

Council of Europe issues report on far-right massacre in Odessa

By David Levine
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In November of last year, the International Advisory Panel (IAP) of the Council of Europe (CoE) concluded that the Ukrainian government had failed to properly investigate and prosecute those responsible for violent clashes in Odessa in May 2014 between supporters of the far-right, US-backed coup in Kiev and its opponents. At least 48 people were killed in the conflict.

The overthrow of the government of Viktor Yanukovich, which had rejected an economic alliance with the European Union (EU) in favour of closer ties with Russia, in the Maidan “revolution” resulted in the installation of a virulently anti-Russian government in Kiev. In the wake of the February 2014 coup, ultra-nationalists unleashed a wave of anti-Russian chauvinism, which continues to this day. Odessa, like Donetsk, Luhansk, and Sevastopol, historically has been a predominantly Russian-speaking city.

On May 2, 2014, 6 people were killed by gunfire, mostly on and around Odessa’s Hretska Square. At Kulykove Pole, approximately 12 blocks away, at least another 42 people—the overwhelmingly majority opponents of Kiev—died in a massacre carried out by far-right militia in the city’s trade union hall. Anti-Maidan protesters were assaulted and driven into the public building, which was then set ablaze. Hundreds were injured in the clashes. There is evidence that attackers lay in wait in the trade union hall, shooting, raping, and beating protesters as they sought cover inside.

Two days later, Right Sector, a heavily armed neo-fascist organisation that played a key role in overthrowing Yanukovich, published on its website a statement celebrating the killing of anti-Maidan activists in Odessa as “yet another bright page in our fatherland’s history.” Claiming responsibility for the

slaughter, it wrote, “Bands of anti-state rebels were countered not by professional troops, but by the public, including about a hundred members of Right Sector, as well as *ultras* [extreme football fans] and patriotically-minded Odessa residents. ... Right Sector fighters and other Ukrainian patriots sustained casualties, including some killed and some wounded. However, the losses among the Russian terrorists were much greater, and the very phenomenon of ‘separatists’ in Odessa has disappeared. All of this is attributable to a public unified in its patriotic feelings.”

Likewise, Ukrainian member of Parliament Lesya Orobets published a statement on her Facebook page on May 2 celebrating the “liquidation” of the oppositionist *kolorady* (a derogatory term for those who hold pro-Russian views).

Minister of Internal Affairs Arsen Avakov also made a similar statement on a television talk show on March 27, 2015. Referring to the seizure of government buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk by anti-Kiev forces, which occurred in April 2014, just a few weeks before the Odessa events, he stated, “We should have blown to pieces the building of the Donetsk regional administration. This would have killed about fifty terrorists, but then we would not have had five thousand deaths in Donetsk Region. The same would apply to the Security Council of Ukraine building in Luhansk. ...” These statements suggest that the killing of anti-Maidan activists in the Odessa trade union hall was justified.

Since the May 2014 events, proponents of the new Ukrainian regime have systematically sought to cover up and deny the role of far-right groups—in particular, Right Sector—in the slaughter. They insist that anti-Maidan forces were equally, if not more, responsible for what happened. Almost all of those who

have been arrested in relation to the May 2 events and currently face criminal charges belong to the anti-Maidan camp. No one has been charged yet with any crimes related to the events on Kulykove Pole and the trade union hall.

In its report, the IAP concludes that the government investigations into the “mass disorders” in the city centre and the fire in the Trade Unions Building, as well as the investigation into the conduct of the State Emergency Service (SES) staff in response to the fire, lacked “institutional and practical independence.” In other words, the same people and institutions who bear responsibility for the tragedy have been put in charge of investigating it. At the same time, the IAP report also promotes the idea that “all sides” were responsible for the bloodshed by highlighting an allegedly “independent” examination that lays substantial blame for the massacre at the feet of anti-Maidan protesters.

The IAP relies in part on evidence gathered by the May 2 Group, a nominally independent association of journalists, activists, and experts that formed shortly after the events for the purpose of conducting an investigation upon the initiative of Ihor Palitsa, chairman of the Odessa Regional State Administration. The group’s coordinator is Tetiana Herasymova, a self-declared journalist whose work apparently had never been published before her initial appearance last year as the coordinator of the May 2 Group. While its claims that its members have various political orientations, much of the material on the organisation’s website consists of news commentary justifying the actions of the Ukrainian government and nationalist organisations, while denouncing as Russian propaganda those sources that are more critical of the role of the government and its supporters.

According to the May 2 Group, a mostly spontaneous “mass disorder” occurred in 2014, in which both sides shared approximately equal responsibility for the disorder itself, the acts of violence, including the killings, and the fire. The latter supposedly broke out following a more or less equally reckless exchange of Molotov cocktails between those within the building and those outside.

Their materials generally ignore or deny the existence of evidence that groups, particularly Right Sector, conspired to incite and carry out acts of mass violence, and that Ukrainian authorities acted deliberately to

create the conditions for mass violence in Odessa. Such evidence, including the quotation from the Right Sector website cited above, the testimony of survivors from the Trade Unions Building, and video materials of the events available on YouTube, is also left out of the IAP report. Indeed, the document makes no mention of Right Sector.

In mid-December, the May 2 Group refused to participate in a film festival in Berlin called “Democracy in Flames,” at which numerous films related to the Odessa massacre were being shown. They pulled out of the event on the grounds that they are engaged in a “struggle against lies discrediting Ukraine.” The film festival was planning to show “anti-Ukrainian propaganda” and “videos that clearly and maliciously distort facts about the bloody Odessa drama,” they claimed.

As an agency of the CoE, the IAP is an intergovernmental organisation dominated by NATO members that have lined up against Russia and in support of the far-right regime in Kiev. By holding up the work of the May 2 Group as a model, the CoE is essentially facilitating Kiev’s policy of allowing Right Sector and other far-right militias to commit murder and other crimes with effective impunity.

After the IAP report was published, on November 27, 2015, a three-member judicial panel at the Malinovsky Courthouse in Odessa had planned to release on bail five of the anti-Maidan activists charged in the May 2 events, including Russian citizens Yevgeny Mefyodov and Maksim Sakaurov. On that day, armed Right Sector and Samooborona (“Self Defence”) activists seized control of the courthouse, prevented the judges from issuing the order releasing the defendants on bail, and forced the three judges to sign letters of resignation.

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