Political repression in Ukraine

By Phil Wilayto
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The U.S. media is full of stories about what it calls political repression in other countries, but it's strangely silent when it comes to Ukraine.

Here's one example:

In the early morning of March 19, 2022, agents from the federal Security Service of Ukraine, the SBU, showed up at the apartment of Yuri Tkachev, editor-in-chief of the online publication Timer, based in the southern Black Sea port of Odessa.

What happened next was reported on Timer's website (1), quoting journalist and human rights activist Oksana Chelysheva (2), who said she had spoken with Tkachev's wife:

"According to [Oksana], when Yuri opened the door of the apartment, he did not show any resistance. Despite this, the SBU dragged him to the site, laying him face down. They also asked Oksana to leave the apartment. No violence was used against her.

"Oksana claims that through the open front door she saw how one of the SBU officers entered the bathroom and stayed there for several minutes. … After this man left the bathroom, the SBU took Yury [sic] and Oksana back to the apartment, where the search began."

A few minutes later, the SBU agents "discovered" a grenade and a TNT bomb in the bathroom. Tkachev was arrested and, according to his wife, taken away and interrogated by the SBU. All his computers were confiscated. It was only later that Tkachev's attorney was allowed to visit him.

Chelysheva reported that the journalist was "ready to defend his innocence," and that Oksana said "they really need attention."

The Odessa Massacre of 2014

Timer isn't what you would call a left-wing publication. Most of its news has to do with mundane municipal matters like infrastructure issues, car crashes, the weather. But it did have fairly extensive - and objective - coverage of the Odessa Massacre of May 2, 2014. That's when a mob led by openly fascist organizations attacked a much smaller group of progressives, chased them into the five-story House of Trade Unions building in Odessa's Kulikovo square and set the building on fire, killing at least 42 mostly young men and women. (3)

To date, not one of the perpetrators has been punished, despite the fact that their faces can clearly be seen on dozens of cellphone videos taken at the attack and posted online. (4)

The mob attack took place just a few months after the U.S.-backed violent, right-wing coup that overthrew the elected president, Viktor Yanukovych, ushering in an ultranationalist government that was both hostile to the ethnic Russian minority, which is 17 percent of the country, and tolerant of the country's growing fascist movement.

I met Yuri Tkachev in Odessa's Kulikovo square on May 2, 2016, at the second annual memorial for the victims of the massacre. He and his staff were covering the event for their publication. It was an interesting day. Several neo-Nazi organizations had announced that they were going to attack the memorial. One had applied for a permit to hold a machine gun class at the square for its youth group.

The Odessa Massacre was a stunning example of what lay in store after the coup for ethnic Russians and political dissidents, a situation that led to the people of Crimea to decide to separate from Ukraine and rejoin Russia - which they had been part of

for 300 years; the declaration of independence of the People's Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk in the eastern Donbass region; pitched battles between fascists and leftists in the eastern seaport of Mariupol; and physical attacks throughout the country on anyone deemed to be unsupportive of Ukrainian ultranationalism.

Yuri Tkachev: Not an isolated case

The March 19 arrest and detention of Yuri Tkachev comes amid a new political crackdown that the Ukrainian government has been carrying out during the present crisis.

- On Feb. 24, after Russia launched what it calls its "special military operation" in Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelensky declared martial law. (5)
- On March 19 and 20, Zelensky invoked his new emergency powers to outlaw 11 opposition political parties, accusing them of being "pro-Russian," even though many of them had opposed the Russian invasion. Most were small, but one, the Opposition Platform for Life, came in second in the recent elections and had held 10 percent of the 450 seats in the Ukrainian Parliament. (6) The Communist Party of Ukraine had already been banned in 2015.
- That same weekend, the president nationalized television news, combining all national TV channels into one government-run platform to create a "unified information policy." (7)
- Meanwhile, many individual leftists have come under attack, including Mikhail and Aleksandr Kononovich, brothers and youth leaders of the Communist Party of Ukraine who were jailed earlier in March. International demands for their release have been ignored by Kiev. (8)
- In Kiev, the SBU arrested and imprisoned Yan Taksyur, a 70-year-old Orthodox journalist and TV presenter. According to the Ukrainian journalist Miroslava Berdnik, Taksyur, a cancer patient, lost consciousness from pain and was visited by a doctor, but was not allowed to be sent to a hospital. (9)
- Alexey Albu, a spokesperson for the leftist organization Borotba, said the group's members and supporters have been targeted since the war began, with the whereabouts of many unknown. (8)

The present conflict between Russia and Ukraine is being presented in the West as a struggle between a dictatorship and a democracy, but it's a strange democracy that bans opposition political parties, takes over the media, arrests and frames up journalists and turns a blind eye to atrocities committed by neo-Nazi militias.

It might be time to start questioning our own media - again.

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