

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Russia & Eastern Europe > Ukraine > On the left (Ukraine) > **Why did the Ukrainian government suspend 11 ‘pro-Russia’ parties?**

Why did the Ukrainian government suspend 11 ‘pro-Russia’ parties?

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During the weekend, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s government suspended 11 Ukrainian political parties citing their alleged “links with Russia”. The suspensions have more to do with the post-Euromaidan polarisation of Ukrainian politics than genuine security concerns related to the Russian invasion.

While the majority of the suspended parties were small, and some were outright insignificant, one of them, the Opposition Platform for Life, came second in the recent elections and currently holds 44 seats in the 450-seat Ukrainian Parliament.

It is true that these parties are perceived as “pro-Russian” by many in Ukraine. But it is important to understand what “pro-Russian” means in the country today.

Before 2014, there was a large camp in Ukrainian politics calling for closer integration with Russia-led international institutions rather than with those in the Euro-Atlantic sphere, or even for Ukraine entering into a Union State with Russia and Belarus. After the Euromaidan revolution, and Russia’s hostile actions in Crimea and Donbas, however, the pro-Russian camp was marginalised in Ukrainian politics. And at the same time, the pro-Russian label became very inflated. It started to be used to describe anyone calling for Ukraine’s neutrality. It has also started to be employed to discredit and silence sovereigntist, state-developmental, anti-Western, illiberal, populist, left-wing, and many other discourses.

This wide variety of views and positions could be grouped together and condemned under one label primarily because they all criticised and raised questions about pro-Western, neoliberal, and nationalist discourses, which have dominated Ukraine’s political sphere since 2014, but do not really reflect the political diversity of Ukrainian society.

But the parties and politicians who have been branded as “pro-Russian” in Ukraine – and recently been suspended by Zelenskyy’s government – have very different relations with Russia. While some may have links to Russian soft power efforts – though these links are rarely properly investigated and proved, others are actually themselves under Russian sanctions.

Most “pro-Russian” parties in Ukraine are first and foremost “pro-themselves” and have autonomous interests and sources of income in Ukraine. They are trying to capitalise on the real grievances of a sizeable minority of Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizens concentrated in the southeastern regions. These parties do command significant public support. For example, three of the recently suspended parties participated in the parliamentary elections in 2019 and combined [received](#) about 2.7 million votes (18.3 percent) and in the most recent [polls](#) conducted before Russia’s invasion, these parties collectively scored about 16-20 percent of the vote.

Other parties on Zelenskyy’s suspension list were of left-wing orientation. Some of them played an

important role in Ukrainian politics in the 1990-2000s, such as the Socialist and Progressive Socialist parties, but by now they are all completely marginalised. Indeed, there is no political party in Ukraine today with “left” or “socialist” in its name that could secure any considerable portion of the general vote now or for the foreseeable future. Ukraine had already suspended in 2015 all of the country’s communist parties under the “decommunisation” law, which was strongly [criticised](#) by the Venice Commission. The latest round of suspensions may not be necessarily motivated by the wish to erase the left from Ukraine’s political sphere, but it certainly contributes to such an agenda.

The irony is that the suspension of these parties is completely meaningless for Ukraine’s security. It is true that some of the suspended parties, like the “progressive socialists,” were strongly and genuinely pro-Russian for many years. However, practically every leader and sponsor of these parties with any real influence in Ukraine [condemned](#) Russia’s invasion, and are now contributing to Ukraine’s defence.

Moreover, it is not clear how the suspension of party activities would help to prevent any actions being taken by members or leaders of these parties against the Ukrainian state. The Ukrainian party organisations are typically very weak as political or activist collectives, perhaps, with a partial exception of Sharii’s party among the suspended, founded by one of Ukraine’s most popular political bloggers and now focusing on humanitarian activities. Those who are thinking about collaborating with Russia, either directly with the Kremlin or through its propaganda network, amid the invasion would do this outside of party structures. They would have no reason to try and move Russian money via their party’s official accounts.

All this signals that the Ukrainian government’s decision to suspend left-wing and opposition parties has little to do with any objective war-time security needs of Ukraine, and much to do with the post-Euromaidan polarisation of Ukrainian politics and redefinition of the Ukrainian identity that pushed a variety of the dissenting positions beyond the borders of tolerable discourse in the country. It also has to do with Zelenskyy’s attempts to consolidate political power that began long before the Russian invasion.

Indeed, the decision to suspend the parties follows a pattern. Since last year, the government has imposed sanctions on opposition media and some opposition leaders on a regular basis, without providing any convincing evidence of wrongdoing to the public.

One year ago, for example, the government sanctioned Viktor Medvedchuk, a personal friend of Putin, soon after polls started to show that his party may have more public support than Zelenskyy’s “People’s Servant” party and could overtake him in a future election. At the time, the sanctions against Medvedchuk and his TV stations were also [endorsed](#) by the US Embassy in Ukraine. Several analysts have since speculated that those sanctions may have been among the factors that led Putin to begin preparations for the war, by convincing him that Russia-friendly politicians would never be allowed to win an election in Ukraine.

Now, Medvedchuk escaped house arrest and is hiding from Ukrainian authorities. The Opposition Platform for Life removed him from the party leadership, condemned Russia’s invasion, and called its members to join the forces defending Ukraine.

While it is easy to classify the decision to suspend the “pro-Russian” political parties amid a Russian invasion as a security necessity, the move should be analysed and understood in this wider context. It is also important to point out that the government’s sanctions regime against opposition parties, politicians and media has long attracted widespread criticism within Ukraine. Many in the country believe that the sanctions were designed and implemented by a small group attending Ukraine’s Security and Defence Council meetings, without serious discussion, on dubious legal grounds, to

further [corrupt](#) interests.

This is why there is little reason to expect the suspension of the parties to be lifted once the war is over. The Ministry of Justice will likely take legal action and ban the parties permanently.

This, however, will neither help the war effort nor the political ambitions of the current government. In fact, they could push some Ukrainians to collaborate with Russia.

Indeed, so far collaboration with the invaders in the occupied areas has been minimal. There is no indication that the public will get behind a pro-Russia party or politician in large numbers. And while Russia would certainly approach these parties first if it decides to install a puppet government in Ukraine, many in their political cadres would likely decline the offer – they would not want to risk their capital, properties and interests in the West. Some of the local leaders who have been elected with the backing of these “pro-Russian” parties have already made it clear that they do not intend to collaborate with the invading forces.

But after the suspension of these parties, members of their local organisations and councils, as well as their active supporters, may be more inclined to collaborate with the Russians in the occupied areas. Indeed, if they become convinced that they have no political future in Ukraine and rather face persecution, they may start looking towards Russia. This could fuel violence as masses begin searching for and punishing “traitors” and strengthen Russian propaganda about Ukraine’s “Nazism” problem. There is already a worrying growth in reports about searches and arrests of opposition and left-wing bloggers and activists in Ukraine.

Today, Ukraine is facing an existential threat. The Ukrainian government needs to understand that moves such as these suspensions that alienate parts of the Ukrainian public – and make them question the intentions of their leaders – make the country weaker not stronger, and only serve the enemy.

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