



COUNTRY PROFILE

Supporters of Russian President Vladimir Putin call the Ukrainian government a 'fascist junta'. Western supporters consider it a beacon of true democracy within the former Soviet Union. The reality is that paradoxical signs of a country rapidly moving both towards and away from the Far Right are abundant, leaving many outsiders justifiably confused.

Among the most common concerns of creeping fascism is the neo-Nazi presence on the frontlines in the Donbas War against Russian-backed separatists. At the onset of the conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in 2014 (an 'oblast' is an administrative region in many former Soviet nations), when the country barely had a functioning army, Ukrainian oligarchs began funding more than 30 private 'volunteer' units to fill the gap.

From the beginning, many of these units were well known for their neo-Nazi subcultures. Among the most notorious is the Azov Regiment, which uses as its logo a *wolfsangel*, an old German symbol used as insignia by several Waffen-SS and Wehrmacht units in the Second World War. It was partially funded by Serhiy Taruta, a steel baron from Donetsk who

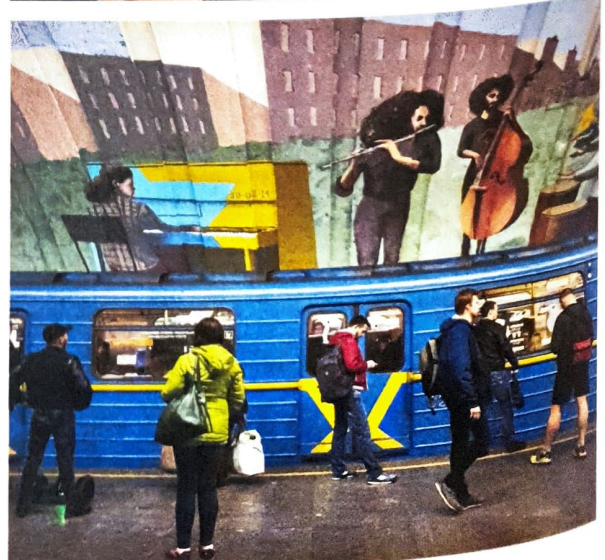
went on to create the far-right National Corps Party in 2016.

Yet Ukrainian far-right parties have performed miserably in elections at a time when their brethren have been on the rise almost everywhere else in Europe. While the extreme Right has a parliamentary presence in France, Germany and the Netherlands, none of the nationalist parties formed in the wake of the Euro-maidan Revolution in 2014 have ever managed to gain a single seat in Ukraine.

Victory in the 2019 presidential election went to Volodymyr Zelensky, a TV star who became famous playing a high-school history teacher turned president on the show *Servant of the People*, which is also the name of his party. The Jewish grandson of Holocaust survivors, Zelensky's ethnic background did not register with the public in any impactful way.

UKRAINE

briefly served as the oblast's governor during the early days of the war. It also received funding from Ihor Kolomoyskyi, one of the country's richest men. Veterans of Azov, which has since been incorporated into the official national guard,



But the political failure of Ukraine's nationalist parties does not change the fact that society has come to tolerate far-right forces within the state-security apparatus. Some of the indifference is a legacy of the Soviet Union's policy of erasing the racism from Nazi ideology. For almost 50 years, memorials to the Holocaust in the USSR only mentioned that the victims were 'Soviet citizens'; according to the official narrative, the Nazis targeted all Soviet ethnicities equally owing to rabid anti-communism.

But in the three decades since independence the Soviet legacy has become less relevant by the day. There is a new kind of cynicism within capitalist Ukraine: in a country where it is understood that oligarchs like Kolomoyskyi and Taruta have the final say, the relevance of ideology takes a backseat to patronage. The

former is currently something of a poster boy for the Ukrainian oligarchy and street gossip has it that he was the hand behind Zelensky's surprise electoral victory.

Is the oligarch funder of Azov himself a Nazi? As Kolomoyskyi is an observant Jew and president of the United Jewish Community of Ukraine, the notion seems absurd. The same goes for Taruta, another prominent leader of the country's Jewish community. In all likelihood they reason, as do many Ukrainians, that neo-Nazis within the ranks are rendered ideologically harmless through the patronage of Jewish individuals.

But while your typical Ukrainian may have no interest in nor great fear of the fascist movement, they may be in for a rude awakening if they continue to be complacent. ●

BENNETT MURRAY

AT A GLANCE

LEADER: President Volodymyr Zelensky

ECONOMY: GNI per capita \$2,660 (Belarus \$5,670, United States \$63,080).

Monetary unit: Hryvnia

Main exports: Grain, sunflower oil, metals.

Once considered the breadbasket of the Soviet Union due to its fertile black earth, Ukraine is today the world's largest exporter of sunflower oil. Soviet Ukraine was also a major industrial base rich in ore deposits, and the country is still a major iron and steel exporter. The country was once a significant arms exporter but the factories now mostly churn out weapons for use on the frontlines in the Donbas.

POPULATION: 37.3 million (excluding Crimea and separatist-controlled territory). Population in separatist-controlled territory is estimated at 3.5 million.

HEALTH: Infant mortality rate: 8 per 1,000 live births (Belarus 3, US 6). Maternal mortality rate: 19 deaths per 100,000 live births. HIV prevalence rate 1.3%.

ENVIRONMENT: Owing to the 1986 Chernobyl



nuclear disaster, Ukraine is home to a 2,600 km² exclusion zone in the oblasts of northern Kyiv and Zhytomyr owing to dangerous levels of radiation. Of particular concern is that damaged industrial plants and coalmines in the Donbas war zone, one of the most industry-heavy regions, may be leaking pollution.

RELIGION: 67.3% Eastern Orthodox; 9.4% Ukrainian Greek Catholic. Ukraine is also home to Crimean Tatar Muslims and a small Jewish community.

LANGUAGE: Ukrainian is the sole official language, but the country is bilingual in practice. Ukrainian is the most common language spoken in the west while Russian is dominant in most cities, including Kyiv, as well as in the southern and eastern oblasts. While native-level competency in Russian is the norm throughout the country, a 2017 poll showed 67.7% identifying Ukrainian as their only native language.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX: 0.751, 88th of 189 countries (Belarus 0.817, US 0.920).

Photos (clockwise from top left): A billboard in the town of Mikolaiv has a clear message for Russia's President Putin – 'Out of Ukraine!'; Lidia Radenko Timifeevna stands in front of the ruins of her house in the village of Nikishyne – one of the first areas of the oblast of Donetsk to be bombed when fighting broke out between pro-Russian and Ukrainian forces in 2015; a traditional singer welcoming Spring at the Slavic pagan holiday of Malenitsa; the Osokorsky metro station in the capital, Kyiv.

IVA ZIMOVA / PANOS

STAR RATINGS



INCOME DISTRIBUTION ★★☆☆☆
Europe's most impoverished country is ruled by a well-heeled oligarchy complete with six billionaires.



LITERACY ★★★★★
100%. Education is a relative bright spot. Kharkiv, home to more than 20 universities, attracts students from across the developing world.



LIFE EXPECTANCY ★★★★★
71 years (Belarus 74, US 79). Healthcare is supposedly free, but frequently is not owing to a combination of underfunding and corruption. Alcohol-induced cirrhosis is a common cause of death, particularly among men.



POSITION OF WOMEN ★★☆☆☆
While the status of women is improving, the country remains brutally patriarchal. Domestic violence was only criminalized in 2019 while sexual violence, especially in the war zone, remains rife.



FREEDOM ★★★★★
Unlike neighbouring post-Soviet countries Russia and Belarus, whose autocratic leaders have ruled since 2000 and 1994 respectively, Ukraine has seen a revolving door of presidents since 1991. Freedom of expression is, for the most part, permitted by the state, particularly since the 2014 revolution.



SEXUAL MINORITIES ★★☆☆☆
Although homophobia is deeply entrenched, the situation has begun improving in recent years. Kyiv is now home to a legally sanctioned annual pride parade, albeit one that requires extensive police protection to keep the crowd safe from far-right thugs.



POLITICS ★★☆☆☆
While Ukraine's elections are free, the oligarchy knows how to spread its largesse around. President Volodymyr Zelensky came to power on a sweeping pledge to clean up corruption, although concrete improvements have yet to materialize. Politics in the two Russian-backed separatist territories is a bloody affair, with infighting often resulting in assassination. Most of eastern Ukraine is under Kyiv's control, with the dominant Opposition Bloc party calling for greater regional autonomy and closer ties with Moscow.

★★★★★ Excellent
★★★★☆ Good
★★★☆☆ Fair
★★☆☆☆ Poor
★☆☆☆☆ Appalling