

Zelensky struggles to contain Ukraine's Neo-Nazi Problem

Militiamen of Ukraine's nationalist movement are espousing white supremacist views. This is one of the challenges Ukrainian President Zelensky is facing.

Dr. Valery Engel

On October 10, during a “marathon” press conference in Kiev¹, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky said that it is impossible to separate the opposing forces of the Ukrainian army and the forces of the self-proclaimed republics in the territory of Donetsk and Lugansk regions, “while a different people from both sides will come there and accidentally shoot.” In the same interview, he said that now this issue depends also on the Ukrainian side.²

There is a serious problem behind all of this, because despite the signing by Ukraine of the so-called the “Steinmeier formula”, which defines the mechanism for enacting of the Law on a special procedure for local self-government on this territory, despite the process of exchange of prisoners, as well as the obvious intention of the new Ukrainian authorities to fulfill their election promises and achieve peace in the east of their country, this goal remains unattainable. Moreover, this is due to the tough position of the Ukrainian Radical Rights.

What happened and why we speak about the Radical Rights? We are talking about the militants of the National Corps Party, linked directly to the “Azov” National Guard Corps of Ukraine (the former “Azov volunteer battalion”), and the neo-Nazi organization C-14, which were recognized in 2018 by the US State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor as a “Nationalist Hate Groups“.³

In 2016, a BBC journalist Dina Newman published an article about “Azov”.⁴ In this article she wrote the following: “The key figures in the “Azov” Battalion are its commander, Andriy Biletsky, and his deputy, Ihor Mosiychuk. Andriy Biletsky is also the leader of a Ukrainian

¹ *Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky holds record-breaking 14-hour press conference* (Euronews, 11/10/2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/10/11/ukrainian-president-volodymyr-zelensky-holds-record-breaking-14-hour-press-conference>).

² *Зеленский рассказал, когда будет возможность разведения сил в Золотом* (Web-site «Деловая столица», <https://www.dsnews.ua/politics/zelenskiy-rasskazal-kogda-budet-vozmozhno-razvedenie-sil-10102019105300>).

³ *Tanya Gerasimova, U.S. Considers C14 And National Corps Nationalist Hate Groups* (Ukrainian News, 14 March 2019, <https://ukranews.com/en/news/619748-u-s-considers-c14-and-national-corps-nationalist-hate-groups>).

⁴ *Dina Newman, Ukraine conflict: 'White power' warrior from Sweden* (BBC News, 16 July 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28329329>).

organization called the Social National Assembly. Its aims are stated in one of their online publications:

- “to prepare Ukraine for further expansion and to struggle for the liberation of the entire White Race from the domination of the internationalist speculative capital”;
- “to punish severely sexual perversions and any interracial contacts that lead to the extinction of the white man”. This, according to experts, is a typical neo-Nazi narrative. “

C-14 holds roughly the same view, which, as *OpenDemocracy* writes, “combine generic“ healthy patriotic ”message with subtler hints which can be easily deciphered by members of the subculture (such as the symbolic date of the Roma pogrom on Hitler’s birthday or indeed the very name of the organization).”⁵

Over the past, nothing has changed. These groups organize gypsy pogroms, acts of vandalism against Jewish shrines and property, attack their political opponents, whom they call pro-Russian, what very often is far from the true, and so on.⁶ There is one problem – the neo-Nazis did not get to today’s Ukrainian parliament where the overwhelming majority are represented by deputies from the pro-presidential party “Servant of the People.” The radical nationalist bloc has not received a single mandate; the representation in Rada lost the former leader of the neo-Nazi party “Right sector” Dmitry Yarosh, one of the leaders of the ultra-radicals Borislav Beresa, as well as commander of the “Azov” Andriy Biletsky. And that’s why they are very worried.⁷

To restore their political influence, the right-wing radicals need to mobilize their electorate, who is also tired of the unpredictability of the extreme rights and in the recent elections voted for the more moderate politicians Petr Poroshenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, although they failed to gain a majority in the Parliament. However, P. Poroshenko signed the Minsk agreements in 2015, which the veteran of Ukrainian politics, the former presidential candidate Y. Tymoshenko, did not fail to point out recently, speaking in the Rada. This was also recalled by President Zelensky on December 5, 2019, responding to criticism from the opposition.⁸

⁵ Denys Gorbach, *Entrepreneurs of political violence: the varied interests and strategies of the far-right in Ukraine* (OpenDemocracy, 16 October 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/entrepreneurs-of-political-violence-ukraine-far-right/>)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Дмитрий Ковалевич, *В парламент не прошли. Чем займутся «фюреры украинской нации» после выборов* (Украина.ру, 24.07.2019, <https://ukraina.ru/exclusive/20190724/1024374333.html>).

⁸ Зеленский: Порошенко «не согласен с тем, что именно он подписал» (Regnum, 05/12/2019, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2801105.html>)

That is why the Azov veterans, members of the National Corps and other nationalists led by A. Biletsky decided to intervene in the process of disengaging the armed forces of the warring parties near the villages of Zolotoye and Petrovsky. They hoped that their action would attract the attention of all those who are dissatisfied with the president's peaceful initiatives. And they justified themselves.

On October 8, armed Right-wing radicals, primarily veterans of the "Azov" Battalion, arrived at the demarcation line and tried to break through the Ukrainian National Police checkpoints. Law enforcement officers had to shoot in the air to drive them away, but they broke through the cordon and went into battle positions. "If the President and the Government do not fulfill their direct duty to protect every inch of the Ukrainian land, then we, the volunteer veterans, will do it again," Biletsky promised at an organized meeting in Zolotoy.⁹ He said that he and his team will impede the disengagement of forces in the Donbass and, in the event of withdrawal of the Army troops, they will occupy their positions at the front.¹⁰

According to the one of the separatists' Representatives, militants from the "Azov" National Battalion at the entrance to the Petrovskoye-Bogdanovka checkpoint shot regular units of the Ukrainian army. According to the deputy head of the "People's Police Directorate" of the self-proclaimed "Donetsk Peoples Republic" (DPR), Eduard Basurin, four people were killed and four more were injured. "The nationalists tried to get to the checkpoint on the border with the DPR, bypassing the units of the Armed Forces. They answered with fire. A skirmish ensued, as a result of which both sides suffered losses," he said.¹¹

These losses are not confirmed by the Ukrainian side. According to the Representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, after clashes with nationalists, the military and police did not take illegal and harsh actions against those who tried to break through the border. "Acting in accordance with the law of Ukraine "On the National Police", the commando fired a warning shot into the air. They didn't use any special means or weapons to persons who refused to

⁹ Анна Юранец, «Путь в никуда»: украинские националисты срывают «Нормандский формат» (Газета.ру, 09/10/2019, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2019/10/09_a_12746894.shtml).

¹⁰ Пристайко: Зеленский пытается не дать превратить Донбасс в Приднестровье (Радио Свобода, 11 октября 2019, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30211791.html>).

¹¹ Нацбатальон "Азов" открыл огонь по украинской армии в Донбассе (МК.RU, 11/10/2019, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2019/10/11/nacbatolon-azov-otkryl-ogon-po-armii-ukrainy-v-donbasse.html>).

comply with the lawful requirements of the police, the Statement said. – Please read this information carefully. There were no illegal actions against citizens of Ukraine! Only compliance with the law! ”¹²

Judging by this official Statement, there is a slight panic in the power circles of Ukraine. The authorities are extremely afraid of the intra-Ukrainian conflict, which already once, in 2014, led to a change of power. Now protests against the “Steinmeier formula” pose no threat to the rating of the President, nor to stability in the Society. However, if clashes between activists and the Ministry of Internal Affairs lead to casualties, this will increase the protest potential of the nationalist part of Ukrainian society. Political opponents of Zelensky are now expecting from the Head of the State just such careless and harsh actions. The President of Ukraine has repeatedly stated that the lives of Ukrainians are above all for him, that’s how Zelensky gained popularity among citizens tired of the war. The Head of State cannot allow the new victims.

All this would lead to a sharp activation of the nationalist-minded electorate. The rally against Zelensky’s peace initiatives in Kiev on October 6, (the “All-Ukrainian Chamber “Stop Capitulation”),¹³ which gathered according to various estimates from 5 to 10 thousand people,¹⁴ is evidence of how great its protest potential of nationalists is. It should be added that all local authorities of Western Ukraine and some regional councils of the Right-Bank of Dnepr- River, for example, the Khmelnytsky region, opposed the consent to the implementation of the “Steinmeier formula”. Western Ukraine protests, first of all, against granting special status to Donbass.¹⁵

A. Biletsky himself expressed their position at a press conference in the Ukrainian capital on October 11, 2019. He said that the withdrawal of troops will not lead to the fact that the Ukrainian side will be able to control the elections in the Donbass. Kiev will still not be able to follow the elections, and “observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe are unreliable”.¹⁶

¹² Анна Юранец, «Путь в никуда»: украинские националисты срывают «Нормандский формат» (Газета.ру, 09/10/2019, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2019/10/09_a_12746894.shtml).

¹³ *Ukraine conflict: ceasefire, prisoner exchange settled, other disagreements remain* (JamNews, December 10, 2019, <https://jam-news.net/ukraine-conflict-ceasefire-prisoner-exchange-settled-other-disagreements-remain/>)

¹⁴ Анна Юранец. Ibid.

¹⁵ *Восстание против Зеленского подчеркнуло антирусскость Украины* (МК.RU, 8/10/2019, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2019/10/08/formula-raskola-pochemu-antiruskost-nezavisimoy-ukrainy-sokhranitsya-navsegda.html>).

¹⁶ Рафаэль Фахрутдинов, «Нужна политическая воля»: Путин указал на ошибку Зеленского (Газета.ру, 11/10/2019, https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2019/10/11/12750476.shtml?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fyandex.ru%2Fnews)

The fact of signing the Minsk Agreements by P. Poroshenko in 2015, is considered by the nationalists as a successful “tactical maneuver” and nothing more. The famous Ukrainian oligarch and former Zelensky show-business partner I. Kolomoisky said, “the signing of these agreements was a tactical trick – the Ukrainian army suffered severe defeats from militias, and Poroshenko had to avoid a final defeat.”¹⁷

On the other hand, to make an acquiescence to the Radical Rights is also not permissible for V. Zelensky. This will undermine his credibility as a leader capable of influencing the political situation in the country and having full control over the Parliament. The reputation of a “weak politician” could ruin this artist of the post-Soviet show business, who soared to a political Olympus, having a 71% rating today.

A crisis of trust may well occur too in the West, which is also disastrous for the young President. It is unlikely that they will be able to write off the unwillingness to fulfill his part of the arrangements on the Minsk agreements to the activity of the nationalists. This will demonstrate the President’s weakness also to European partners. Moreover, now, in the eyes of the international community, the guilty party in delaying a peace settlement is the Ukrainian, and not the Russian side, which has been living in the regime of Western sanctions for more than five years and requires only the “strict implementation of the Minsk agreements”.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, speaking in Ashgabat at the CIS summit 11/10/19, blamed the Ukrainian “nationalist armed groups” for disrupting the separation of the parties in the areas of the Zolotoye and Petrovsky settlements. He did not say whether the lack of breeding in the Golden and Petrovsky summits in the “Norman format” would hinder, but his assistant Yuri Ushakov made it clear that Russia insisted on fulfilling this condition.¹⁸

Thus, Radical Rights can once again interfere with a peaceful settlement in Ukraine, which became a pan-European headache. True, there remains one more opportunity to solve the problem. On October 8, 2019, Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko announced it at the Minsk “Dialogue International Forum”. He said that ... he is ready to enter his military peacekeepers to the Donbass. “If you want us to close the border of 400 kilometers between

¹⁷ Будет ли Зеленский выполнять Минские соглашения? (RN, 10/09/2019, <https://rusnext.ru/news/1568096749>)

¹⁸ Путин: Зеленский не может обеспечить развод сил и техники в Донбассе из-за националистов (ТАСС, 11/10/2019, https://tass.ru/politika/6988942?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=smm_social_share&fbclid=IwAR3QYtKWwUm7iVZYtgUhdUX0NO88TtxNoKY74-Txs9fVEJGNqxLuoLRIkRM)

Ukraine and Russia, which is now not controlled by the Ukrainian authorities,” he said, referring to the Ukrainian delegation, “we will close this border.” According to him, the troops enter will be a “big problem” for Minsk, as the Belarusians do not want to get involved into the Conflict. Nevertheless, the Belarusian leader added, he can do it with the consent of the “both sides”.¹⁹

In this Statement, it is interesting not only that the President of the closest Russian Ally-State declared his readiness to send his troops to the border between Russia and Ukraine. For the first time, to the Kremlin’s obvious displeasure,²⁰ Lukashenko called Russia a “Party to the Conflict”.²¹ Therefore, speaking of the “both sides” that require consent to the Belarusian troops enter, he did not mean the Ukrainian side and the separatists, but Ukraine and Russia. And this indicates a fundamental change of the trend in Minsk. “And it is not necessary after me to say that this is not a conflict between Russia and Ukraine,” BelTA news agency quotes the president of Belarus.²²

Another important point in Lukashenko’s speech is his statement that the conflict in Ukraine cannot be resolved without the participation of the United States²³, with which Moscow also categorically disagrees.²⁴ It is difficult to say whether such a position will help resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine, in particular, whether the entry of Belarusian peacekeepers to the Russian-Ukrainian border will help a peaceful settlement, and V. Zelensky himself, given the mood of right-wing militants and the Ukrainian population supporting them. However, for the Ukrainian president, this is an another chance.

Another thing is interesting. The Belarusian leader unequivocally took up European and even American positions, demonstrated his independence from Russia, supported the Norman format and the policy of a united Europe. If this is not another attempt to knock out a new economic benefits from the Kremlin, then we can talk about the upcoming changes in the alignment of political forces both in the Ukrainian conflict and in the international arena as a whole, which

¹⁹ Иван Апулеев, «Мы закроем границу»: Лукашенко готов послать белорусов в Донбасс (Газета.ru, 26/09/2019, <https://m.gazeta.ru/army/2019/09/26/12688945.shtml>)

²⁰ Кремль ответил Лукашенко на слова о конфликте России и Украины (МК.RU, 8/10/2019, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2019/10/08/kreml-otvetil-lukashenko-na-slova-o-konflikte-rossii-i-ukrainy.html>)

²¹ Президент Белоруссии Александр Лукашенко назвал войну в Донбассе конфликтом Украины и России (Radio “Echo Moskvу”, 8/10/2019, <https://echo.msk.ru/news/2515759-echo.html>)

²² Лукашенко назвал события в Донбассе конфликтом России и Украины (МК.RU, 08/10/2019, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2019/10/08/lukashenko-nazval-sobytiya-v-donbasse-konfliktom-rossii-i-ukrainy.html>)

²³ Radio “Echo Moskvу”. Ibid.

²⁴ Кремль предложил США форму участия в урегулировании конфликта на Украине (Ведомости, 08/10/2019, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2019/10/08/813129-ukraine>)

will certainly strengthen the position of the West in the confrontation against Moscow. Obviously, both Brussels and Washington should be grateful to A. Lukashenko for a different position from Russia, not only in the Crimea, which he did not recognize as a part of Russia, but also in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, where he clearly wants to become a Key Player.