

Gonzalo Lira and the kill chain

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I: 'The weapons of divine justice'

On 19 September 2022, an American blogger living in Ukraine uploaded a video to YouTube. It was called 'Notes on Being Unpersoned'. The blogger, Gonzalo Lira, had been extremely critical of the Ukrainian government, and of the western governments supporting it, during the Russian invasion that had begun in February of that year. Lira had found his name and photo on what he called a hit list, and felt obliged to state calmly and clearly, for the record, what he believed was going on.

'[I]f I get unpersoned, then nobody will notice if I get killed. Nobody will notice if I'm gone.¹ Somebody wants me unpersoned. Unpersoned. And so nobody will notice when I get... God knows what.² [. . .] And then nobody's going to notice when something horrible happens to me. And they want something horrible to happen to me, or they wouldn't have put me on this, um, list, this 'Peacemaker' list.³ [. . .] I realise that I am literally a marked man. And marked by people who actually have the ability to do something about it.'⁴

Lira's suspicions had been aroused by the repeated bans and suspensions imposed on him by social media companies, in particular Twitter and YouTube. As he correctly remarked, it was already a matter of public record that governments, particularly the US federal government, applied pressure on social media companies to suppress activities deemed undesirable, and sometimes used private data from those companies to pursue users thought to be criminal suspects or even what are referred to (with deliberate ambiguity) as 'persons of interest'.

¹ Gonzalo Lira, 'Notes on Being Unpersoned (I'm on the Myrotvorets Hitlist)', YouTube.com, 19 September 2022. See <<https://youtu.be/SYSf1pkkeZk>> commencing at 31 minutes, 22 seconds. Video archived at <<https://tinyurl.com/6fsfa54s>> or <<https://archive.org/details/notes-on-being-unpersoned-im-on-the-myrotvorets-hit-list-19-september-2022>>.

Unless otherwise indicated, sources cited in this essay have been preserved in the Internet Archive (archive.org) and can be retrieved by using their URLs as search terms.

² Lira, 19 September 2022. See note 1 above. Commencing at 36m 49s.

³ Lira, 19 September 2022. See note 1 above. Commencing at 37m 36s.

⁴ Lira, 19 September 2022. See note 1 above. Commencing at 38m 29s.



Gonzalo Lira, March 2022

Gonzalo Ángel Quintilio Lira López (b. 1968; d. 2024) was a man of extraordinary, and in some cases fairly extreme, convictions, who had already been rampaging through internet subculture for years before he attained international notoriety during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A novelist and screenwriter, he had found his temperament suited to the constantly-shifting kaleidoscope of life online. He had drifted into digital self-promotion, which also allowed him an artistic outlet for his considerable intelligence.

The hard-right conservative capitalist reinvented himself as 'Coach Red Pill',⁵ a nickname he admitted was 'cringey'

marketing. Using this brand, Lira published a steady output of online videos with advice he wanted to share with younger male viewers. It was, he explained, the sort of advice that he would like to give to his children later in their lives. Sometimes, he even addressed his recorded words to 'Son'. Lira's original motivation was awareness of his own heart condition – which he did not specify, but was apparently serious – that meant he would probably not live to see his children reach adulthood.

What his children will make of their father's oeuvre is hard to imagine. Often disparaged as 'a sleazy dating coach', Lira was more of a lifestyle coach, a comparable but non-synonymous genre of online personality. While he didn't hold back with relationship advice when his monologues took him in that direction, Lira's range tended more toward topics such as economics, politics, and psychology. His evidence was often flawed, and the conclusions he reached highly debatable, but his reasoning and arguments were normally sophisticated. Sometimes his advice was cynical, amoral, and exploitative. Lira was also an unreconstructed male chauvinist, who was at best indifferent to racism, and frequently denounced what he thought was a worldwide campaign against heterosexuality and gender stability. Among the other extravagant conspiracy theories he endorsed was the idea that vaccination against the Covid-19 pandemic was akin to a form of biological warfare, conducted by western

⁵ A reference to the blue pill/red pill concept from the film *The Matrix*. If you take the blue pill, you remain ignorant but content. The red pill will make you self-actualised at the price of permanent discontent. This dichotomy was very popular online in the 2015-2020 period, and usually served as a shorthand term for right-wing self-radicalisation.

governments against their own populations.⁶

Lira had emigrated to Ukraine in 2016, in the belief that the US-led western world was on the verge of collapse, and that – as a cultural but secular Roman Catholic – a more traditional way of life in Eastern Europe would suit him better anyway. On 24 February 2022, this move proved to have had unforeseen consequences, and almost overnight Lira turned himself into a full-time geopolitical commentator on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

From an apartment in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second city, Lira produced a steady stream of YouTube videos harshly criticising the government of President Volodymyr Zelensky, and explaining why if he, Lira, had been 'dictator of Russia' [sic], he would have invaded Ukraine years earlier. His opinion, expressed frequently and with clarity, was that Ukraine could not win the war against Russia, and that a whole generation of Ukrainians would be killed, as he put it, 'for nothing'. Due to the scarcity of criticism of the Ukrainian regime by western media, and his uniqueness as a dissenting on-the-spot correspondent, Lira's YouTube channel rapidly attracted thousands of new subscribers.

Lira's anxiety in his September 2022 video about being 'unpersoned' was heightened by the fact that he had been detained – NB not arrested – for a week in April that year, on ill-defined suspicions of aiding and abetting the Russian invasion. He had been told he could not leave the city of Kharkiv until the investigation into his activities was complete. His captors were Ukraine's internal security service, the SBU. Lira felt that if his social media disappeared and his contact with the English-speaking world were severed, his own disappearance would follow. Lira was not naïve about this prospect, having grown up in the Chilean dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, which Lira said was 'the paradigm of democracy' compared to modern Ukraine.

Lira's opinions on Pinochet varied depending on his audience. He said that he had participated in contemporaneous demonstrations against Pinochet, whom he acknowledged as a repressive dictator. On other occasions he said that the Pinochet junta was the best government Chile had ever had, because it had 'cracked down on communists'. As with many of Lira's online stances, it is hard to distinguish his shifts between personal sincerity, spontaneous performance, and deliberate provocation.⁷

As Lira's Ukraine commentary drew in increasing numbers of viewers, an

⁶ Lira's distinctly spotty past and personal life are entertaining and appalling in equal measure, but not relevant to this essay.

⁷ Pinochet's reputation remains a polarising subject in Chile. At the time of his death, a third of Chileans still regarded him as a great leader. Per *Reuters*, 9 August 2007. See <<https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN10462605/>>, archived at <<https://archive.is/jH6XS>>.

online information campaign against him began and steadily intensified. The chief antagonists were overtly connected to propaganda projects being run by the Ukrainian government. At least three of these individuals also boasted connections to the military or intelligence branches of NATO governments. As with most counter-intelligence operations in the 'information space', the effect on Lira was to implement the classic three Ds: **disrupt** the target's output; **degrade** the target personally; and ultimately **deny** the target access – access, in this instance, meaning access to an audience. The thrust of all the attacks was to paint Lira as a Russian intelligence agent and discredit his work as enemy propaganda. No substantive evidence whatsoever that Lira was any kind of Russian state operative was offered during his lifetime, and that remains the case at the time of this essay's publication.

In the flush of panic that had flooded through the Washington DC establishment when Donald Trump was elected US president in 2016, the permanent state tried to figure out what had gone wrong. Since America's two-party monopoly could not be faulted, its intelligence panjandrums came to the belated but convenient conclusion that

Moscow's influence campaign [during the 2016 election campaign period] followed a Russian messaging strategy that blends covert intelligence operations – such as cyber activity – with overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or "trolls".⁸

The obvious but unmentioned corollary of the report's findings was that future operations would have to tackle cyber-threats from identifiable people, as well as from the usual untraceable hackers and plagues of 'bot' networks.

In contrast to more traditional forms of cyberattack, cyber operations today target people within a society, influencing their beliefs as well as behaviors, and diminishing trust in the government. US adversaries now seek to control and exploit [. . .] social media to harm US interests, discredit public and private institutions, and sow domestic strife.⁹

Whatever their affiliations or intentions, whether the online operatives seeking to bring down Gonzalo Lira actually believed he was a Russian agent, is almost

⁸ US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections*, p. ii, partially declassified January 2017. See <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf>.

⁹ Jarred Prier (Lt-Col, USAF), 'Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare' *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2017, pp. 50–85. See <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26271634>> archived at <<https://archive.org/details/prier-commanding-trend-2017>>.

beside the point. The online suspicion and hysteria sparked by the 2016 election had become a social 'given' for internet users, long before Russia invaded Ukraine. Perhaps this development was inevitable, since the online world is so heavily-slanted in favour of anonymity, privacy, and user security. The average internet user leads a covert double-life without really being cognisant of that duality, and other internet users can easily begin to suspect clandestine activity where there is none. Conversely, participants in genuine clandestine activity try not to draw attention to it.

In standard models of cyberwarfare, the core D-list kill chain (disrupt, degrade, deny) often terminates with a fourth D: **destroy**.¹⁰ When applied to neutralising infrastructure attacks such as hacking, the 'destroy' element of the kill chain means:

To completely and irreparably deny access to, or operation of, a target [attacker]. Destruction maximizes the time and amount of denial.

However, destruction is scoped according to the span of a conflict, since many targets, given enough time and resources, can be reconstituted.¹¹

The year after recording his 'Unpersoned' video, and while the counter-operation against him was still intensifying, Lira's social media accounts all fell silent simultaneously when he was arrested while attempting to flee Ukraine. Six months after he was apprehended, he died in Ukrainian custody. While there is no suggestion that his online adversaries – at least, not the ones mentioned in this essay – deliberately set out to end his life, Lira's death occurred in deplorable and extremely suspicious circumstances. These bear striking similarities to multiple serious and court-proven human rights violations in Ukraine.

Myrotvorets

The 'hit list' referred to by Lira was and still is the Myrotvorets (in English: 'Peacemaker') website, a publicly accessible database of personal information about those deemed enemies of the Ukrainian state. While it represents itself as a resource for use by guards and special services, its public availability means it is unquestionably a work of stochastic terrorism.¹² It encourages reprisals and

¹⁰ The full version of the list runs to six Ds, as summarised by (e.g.) Tim Grant, 'Detect, Deny, Degrade, Disrupt, Destroy, Deceive: which is the greatest in OCO?' in *Proceedings of the 22nd European Conference on Cyber Warfare and Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2023). See <<https://papers.academic-conferences.org/index.php/eccws/article/view/1089>>, archived at <<https://archive.org/details/grant-ews-036>>.

¹¹ Grant, 2023 (see note 10) table 5, page 5.

¹² See Molly Amman and J. Reid Melo, 'Stochastic Terrorism: A Linguistic and Psychological Analysis', in *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 15, Issue 5, October 2021. See <https://pt.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-04/Article%201_12.pdf>.

simultaneously disowns and disguises the responsibility for reprisals. The site's founder, 'Roman Zaitsev' (probably a pseudonym), has disingenuously stated that: '[T]he main thing is that any citizen anywhere in Ukraine could use our resource to ensure their own safety and the safety of their relatives and friends.' While claiming that Myrotvorets does not endorse the physical harm of people listed on the site, and that the information is for official use only, Zaitsev has stated that appearing on the list can lead to blackmail, eviction, unemployment, bank account closure, and credit blacklisting. None of those outcomes is officially endorsed by the Myrotvorets site either.

Myrotvorets sometimes includes among the personal details of each 'suspect' their date of birth and a corresponding entry titled 'Date of liquidation' – which is left enticingly blank until the subject's death.

Sometimes, the death of a subject is recorded by marking the word 'Eliminated' across their photograph, which serves as a grim memorial when the record could have simply been deleted instead. The formal database of suspects is called 'Purgatory' by the staff, on the basis that 'According to some Christian religions, the souls of sinners stay in purgatory before going to heaven, in Islam it is the space between hell and heaven'. Death is implicit in the name 'Purgatory', and the staff – consciously or not – are playing God. The website is therefore deliberately intimidating on a symbolic as well as a literal level, the more so since Ukraine is a widely devout Eastern Orthodox Christian nation. Zaitsev himself said: 'Our "weapon" serves to make normal people feel safe, while the enemy trembles in fear.' One elected councillor wrote pleadingly for Myrotvorets to delete her 'Purgatory' listing, saying 'you are not a judge, and posting my data can be life-threatening'. Zaitsev brushed it off dismissively: 'If we forget about people like her, the danger to our lives will be real for all of us.'¹³

The Myrotvorets website's underlying links to Ukraine's government and its deep state apparatus cannot be seriously doubted. The site's main organiser admitted in 2015 that during the creation of the website, 'communication was established with security forces at all levels: from operatives to deputy heads of



The emblem of the Myrotvorets website

¹³ *Faktyi*, 4 November 2014. See <<https://shorturl.at/dhtET>> or <<https://fakty.ua/208139-roman-zajcev-dlya-kremlya-my-kost-v-gorle-ogromnye-sily-i-resursy-brosheny-na-nashe-unichtozhenie>> (source in Ukrainian).

relevant ministries and departments'. During Ukraine's 2019 presidential election, candidate Volodymyr Zelensky's wife Olena was placed on the list as a threat to state security, seemingly on the basis that she had unwittingly shared a piece of Russian propaganda on Facebook. As soon as Zelensky won the election and became president, Olena's entry disappeared from the website. While the Myrotvorets website's staff remain unidentified, one of its official co-founders was Ukrainian politician Anton Gerashchenko, who really served as the public relations face of Myrotvorets.

Roman Zaitsev has stated that the creation of the Myrotvorets website was at an advanced stage well before Gerashchenko became involved:

In June-July [2014], we worked closely on the development of the technical component. And by the end of 2014, help unexpectedly arrived. Not demanding anything in return, Anton Gerashchenko and Georgy Tuka¹⁴ [. . .] covered us on the information front, switching the negativity to themselves. We are very grateful to them for this.

When the Myrotvorets website was officially launched, Anton Gerashchenko (born 1979) had been an elected People's Deputy in Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, for less than a month. Gerashchenko did not seek re-election in 2019. And yet President Zelensky still appointed him as a deputy minister in the Ministry of Internal Affairs (hereinafter, MOIA), roughly analogous to the UK government's Home Office. Throughout this period, and beyond, Gerashchenko remained openly affiliated with the website. Thus, it is true to state that Myrotvorets has been endorsed by the Zelensky government.



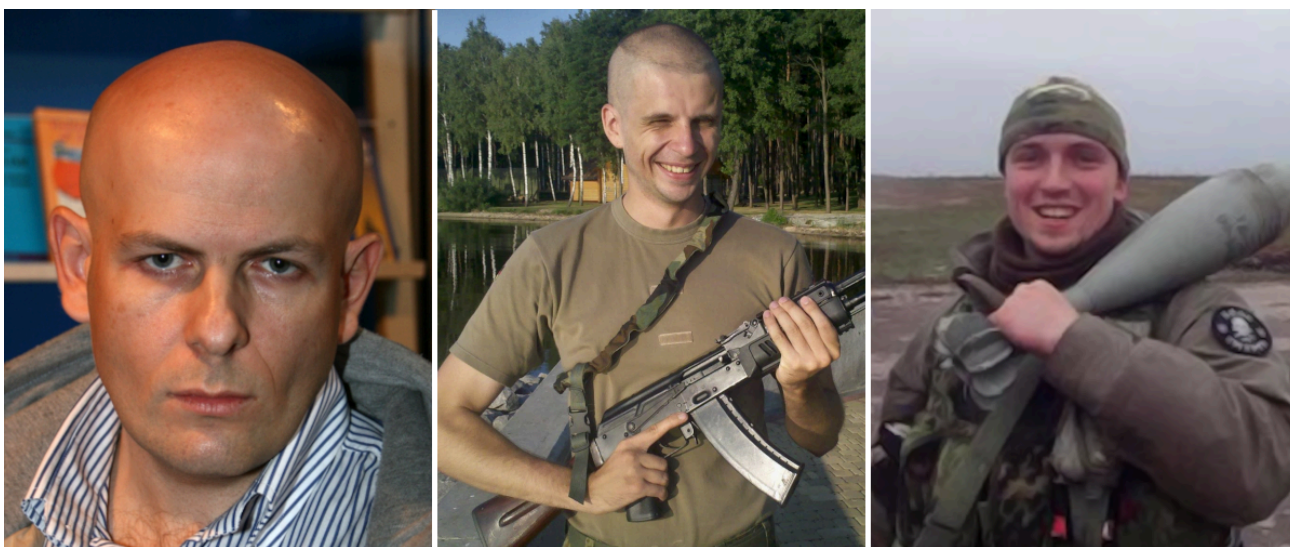
Anton Geraschenko
(Credit: News UTR)

On 15 April 2015, a few months after the official launch of the Myrotvorets site, former People's Deputy Oleh Kalashnikov was shot dead at his home. The following day, Ukrainian journalist Oles Buzina was shot dead in the courtyard of the apartment block where he lived.

Both men had appeared on the Myrotvorets Purgatory list shortly before their deaths. (Both killings are discussed further, below.) Zaitsev acknowledges

¹⁴ A Ukrainian activist and crucial organiser of anti-Yanukovich demonstrations during the Madian revolution. In 2015, Tuka was rewarded with the governorship of the breakaway Donetsk oblast, which in practice meant organising local efforts to retake the region. Strangely, Tuka also claims to have taken part in the 2011 Egyptian revolution, during the so-called Arab Spring. *Left Bank*, 3 January 2015. See https://lb.ua/society/2015/01/03/291256_georgiy_tuka_dazhe_stal.html (source in Ukrainian).

the correlative link between his website and Kalashnikov's death, for which no suspect has ever been identified. But Zaitsev also claims that Myrotvorets falsified a record after Buzina's death to make it look like he had been on the list before he was killed. The purpose, Zaitsev stated, was to create a trap by drawing scandalised visitors to the site, which had enabled the Myrotvorets staff to capture data to identify other pro-Russian suspects. In reality, Zaitsev's triumphant dissembling in November 2015 served to distance the Myrotvorets site from the arrests, earlier that year, of the two men believed to have murdered Buzina. They were Andriy Medvedko and Denys Polishchuk, each of whom had government connections that matched those of the Myrotvorets team.



*Left to right: Oles Buzina; Andriy Medvedko; Denys Polishchuk.
Photo credits: Lviv Publishers Forum (Buzina) and Facebook (Medvedko and Polishchuk)*

Andriy Medvedko (born 1989) was an officer in the MOIA's Kyiv-2 police regiment, a volunteer force formed during the Maidan revolution in 2013,¹⁵ that later fought against pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas region.¹⁶ Denys Polishchuk (born 1990) was also a veteran of the Donbas conflict, and both men were paid-up members of the neo-Nazi terrorist group Sich-14.¹⁷ Sich-14 is

¹⁵ For simplicity's sake, this essay uses the term 'Maidan' to denote the popular uprisings in Ukraine that began in November 2013. The term 'coup' is used to denote the climax of the uprisings, i.e. the US-backed overthrow of Ukraine's President Yanukovich in February 2014.

¹⁶ The word 'Donbas' denotes Ukraine's south-eastern oblasts of Donetsk and Lugansk, and to a lesser extent the Kharkiv oblast slightly north of the two. The word is a contraction of 'Donetsk Corner Basin', a geographical depression around the Ukrainian stretch of the River Don. (Донецький вугільний басейн, or in the Roman alphabet, 'Donetskyi vuhilnyi basein'.)

¹⁷ Sometimes given as C14. The Ukrainian Cyrillic letter C corresponds to the Western Roman letter S, the initial of the word 'січ' (English: 'Sich') which in Ukrainian history denoted any Cossack-controlled area.

known to have worked as a cut-out for Ukraine's security service, the SBU, performing violent operations that are excluded from the SBU's statutory duties. In 2017 the leader of Sich-14, Yevhen Karas, openly discussed his gang's cooperation with the SBU.¹⁸ This was confirmed in 2019 by an SBU officer of 10 years, Ivan Stupak, who stated:

There was always the idea of a fix – to take covert control over any public organization that has a power block. At certain stages, the SBU involved its operational contacts, that is, they found certain common points of view with the leaders of 'C14' and directed them to solve certain operational tasks. Searching and identifying separatists whom the SBU cannot detain for certain legislative reasons – and if a public organization is sent, it can smash a car and cause bodily harm.¹⁹

Gonzalo Lira believed that the Myrotvorets list is 'an American op', pointing out that the website's front page carried a statement that the site is partly managed from Langley, Virginia. As Lira said: 'You know who else is based in Langley? There you go.'²⁰

So basically, it's the US government who wants to unperson me. And . . . you know, maybe they just want to unperson me so I'll shut up. Or maybe they want to do something worse . . . You know. Whatever their objective is, this [Myrotvorets website] is the means that they're doing it. [sic]

Lira's deductions looked dubious at the time. The staff of the Myrotvorets website evidently share a dark sense of humour, because the administrators use online noms-de-plume such as 'Nato', 'MI5', and 'NSA'. There was no reason to presume that the reference to Langley, Virginia, had any real-world significance.

But six weeks after Lira's death, the CIA admitted that it been operating in Ukraine, hand-in-hand with the Ukrainian security and intelligence services, for at least a decade. The relationship had started under US president Barack Obama, apparently within days of the US-backed coup that toppled Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014. Valentyn Nalyvaichenko, then-director of Ukraine's SBU, claims to have invited British and American intelligence to rebuild Ukraine's intelligence capabilities. Nalyvaichenko claimed that this was necessary because the departing Yanukovich regime had executed

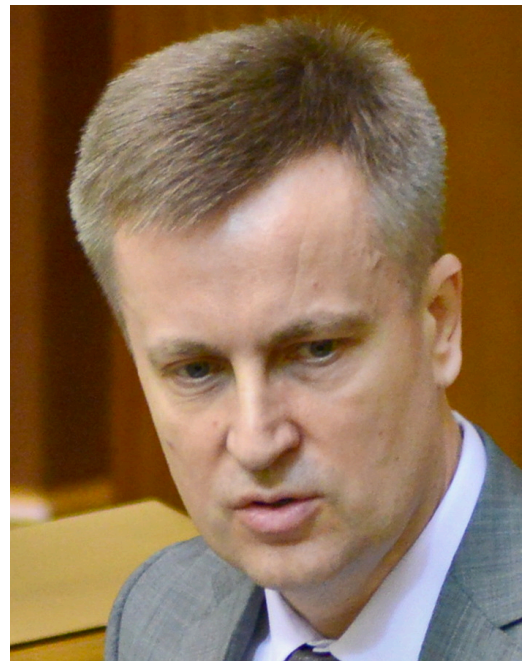
¹⁸ *Liga*, 15 November 2017. See <<https://shorturl.at/egFW6>> or <https://news.liga.net/politics/interview/s14_kto_oni_i_pochemu_im_pozvoleno_bit_lyudey> (source in Russian).

¹⁹ *Radio Svoboda*, 21 March 2019.

See <<https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/schemes/29834770.html>> (source in Ukrainian).

²⁰ Lira, 19 September 2022. See note 1 above. Commencing at 40m 43s.

a 'scorched earth' policy on Ukraine's state security systems, burning files and wrecking computer networks. The Myrotvorets website had been launched just a few months after the British and Americans set up shop in Ukraine. Whether or not Nalyvaichenko's alibi was true, the foothold in Ukraine was inviting to British and US intelligence because it offered a ready-made outpost on the Russo-Ukrainian border, as well as a steady supply of Ukrainian operatives who were anti-Russian but understood Russia's language and culture. The foothold ultimately became a stronghold, with at least 12 permanent CIA bases in Ukraine, and CIA training for Ukrainian commandos. Predictably, this gave Ukraine a strong assassination capability, which was duly deployed and killed several Russian military figures. Equally predictably, the US did not lift a finger to intervene.²¹



Valentyn Nalyvaichenko
(Photo: Vadim Chuprina)

In fact, Nalyvaichenko had been accused a decade earlier of being a CIA agent and of keeping a whole storey of the SBU headquarters for the use of CIA employees. Nalyvaichenko was alleged to have begun work for the CIA during a diplomatic posting to the Ukrainian Embassy in Washington DC. The source for these assertions had been SBU chief during the Yanukovich presidency, and his remarks were made to Russian media in 2014, weeks after Yanukovich had been overthrown, which is probably why this revelation was overlooked in the west.²²

So, although he had no proof at the time, Gonzalo Lira's fears about the significance of his own appearance on the Myrotvorets Purgatory list reflected the parapolitical realities of Ukraine. Moreover, the city of Kharkiv, where Lira resided, has a notorious history of organised crime and far-right domestic terrorism, up to and including numerous political murders.

II: 'Warning actions'

The Kyiv regime. I'm telling you right now. These people are neo-fascists, neo-Nazis. You say to me 'Well, how's that possible? You know,

²¹ *New York Times*, 25 February 2024. See <<https://shorturl.at/lpMZ4>> or <<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/25/world/europe/cia-ukraine-intelligence-russia-war.html>>.

²² *Vesti*, 14 April 2014. See <<https://www.vesti.ru/article/1805168>> (source in Russian).

because Zelensky's Jewish. I mean, he would never ally himself with neo-Nazis.' No, dude [. . .] They hate Russians, OK, so if they need some Jewish guy to pretend to be president – because he's not actually the president, he's not actually the leader in the things that really matter, right [. . .] They don't care, they just want to kill Russians because they hate Russians.²³

At the time of Anton Gerashchenko's posting to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in November 2014, the Minister himself was Arsen Avakov, who had been in office since the February 2014 coup.²⁴ As Minister for Internal Affairs, Avakov (born 1964) was directly in charge of the country's National Guard, National Police, State Border Service, State Migration Service, and State Service for Emergency Situations, which together amounted to nearly a quarter of a million state employees. He had attained this powerful and seemingly permanent position in the Ukrainian government by years of machination and manoeuvring, working his way up the system with the help of political and paramilitary allies, whom he consistently rewarded by abusing his new powers each time. A local businessman who had become very wealthy from post-Soviet privatisations of Ukraine's state industries, Avakov had entered politics in 2002 as a city councillor in Kharkiv, the principal settlement in the eponymous oblast of eastern Ukraine.²⁵ As a councillor, Avakov carried favour with presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko (a non-partisan independent) in 2004, and was seemingly rewarded in 2005 with the post of governor of Kharkiv oblast. When it became clear in 2010 that Yushchenko would not win re-election as president, Avakov sided instead with Yushchenko's rival Yulia Tymoshenko of the All-



Arsen Avakov
(Credit: National Guard of Ukraine)

²³ Gonzalo Lira, 'The Ukraine Conflict - A Primer', YouTube, 31 January 2023. See <https://youtu.be/loVtI_7xRHw> commencing at 47m 57s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/2023.01.31-the-ukraine-conflict-a-primer>>.

²⁴ Thus having already served under two presidents and six prime ministers by the time Zelensky was elected in 2019. Zelensky eventually dismissed Avakov in 2021 for undisclosed reasons.

²⁵ There is no direct English-language equivalent of *Oblast*. A Ukrainian oblast is a sharply-defined area that can be considered in similar terms to a UK county or a US state. Today, Ukraine comprises 24 oblasts and, confusingly, each oblast has the same name as its own principal city.

Ukrainian Union Fatherland Party.

Unfortunately for Avakov, Tymoshenko was defeated by Viktor Yanukovich, of the Party of Regions. Avakov then resigned as governor of Kharkiv oblast, citing his ideological objections to the Party of Regions' pro-Russia stance. It may have been a case of 'jumping before he was pushed', because Avakov was soon placed under criminal investigation for illegal land transfers performed during his time as governor of Kharkiv. Avakov fled to self-imposed exile in Italy, but was put on the Interpol wanted list and ended up having to fight lengthy cases against extradition.²⁶ While still trapped in Italy, Avakov ran for



Andriy Biletsky
(Credit: My News 24)

election, *in absentia*, as a member of the Ukrainian parliament. He won his seat and was therefore able to return to his homeland completely unchallenged, because as an elected People's Deputy he had automatically acquired parliamentary immunity.

Avakov is a friend of Ukrainian neo-Nazi Andriy Biletsky, the founder of the Azov Regiment, both men having been significant players in the local politics of Kharkiv. During Avakov's time as governor of Kharkiv Oblast, Biletsky had led an ultra-right wing paramilitary called Patriot

of Ukraine, headquartered in Kharkiv city. Patriot of Ukraine was originally the youth branch and recruitment pool for the Social Nationalist Party of Ukraine (SNPU), which as the name suggests, was a thinly-disguised front for neo-Nazism.

When the SNPU decided to rebrand as Svoboda in 2004, Patriot of Ukraine was officially disbanded. Andriy Biletsky had belonged to the Kharkiv branch of the SNPU, but renounced his membership when it mutated into Svoboda, and a year later he officially revived Patriot of Ukraine. A few years after that, Biletsky established something called The Social-National Assembly, which was an unashamed attempt to resurrect the pre-Svoboda SNPU. The Patriot of Ukraine youth movement then became affiliated with the Social-National Assembly, and since Biletsky was in charge of both simultaneously, they had effectively merged. It was from this newly-broadened pool of fascists that Biletsky recruited the original volunteer formation of the Azov battalion. The influence of

²⁶ *Kyiv Post*, 21 March 2012. See <<https://shorturl.at/aBS58>> or <<https://archive.kyivpost.com/article/content/ukraine-politics/interpol-puts-ex-governor-of-kharkiv-region-avakov-124658.html>>.

the Patriot of Ukraine organisation²⁷ on Ukrainian party politics has been immense and enduring, even though it has often gone unnoticed.

Kharkiv is a deeply divided oblast. It has a population of around 2.75 million, of whom around half live in Kharkiv city. Some 70 per cent of the city's residents speak Russian, but in the broader oblast outside, 90 per cent of residents speak Ukrainian. Ukraine is still a fundamentally bilingual nation and, while language is an unreliable guide to ethnic identity, linguistic preference strongly influences cultural tastes. Russophone Kharkivites are more likely to rely on Russian media, which is in good supply in the oblast because it shares a land border with the Russian Federation.²⁸ This linguistic bias in turn means widespread absorption of pro-Russian media narratives.

When the oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk attempted to secede from Ukraine in March 2014, a similar uprising took place in Kharkiv. Separatists managed to seize control of some government offices in Kharkiv city, but the rebellion was quickly suppressed. With the formal government in disarray at the time, the oblast's far-right gangs and paramilitaries, including those led by Andriy Biletsky, played the decisive role in quashing the insurrection.

In 2010, Arsen Avakov ran for election as Kharkiv city mayor, but was defeated by Hennedi Kernes, a local business rival. The election was accompanied by widespread accusations of vote fraud, and the result was hotly contested. Electoral fraud is so commonplace in Ukraine that there is a nationally-known slang term for it – 'Buckwheat' – derived from the historical practice of buying votes with bags of grain.²⁹ Exit polls showed Avakov beating Kernes, by 34.7 per cent against 30.9 per cent, but the outcome was a shock Kernes victory, with 30.09 per cent of the vote against Avakov's 29.49 per cent, a margin of 0.6 percentage



²⁷ Encompassing its original incarnation as the SNPU's youth wing and its post-SNPU revival under Biletsky's leadership.

²⁸ The city of Kharkiv is just 40 km from the Ukrainian border, and closer to Moscow (648 km away) than London is to Inverness (714 km).

²⁹ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 22 October 2014. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2014/10/22/7041578/>> (source in Russian).

points.³⁰ This dubious election intensified the two opponents' mutual resentment and hostility, which was already considerable.

Hennedi Kernes – a convicted fraudster – was himself no stranger to organised crime. He covertly employed *Titushki*, gangs of paid agitators and agents provocateurs masquerading as football hooligans, to cause trouble and persecute his rivals. Unlike Avakov, Kernes was an ardent supporter of Ukraine's pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich, who had helped finance Kernes's campaign to become Kharkiv city mayor. This left Kernes in a politically-vulnerable position when Yanukovich was ousted in the US-orchestrated coup of February 2014. Simultaneously, Kernes's opponent, Arsen Avakov, suddenly entered the post-putsch government as Minister of the Interior. The sudden reversal of the power balance between the two men seems to have coincided with something of a blood feud in Kharkiv city.

In March 2014, just weeks after the coup, Hennedi Kernes was arrested for his alleged complicity in the abduction and torture of anti-Yanukovic protestors.³¹ The same month, Arsen Avakov's former deputy governor, Vasily Tretetsky, was attacked in Kharkiv and fatally beaten and shot by unidentified assailants.³² The following month, Hennedi Kernes (at liberty, on pre-trial bail) was shot in the back while out jogging, and only narrowly survived.³³ The criminal case against Kernes was dropped in July the same year because his injuries were so severe that his medical treatment was still ongoing.³⁴ The would-be assassin has never been identified, but suspicions abounded at the time that it was Andriy Biletsky or (less improbably) an associate.³⁵ Biletsky himself has never categorically denied accusations of involvement in the Kernes

³⁰ *Television News Service (TSN)*, 4 November 2010. See <<http://ru.tsn.ua/ukrayina/oficialno-kernes-pobedil-na-vyborah-mera-harkova.html>> (page deleted, archive only, source in Russian).

³¹ NAH News, 19 March 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/3u6xrt8a>> or <<http://nahnews.com.ua/the-interrogation-of-kernes-will-be-held-in-the-prosecutor-generals-office/>> (page deleted, archive only).

³² Tretetsky was attacked on 16 March and died in hospital 10 days later. *Segodnya*, 28 March 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/mrymbxa3or>> <<https://ukraine.segodnya.ua/regions/kharkov/v-harkove-poproshchalis-s-ubitym-eks-zamestitelem-gubernatora-506035.html>> (source in Russian).

³³ BBC News, 26 April 2014. See <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27185085>>.

³⁴ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 4 July 2014. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2014/07/30/7033419/>> (source in Ukrainian). Kernes had to use a wheelchair for the rest of his life. He eventually died in 2020 from renal failure.

³⁵ Biletsky had been released from prison the previous month, having been convicted in 2013 of involvement in a murder committed in 2011. His premature release was the result of a national amnesty for political prisoners.

shooting but has said it 'sounds somewhat absurd', and remarked dismissively that 'love for conspiracy theories on any occasion is in our blood'.³⁶ A rumour that Avakov had ordered the Kernes shooting still circulates among the city's population, many years later, which if nothing else is a testament to the extraordinary degree of corruption in Kharkiv.

At the time of the Kernes shooting, Avakov had been Minister of the Interior for less than a month. The rivalry with Kernes continued long after Avakov entered government, with one 2015 analysis noting that: 'Kernes retains his influence on the city council, and Avakov controls the local security services', meaning the Kharkiv regional division of the SBU.³⁷ While under criminal investigation, Kernes tried repeatedly to get his case taken from the police (who are controlled by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, MOIA) and passed to the state Prosecutor-General instead. This would have been a fairly routine development in other politically-sensitive cases.



*Avakov confers with SBU chief Valentyn Nalyvaichenko
(Credit: Vadim Chuprina)*

Avakov kept the case against Kernes in the hands of police, and therefore under the control of his executive department. Avakov observed:

Now [Kernes] has chosen the tactics of delaying the trial in court. Probably, he expects that the authorities will change, that he will agree that Avakov will be removed, and the next minister and prosecutor will be more simplistic [. . .] And Kernes will also shout about political persecution. My personal attitude to him is bad, and it is very bad, it is true.³⁸

A member of the main opposition party during the Yanukovich presidency, Avakov had won the approval of the US Department of State by acting as a civilian commander of the Maidan Self-Defence units during the revolutionary uprisings that preceded the February 2014 coup. These self-defence units were squads of supposedly non-military volunteers who fought against state forces

³⁶ *Left Bank*, 10 December 2014. See <https://lb.ua/news/2014/12/10/288683_andrey_biletskiy_polovina_azova.html> (source in Russian).

³⁷ Centre for Eastern Studies, 9 June 2015. See <<https://tinyurl.com/32hcdaew>> or <<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2015-06-09/kharkiv-oblast-a-fragile-stability>>.

³⁸ *Liga*, 28 May 2015. See <<https://tinyurl.com/4m23cams>> or <https://news.liga.net/politics/interview/avakov_ya_za_polnoe_razgranichenie_s_okkupirovannym_donbassom> (source in Russian).

still loyal to President Yanukovich. In reality, as might be expected, these squads mainly consisted of men from the far-right militias and paramilitaries in the Kharkiv oblast, which was still very much Avakov's fiefdom. Although few would have expected that Avakov, as the newly-installed Minister of the Interior, would immediately appoint members of these gangs as his official aides, which is exactly what he did.

Avakov and his principal departmental advisor, Anton Gerashchenko, welcomed Andriy Biletsky and his fighters into the Ministry of Internal Affairs, helped the newly-formed Azov battalion establish its first permanent garrison (in Mariupol), and promoted Azov in government publications.³⁹ In his capacity as Azov commander, Biletsky claimed he only spoke to Avakov ten times a year, a statement which is hard to take seriously given their intertwined careers in Kharkiv,⁴⁰ and the fact that Avakov boasted of planning Azov operations with Biletsky, in person.⁴¹

Azov was just one of the factions that emerged as so-called self-defence forces during the 2013-2014 revolution. Starting in April 2014, most of them were formally turned into what were called 'special purpose battalions' attached to units of the Ukrainian National Guard. In Azov's case, this led to full integration into the National Guard later the same year, a preferment no doubt linked to Arsen Avakov's unofficial patronage and his personal friendship with Andriy Biletsky. In strictly utilitarian terms, the former revolutionary self-defence forces were a welcome augmentation of Ukraine's depleted and understaffed military. From a pragmatic point of view, it was also safer to have these freelance forces under the watchful eye of the post-coup government, since they had already proved themselves ready and able to take direct action against the Ukrainian *systema*.⁴² However, if the Ukrainian state had assumed that adopting these rogue fanatics would effectively de-radicalise and neutralise them, then it had made a miscalculation of what would prove to be a historic magnitude.

Right Sector

The chief entryists to Avakov's ministry were members of a far-right nationalist

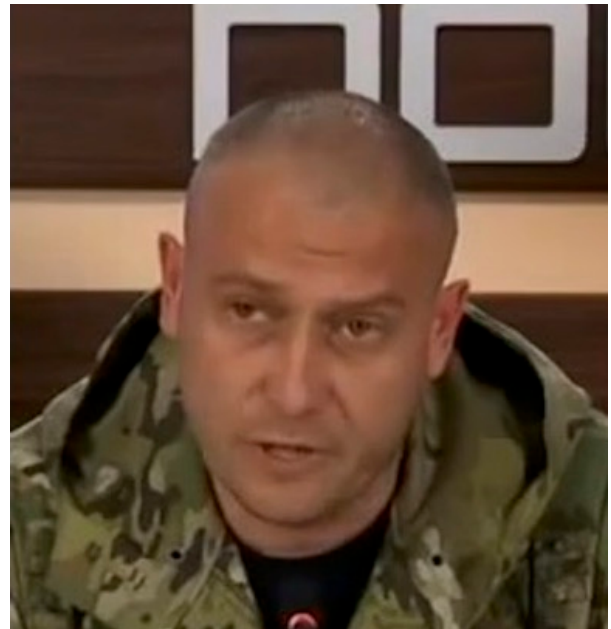
³⁹ *Hromadske*, 13 October 2016. See <<https://tinyurl.com/2jrx54n>> or <<https://hromadske.ua/posts/my-namahaiemosia-pryity-do-vlady-cherez-vybory-khochha-maiemo-vsiaki-mozhlyvosti-iak-azov-staie-partiiei>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁴⁰ *Focus*, 4 October 2016. See <<https://focus.ua/politics/358170>>(source in Russian).

⁴¹ *Liga*, 28 May 2015. See note 38 above.

⁴² A political tactic aptly summarised by US President Lyndon Johnson, who remarked that he was keeping J Edgar Hoover as director of the FBI because 'It's probably better to have him inside the tent pissing out, than outside the tent pissing in.'

militia called Right Sector, led by a man called Dmytro Yarosh (born 1971).⁴³ Right Sector was the only one of the revolutionary defence forces that refused Avakov's invitation to be absorbed into the Ukrainian military, and had demanded access to the Ministry of the Interior itself. Avakov had accepted this, seemingly on the basis that this would both satisfy the group's nationalistic clamouring and assert his own authority on ministry appointees left over from the Yanukovich presidency.



Dmytro Yarosh
(Photo credit: Glavnie Novosti)

What Avakov had actually done was install a revolving door through which other forces from the Ukrainian far right could enter his department almost unchallenged. Avakov cannot have been ignorant of this. As the name suggests, Right Sector is something of an umbrella organisation for Ukrainian ultra-nationalists to combine their forces as circumstances demand. Given the range of ideologies among the country's far-right, to say nothing of their factional infighting, this means that the organisation is extremely amorphous, with coalition partners and individual members coming and going as their interests coincide and diverge. There is no Right Sector as such, just an undifferentiated mass of activists operating under one name at any given time.

The cases of Andriy Medvedko and Denis Polishchuk, the men who murdered Oles Buzina (see page 8 above), provide a frozen snapshot of this constantly mutating political front. While both men were in the neo-Nazi Sich-14 gang, it had briefly merged with Right Sector.⁴⁴ Additionally, Polishchuk had been (and by some accounts, still was) a member of UNSO (Ukrainian People's Self-Defence),⁴⁵ yet another far-right paramilitary that was subsumed into Right Sector – which, in UNSO's case, happened a month after the Buzina

⁴³ *Left Bank*, 22 February 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/y7a7dx4j>> or <https://lb.ua/news/2014/02/22/256650_rukovodyashchiy_sostav_mvd_voydut_chleni.html>(source in Russian).

⁴⁴ Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, 12 February 2018. See <<https://khpg.org/en/1518396244>>.

⁴⁵ UNIAN News Agency, 18 June 2015. See <<https://tinyurl.com/469mbujp>> or <<https://www.unian.info/politics/1091183-polischuk-accused-of-journalist-buzynas-murder-detained-for-two-months.html>>.

murder.⁴⁶

Medvedko and Polishchuk were charged with murdering Buzina, on evidence that included multiple eyewitness accounts, CCTV footage, and DNA matches. But both murderers got away scot-free. The presiding judge recused himself, court hearings were repeatedly postponed, and the bail conditions of the suspects were progressively relaxed, until the trial itself was quietly abandoned without explanation, never reaching a verdict. Medvedko and Polishchuk remain at liberty in 2024.

Sich-14, the gang to which Medvedko and Polishchuk belong, continues to operate without let or hindrance, especially since it was granted permission by Kyiv city council to form a municipal patrol.⁴⁷ This small-scale mercenary vigilantism means Sich-14's activities are at best downplayed by the police and at worst sometimes assisted.⁴⁸

With regard to the inexplicable failure to prosecute Medvedko and Polishchuk, UNESCO noted in 2022 that 'On November 4, 2015, the criminal proceeding investigation [against Medvedko and Polishchuk] was transferred to the Kyiv City Prosecutor's Office for further and [sic] was not returned to the pre-trial investigation bodies of the National Police of Ukraine.'⁴⁹

The Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group (a humanitarian NGO in Ukraine) was approached for its opinion on the cases of Medvedko and Polishchuk. A spokesman replied:

We will not give you any comments on this. In fact, we consider this a provocation from your side. Your intentions are very clear for me, and I'm not going to help you fucking around with this.

Right Sector's deliberate formlessness is a calculated way of overcoming the



*Andriy Medvedko - election flier
(Credit :Svoboda)*

⁴⁶ Interfax, 22 May 2014. See <<https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/206070.html>>.

⁴⁷ Reuters, 20 March 2018. See <<https://tinyurl.com/yc5rkbjn>> or <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cohen-ukraine-commentary/commentary-ukraines-neo-nazi-problem-idUSKBN1GV2TY/>>.

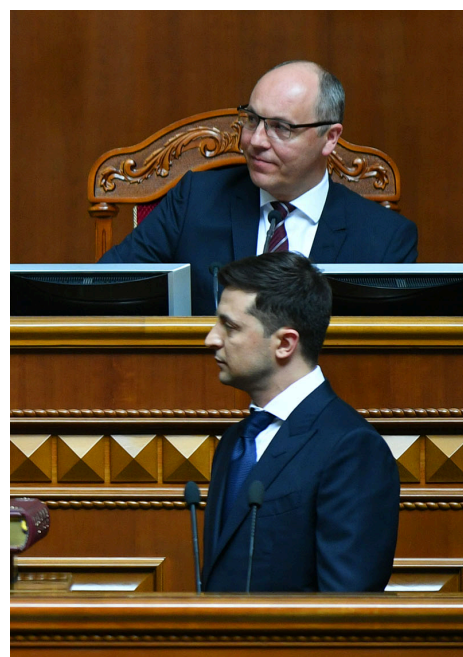
⁴⁸ Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, 13 March 2018. See <<https://khpg.org/en/1520808476>>.

⁴⁹ See <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ukraine_safety_of_journalists_2022.pdf>

lack of cohesion between Ukraine's far-right groups. In mainstream politics this might be called the 'Big Tent' school of thought. For Right Sector's extremist political milieu, the party is a 'Big Camouflage Net'. This meta-party simultaneously frustrates unwelcome observers and defies structural analyses by embracing adhocism instead of bureaucracy.⁵⁰ The never-ending comings and goings mean that Right Sector founder Dmytro Yarosh is one of a small number of unchanging faces in the party's leadership.

According to Yarosh himself, Right Sector had recruited 'retired officers, generals of the interior ministry and security agencies' during the February 2014 coup. In March 2014 (barely a fortnight after the overthrow of Yanukovich), he stated: 'We [Right Sector] are coordinating our actions with the council of the National Security and Defense, as well as with the army's General Headquarters.'⁵¹ Later that month, Yarosh was proposed as Deputy Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council (NSDC) in Ukraine's first US-assembled coalition government. He turned it down, reportedly saying that he considered it beneath him. The implication was that Yarosh wanted the position of Secretary, rather than Deputy Secretary.

The NSDC is the Ukrainian presidency's interface with the state's various security and intelligence agencies. The first NSDC secretary appointed after the February 2014 coup – and thus Yarosh's prospective superior – was yet another alumnus of Patriot of Ukraine, and perhaps the most important alumnus. Andriy Parubiy (born 1971) had been one of the founders of the crypto-Nazi front, the defunct SNPU (see page 12 above). He had personally overseen the SNPU's paramilitary youth movement, in its original pre-2004 formation.⁵²



Parubiy presides over the 2019 inauguration of President Zelensky
(Credit: Pulse News)

⁵⁰ Per *Encyclopedia Britannica*: 'Adhocism: an organizational design whose structure is highly flexible, loosely coupled, and amenable to frequent change.'

⁵¹ *Newsweek*, 21 March 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/7eunbdck>> or <<https://www.newsweek.com/2014/03/21/dmitry-yarosh-man-who-claims-victory-ukrainian-revolution-speaks-247987.html>>.

⁵² Artem Iovenko, 'The ideology and development of the Social-National Party of Ukraine, and its transformation into the All-Ukrainian Union "Freedom", in 1990–2004', in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2/3, 2015, p. 230. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48610450>> (not archived).

Parubiy resigned as NSDC secretary in August 2014, for reasons that have never been disclosed. It may have been connected to the fact that Right Sector was becoming increasingly strident about the slow progress of clearing out the Yanukovich 'old guard' from within the Ukrainian government. Dmytro Yarosh publicly accused elements within the halls of power of fomenting an 'internal counterrevolution'.

He did not identify these subversive elements, but pointed an accusatory finger at 'the Interior Ministry, including those at the highest posts'.⁵³

Lustration lawlessness

Some of Right Sector's concerns were assuaged by the Lustration Law – a legislative purge of Yanukovich-era politicians and officials – that was adopted by Ukraine's parliament on 16 September 2014. Its enactment was delayed by political infighting. The law had to be voted on three times in the same parliamentary day before it could be passed, due to the constitutional problem presented by the fact that the text of the proposed law itself had not been finished. The law then fell into a procedural void while the final draft was prepared, meaning a further delay between its passage and being signed into effect by then-president Petro Poroshenko in mid-October.⁵⁴

The Lustration Law had been preceded by the passage of a post-coup law that attempted to remove judges from office if they had upheld various decisions made by the ousted Yanukovich government. This had aroused the alarm and condemnation of international observers, who understandably regarded the new law as an attack on the independence of Ukraine's court system.⁵⁵

In the lull after the Lustration Law was passed in September, Right Sector began assaulting politicians they believed to be corrupt and pro-Russian, and humiliating them by posting the results on social media. The principal phase of Right Sector's attacks was called the Trash Bucket Challenge. The name was an allusion to an existing online craze at that time called the Ice Bucket Challenge, in which people were dared to have a bucket of icy water poured over them and then publish a video of the event. The aim of the Ice Bucket Challenge was to raise money for medical research. Right Sector's Trash Bucket Challenge was

⁵³ *Euromaidan Press*, 17 August 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/yc7bhcz>> or <<https://euromaidanpress.com/2014/08/17/letter-to-the-president-of-ukraine-from-the-right-sector-military-political-movement/>>.

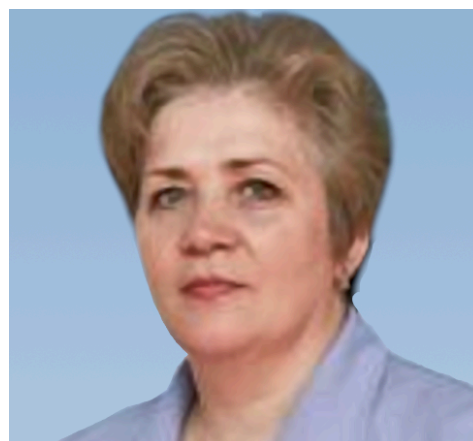
⁵⁴ Centre for Eastern Studies, 1 October 2014. See <<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-10-01/ukrainian-lustration-act>>.

⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch, 9 April 2014. See <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/04/09/ukraine-new-law-violates-judicial-independence>>.

less charitable. It was intended to apply pressure on the Poroshenko government to hurry up and introduce the Lustration Law, to purge Ukrainian society of perceived Russian influences. Politicians and officials were filmed and photographed as they were attacked and then thrown into the nearest municipal rubbish dumpster, sometimes suffering more serious assaults in the process. Many of the victims were People's Deputies, who served in Ukraine's parliament at the time.

On 16 September 2014 – the day the Lustration Law was passed – 59 year-old politician Vitaly Zhuravsk was mobbed and thrown into a pile of rubbish.⁵⁶ On 26 September, Viktor Pylypyshyn (53) was attacked and beaten while trying to re-register as a parliamentary candidate. His attackers also poured red paint over him, and he was then thrown into a waste receptacle.⁵⁷ A fortnight later, another deputy, Nestor Shufrych (47), was mobbed and beaten and his face daubed with green paint, but he managed to escape to his van parked nearby. Shufrych's injuries required a hospital stay for treatment, but he was cognisant of the fact that it could have been much worse: his attackers had shouted 'Let's finish the scum off!'⁵⁸

The previous month, the former head of the State Property Fund⁵⁹ had been found dead. Valentyna Semenyuk-Samsonenko (57) had been shot in the head with a rifle registered to her husband (or, in some reports, to her son-in-law), at some point on the evening of 27 August.⁶⁰



Valentyna Semenyuk-Samsonenko

Earlier, in June, Semenyuk-Samsonenko had been attacked by a pair of

⁵⁶ *Reuters*, 16 September 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/2evdsu82>> or <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-lawmaker/protesters-throw-ukrainian-lawmaker-in-trash-idUKKBN0HB1YV20140916/>>. Archived at <<https://archive.ph/QcU3K>>.

⁵⁷ *Kyiv Post*, 26 September 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/dfkt5e43>> or <<https://archive.kyivpost.com/article/content/reform-watch/frustrated-over-lack-of-justice-ukrainians-throw-officials-to-trash-video-366120.html>>.

⁵⁸ *Reuters*, 30 September 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/43d3ceb9>> or <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-lawmaker/deputy-of-ousted-ukraine-leader-beaten-by-mob-in-odessa-idUSKCN0HP1QM20140930/>>.

⁵⁹ An executive agency of the Ukrainian government, the purpose of which is to administer the income derived from privatisations of state assets.

⁶⁰ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 28 August 2014 See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2014/08/27/7035985/>> (source in Ukrainian).

camouflage-clad masked men, while visiting the presidential administration in Kyiv. That attack required hospital treatment and left her with prolonged nervous tension and depression, but for some reason she refused to report her assault to the police.⁶¹ After recovering, she was offered a new job by an old political acquaintance.⁶² In July, she had also spoken out about the unsolved murder of a town mayor, whom she believed had got on the wrong side of the infamous oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky.⁶³

On the day Semenyuk-Samsonenko died, she was preparing to meet President Poroshenko to discuss what she thought had been illegal privatisations of some state industries. Her brother claimed she had been receiving anonymous threats. No-one who knew her believed Semenyuk-Samonsenko had killed herself.⁶⁴

In all, a dozen Ukrainian parliamentarians, councillors, and civil servants were attacked during the Trash Bucket Challenge, in the fortnight after the September passage of the Lustration Law. A clear indication of state acquiescence (or perhaps even complicity) is the fact that no police investigations were launched, and none of the attackers was ever arrested for what Right Sector referred to as 'people's lustration'.

With the Lustration Law still held up in legislative limbo at the time, a Right Sector spokesman told the *Kyiv Post* that the attacks were intended to intimidate perceived pro-Russian candidates into withdrawing from the forthcoming parliamentary elections, and that anyone who withstood the intimidation would suffer the consequences:

Right Sector said in the very beginning that we are going to fight these bastards. *These are just the warning actions.* We are just warning them – Pylypyshyn, Shufrych and other bastards that they should not be

⁶¹ *Vesti*, 19 June 2014. See

<<http://vesti-ukr.com/kiiev/57439-valentinu-semenjuk-izbili-neizvestnye-v-maskah>> (page deleted, archive only, source in Russian).

⁶² *Vesti*, 28 August 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/2trnd3h3>> or <<http://vesti-ukr.com/strana/67230-nakanune-tragedii-semenjuk-vozili-k-psihiatru-s-depressiej>> (page deleted, archive only, source in Russian).

⁶³ The mayor, Oleg Babayev, was shot dead in front of his house by a man with a silenced pistol. *Reuters*, 26 July 2014. See <<https://shorturl.at/5VF3n>> or <<https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-ukraine-crisis-mayor-idCAKBN0FV08820140726/>>.

For more on Ihor Kolomoisky, see 'Volodymyr Zelensky and the breadbasket-case of Europe' in *Lobster* 87.

⁶⁴ *Vesti*, 29 August 2014. See

<<http://vesti-ukr.com/strana/67372-tajna-smerti-valentiny-semenjuk>>. (Page deleted, archive only, source in Russian.)

candidates. *If they don't listen to us we will do it another way.*⁶⁵
(Emphases added.)

As a consequence of the 'people's lustration' thuggery conducted by Right Sector, international election observers reported that the October 2014 parliamentary elections were not 'free and fair'.⁶⁶ Azov Battalion founder Andriy Biletsky won a parliamentary seat as an elected People's Deputy, his first and to date last engagement with democratic processes. Right Sector's founder Dmytro Yarosh was also elected to parliament for the first time, which was a tacit endorsement of his paramilitary's pro-lustration attacks. Yarosh's new position allowed him to exercise a degree of formal influence on the Poroshenko government, in addition to Right Sector's covert penetration of the government implemented by Arsen Avakov earlier that year (discussed on page 15).

Yarosh was not a complete parliamentary novice. He had served a sort of 'apprenticeship' as parliamentary aide-de-camp to Valentyn Nalyvaichenko, who was an elected deputy in 2012. By the time Yarosh entered parliament in his own right in 2014, Nalyvaichenko had become chief of the security service, the SBU, this relationship being the crucial node in the connections between Ukraine's far-right militias and the state's intelligence apparatus (see page 10 above).⁶⁷ The possibility therefore exists that Yarosh was also in some form of indirect communication with the US Central Intelligence Agency (see page 10 above). His connections may be one of the reasons that Yarosh was inexplicably offered the role of SBU chief in the first post-coup government of 2014, although the proposal came to nothing for equally unclear reasons.⁶⁸

III. The Ministry and the murderers

Killing me would be the least of it. I have seen videos of them carrying

⁶⁵ *Kyiv Post*, 30 September 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/268mz37z>> or <<https://archive.kyivpost.com/article/content/oct-26-parliamentary-election/right-sector-brutalizes-shufrych-in-odesa-promises-new-attacks-366467.html>>.

⁶⁶ European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations, *Ukraine: Early Parliamentary Elections, Final Report*, 26 October 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/3z4c7txd>> or <<https://enemo.org/storage/uploads/OJ7P8IYVP3dq80qMLxAHThXtNO3hBkCr6rUHKbov.pdf>>.

⁶⁷ Serhiy Kudelia, 'When Numbers Are Not Enough: The Strategic Use of Violence in Ukraine's 2014 Revolution', *Comparative Politics*, vol. 50, no. 4, (2018) p. 512. See <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26532701>> (not archived).

⁶⁸ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 1 April 2014. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/articles/2014/04/1/7020952/>> (source in Ukrainian).

NB that this article was written by Mustafa Nayem, one of the principal instigators of the Ukrainian revolution in 2013. For more on this, see 'Volodymyr Zelensky and the Breadbasket-case of Europe', in *Lobster* 87.

out the most grotesque tortures, the most grotesque murders [. . .] You have to understand that when you support Zelensky, you are supporting actual neo-Nazis. Actual fascists. Actual torturers. Murderers. Thieves. Thugs. And don't give me this stuff, that 'Oh, you're a Putin apologist, then!' – 'Oh, you're against Zelensky so you must be a Putin apologist!'– Fuck you.⁶⁹

Some western observers have used Right Sector's meagre parliamentary showing to argue that there is little support in Ukraine for far-right militias. However, such notions fail to distinguish between political and popular will.⁷⁰ Opinion polling in Ukraine in December 2014 (so, two months after Yarosh and Biletsky had entered parliament, discussed on page 23 above) showed that, in aggregate, the country's volunteer battalions were regarded as the 'military-patriotic elite' by 30 per cent of the population. 25 per cent of those polled believed that the then-ongoing absorption of these paramilitaries would strengthen the Ukrainian state military.⁷¹

The far-right Ukrainian nationalists had achieved their goal by default, when the Soviet Union collapsed and Ukraine became independent. This reduced the far-right's electoral appeal at precisely the moment they were able to seek political representation for the first time, because 'they were unable to provide an adequate agenda for society in response to changing circumstances'.⁷²

The same activists and militias had fought on a side that was contrary to their own agenda in 2014: Yanukovich had been overthrown primarily because of his decision to pivot the country away from the European Union. Ukraine's ultra-nationalists had eagerly helped topple the rogue president, but – like Yanukovich himself – they were also (and almost by self-definition) vehemently opposed to being integrated into the EU. Any alliance with western Europe

⁶⁹ Gonzalo Lira, 'Who Is Zelensky? A Puppet—and Here's Why', YouTube.com, 05 March 2022. See <<https://youtu.be/j7NTLZDd4tc>> commencing at 9m 41s. Archived at <<https://archive.org/details/gonzalo-lira-05-march-2022>>.

⁷⁰ Without implying any ideological comparison, an analogous mistake might be to claim that Nigel Farage had nothing to do with Brexit, because he was first elected as an MP eight years after the UK voted to leave the EU.

⁷¹ Cited by Huseyn Aliyev, in 'Strong militias, weak states and armed violence: Towards a Theory of "State-Parallel" Paramilitaries', *Security Dialogue*, vol. 47, no. 6, (2016), p. 512. See <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26293810>> (not archived).

⁷² Vyacheslav Likhachev. 'The "Right Sector" and Others: the behavior and role of radical nationalists in the Ukrainian political crisis of late 2013 – early 2014', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2/3, 2015, p. 258. See <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48610452>> (not archived).



Right Sector - Maidan Revolution, Kiev, 13 April 2014 (Credit: Aimaina Khikari)

and America could therefore only be temporary and discardable.

Azov Battalion deputy commander Oleg Odnorozhenko said: 'There is no cultural, ideological, overall, essential difference between the neo-Soviet project of Putin and the liberal project of the EU.' He added that Azov would acquiesce in foreign assistance for convenience's sake, stating that

[We] have no illusions about the EU, NATO and other euroatlantic international structures. Our attitude to them is quite critical and negative. However, at the same time we understand clear enough what kind of a neighbor in the northern east we have, that is the Russian Federation.⁷³

Right Sector's Dmytro Yarosh told Ukrainian TV News:

We believe that Ukraine should be a subject, not an object of geopolitics. We are in favor of the non-aligned status of the country. [. . .] I emphasize: we offer a variant of the non-aligned status of Ukraine.⁷⁴

Thus, the Ukrainian ultra-nationalists had almost automatically embarked on a new project: having overthrown a pro-Russian president, they would set about purging Ukrainian society of lingering Russian influences. And they would do this with the naïve approval of the western powers.

In November 2014 – just weeks after the parliamentary elections and the climax of Right Sector's Trash Bucket Challenge – Kharkiv businessman and banker Vadim Vishnevsky (53) was fatally shot in the head. Vishnevsky had been a personal friend of Arsen Avakov's rival Hennediy Kernes (see page 14 above), and had also been an aide to Arsen Avakov's successor as governor of

⁷³ Interview with the Ukrainian Traditionalist Club, 9 June 2015. See <<https://uktk.org/azov-reconquista-interview-with-oleg-odnorozhenko-text-photo-video/>>.

⁷⁴ *Interfax*, 19 March 2014. See <<https://ua.interfax.com.ua/news/political/196698.html>> (source in Ukrainian).

Kharkiv.⁷⁵ Anonymous sources told media that Vishnevsky had left a suicide note, but this was never finally verified. Arsen Avakov's advisor at the MOIA, Anton Gerashchenko, told reporters: 'About two months ago, the chairman of the board of [Vishnevsky's] bank left the house for a walk with his dog and disappeared without a trace. It's all very strange. As if someone is sweeping the traces.'⁷⁶

A wave of suspicious deaths then swept through politicians from exiled president Viktor Yanukovich's Party of Regions.



Serhiy Walter

Mykhailo Chechetov

Stanislas Melnyk

On 29 January 2015, the former head of Kharkiv's regional government was found hanged. Alexey Kolesnik's wife was in the house at the time, but neither she nor anyone else could explain why he would have killed himself.⁷⁷ On 25 February, Serhiy Walter, former Mayor of Melitopol in Zaporizhzhia, was also found hanged.⁷⁸ 24 hours later, the deputy chief of Melitopol's police force was found dead in a garage.⁷⁹ The day after that, another former head of

⁷⁵ *Vgorode*, 21 November 2014. See <<https://shorturl.at/fmELO>> or <<https://kh.vgorode.ua/news/sobytyia/243095-druh-pohybsheho-byznesmena-eho-podvely-k-etomu-ubyistvu>> (source in Russian).

⁷⁶ *Korotko*, 23 November 2014. See <<https://kp.ua/kharkov/479211-druhu-dobkyna-pomohly-zastrelytsia>> (source in Russian).

⁷⁷ *Korotko*, 29 January 2015. See <<https://shorturl.at/CR037>> or <<https://kp.ua/incidents/488393-vtoroe-samoubyistvo-chynovnyka-za-nedelui-v-kharkove-povesylsia-eks-hlava-oblsoveta>> (source in Russian).

⁷⁸ *Ukrainian Pravda*, 25 February 2015. See <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2015/02/25/7059689/>> (source in Ukrainian).

⁷⁹ *Ukrinform*, 26 February 2015. See <<https://shorturl.at/fvwEP>> or <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-sports/1819662-city_police_deputy_chief_found_dead_in_melitopol_on_thursday_329372.html>. No cause of death was ever released by investigators.

Ukraine's State Property Fund died. Mykhailo Chechetov (61), had been the immediate successor to Valentyna Semenyuk-Samsonenko (see page 21 above) at the government's privatisation agency. He fell to his death from a 17th storey window of the apartment block where he lived. Interior ministry advisor Anton Gerashchenko was on hand to comment again, and posted on Facebook what he claimed were excerpts from Chechetov's suicide note. Gerashchenko added:

'There's only one question – if Chechetov was brought to suicide by threats during meetings or by phone, made by the people against whom he could testify.'⁸⁰

In March, Ukrainian media reported rumours about 'purges within the Party of Regions'. An 'insider', whose identity was protected by obscuring his face and altering his voice, was interviewed on television and said the action would 'would still cost many lives'.⁸¹

On 10 March 2014, Party of Regions parliamentarian Stanislav Melnyk was found dead in his home, having apparently shot himself with a rifle.⁸² On 12 March, the former governor of the Zaporizhzhia oblast, Oleksandr Peklushenko, was found dead in his home, having been shot through the neck with a rifle.⁸³ Interior Ministry advisor Anton Gerashchenko told television channel 112-Ukraine that there were 'grounds to believe he was driven to suicide'.⁸⁴ Ten days later, regional prosecutor Sergei Melnychuk was found dead on the pavement, outside the apartment block where he lived in Odessa. News media were told that he had committed suicide by jumping from his flat on the



*Oleksandr
Peklushenko*

⁸⁰ *Kyiv Post*, 28 February 2015. See <<https://shorturl.at/yzFQV>> or <<https://archive.kyivpost.com/article/content/ukraine-politics/yanukovychs-ally-commits-suicide-under-house-arrest-382145.html>>.

⁸¹ *Handelsblatt*, 23 March 2015. See <<https://shorturl.at/cmqrB>> or <<https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/international/ukraine-krise-das-raetsel-um-die-toten-des-janukowitsch-clans/11543096.html>> (source in German).

⁸² *Kyiv Post*, 10 March 2014. See <<https://tinyurl.com/3htwveau>> or <<https://archive.kyivpost.com/article/content/ukraine-politics/former-ukrainian-parliamentarian-melnyk-found-dead-in-apparent-suicide-383071.html>>.

⁸³ *Ukrinform*, 12 March 2015. See <<https://tinyurl.com/mpf2zy4d>> or <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-crime/1824530-ex_zaporizhzhia_region_governor_peklushenko_found_dead_329732.html>.

⁸⁴ Cited by *TASS*, 12 March 2015. See <<https://tass.com/world/782399>>. 112-Ukraine's original coverage is irretrievably lost, because the terrestrial broadcast channel and its online outlets were all banned by the Zelensky government in 2021.

ninth storey, but his neighbours had alerted police shortly before the death, having overheard the sounds of a physical fight from Melnychuk's apartment. An autopsy determined that Melnychuk had been attacked and injured, and then thrown to his death.⁸⁵

In April, two prominent Yanukovich supporters were murdered in Kyiv, in the space of 24 hours. Oleg Kalashnikov (53) had been a parliamentary deputy of the Party of Regions. On 15 April, he was found shot to death, with police issuing contradictory statements about whether the death was suicide or murder, and whether Kalashnikov's body had been discovered outside his home or inside it.⁸⁶ Oles Buzina (45) was a journalist and pro-Russian activist who had opposed the February 2014 revolutionary coup, and argued that Yanukovich should not have been forced out of office. On 16 April, Buzina was shot dead by masked gunmen outside his apartment block.⁸⁷ The names, home addresses, and supposed crimes of Buzina and Kalashnikov had appeared on the Myrotvorets 'Purgatory' list a few weeks earlier (see page 8 above), and both men had reported receiving threats. Kalashnikov specifically mentioned on social media that someone had told him: 'Run, walk, and look back – we have started hunting for you.'⁸⁸



Oleh Kalashnikov
(Credit: Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs)

The MOIA's Anton Gerashchenko was keen to comment yet again, and insinuated that Kalashnikov had probably been killed because he had undisclosed information about the Yanukovich government's attempts to suppress the 2013-2014 Maidan revolution, saying: '[Kalashnikov] takes these secrets with him to the grave.'⁸⁹ The next day, Gerashchenko told reporters:

These murders [of Buzina and Kalashnikov] are similar, I don't rule out that these murders were organized by Russian intelligence agencies to

⁸⁵ *Newsweek*, 8 April 2015. See <<https://tinyurl.com/hh8fwpbt>> or <<https://www.newsweek.com/2015/04/17/ukraine-plagued-succession-unlikely-suicides-former-ruling-party-320584.html>>.

⁸⁶ BBC News, 15 April 2014. See <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32329512>>.

⁸⁷ BBC News, 16 April 2015. See <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32337621>>.

⁸⁸ *Gazeta.ua*, 15 April 2015. See <<https://tinyurl.com/3pya5jt4>> or <https://gazeta.ua/ru/articles/life/_kalashnikov-poluchal-ugrozy-posle-23-fevralya-hodi-i-oglyadyvajsya-my-nachalina-tebya-ohotu/621155> (source in Russian).

⁸⁹ *Reuters*, 15 April 2015. See <<https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN0N62G7/>>. Archived at <<https://archive.is/9bUnr>>.

create an atmosphere of terror and hysteria in Kyiv.’

Gerashchenko also tried to link Buzina’s murder to the counter-revolutionary forces, saying: ‘It seems like the shooting of witnesses in the Anti-Maidan case continues.’ But an official of the Prosecutor-General’s department gave the lie to Gerashchenko’s remarks, by stating that Buzina was not connected to the counter-revolutionist efforts in any way.

Human rights activists Amnesty International called for independent inquiries into the wave of deaths:

It is certainly plausible that some of the deaths were suicides or accidents. However, in the absence of credible investigations, and given the rapid succession of the deaths within the wider context of Ukraine’s political climate at the moment, nobody can rule out that some of them were politically-motivated killings. But by whom? No-one will know without independent, impartial and thorough investigations.⁹⁰

In May 2015, Members of the European Parliament asked the Vice-President of the European Commission: ‘Has your office delivered any formal opinion/recommendation regarding these deaths in Ukraine? Has your office discussed them with the Ukrainian Government? Have the European institutions offered their help to the Ukrainian authorities with a view to credible investigations being conducted into the above mentioned deaths?’⁹¹ In a written statement, Vice-President Federica Mogherini responded:

The EU considers it essential that independent and transparent investigations into these incidents are carried out. This issue was raised by the EU in a recent meeting at senior officials’ level with the Ukrainian government, and the topic will be kept on the agenda of relevant future EU-Ukraine meetings, as appropriate.⁹²

There was no independent investigation in Ukraine. This may or may not be related to the fact that shortly after Mogherini urged ‘independent and transparent investigations’, Right Sector (for the second time) began agitating for the overthrow of Ukraine’s president Petro Poroshenko, accusing him of not

⁹⁰ Amnesty International, 17 April 2015. See <<https://tinyurl.com/bdfj98cx>> or <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/04/ukraine-suspicious-deaths-need-credible-investigations/>>.

⁹¹ Parliamentary question P-007210-15 (VP/HR): ‘Murders and suspicious deaths in Ukraine’. See <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/P-8-2015-007210_LT.html>.

⁹² Parliamentary question P-007210/2015 (ASW), ‘Answer on behalf of the Commission’, issued 23 June 2015. See <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/P-8-2015-007210-ASW_EN.html>.

enforcing the Lustration Law.⁹³ The European Commission never referred to the deaths again.

In May 2014, Arsen Avakov, as Minister for Internal Affairs, had personally chosen former Patriot of Ukraine mobster Vadim Troyan as police chief of the Kyiv Oblast.⁹⁴ Vadim Troyan was also deputy commander of the Azov regiment, having been a personal friend of Andriy Biletsky since their shared Kharkiv childhood. At the time of their May 2014 meeting, Troyan was managing director of a company owned by Avakov's business partner Alexey Lipchansky, another Kharkivite. Throughout Avakov's 2005-2010 governorship of the Kharkiv oblast, Lipchansky had also served as his press spokesman. Simultaneously, Lipchansky oversaw the financing of Biletsky's revived Patriot of Ukraine movement, although neither Lipchansky nor Avakov ever explained where the money was coming from.



Vadim Troyan
(Credit: Oleksandr Ivanov)

In August 2014, while Vadim Troyan's police appointment was still pending, Andriy Biletsky himself (still in military service at the time) was awarded the honorary rank of police lieutenant colonel by Avakov.⁹⁵ Troyan took office as Kyiv Oblast police chief two months later.

Avakov advisor Anton Gerashchenko defended Troyan's appointment by dismissing concerns about his past with Patriot of Ukraine.

Is there a decision by the Ukrainian courts to recognize the organisation as extremist? I answer – no. It is only opinion that says Patriot of Ukraine is terribly bad.⁹⁶

On the other hand, human rights expert Yevgeny Zakharov (another Avakov advisor and Kharkivite) denied that Troyan had been an active Patriot of Ukraine member at all. Zakharov told Avakov:

⁹³ *Kyiv Post*, 23 July 2015. See <<https://tinyurl.com/44345aj3>> or <<https://archive.kyivpost.com/article/content/ukraine-politics/right-sector-calls-for-continued-revolution-394165.html>>.

⁹⁴ The oblast's jurisdiction does not include the city of Kyiv itself, which is a policing 'island'.

⁹⁵ National Corps Party Website, biographical profile; undated. See <<https://nackor.org/en/andrey-bileckiy>> (page deleted, archive only, source in Ukrainian).

⁹⁶ Gerashchenko has also denied – with even less plausibility – that Patriot of Ukraine's conjoined twin, the Social-National Party, has any connection to neo-Nazism. BBC News, 16 July 2014. See <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28329329>>. (See also note 51.)

In Ukraine, the risks of appointing a guy with such a background are underestimated. Although he was not actually in this organisation, it will be used in Russia's propaganda.⁹⁷

That Zakharov was engaged in special pleading to appeal to his Minister's better senses can be seen in his warning to Avakov that: 'Those who want to see the support of the Ukrainian authorities for the "Nazis" will definitely see it here.' When Zakharov issued this advice, it was a matter of public record that Vadim Troyan had already been deputy commander of Biletsky's Azov regiment for the previous six months. Questioned in December 2014 about how the Kyiv oblast's police employment policy would develop under his leadership, Troyan said that 'We are recruiting young people, gradually' and mused that 'New people are needed [. . .] with appropriate education and experience. And above all, patriots, I think.' His ideas about the purpose of the organised crime division were simple. It should be redeployed against immigrants and 'bandits from the east'.⁹⁸

Troyan's grounding in far-right extremism was never going to be a realistic impediment to his police career. If anything, it was almost a qualification. In 2015, he was appointed deputy chief of Ukraine's national police. Later that year, Troyan was briefly made acting chief, and he was then appointed Arsen Avakov's deputy minister in the Ministry for Internal Affairs.

Troyan's permanent replacement as chief of police turned out to be Serhiy Knyazev, a self-declared admirer of Stepan Bandera, the Ukrainian independence movement's leader during the Second World War. Knyazev was in safe company. The Joint Spokesman for the Police and MOIA, Artem Shevchenko, was a proud Banderite too. So was Interior Minister Arsen Avakov's chief advisor Zoryan Shkyryak.⁹⁹

The second part of this is in *Gonzalo Lira and the kill chain (continued)* at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/89/gonzalo-lira-and-the-kill-chain-continued/>>.

⁹⁷ Zakharov's advisory status was linked to his chairmanship of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group. His deputy Halya Coynash was not encumbered by involvement in the Ukrainian government, and called Troyan's appointment 'awful'. *Kyiv Post*, 3 December 2014. See <<https://www.kyivpost.com/post/9194>>.

⁹⁸ *Left Bank*, 2 December 2014. See <https://lb.ua/society/2014/12/02/287807_vadim_troyan_mi_ponimali_sdadim.html> (source in Russian).

⁹⁹ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 13 February 2019. See <<https://shorturl.at/hlsHR>> or <<https://www.rferl.org/a/banderite-rebrand-ukrainian-police-declare-admiration-for-nazi-collaborators-to-make-a-point/29764110.html>>.

