

The Kremlin's Fascism Narrative



WHY DOES THE KREMLIN KEEP CRYING FASCISM?

- Like many allied countries, the fight against Nazi Germany (known as the Great Patriotic War in Russia) has always been a source of immense national pride for the Russian people.
- After the collapse of the Soviet Union and a decade of economic and political chaos, Vladimir Putin latched on to this source of pride to reinvigorate the national narrative of "Russian greatness" by reframing the conflict as a uniquely Russian victory.
- Under the Kremlin's cultivation, the conflict has now achieved a semi-religious status in Russia; containing its own rituals and lexicon. It has since extended to the military itself and become associated with more modern Kremlin campaigns; Putin commissioned a Cathedral to the armed forces in 2020 that features depictions of Russian soldiers in Chechnya and Crimea.
- The Kremlin has also continually branded its domestic and foreign enemies as "fascists" in order to rally public opinion and justify domestic repression, as a conflict against fascism is historically equated to a fight for survival.
- It is now attempting to do the same in Ukraine in order to justify its invasion and lend credence to its disinformation that alleged war crimes are being faked or performed by Ukrainians themselves by depicting Ukrainians as inherently evil.

WHAT IS "FASCISM?"

A political philosophy, movement, or regime that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralised autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition. **Miriam-Webster**

Table 1. Vote shares of major Ukrainian far-right parties in presidential elections and in the proportional-representation parts of parliamentary elections, 1998–2019

Party or alliance	Bloc "Natsionalnyy front" [National Front] (KUN, UKRP & URP) / URP / KUN	UNA / Pravyi sektor [Right Sector]	Bloc "Menshe sliv" [Fewer Words] (VPO-DSU & SNPU) / VOS
National election			
1998 (parliamentary)	2.71 (NF)	0.39 (UNA)	0.16 (MS)
1999 (presidential)			
2002 (parliamentary)		0.04 (UNA)	
2004 (presidential)	0.02 (Kozak, OUN)	0.17 (Korchyns'kyy)	
2006 (parliamentary)		0.06 (UNA)	0.36 (VOS)
2007 (parliamentary)			0.76 (VOS)
2010 (presidential)			1.43 (Tiahnybok)
2012 (parliamentary)		0.08 (UNA-UNSO)	10.44 (VOS)
2014 (presidential)		0.70 (Iarosh)*	1.16 (Tiahnybok)
2014 (parliamentary)	0.05 (KUN)	1.81 (PS)	4.71 (VOS)
2019 (presidential)			1.62 (Koshulyns'kyy)
2019 (parliamentary)			2.15 (VOS)**

* In the 2014 presidential election, Dmytro Iarosh formally ran as an independent candidate but was publicly known as the leader of Pravyi sektor (PS).

** The 2019 Svoboda list was a unified bloc of most of the relevant Ukrainian far-right political parties, but was officially registered only as a VOS list.

Source: The Swedish Institute for International Affairs

FACT CHECK: FASCISM IN UKRAINE

- There are several far-right groups that are active in Ukraine; the one that has caught popular attention and features frequently in the Kremlin's disinformation narratives is the Azov Movement.
- The Azov movement is a neo-nazi organisation with a history of targeting minorities. However, it has only ever had a maximum membership of 1500 and have since been incorporated into the Ukrainian military, blunting its ability to act independently. This makes it more of an unpleasant nuisance rather than a significant threat to Ukrainian democracy that Russia portrays it as.
- Traditionally, far-right parties have performed abysmally in Ukraine's presidential and parliamentary elections; often failing to go beyond single digit percentage points (see left).
- The Ukrainian state has also gone at length to protect Tatar and LGTBQ minorities.

FASCISM IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA?

- Evidence suggests that fascism's reach in Ukraine is extremely limited, there have been growing concerns regarding the fascist tendencies of Putin's Russia.
- The reverence of the military, a cult of personality, a focus on "purity", the creation of youth movements for indoctrination, the forcible suppression of opposition and conducting warfare without regard for the norms of war, are symptomatic of fascist states.
- The Kremlin also has direct relationships with far-right and neo-nazi groups; cultivating them at home to suppress opposition, funding their activities across Europe to destabilise the EU (and its individual member states) and utilising mercenary groups with ties to right-wing extremism to strengthen its influence abroad.
- The ubiquitous "Z" to denote support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been likened to the swastika as a political tool of solidarity and intimidation.