Soon after its formation,⁸⁷ the city of Mariupol was liberated by Azov—the event that established its initial fame.

On the second anniversary of the foundation of Azov, Anton Herashchenko, an official advisor of Ukraine’s Minister of Interior, posted his recollections of the emergence of Azov in a long Facebook note. A historic document of sorts, Herashchenko’s Russian-language memoirs of May 2016 are translated and reproduced here in full. While not all information provided in it can be taken at face value, Herashchenko’s report illustrates the atmosphere, determinants, and circumstances of the emergence of the Azov battalion, in particular, and of Ukraine’s entire armed volunteer forces movement, after the Euromaydan, in general:

Yesterday marked exactly two years since the decision was taken to create the already legendary Azov battalion. My friend Yuriy Butusov believes that it is important that the events of that memorable spring are not forgotten. They must be kept in people’s minds. Not all people remember and value what happened then, and judge the events from the surface and do not look deeper. Following his advice, I will tell you about my memories of the events that led to the founding of Azov. I had heard about Andriy Bilets’kyy and his team before. Together with other like-minded people, he had created the national-patriotic organization “Patriot of Ukraine” in Kharkiv, which brought together pro-Ukrainian thinking youngsters, wanting to make our country strong and genuinely independent. Naturally, under President Yanukovich, such an organization immediately came under pressure from the Ministry of Interior [MVD] and the Security Service of Ukraine [SBU]. Andriy Bilets’kyy alongside some of his comrades was held in custody under trumped-up charges, where he spent more than 2 years, only released following the amnesty law passed for political prisoners after the victory of Maydan. I met Andriy Bilets’kyy on April 6, 2014, when he, Dmytro Korchyns’kyy, and Ihor Mosiychuk were at a meeting with the Minister of Interior, Arsen Avakov.

On that Sunday, in the morning, the Minister and I agreed to discuss plans on reforming the Ministry and I thought I was only going to be there half-an-hour to an hour. But history made a different choice. After we had concluded our discussions on plans for future reforms, the phones on the Minister’s desk began to ring non-stop. From Kharkiv, Donets’k, Luhansk, and other regional capitals in the South-East, there was a continuous flow of information about well-planned and well-organized seizures of government buildings involving fighters brought in from Russia.

The police were demoralized and a significant portion of the police forces were ready to surrender and defect to the Russian militia [*politsaev*], just like their colleagues had done two weeks earlier in Crimea. Many, though not all, SBU staff in the Donets Basin were also in part demoralized, in part secretly co-operating with the separatists, passing them information about Kyiv's plans to quell the separatist insurgency. In Luhansk, the SBU staff did not even dare or did not want to fire warning shots into the air to stop the separatists capturing their building. As a result, more than 1,100 firearms fell into the hands of pro-Russian citizens, weapons that had been held there since the Stalin era in case an underground organization needed them.

For a month after the separatist insurgency, no one wanted to or gave the orders for those weapons to be brought out of Luhansk ... So it was at this difficult time that our memorable meeting took place. Andriy Bilets'kyi announced at that time that he and his team wanted to conduct armed defense of Ukraine. The Minister said that this was possible, but that the members of the "Patriot of Ukraine" would have to join the police or the National Guard (as the First Reserve Battalion of the National Guard, later named after General Kul'chyts'kyi, had done), in order to take an oath and receive weapons in accordance with the Constitution and law. At that point, Andriy was not prepared to do that. Too great was the hostility and hatred towards the police who had mocked and beaten pro-Ukrainian [activists] for years. They had at times broken the law, but they did not deserve that kind of inhumane treatment or lawlessness.

After April 6 [2014], I met with Oleh Odnorozhenko, Patriot of Ukraine's ideologist, and asked him to convince Andriy and the organization's leadership to indeed take the decision to join up with the police. I was met with full support from Oleh. Although he could not promise anything quickly. At the same time, we agreed to coordinate Patriot of Ukraine's actions for the enforcement of social order in Kharkiv, given the further attempts by the Russian special service to destabilize the situation. Following [Minister of Interior] Arsen Avakov's and [Internal Troops commander] Stepan Poltorak's organization of a forced "expulsion" of the separatists from the Kharkiv Regional State Administration building on April 8 [2014] and despite 64 arrests, the situation remained incredibly complex. In mid-April [2014], the police remained demoralized and unable to counteract the mass unrest organized under Moscow's order.

The involvement of a few hundred guys [probably, a vast exaggeration - A.U.] from the Patriot of Ukraine to help enforcing social order in Kharkiv between April 13 and 20 [2014], in close coordination with the MVD and SBU, thwarted Moscow's attempts to "explode" the situation in Kharkiv. The task was not to intervene or provoke clashes with pro-Russian protesters, but to work as a "quiet force," making it clear to anyone who once again attempted to seize the Regional State Administration building that they would not only have to deal with a disorganized and indolent police force, but also with young pro-Ukrainian citizens who would not let them off lightly. I recall how Andriy Bilets'kyi's guys in black uniforms went through Kharkiv in a column of vehicles and with one glance by them made clear that Kharkiv would be defended and that what happened in Donetsk and Luhansk would not happen here!

At the end of April [2014], Andriy and Oleh approached me with the idea of organizing an "expulsion" of the separatists, who had been occupying and holding the city council building in [the important East Ukrainian industrial city and port of] Mariupol' for several weeks. We knew that in Mariupol', as in other cities of the Donets' Basin [Donbas], the separatists did not have local support, but instead were acting on the basis that the Russians would arrive shortly. All in all, the decision was taken to support the guys' initiative and attempt to liberate another strategically important Donbas city from the separatist infection spread by Moscow. The building was stormed on April 24 [2014]. The governor of the Donetsk Region [and prominent East Ukrainian "oligarch"] Serhiy Taruta was one of the key figures in driving the preparation process to clear out the city council building. After all, Mariupol' is his home and favorite city. Serhiy Taruta understood perfectly well that, at that time in the Donetsk region as well as in Ukraine as a whole, there were virtually no orchestrated government forces capable of carrying out such an operation. Any survivors, including the famous fighters of the "Jaguar" group, who had liberated the Kharkiv Regional State Administration building, were otherwise engaged in Slov'yans'k. [Interim President

of Ukraine] Oleksandr Turchinov, [Minister of Interior] Arsen Avakov and [Head of Presidential Administration] Serhiy Pashyn'skyi gave their full backing to the operation, as full as possible in the circumstances.

It would be biased of me not to say that the head of the Dnipropetrovsk Regional State Administration Ihor Kolomoys'kyi and his team played an active role, using all means possible to liberate the Mariupol' city council. They assisted with organizational, financial, and human resources.

As for me, my task was to coordinate access for the guys coming to Mariupol' from all over Ukraine to carry out the duty that, at that time, the Ukrainian government and its bodies were unable to do. On the night of the storming, the 23rd to 24th [April 2014], the Mariupol' city council building was cleared out in a matter of minutes, practically without bloodshed. The whole of Ukraine was jubilant! But the joy was short-lived. The building that had been liberated by night and under official police protection, was by day again in the hands of the separatists and the guys who had liberated it had already left, as they did not have any plans or duties to remain in Mariupol'.

According to our voluntary intelligence services, this time, firearms had been brought in. This incident showed that young pro-Ukrainian guys and patriots could not effectively protect their homeland whilst they were not part of the police and could not get weapons legally. The tension continued to ratchet up. On May 11 [2014], a referendum was scheduled to take place on the creation of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Lugansk People's Republic (LPR).

At the same time, snap Ukrainian presidential elections were planned for May 25 [2014]. An order came from Moscow to ensure at any cost that the fake referendum of May 11 [2014] would not be disrupted and under no circumstances to allow [Ukrainian presidential] elections to take place on a territory home to almost 7 out of Ukraine's 45 million people. In the end, Andriy Bilets'kyi and his team finally agreed to the Minister of Internal Affairs Arsen Avakov's proposal and decided to join the police.

On the night of May 4–5 [2014], in Mariupol', around 100 young patriots took the oath and were given weapons. From that point on, each day and each hour really counted! The new force was named Azov. Legally, Azov was established as a battalion of the Patrol-Guard Service of the Donetsk Department of Internal Affairs. Direct document preparation was carried out by the newly-appointed chief of the Mariupol' police department, [Valeriy] Androshchuk.

During the May 9 [2014] unrest, he was subsequently taken captive by terrorists and tortured, but he was [later] effectively bought out of captivity by Serhiy Taruta. Senior Lieutenant Volodymyr Shpara was appointed head of Azov. He had previously spent two-and-a-half years in custody together with Ihor Mosiychuk and another comrade in the SBU-fabricated Vasyliuk terrorist' affair during Yanukovich's reign but was freed following the victory of the Revolution of Dignity.

It would be biased of me not to say that the people's deputy [i.e. Member of Parliament] and simultaneous presidential candidate Oleh Lyashko did play a very active role [*zhyveyshe uchastie*] in the formation the Azov battalion. He contributed to Azov's creation both because he truly wanted to see a force capable of clearing out the city, and to gain electoral perks as a presidential candidate. On the same night, the separatists, knowing that a real force had emerged in Mariupol' capable of stopping them in their tracks, evacuated the city council building. Their operation was preceded by a "chemical attack" organized by a group of pro-Ukrainian volunteers, who had previously infiltrated the separatist groups in order to collect intelligence and carry out plans to demoralize them. This group's work was coordinated by Serhiy Taruta and one of his assistants who had "miraculously" escaped death in captivity. On that night in the basement and on the first floor of the city council building, a special liquid was spilt that, although generally unharmed to humans, causes an unbearable sharp pain to the conjunctiva of the eyes. In the morning, Azov went through the streets of Mariupol' in a column of vehicles in black uniforms carrying weapons. It was a demonstration of power designed to show that Mariupol' always has been and will always remain a Ukrainian city. After this patrolling, the separatists disappeared from Mariupol' in the space of a few days, only to then, during a covert

operation planned and organized by the Russian special services, organize yet another bloody coup on May 9 [2014], which I will talk about later separately.

The creation of the Azov battalion was another milestone in pushing back the separatist insurgency, organized by the Russian special service, in eight oblasts of South-Eastern Ukraine. In their planning, Putin's strategists had banked on Ukraine's army, police and security service being so corrupt, disorganized and demoralized that they would be unable to push back not only regular units of the Russian army but even groups of local criminal elements propped up by the supply of criminal scum like "Givi" and "Motorola" [nicknames of infamous pro-Russian separatist commanders] from Russia. At the beginning, this is indeed what happened. But in mid-April [2014], following Turchinov's and Avakov's decision to arm volunteers and, on this basis, to create special divisions of the police or "volunteer battalions," the situation changed fundamentally. The Azov battalion, together with more than 30 other voluntary divisions of the police, the National Guard and the Ukrainian Armed Forces, became another building block in the foundation of a new, independent of Russia, Ukrainian Nation [sic]!⁸⁸

Azov's initial emblem was similar to the former symbol of the Social-National Party of Ukraine and the official logo of the SNA/PU, made up of the Latin letters "I" and "N" arranged on top of one another, symbolizing the phrase "Idea of the Nation." The emblem is also a mirror image of the so-called "wolf hook" (*Wolfsangel* in German), which was used by, amongst others, the SS division "Das Reich" and the Dutch SS division "Landstorm Nederland" during the Second World War, as well as a range of neo-fascist organizations after 1945.⁸⁹ The symbol is illustrated below:

In response to criticism about the symbol, the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs alleged that the National Guard's Azov logo is also the Nobel Foundation's emblem.



Minister Avakov also insisted that most Azov volunteers have their own personal world views.⁹⁰

Yet, the symbol of the “Idea of the Nation,” with its occult Black Sun image in the background, has an obvious connection to the pre-history, quoted statements, international links, and political behavior of Azov’s leaders. Azov’s wolf hook has a more than coincidental semblance with far-right symbols of other countries and from other eras. The early Azov emblem’s significance is an indication of continuity between the early battalion and SNA/PU. This was also illustrated in an interview conducted by Tetyana Bezruk with volunteers who supported Azov in summer 2014 in Kyiv and who responded that ideology had a place within the unit’s communication.⁹¹ After Azov’s creation in 2014, Bilets’kyy himself admitted that: “We have not moved away from what we are. Everything that is behind ‘Azov’s’ soul comes from our right-wing ideology, from the heritage of the Patriot of Ukraine.”⁹²

The ideological imprint on the early Azov battalion was strong enough to let some Russian neo-Nazis, including Roman Zheleznev,⁹³ Aleksei Kozhemyakin, and Aleksandr Parinov,⁹⁴ to find their way into the battalion’s so-called Russian Corps, while a Russian reporter with similar views, Aleksei Baranovskii, who had moved to Ukraine was allowed to observe Azov’s daily routine.⁹⁵ It is notable that Parinov and Baranovskii had previously been linked to one of Putin’s Russia’s most notorious neo-Nazi groups, the so-called Combat Organization of Russian Nationalists known under its Russian abbreviation BORN⁹⁶ which, amongst other things, carried out targeted killings of Russian anti-fascists. Oddly, the legal wing of BORN, *Russkii Obraz* (The Russian Image)⁹⁷ had at one time been under the indirect protection and direction of the Kremlin.⁹⁸

After the start of serious fighting in Eastern Ukraine, out of Azov’s initial group of founders, Lyashko and Mosiychuk left the battalion, and continued to be full-time politicians, in parliament. Bilets’kyy, the commander of the battalion, also entered high politics. In summer 2014, he came to considerable fame and prominence in Ukrainian society thanks to the battalion’s military successes, and his numerous interviews for Ukrainian mass media. In August 2014, Bilets’kyy was awarded the Order “For Courage” (III degree) and promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.⁹⁹

By the end of summer 2014, the Azov battalion comprised between 400 and 450 people.¹⁰⁰ On September 17, 2014, on an order from the Minister of Internal Affairs Avakov, the battalion was upgraded to a regiment.¹⁰¹ On November 12, 2014, Azov was integrated, as a so-called Special Purpose Regiment, into the National Guard of Ukraine, with a staff of 800 soldiers.¹⁰² In this format, Azov has continued to exist and grow in size. Minister of Interior Avakov later commented on the establishment of Azov as a fully regular armed unit, under his ministry, and its inclusion of ultra-nationalists, the following way:

Many political leaders were afraid of the whole volunteer movement. It is very complicated, for me too. There are issues [with that]. In Azov, there are more of them than in other [volunteer units]. This concerns the religious views [i.e. paganism] of various people, and the right-wing radicals. But would it be better, if the right-wing radicals were on the streets and destroying vitrines [of shops]? Or [isn’t it better that they] feel responsibility for this country and fight a little bit for it? This is my logic.¹⁰³

The inclusion of the originally semi-regular armed unit into Ukraine’s power structures have opened a new chapter in its development. As with the “nationalization” of other

Ukrainian voluntary battalions newly formed in 2014, the quick transformation of Azov from a post-Euromaydan extra-governmental Third Sector phenomenon into a constituent part of the new Ukrainian state, this has changed the nature of this originally grass-roots initiative. The role of Azov in the National Guard, and related questions require further empirical study, comparative analysis and separate evaluation.

Instead of a conclusion: the Azov founders' entry into politics

As mentioned, in 2014 Mosiychuk was elected, on behalf of Lyashko's Radical Party, first into the Kyiv City Council and then into the national parliament, Verkhovna Rada. Although he was, already by 2015, under investigation for corruption, he remains, by early 2018, a visible political figure in Ukraine. In September 2014, Bilets'kyi was included into the Military Council of then Prime-Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk's newly formed party Narodnyy Front (Popular Front). Bilets'kyi was initially put forward as number 50 on the Front's electoral list for the proportional part of the October 2014 parliamentary elections. Following protests from a group of Ukrainian political experts and human rights activists, Bilets'kyi's name was removed from the Front's list.¹⁰⁴ However, the Azov commander was nevertheless elected to the Verkhovna Rada via the single member electoral district 217 in Kyiv's famous Obolon' district, with 33.8% of the vote. Although he was officially an independent candidate, his campaign received de-facto support from Yatsenyuk's Popular Front.¹⁰⁵ On October 31, 2014, another former SNA/PU activist and deputy commander of Azov, Vadym Troyan, was appointed chief of Kyiv Oblast's Central Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.¹⁰⁶

Despite these and other similar developments as well as notwithstanding the above quotes from Bilets'kyi and Odnorozhenko, these trends cannot be easily labelled as unequivocal evidence for a notable surge of neo-Nazism in Ukraine. Bilets'kyi's steep political rise, Mosiychuk's election to parliament,¹⁰⁷ and the appointment of Troyan to a high governmental post are all entirely related to Azov's 2014 military successes rather than these men's earlier political backgrounds. They emerged as national politicians in spite rather than because of their older ultra-nationalist views and actions—a part of their biographies still fairly unknown in Ukrainian society. As Anton Shekhovtsov has pointed out, in Bilets'kyi's Kyiv single-member district, during the October 2014 Verkhovna Rada elections, there was no other candidate from the Euromaydan-related national-democratic camp to vote for. Virtually, any unopposed candidate from that camp would have, shortly after the Revolution of Dignity, won in the high-brow district of Ukraine's capital where Bilets'kyi won.¹⁰⁸

Until spring 2014, the SNA/PU had been a distinctly marginal lunatic fringe group largely unknown even among many experienced journalists and analysts writing on Ukraine. Those experts on far-right extremism who knew about the SNA/PU associated it, as in the case of Korchyns'kyi's Bratstvo, primarily with questionable "political technologies" and only, in second instance, with an extremist political ideology. Despite the, even within the specific context of Ukrainian right-wing extremism, oddities in the tale of the SNA/PU pre-Euromaydan development, by the end of autumn 2014, several of its leaders, alongside their temporary associate Lyashko, were able to benefit from their widely publicized involvement in the spontaneous creation, dynamic development, and first fighting of Azov. In spite of their dubious backgrounds, these men were able to transform themselves, within half a year, from minor and even miniscule political figures

into more or less significant participants of Ukrainian public life including its parliamentary affairs, mass media, and party politics.

In doing this, they partially followed the path of several further previously unknown or little-known political activists or former servicemen who became commanders of post-Euromaidan semi-regular or irregular voluntary units such as, among others, the founder of the Donbas battalion “Semen Semenchenko” (alias Kostyantyn Hryshyn) who, on October 26, 2014, was also elected deputy of the Verkhovna Rada, on the list of the new pro-Western post-Euromaidan party “Samopomich” (Self-reliance). The emergence of the Azov regiment and political rise of its leader was thus—at least, initially—not an expression of exploding right-wing extremism, but a component of a larger wave of armed and non-armed societal activism generated by the specifically post-revolutionary Ukrainian circumstances after the Euromaidan, and by the peculiarly hybrid (i.e., combined military and non-military) war that Russia has been semi-secretly conducting ever since against Ukraine. The combination of unusual traits of the founders of the Azov battalion/regiment, such as the dubious actions they were involved in before the war, the barely hidden neo-Nazism of the SNA/PU, as well as Bilets’kyy and Co’s collaboration with political provocateurs like Korchyns’kyy and Lyashko¹⁰⁹ distinguish Azov somewhat from other new Ukrainian voluntary armed units and even from other battalions with an ultra-nationalist background.

On the other hand, nationalism within battling post-colonial countries still under the spell and attack of their former imperial centers has a different dimension than nationalism in long-ago settled and securely independent states. Even nationalism’s most militant expressions can, under conditions of an ongoing war for independence, not be easily interpreted as exclusive and unambiguous permutations of right-wing extremism, uncivil society, and anti-democratic politics. For this and similar reasons, Azov’s emergence was, at least within the extraordinary political situation of 2014, a phenomenon that, in spite of some of the evidence presented above, largely falls under the heading of “civic activism in times of armed conflict.”

It is later developments connected to Azov following the turning-point of 2014—not dealt with here—that pose serious questions about this phenomenon’s eventual political role within Ukrainian society, and its future impact on Ukraine’s post-revolutionary politics.¹¹⁰ Although Azov itself has become fully integrated into the National Guard and thereby a combat unit of the Ministry of Interior, its creators have recently started a new comprehensive party-political project and non-governmental movement that goes beyond the confines of national security, patriotic mobilization, and military defense. With the creation of the Azov-linked political party Natsional’nyy korpus (National Corps), non-governmental organization Tsyvil’nyy korpus (Civil Corps), and unarmed militias Natsional’nyy druzhyny (National Fellowships) in 2015–2017, the Azov founders may be returning to their roots in the Patriot of Ukraine and Social-National Assembly. Perhaps, these new initiatives are ideologically sufficiently dissimilar from the SNA/PU to be also classified as permutations of neo-Nazism; perhaps, not. Future research will have to show.

In any way, the manifest connection between these new nationalist extra-state projects with a heavily armed combat unit of Ukraine’s National Guard as well as the National Corps’ emerging alliance and possible future joint electoral bloc with Svoboda and the Right Sector give reason for pause. Azov may have, with its liberation of Mariupol’ and

with other military actions in 2014–2015, played a significant or even crucial role in saving the fragile Ukrainian post-revolutionary state from being demolished by the Kremlin-directed and Russia-supported irregular forces active in the Donets Basin. Yet, Azov's transformation into a larger venture combining an armed regiment with a political party and supposedly non-political self-help movement raises concerns. It may mean that the Azov phenomenon will eventually have to be re-evaluated within the framework of uncivil movement as well as right-wing extremism studies, and the peculiar threats that groups falling under these headings pose for the consolidation and development of democracy.¹¹¹

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Notes

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59. Ivo Mijnsen, "Kuznitsa modernizatsii na ozere Seliger: dvizhenie 'Nashi,' putinskii patriotism i Vserossiiskii molodezhnyi obrazovatel'nyi forum 2005–2010 gg.," *Forum noveishei vostochnoevropetskoi istorii i kul'tury* 8, no. 2 (2012): 132–57.
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70. M. Balutenko and V. Pribylovskii, *Kto est' kto v politike na Ukraine: Biograficheskii sbornik* (Moskva: Panorama, 2007), 141–43.
71. *Ibid.*, 143. See also: A. Pridonov, "Dmitriy Korchinskii otvetit za Chechnyu," *Utro.ru*, March 20, 2006, <http://ukraina.utro.ru/articles/2006/03/20/531851.shtml>.
72. Vyacheslav Likhachev, "Chto NAM v NIKH ne nraivitsya – II: Igor Moseichuk," *Etnograficheskoe oborzenie* [sic], November 5, 2014, <http://corneliu.livejournal.com/228211.html>.
73. Bevz was also an SNA/PU activist, but seemingly first joined the "Kyiv-2" battalion and apparently only later rejoined his former colleagues in Azov. Communication with Vyacheslav Likhachev, November 2015.
74. Shekhovtsov, "'Vasil'kovskie terroristy,' oni zhe bandity i neonatsisty." See also: A. Kalinin, "Komandir batal'ona 'Azov' Vladimir Shpara: 'My prishli ne za vlast'yu, a zashchichat' svoyu Rodinu'," *Pro.Berdyansk.Biz.UA*, June 12, 2014, <http://pro.berdyansk.biz/content.php?id=22187>.
75. Likhachev, "Chto NAM v NIKH ne nraivitsya – II: Igor Moseichuk."

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79. “Kak sozdavalsya polk Azov,” *UkrLife*, June 30, 2015, <http://www.ukrlife.tv/video/suspilstvo/kak-sozdavalsya-polk-azov>.
80. “Kto takie ‘chernye chelovechki’: treniruyutsya na bazakh v dvukh oblastyakh i deistvuyut po nocham,” *Segodnya*, April 28, 2014, <http://www.segodnya.ua/politics/society/chernye-ohotniki-na-zelenykh-chelovechkov-516179.html>.
81. Likhachev, “Chto NAM v NIKH ne nraivtsya – I: Andrei Biletskii.”
82. “‘Pravyi sektor’ sformiruet ‘poezd druzhby’ i ne dopustit raskola Ukrainy, – Mosiichuk,” *112 Ukraina*, February 24, 2014, <http://112.ua/politika/pravyi-sektor-sformiruet-poezd-druzhby-i-ne-dopustit-raskola-ukrainy-mosiichuk-26132.html>.
83. “Kak sozdavalsya polk Azov.”
84. “‘Azov’ u Shyrokokynomu,” 428.
85. “Kak sozdavalsya polk Azov.”
86. “‘Azov’ u Shyrokokynomu,” 428.
87. “V Zaporozhskoi oblasti boitsy batal’ona ‘Azov’ prokhodyat ucheniya,” *ReporterUA*, May 21, 2014, <http://reporter-ua.com/2014/05/21/v-zaporozhskoy-oblasti-boytsy-batalona-azov-prohodyat-ucheniya-foto>.
88. “Anton Gerashchenko,” *Facebook*, May 6, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/anton.gerashchenko.7/posts/1046993312054182>. Herashchenko added: “P.S. My apologies in advance to those who believe that I should have mentioned them in this post. Human memory is not perfect. In this constantly changing kaleidoscope of events, some things have slipped out of my mind. Some extracts of my memories of those monumental days get brighter and others fade. This summer, the publisher ‘Folio’ is getting ready to release a book on the creation and development of the voluntary movement in Ukraine. I think this will shed even more light on those heroic days.”
89. Andreas Umland and Anton Shekhovtsov, “Natsional-ekstremizm, shcho ne vidbuvsya? Pravoradikal’na partiyna polityka v postradyans’kiy Ukraini ta zahadka elektoral’noy marhinal’nosti ukrains’kykh ul’tanatsionalistiv u 1994–2009 rokakh,” *Politychna krytyka*, no. 2 (2011): 17–34, here: 24.
90. Aleksandr Golubov, “Arsen Avakov: Mir nuzhen, no ne lyuboi tsenoi,” *Fokus*, September 30, 2014, <http://focus.ua/country/316552/>.
91. Tetyana Bezruk’s interview with volunteers of the Azov battalion, September 10, 2014, Kyiv.
92. As quoted in: Likhachev, “Chto NAM v NIKH ne nraivtsya – I: Andrei Biletskii.”
93. Anton Shekhovtsov, “Rossiiskii neo-natsist Roman Zheleznov prosit politicheskogo ubez-hishcha v Ukraine,” *Anton Shekhovtsov’s Blog*, July 14, 2014, <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com/2014/07/blog-post.html>.
94. Anna Gritsenko, “Ukrainskie svyazi Boevoi organizatsii russkikh natsionalistov: kontakty i kontesktly v do- i postmaidannoii Ukraine,” *Forum noveishei vostochnoevropeskoii istorii i kul’tury* 13, no. 1 (2016): 193–206.
95. A. Baranovskiy, “Azovskii dnevnik,” *Petr i Mazepa*, September 5, 2014, <http://petrimazepa.com/ua/azov-diary.html>.
96. Gritsenko, “Ukrainskie svyazi Boevoi organizatsii russkikh natsionalistov.”
97. Vladimir Pribylovskiy, “Russkiy Obraz,” *Antikompromat*, http://www.anticompromat.org/nazi-p/spr_rusobr.html.

98. Robert Horvath, "Russkii Obraz and the Politics of 'Managed Nationalism,'" *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 3 (2014): 469–88. Even more oddly, two former Russian ultra-nationalist activists close to *Russkii Obraz*, Evgenii Valyaev and Stanislav Byshok, have recently come to "present themselves as 'political experts.' They are currently employed with 'Public Diplomacy' and the International Electoral Monitoring Organization 'CIS-EMO.'" See A. Litoi, "Delo Il'i Goryacheva: ot BORN k Antimaidanu," *The Insider*, June 3, 2015, <http://theins.ru/politika/8873>. On the Commonwealth of the Independent States – Election Monitoring Organization (CIS-EMO), see: Anton Shekhovtsov, "Politicheskii motivirovannoe mezhdunarodnoe nablyudenie za mestnymi vyborami 2015 goda v Ukraine," *Forum noveishei vostochnoevropeiskoi istorii i kul'tury* 11, no. 2 (2015): 50–64. Byshok has even become an "expert" in Ukraine's radical right. See: Stanislav Byshok, *Ilyuziya svobody: Kuda tyanet Ukrainu Tyagnibok*. 3rd edn (Moskva: Knizhnyi mir, FRIGO "Narodnaya diplomat-iya," 2013). For a critical review of this book, see Konstantin Fedorenko, "Stanislav Byshok: Ilyuziya svobody. Kuda tyanet Ukrainu Tyagnibok," *Forum noveishei vostochnoevropeiskoi istorii i kul'tury* 9, no. 1 (2013): 489–92.
99. Likhachev, "Chto NAM v NIKH ne nraivitsya – I: Andrei Biletskii."
100. Myronova, "Rol' 'Azova,'" 403.
101. "Batal'ion Azov rosshiryly do polku," *Visnyk + K*, September 18, 2014. <http://visnyk.lutsk.ua/news/ukraine/batalion-azov-rozshyryly-do-polku/>.
102. "Polk 'Azov' pereidet v sostav Natsgvardii – Avakov," *Interfaks-Ukraina*, October 9, 2014, <http://interfax.com.ua/news/general/227799.html>.
103. As quoted in: "'Azov' u Shyrokokynomu," 430–31.
104. "Eskperty prizvali Yatsenyuka ne vydivgat' kombata 'Azova' kandidatom v nardepy," *Obozrevatel*, September 15, 2014, <http://obozrevatel.com/politics/01652-ekspertyi-prizyi-vayut-yatsenyuka-ne-vydivgat-kombata-azova-kandidatom-v-nardepyi.htm>.
105. Likhachev, "Chto NAM v NIKH ne nraivitsya – I: Andrei Biletskii."
106. *Idem*, "Chto NAM v NIKH ne nraivitsya – IV: Bonus! Vadim Troyan," *Etnograficheskoe oborzenie*, November 5, 2014, <http://corneliu.livejournal.com/228690.html>; Halya Coynash, "Disastrous Police Appointment," *Human Rights in Ukraine*, November 7, 2014, <http://khpg.org/index.php?id=1415367345>.
107. The election of another "Azov" related activist, Oleh Petrenko, to the Verkhovna Rada in October 2014 would demand a separate investigation and interpretation, in as far as Petrenko had no political background in the "Patriot of Ukraine," Social-National Assembly, or other ideologically driven far-right organizations.
108. Communication with Anton Shekhovtsov, November 2014.
109. For another revealing episode, see the brief investigation by Anton Shekhovtsov, "Strannye druz'ya Yuriya Zbitneva i Yuriya Romanenko," *Anton Shekhovtsov's Blog*, December 22, 2013, <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com/2013/12/blog-post.html>.
110. Gorbach and Petik, "Azovskii shlyakh."
111. On uncivil society and uncivic movements, in chronological order: Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (1997): 401–429, https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/27691692/civil_society_and_the_collapse_of_the_weimar_republic.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1518887980&Signature=tzxKaWR3yPotdvBSQcHCPDo8v6c%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DCivil_society_and_the_collapse_of_the_We.pdf; Leigh A. Payne, *Uncivil Movements: The Armed Right Wing and Democracy in Latin America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Ami Pedahzur and Leonard Weinberg, "Modern European Democracies and Its Enemies: The Threat of the Extreme Right," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 2, no. 1 (2001): 52–72; Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein, "Bad Civil Society," *Political Theory* 29, no. 6 (2001): 837–865, <http://cui-zy.com/Recommended/%E5%AE%AA%E6%94%BF%E4%B8%8E%E6%B0%91%E4%B8%BB/BadCivilSociety.pdf>; Cas Mudde and Petr Kopecký, eds., *Uncivil Society? Contentious Politics in Eastern Europe* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2003); Richard Boyd, *Uncivil Society: The Perils of Pluralism and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004).