The Right Wing Checkpoint for Canada's Intervention in Ukraine

Canadian weapons and military aid are flowing to far-right paramilitary units, ultranationalist factions in Ukraine

All Global Research articles can be read in 51 languages by activating the "Translate Website" drop down menu on the top banner of our home page (Desktop version).

To receive Global Research's Daily Newsletter (selected articles), click here.

Visit and follow us on Instagram at @globalresearch_crg.

***

This article was originally published on Canadian Dimension on May 21, 2020.

Stoking the fire

For over six years, Ukrainian and Russian-supported separatist forces have been in a stand-off in an armed conflict that has ravaged the Donbass region in eastern Ukraine. It has claimed the lives of over 13,000 people, including over 3,000 civilians. Awaiting return to peaceful life, residents have had to pass through military checkpoints to go to work, visit family, and deal with administrative matters. Further, the coronavirus crisis has resulted in additional measures preventing movement between the separatist-controlled regions and the rest of Ukraine.

Canada's policy of providing Ukraine military aid has been disproportionately shaped by both Ukrainian far-right nationalism and the domestic right-wing lobby in Canada. The far-right in Ukraine holds a degree of military power and a corresponding threat of violence that surpasses that of other comparable European ultranationalist organizations. Numerous acts of violence by the far-right have directly contributed to enflaming and prolonging the drawn-out war, in some cases subverting action taken toward peace. Yet, Canada's preference for fueling a military resolution has come at the expense of addressing the Donbass region's complex underlying discontent, and at the cost of normalizing ultranationalist right-wing factions within the country.

A year after the conflict erupted, the Conservative Party of Canada under former Prime Minister Stephen Harper initiated a military mission in Ukraine known as Operation UNIFIER, through which Canada provided training and weapons to the Ukrainian military and paramilitary police. On March 18, 2019, former Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland and Minister of National Defense Harjit Sajjan announced the extension of UNIFIER until 2022.

This extension was notably endorsed by the Ukrainian Canadian Congress and by the [Conservative Party of Canada](). James Bezan—the Conservative Shadow Minister for National Defense and Manitoba's MP for Selkirk-Interlake-Eastman—also promoted Canadian military aid and weapons sales to Ukraine in the [House of Commons]().

Until the appointment of François-Philippe Champagne as the Liberals' Foreign Minister in November 2019, military engagement in the Donbass conflict was conspicuously championed by Freeland, who walked in-step with former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. In May 2019, Ukraine elected President Volodymyr Zelensky, a former comedian with no prior political experience, on the 'pro-peace' and anti-corruption platform of his "Servant of the People" party. Champagne's appointment has also signaled a slight shift away from Freeland's approach toward more neutral diplomacy, as he has not been as personally invested in the Donbass war.

Two Minsk agreements were signed between Russia, Ukraine and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in September 2014, calling for ceasefire and withdrawal of heavy weapons from eastern Ukraine. Some progress on the agreements has since been made, including a pact on April 10, 2020 to exchange 37 prisoners. On May 5, Zelensky also [appointed]() representatives for the Trilateral Contact Group to interface with the self-declared republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

The Minsk agreements notably proposed a form of semi-autonomous governance for Donbass. Both the government and separatist-controlled regions of Donbass have significant diversity, with mixed Ukrainian-Russians, Russian-speaking Ukrainians, and an ethnic Russian diaspora. During his term, Poroshenko introduced a slew of nationalist legislation targeting the Russian diaspora in Ukraine, including a law which granted special status to the Ukrainian language, making it [mandatory]() for public sector workers, particularly those in regional administration in areas with large cultural minorities—such as the Donbass.

While on a dramatically different scale, the issue of minority rights in Ukraine resonates at different frequencies elsewhere in the country. Hungary, for example, has recently [withheld]() its support for NATO-Ukraine Council meetings due to a perceived neglect of Hungarian minority rights, particularly [language rights](), in the western Ukrainian region of Zakarpattya. Far-right groups that have promoted views of an ethnically homogenous Ukraine have instigated violence at key moments that inform the crisis in the Donbass.

In numerous papers, Ivan Katchanovski, political scientist and professor at the University of Ottawa who has been researching the far-right, has drawn attention to the continuity between far-right violence in the Maidan and the Odessa massacres, and the Donbass war.

Members of far-right groups were [found to be responsible]() for the murder of protesters with hunting pellets during the Maidan coup of February 2014. One of the most prominent participating groups was the Right Sector, an alliance of the ultranationalist organizations Tryzub, Social National Assembly, and Patriot of Ukraine. The latter group was inspired by the Nazi Ukrainian Insurgent Army of the Second World War.

Since May 2014, the Right Sector has also included the Ukrainian National Assembly (UNA) and its paramilitary branch, known as the Ukrainian National Self Defence Organization (UNSO). The UNA-UNSO has been identified by Human Rights Without Frontiers as anti-Semitic, and [recognized]() as a neo-fascist organization. In their eyes, the narrative of a

sovereign Ukraine is that of a homogenous country made up of "[ethnically pure](#)" Ukrainians. The UNA-UNSO has deplored "abhorrent Russification" and openly [called for](#) the slaughter of Russians.

In the Odessa massacre of May 2, 2014, [fifty people died](#) in the arson of the House of Trade Unions. Most of those who died were pro-Russian Odessans in the wake of the February coup—which deposed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, who had received majority support in eastern Ukraine, after he rejected Ukraine's association agreement with the European Union.

Ukraine's shift toward the West carried heavy implications for the Donbass, a region that is [reliant](#)on coal-mining, metallurgical and chemical industries. The dissolution of the Soviet Union left many people divided across new state borders, with differing expectations of economic promise in eastern Ukraine that, over the past decades of [neoliberalization](#), were not realized.

"You have people in the Donbass who actually feared going into the European Union, and feared for their jobs and their livelihoods because their whole industry, their whole economy is very geared toward Russia," noted Andrew Rasiulis, former defense official and fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, who was responsible for Canadian national defense policy in the 1990s on central and eastern Europe.

"There is the whole cultural, ethnic mindset in western Ukraine that is very different, and the trick for Ukraine is to actually accommodate both sides," he noted. "I think the west has a hard time understanding that there's this nuance. The west tends to read the Ukrainian nationalist narrative as being the holistic narrative for all of Ukraine."

Both Russia and the separatists have since supported the Minsk agreement's call for reintegration of Donbass into Ukraine. [Normandy summit](#) talks in December 2019 were intended to re-affirm the Minsk agreements, which would mean steps toward the withdrawal of troops, and Ukrainian government support for an election in Donbass under the observation of the OSCE.

Zelensky continues to face criticism from influential ultranationalist factions in Ukraine, who have depicted the president's actions since his election victory as "[treason](#)" and a form of "capitulation" to Russia. Nationalist far-right groups like the Azov Battalion have significantly more influence in western Ukrainian cities like Lviv, where Zelensky also garnered the least support during last year's elections.

Street exhibit commemorating the Azov Battalion in Kharkiv (Kharkov), Ukraine, August 2018. Photo from [Flickr](#).

Created in the spring of 2014 out of the Social National Assembly and Patriot of Ukraine, the Azov Battalion has been one of the most prominent far-right organizations volunteering on the Donbass frontlines. The paramilitary group has notably been involved in [undermining](#) actions toward demilitarization in Luhansk by the Ukrainian military, as with the case of [Zolote](#) in October 2019 when the volunteer battalion replaced withdrawing Ukrainian troops.

Andriy Parubiy, leader of the Svoboda party that grew out of the neo-Nazi Patriot of Ukraine party, clearly stated in 2014 that attacks on 'insurgents' would continue after withdrawal of Russian troops. An amnesty agreement for Donbass has been debated since 2015 but has still not been signed, although Ukraine has [proposed amendments](#) for a draft agreement.

While Canada has focused on providing weapons and military training to Ukraine, many experts agree that a more productive role for Canadian involvement would be to advance the Minsk agreement for the reintegration of Donbass.

Rasiulis has pointed to the potential for Canada to play a more proactive role through the OSCE, where Canada has a seat, by supporting Russian language rights, for example, and federalism to facilitate the integration of Donbass into a culturally heterogenous Ukraine. "These are things that Canada has a lot of experience in," he notes.

Canada has instead taken a less productive route. As Rasiulis observes, "we have distanced ourselves and aligned ourselves with the nationalist sector of Ukrainian politics." Increasing Canadian weapons sales and military aid to Ukraine has shown that some Canadian actors in the Donbass conflict have only their own interests at heart.
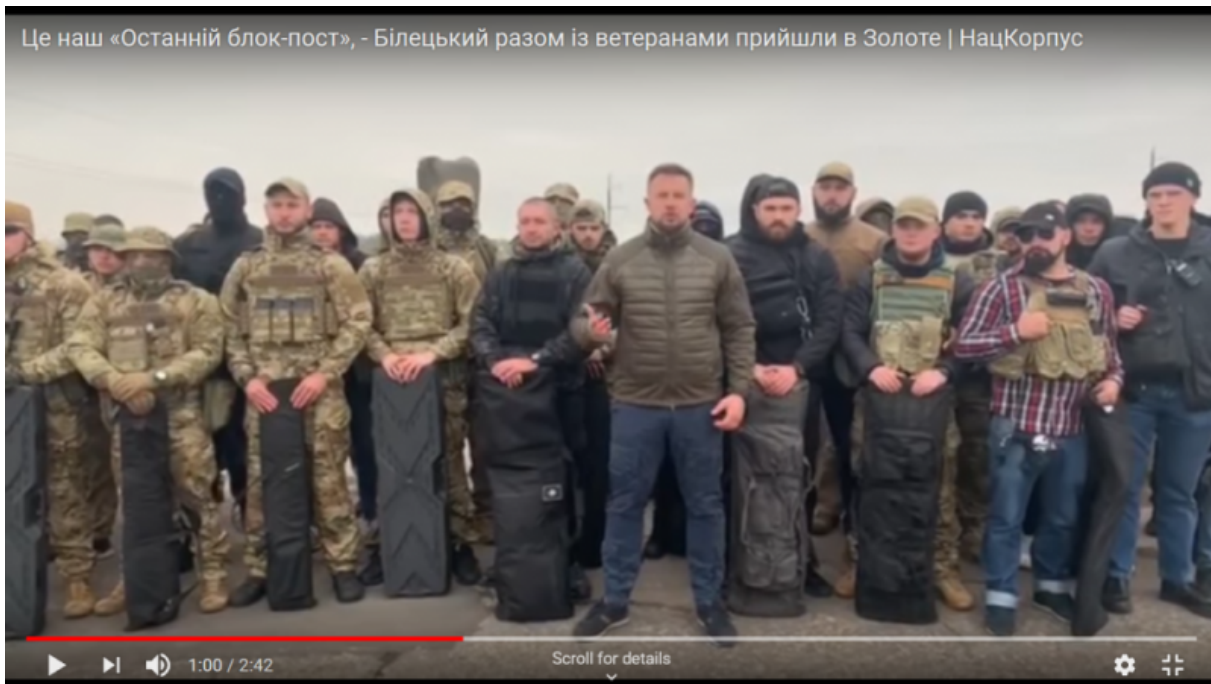
Video of an announcement by Andrei Biletskii, the first commander of the volunteer-based Azov Regiment of the National Guard of Ukraine, with volunteer fighters near Zolote. Still image from YouTube.

Out of our hands

In August 2018, Global Affairs Canada approved a record-breaking arms deal to sell Ukraine fifty LRT-3 50 calibre sniper rifles manufactured by Winnipeg's PGW Defense Technologies. With an approximate range of 1,800 meters, the rifles are described by PGW as intended for "long-range engagements of both hard and soft targets"—in other words, machines and people.

The sale became controversial because in June 2014 Ukraine had formally integrated extremist far-right militias including the Aidar, Dnipro, Donbass, and Azov battalions into the National Guard—which is itself under the command of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. With this integration, the distinction between the official military and its extremist, far-right volunteer factions has been blurred.

In September 2014, Amnesty International released a report on war crimes by the far-right Aidar Battalion. Aidar was found to have detained, beaten and tortured civilians in Donbass including businessmen and farmers that members of the battalion accused of collaborating with the separatists. The UN Human Rights Commission reported on executions of Donbass civilians by members of the Dnipro Battalion. Testimonials by captives have also described torture by both National Guard servicemen and volunteer battalions.

Winnipeg's PGW made headlines when sniper rifles sold to Saudi Arabia (Coyote, LRT-3, and Timberwolf) were found in the possession of Yemeni soldiers, and also captured by Houthi forces who targeted civilians in Yemen. As Project Ploughshares researcher Kelsey Gallagher explained, the PGW rifles that made their way to Yemeni soldiers "have recently been illegally diverted from Saudi Arabian stockpiles to illicit third-parties in Yemen, in breach of Canadian export controls." General Dynamics Land Systems light armoured vehicles (LAVs)—manufactured in London, Ontario—were also found as part of Yemeni convoys.

When PGW's rifles were found in Houthi hands, the rifle company's founder Ross Spagrud hired consultant Kory Teneycke, of lobbying firm Coriolis Public Affairs, former VP of Sun News and previously Director of Communications for the Conservatives under Harper.

Teneycke confirmed by email that he advised PGW on both Saudi Arabia and Ukraine in 2016, indicating PGW's concerns with the potential controversy in the Ukrainian deal months before Canada even approved sales of restricted weapons to Ukraine. Canada had lifted the [restrictions](#) on prohibited firearms trade with Ukraine in December 2017, adding the country to Canada's Automatic Firearm Country Control List (AFCCL).

Compared to the Canadian arms trade with Saudia Arabia and Israel—both of which are destinations for the majority of Canadian military exports—$1 million worth of sniper rifles is not a large military sale. The rapid increase in exported weapons following the addition of Ukraine to the AFCCL, however, allows the sale of Canadian-made firearms, making the Donbass conflict a profitable opportunity for Canadian weapons manufacturers.

As Kelsey Gallagher explained, the AFCCL is supposed to act as an arms control instrument but actually becoming a member of the AFCCL "frequently predates an associated spike in Canadian arms sales, acting to facilitate the Canadian arms trade, as opposed to hinder it."

This became clear when Canada's total military exports to Ukraine in 2018 quickly doubled that of 2014, rising to $5.2 million. What's more, shortly before Canada added Ukraine to the AFCCL, Minister Harjit Sajjan met with former Ukrainian Defense Minister Stepan Poltorak in September 2017 to discuss the construction of a joint [ammunition production plant](#) in Ukraine.

While the far-right battalions in Ukraine's National Guard are not representative of the country's army as a whole, they still play an active role on the front-lines of Donbass and may be the recipients of American Javelin missiles or Winnipeg-made sniper rifles. Gallagher noted that Canada's lack of a "functioning post-export inspection regime" means there is not enough oversight to ensure that weapons are not being used by far-right extremists.

In the case of Ukraine, Canadian equipment has already been found with the volunteer battalions, whose integration into the National Guard makes it all the more difficult to track weapons use. According to Ivan Katchanovski, "Azov got several Spartan armoured personnel carriers, which were produced in Ukraine under a Canadian license." Ukrainian officials have also recently discovered a [weapons cache](#) at what was alleged to be a volunteer battalion base.

The human rights violations of the volunteer battalions and their disregard for civilians—documented for years by Amnesty International, the UN Human Rights Commission, and other human rights non-profits—should have triggered alarm concerning the far-right groups within the Ukrainian military.

"This fact alone would, [under] Canadian export law, preclude the transfer of these rifles to Ukraine," said Gallagher. "Yet we continue to see Global Affairs very flexibly interpret their obligation to stem weapon exports [into] scenarios where there is overriding risk that these violations can occur, or where Canadian weapons can contribute to ongoing instability."

Phil Gurski, former senior strategic analyst at CSIS specializing in terrorism and president of Borealis Threat and Risk Consulting, referred to such arms deals as "strictly a political

decision". Global Affairs Canada can approve deals, like PGW's rifles, overriding concerns from National Defense or CSIS on the risk of weapons being diverted to, or captured by, extremists.

By the end of May 2019, Operation UNIFIER had trained over 12,500 Ukrainian troops. The Canadian government has offered [assurances](#) that the Canadian Armed Forces would not provide training or support for Ukrainian extremists. But there is no explicit law prohibiting Canadian military aid to Azov or other far-right regiments. This is in contrast to restrictions adopted, at least on paper, by the United States. Katchanovski's academic studies of the Ukrainian far-right contributed to the US adoption of a [defense appropriations bill amendment](#) in 2018, which banned U.S. military aid including prohibitions on providing arms, funding or training to the Azov Regiment.

Official statements by the Canadian government haven't stopped Canadian military personnel from training the neo-Nazi battalions on their own initiative. Retired Canadian Armed Forces Major Oksana Kuzyshyn—who previously served in Israel, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Haiti—[spent 60 days](#) training the Azov Battalion to NATO standards. She even gave a presentation about it in 2016 to the Ukrainian Canadian Professional and Business Association of Calgary. Kuzyshyn was a member of the Canadian military since 1985, and since May 2014 has worked as a CAF contract officer.

Canadian civilians have also fought with Ukraine's far-right battalions—finding common cause in the nativist, extremist politics of these battalions. An anonymous data-dump on the now-defunct far-right message board Iron March in November 2019 released a list of identities connected with various violent far-right groups including Atomwaffen—a terrorist group created through the forum—National Action, and Golden Dawn. The Azov Battalion was also among them.

The message board, now archived and maintained by *[The Jewish Worker](#)*, included messages between members discussing [joining](#) Azov at the headquarters in Kiev. Boris Mihajlovic, a Canadian Navy reservist based in Alberta—[identifying](#) as Serbian with Croatian citizenship—acted as a moderator on the Iron March forum, and brokered arms deals in Bosnia. Known as MOONLORD, Mihajlovic [promoted](#) training to forum members with the [Canadian Armed Forces](#).

From: TheWeissewolfe Sun, 13 Sep 2015 11:34:17 GMT ⁂	Yes, it does. What about English speakers that have no combat experience? Or don't speak Ukrainian?
Sun, 13 Sep 2015 11:44:53 GMT ⁂	We have international group in our reconaissance in Azov, and in other parts of regiment.
From: TheWeissewolfe Sun, 13 Sep 2015 11:48:18 GMT ⁂	We have international group in our reconaissance in Azov, and in other parts of regiment. I'm glad to hear that, are y'all accepting those without combat experience though?
Sun, 13 Sep 2015 13:07:09 GMT ⁂	We have hard trainings here.

Excerpt from a conversation about the Azov Battalion on the Iron March message board.

The Florida-based Atomwaffen already had members embedded within the Canadian military. As Mack Lamoureaux and Ben Makuch reported for *Vice* in May 2019, Canadian military intelligence documented over 50 CAF members as connected to a hate group or who "made statements/took actions deemed to be discriminatory in nature."

In its September 2019 report on the transnational rise of violent white supremacism, the New York-based Soufan Centre called out the Azov Battalion for its "neo-Nazi beliefs". Citing the global connections of white supremacist groups, the Centre described how far-right agents have taken advantage of the conflict in eastern Ukraine to pursue their own agendas. The highest numbers of foreign volunteers in Ukraine, other than Russia, have come from Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Croatia, Georgia, and Italy, among others.

Undue influence

Rather than distancing themselves from the ultranationalist Ukrainian far-right, influential institutions within the Ukrainian Canadian diaspora have instead supported these alliances. The Toronto-based Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC), for example, is one of the main organizations lobbying the Canadian government to send weapons to Ukraine. As Moss Robeson reported for *The Grayzone*, the UCC had denounced support for Ukrainian fascist martyr Stepan Bandera in its early years, yet has recently adopted his symbolism of Ukrainian nativist unity and historical alliance with the Nazis. Canadian Armed Forces Major Oksana Kuzyshyn—the contract officer who trained the Azov Battalion to NATO standards—is a board member of the UCC.

In addition to Canada's official military aid, Canadian civilians have raised funds and provided lethal aid to Ukraine through channels in the Canadian-Ukrainian diaspora. The UCC has fundraised for Right Sector and Army SOS, an organization that operates a drone factory based in Kiev that was founded by investment banker Yaroslav Tropinov. In the early years of the conflict, Army SOS claimed that it worked "directly with commanders and

soldiers (bypassing corrupt generals)," providing drones, weapons and vehicles, among other forms of military aid. According to the *Globe and Mail* in 2015, Army SOS had also "purchased parts for sniper rifles and tripwire detonators."

As a result, Canadian foreign policy on Ukraine and, by extension, the media narrative, has also been largely influenced by right-wing factions of the Ukrainian Canadian diaspora, which have an influential electoral base with strong support for Conservatives in the Canadian mid-west. According to Rasiulis, they have had a disproportionate influence on Canadian foreign policy.

In Ukraine, far-right groups continue to undermine the role of Ukrainian authorities and implement their own interpretation of the law. For example, a volunteer battalion known as National Druzhina, formed out of Azov veterans, is known to have attacked Roma camps in 2018, when it decided that a Roma community had not complied with an ultimatum issued on Facebook to clear out of their camp. The ultimatum stated, "When the police don't act, the National Druzhyna takes control of the situation." Druzhina also announced its intention to monitor the 2019 presidential elections.

The links to the Ukrainian far-right as well as to domestic right-wing politics have ultimately affected Canada's actions with respect to the resolution of the Donbass conflict. Rasiulis maintains that "the nationalists' influence on Canada—and Freeland particularly in her role as Deputy Prime Minister—still restrains Canadian diplomacy from going so far as to actually work toward a solution."

Canada has used its stature as a perceived leader in international development, humanitarian, and peace and security assistance efforts to forge dubious alliances, supposedly promoting what Freeland has referred to "rules-based international order". Since 2014, however, Canada's focus on military aid and arms deals with Ukraine has done more to foment hostilities and lend legitimacy to ultranationalist subversion in the Donbass. Everyday people in Donbass have been treated by their governments as political pawns, by Canadian politicians as fodder for distant, nationalist electorate bases, and by North American weapons manufacturers as dispensable justification for profit. But Canadian politicians have opted to disregard their involvement in supporting the far-right and simply look the other way.

*

Note to readers: Please click the share buttons above or below. Follow us on Instagram, @globalresearch_crg. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Lital Khaikin is an author and journalist based in Tiohtiá:ke (Montréal). She has published articles in Toward Freedom, Warscapes, Briarpatch, and the Media Co-op, and has appeared in literary publications like 3:AM Magazine, Berfrois, Tripwire, and Black Sun Lit's "Vestiges" journal. She also runs The Green Violin, a slow-burning samizdat-style literary press for the free distribution of literary paraphernalia.

Featured image: Members of the Azov Battalion and other far-right groups march through Kyiv during Defenders of Ukraine Day, October 14, 2018. Photo from Leave the West Behind.

The original source of this article is [Canadian Dimension](#)
Copyright © [Lital Khaikin](#), [Canadian Dimension](#), 2022

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Lital Khaikin](#)