

US Congress Quietly Enables Funding for Ukrainian Neo-Nazi-led Azov Regiment

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The 2016 Consolidated Appropriations Act, signed into law by US President Barack Obama late last year, did not include a previously expected ban against the funding of the Azov Regiment, a military organization that originated as a volunteer militia in May 2014 and was subsequently incorporated into the National Guard of Ukraine.

The Azov Regiment is notorious for the openly white supremacist and anti-Semitic views of its members, and its use of the Wolfsangel, a swastika-like symbol once used by certain divisions of the armed forces of Nazi Germany, as well as its leading role in the Battle of Mariupol in May-June 2014. The regiment's leader is Andriy Biletsky, a current member of the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada (parliament) and also leader of the neo-Nazi Social-National Assembly. In a characteristic statement, Biletsky was quoted by the UK *Telegraph* last August as stating, "The historic mission of our nation in this critical moment is to lead the White Races of the world in a final crusade for their survival, a crusade against the Semite-led *Untermenschen*."

The 2016 Consolidated Appropriations Act includes a section entitled "Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative," which appropriates \$250 million "to provide assistance, including training; equipment; lethal weapons of a defensive nature; logistics support, supplies and services; sustainment; and intelligence support to the military and national security forces of Ukraine.. ." Additionally, the US is to spend at least \$658.2 million on "bilateral economic assistance," international security assistance," "multilateral assistance," and "export and investment assistance" for Ukraine in 2016. All this follows nearly \$760 million in "security, programmatic, and technical assistance" and \$2 billion in loan guarantees that the US has provided Ukraine since the February 2014 Maidan coup.

In June last year, the House of Representatives voted to amend the 2016 Department of Defense Appropriations Act so as to include the text, "None of the funds made available by this Act may be used to provide arms, training, or other assistance to the Azov Battalion." Representative John Conyers, Jr. (Democrat-Michigan) had introduced this proposal, pointing out that the magazine *Foreign Affairs* as well as other leading media organizations characterized the Azov Battalion as "openly neo-Nazi" and "fascist," and arguing that "these groups run counter to American values."

According to the *Nation*, the Defense Department subsequently began exerting pressure on the House Defense Appropriations Committee to withdraw the proposed amendment, arguing that the restriction was redundant. According to this specious line of reasoning, funding of the Azov Regiment should already be prohibited by the Leahy Law, which establishes that "No assistance shall be furnished ... to any unit of the security forces of a

foreign country if the Secretary of State has credible information that such unit has committed a gross violation of human rights.”

The Department of State explains on one of its official web sites that it

“vets its assistance to foreign security forces, as well as certain Department of Defense training programs, to ensure that recipients have not committed gross human rights abuses. When the vetting process uncovers credible information that an individual or unit has committed a gross violation of human rights, US assistance is withheld.”

Reports published by Amnesty International in 2014 and 2015 gave evidence of widespread torture and summary executions in Ukraine but did not specifically name the Azov Regiment or its members as suspects. The UN also issued a report in 2014 accusing both sides of the Ukrainian civil war of committing acts of torture and attacks on civilian targets.

While Conyers’ amendment was widely reported in the media when it passed the House of Representatives in June last year, it was never subject to a vote in the Senate. The 2016 Department of Defense Appropriations Act was incorporated into the 2016 Consolidated Appropriations Act, which became law on December 18. The absence of the prohibition on funding for the Azov Regiment was first noted in the media by the *Nation* on January 14.

Even without the intervention of the Department of Defense and the Senate’s rejection of the proposed amendment, the prohibition in question was a red herring and a fraud from the beginning. While the Azov Regiment and its leader have gained notoriety for the peculiarly repugnant, intensely hateful political positions of its leader and members, those positions distinguish them only superficially from the rest of the officers, special forces operatives, volunteers and mercenaries who have been leading Kiev’s war against the people of eastern Ukraine.

The fact that the Azov Regiment’s leader and at least some of its members participate in neo-Nazi politics does not apparently impede their ability to fight alongside other far-right Ukrainian nationalists who do not identify specifically as “fascist” or “neo-Nazi” but are nevertheless rabidly anti-Russian and generally identify with the political legacy of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, which collaborated with the Nazis in World War II against the Soviet Union and took part in mass killings of civilians, including Jews and Poles. Such extreme nationalists represent the prevailing political tendency in the Ukrainian government today, and particularly its military leadership.

The Azov Regiment, which has approximately 1,000 members, is one of many subdivisions of the Ukrainian National Guard. The Ukrainian National Guard was re-established in March 2014, consists currently of approximately 60,000 servicemen, and has played a key role in the ongoing Ukrainian civil war.

In addition to the Azov Regiment, there are at least thirteen other special forces units of the Ukrainian National Guard, including Alfa, Bars, Donbas, Hepard, Kobra, Lavanda, Omeha, Skat, Skorpion, Tin, Tyhr, Veba, and Yahuar; as well as over 30 special forces units of the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs, of which the National Guard is itself a subdivision. There are also over 40 volunteer territorial defense battalions operating within the Ministry

of Defense.

Among the various units and organizations participating in Kiev's war should also be counted the Right Sector Volunteer Ukrainian Corps, which operates as an independent militia not subordinate to any branch of government; as well as mercenaries, special agents, advisers, and "instructors" from foreign countries.

According to an article published in the *Daily Beast* last July, in an interview for that publication, Sgt. Ivan Kharkiv of the Azov battalion "spoke about his battalion's experience with US trainers and US volunteers quite fondly, even mentioning US volunteer engineers and medics that [were] still currently assisting them."

Yaryna Ferentsevykh, Press Officer of the US Embassy in Ukraine, also told the *Daily Beast* that "as far as we know," there were no members of the Azov Regiment being trained by US forces. She explained,

"Whether or not some may be in the lineup, that is possible. But frankly, you know, our vetting screens for human rights violations, not for ideology. Neo-Nazis, you know, can join the US army too. The battalions that are in question have been integrated as part of Ukraine's National Guard, and so the idea is that they would be eligible for training, but in all honesty I cannot tell you if there are any on the list we train. There were not any in the first rotation as far as I am aware."

Capt. Steven Modugno, US Army Public Affairs Officer from the 173rd Airborne Brigade, which trains Ukrainian forces in Yavoriv, also told the *Daily Beast* that he didn't know whether they had trained any members of the Azov Regiment, but that they had trained the *Hepard* ("Cheetah") and *Yahuar* ("Jaguar") regiments, which also belong to the Ukrainian National Guard.

The United States has been supplying military hardware to Ukraine since last March, and US instructors have been training Ukrainian National Guard units since April last year. As of December 2015, approximately 400 American military instructors, as well as military instructors from Canada, Lithuania, and the United Kingdom, were training Ukrainian military servicemen at the Yavoriv Training Center in Lviv Region. American instructors are also teaching Ukrainian special operations forces in Khmelnytsky Region. Instructors from the United States have also been sent to Ukraine to train special police units analogous to US SWAT teams. NATO troops have been participating in joint military exercises in Western Ukraine. And, according to "hactivist" organization Cyber-Berkut, American specialists have been sent to Kiev to train their Ukrainian counterparts in methods of psychological warfare and disinformation.

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