

Ukraine - An address from researchers on social sciences: Kyiv's Euromaidan is a liberationist and not extremist action of civic disobedience

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Collective statement by experts on Ukrainian nationalism on the role of far right groups in Ukraine's protest movement, and a warning about the Russian imperialism-serving effects of some supposedly anti-fascist media reports from Kyiv.

We are a group of researchers who comprise specialists in the field of Ukrainian nationalism studies, and most of the world's few experts on the post-Soviet Ukrainian radical right. Some of us publish regularly in peer-reviewed journals and with academic presses. Others do their research within governmental and non-governmental organizations specializing on the monitoring of xenophobia in Ukraine.

As a result of our professional specialization and research experience, we are aware of the problems, dangers and potential of the involvement of certain right-wing extremist groupings in the Ukrainian protests. Following years of intensive study of this topic, we understand better than many other commentators the risks that its far right participation entails for the EuroMaidan. Some of our critical comments on nationalist tendencies have triggered angry responses from ethnocentrists in Ukraine and the Ukrainian diaspora living in the West.

While we are critical of far right activities on the EuroMaidan, we are, nevertheless, disturbed by a dangerous tendency in too many international media reports dealing with the recent events in Ukraine. An increasing number of lay assessments of the Ukrainian protest movement, to one degree or another, misrepresents the role, salience and impact of Ukraine's far right within the protest movement. Numerous reports allege that the pro-European movement is being infiltrated, driven or taken over by radically ethnocentrist groups of the lunatic fringe. Some presentations create the misleading impression that ultra-nationalist actors and ideas are at the core or helm of the Ukrainian protests. Graphic pictures, juicy quotes, sweeping comparisons and dark historical references are in high demand. They are combined with a disproportionate consideration of one particularly visible, yet politically minor segment within the confusing mosaic that is formed by the hundreds of thousands of protesters with their different motivations, backgrounds and aims.

Both the violent and non-violent resistance in Kyiv includes representatives from all political camps as well as non-ideological persons who may have problems locating themselves politically. Not only the peaceful protesters, but also those using sticks, stones and even Molotov Cocktails, in their physical confrontation with police special units and government-directed thugs, constitute a broad movement that is not centralized. Most protesters only turned violent in response to increasing police ferocity and the radicalization of Yanukovich's regime. The demonstrators include liberals

and conservatives, socialists and libertarians, nationalists and cosmopolitans, Christians, non-Christians and atheists.

True, the violent and non-violent protesters also comprise a variety of radicals of both the far right and far left. Yet, the movement as a whole merely reflects the entire Ukrainian population, young and old. The heavy focus on right-wing radicals in international media reports is, therefore, unwarranted and misleading. Such an over-representation may have more to do with the sensationalist potential of extremely ethnonationalistic slogans, symbols or uniforms than with the actual situation, on the ground.

We even suspect that, in some semi-journalistic reports, especially those in Kremlin-influenced mass media, the inordinate attention to far right elements in Ukraine's protest movement has nothing to do with anti-fascism. Paradoxically, the production, biases and dissemination of such reports may themselves be driven by an imperial form of ultra-nationalism - in this case, its Russian permutation. By fundamentally discrediting one of the most impressive mass actions of civil disobedience in the history of Europe, such reports help to provide a pretext for Moscow's political involvement, or, perhaps, even for a Russian military intervention into Ukraine, like in Georgia in 2008. (In a revealing blog, Anton Shekhovtsov has recently detailed the activities of some obviously pro-Kremlin institutions, connections and authors. See "Pro-Russian network behind the anti-Ukrainian defamation campaign" at <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com/2014/02/pro-russian-network-behind-anti.html>. Probably, there are more of them.)

In light of these threats, we call upon commentators, especially those on the political left, to be careful when voicing justified criticism of radical Ukrainian ethnonationalism. The more alarmist statements on the EuroMaidan are likely to be used by the Kremlin's "political technologists" for the implementation of Putin's geopolitical projects. By providing rhetorical ammunition for Moscow's battle against Ukrainian independence, such alarmism unintentionally helps a political force which is a far more serious threat to social justice, minority rights and political equality than all Ukrainian ethnocentrists taken together.

We also call upon Western commentators to show empathy with a nation-state that is very young, unconsolidated and under a serious foreign threat. The fragile situation in which Ukraine's nation still finds itself and the enormous complications of everyday life in such a transitional society give birth to a whole variety of odd, destructive and contradictory opinions, behaviors and discourses. Support for fundamentalism, ethnocentrism and ultra-nationalism may sometimes have more to do with the permanent confusion and daily anxieties of the people living under such conditions than with their deeper beliefs.

Finally, we call upon all those who have either no particular interest for, or no deeper knowledge of, Ukraine to not comment on this region's complicated national questions without engaging in some in-depth research. Being specialists in this field, some of us struggle every day to adequately interpret the growing political radicalization and para-militarization of the Ukrainian protest movement. In face of what can only be called state-terror against Ukraine's population, an increasing number of both ordinary Ukrainians and high-brow Kyiv intellectuals are concluding that, although surely preferable, non-violent resistance is impractical. Reporters who have the necessary time, energy and resources should visit Ukraine, or/and do some serious reading on the issues their articles address. Those who are unable to do so may want to turn their attention to other, more familiar, uncomplicated and less ambivalent topics. This should help to avoid, in the future, the unfortunately numerous clichés, factual errors, and misinformed opinion that often accompany discussions of events in Ukraine.

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