

On the eve of the presidential elections

Ukrainian far right mobilized in inter-oligarchic infighting

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With less than two weeks left in the presidential campaign, the Ukrainian Interior Minister has mobilized against incumbent president Petro Poroshenko the very same far-right forces that were instrumental in the imperialist-backed 2014 coup that brought Poroshenko to power.

Last week, Poroshenko, who currently sits in third place in Ukraine's Presidential election polls, behind comedian and leading candidate Volodmyr Zelenskiy and former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, was accosted by members of the far-right Azov Battalion-affiliated National Militia in the city of Zhytomyr during a campaign stop. In a photo that was widely shared on social media, Poroshenko was seen fleeing reporters and the far-right thugs while jumping through puddles in the street.

Earlier that week, on March 9, members of the National Militia and other far-right groups attacked Poroshenko's office in Kiev, leading to the deployment of 700 officers with tear gas to prevent a potential coup against Poroshenko prior to the March 31 presidential elections.

The attacks by the far right on Poroshenko come weeks after the release of an explosive Youtube video reporting that the son of one of Poroshenko's close political allies, Ihor Hladkovskyy, had begun smuggling military parts from Russia in 2015 and then used private companies linked to Hladkovskyy and Poroshenko to sell the smuggled parts to the military at highly inflated prices. According to the report, the government knew that the items were smuggled into Ukraine from Russia and that the prices were inflated, but continued to purchase the parts in order to enrich companies linked to Hladkovskyy and Poroshenko. Poroshenko later removed Hladkovskyy from his position as deputy secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council.

In the wake of this report, figures such as far-right Azov Battalion leader Andrey Biletsky and his ally Interior Minister Arsen Avakov have come out publicly in opposition to another presidential term for Poroshenko. Despite being a member of Poroshenko's government and parliamentary bloc, Avakov stated in an interview with Ukraine's ICTV, "We are at the end of the political cycle. One way or another, when this political cycle ends, we will have a new president and a new government. And here I am absolutely calm."

Biletsky and the Azov Battalion have demanded the resignation of Poroshenko prior to the elections, and promised to break up all Poroshenko campaign events prior to March 31.

Interior Minister Avakov, who is the only minister who has been part of changing administrations in Kiev ever since the coup in 2014, is rumored to be allied with Poroshenko's rival in the election, former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko. Both Biletsky and Avakov are regarded as political friends of the exiled oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi. Kolomoyskyi is said to be bankrolling both Tymoshenko and leading candidate Volodmyr Zelenskiy against Poroshenko in the upcoming elections.

Avakov, who as Interior Minister controls the country's police force, National Guard, and successor militias to the Azov Battalion which have been incorporated into the government, has immense power to control and threaten voting sites in the upcoming elections. He could also easily order police to stand by in the event of a far-right insurrection against the Poroshenko government.

In addition, the Biletsky-affiliated National Militia have been named official election observers by the country's Central Election Commission. The group has promised to violently threaten anyone it perceives as committing "fraud," stating, "If we need to punch someone in the

face in the name of justice, we will do this without hesitation.”

The comments by Biletsky and Avakov and the threats by the far right point to potentially violent clashes on March 31, with each side crying foul. Poroshenko, who still enjoys the support of the regular military and his Western imperialist backers, has begun making statements promising that the upcoming elections will be “honest” and “would fully meet European standards of the election campaign.” He is using these declarations to set the stage to condemn the results due to election “fraud,” and to seek Western support if he fails to make it out of the first round of the voting.

Poroshenko, whose campaign has relied chiefly on the whipping up of nationalism, religious separatism and Russophobia, has responded to the attacks from the far right by stepping up militaristic threats against Russia. He has tried to portray his far-right opponents as playing into the hands of the Kremlin, stating in one interview, “Putin hopes that anyone but Poroshenko will be elected, so that the new Ukrainian leaders crawl on their knees and grant him Crimea. My position—don’t count on it! We will liberate Crimea.”

Poroshenko is well aware that both Tymoshenko and Zelenskyi are seen as less reliable allies of the United States and NATO in their ongoing confrontation with Russia. Zelenskyi, a native Russian speaker who enjoys widespread popularity both in Russia and Ukraine, previously appealed to Putin to avoid a military confrontation between the two countries. Tymoshenko likewise has had previous business contacts with Russia, and has made vague promises to end the conflict “peacefully.”

The mobilization of the far right, which is drenched in the blood of thousands of Ukrainian civilians who were killed in the past five years of civil war and has rampaged through numerous villages of the Sinti and Roma ethnic minorities, is a direct result of the imperialist-backed coup in 2014, fraudulently portrayed as a “democratic revolution” by the bourgeois media. In reality, exploiting the factional warfare within the oligarchy, the imperialist powers, above all the US and Germany, mobilized far-right forces to bring to power a regime directly subservient to their interests and complicit in their open war preparations against Russia.

Whatever the outcome of the upcoming elections, US imperialism, which views Ukraine as a country of strategic significance in the encirclement of and war preparations against Russia, will not tolerate any

deviation from the confrontational stance taken toward Russia by Poroshenko.

The fascistic forces mobilized openly in 2013-2014 have now become the trump card in the internecine factional battles of the oligarchy. Fueling the explosive conflicts within the oligarchy and the government are the enormous social tensions in the country.

The months leading up to the election campaign have seen a growing wave of protests and strikes by the impoverished working class. The Poroshenko regime responded to these class tensions with an imperialist-backed provocation against Russia in the Azov Sea in late October, and the declaration of martial law in several Ukrainian regions before the election campaign.

Recent polls and media reports show that the overwhelming sentiment in the Ukrainian population is one of opposition both to the ongoing war in the east and to the staggering levels of poverty prevailing in the country. With Poroshenko and Tymoshenko widely hated, the comedian Zelenskyi has been able to capitalize on popular discontent by portraying himself as a pro-peace candidate who would de-escalate tensions with Russia and fight the endemic corruption in the country.

The current situation harbors serious dangers for the working class. The same shock troops that have been targeting Poroshenko and that have been employed against the East Ukrainian civilian population since 2014, will be employed in any major social confrontation between the country’s working class and the oligarchy. They will also be utilized in the case of an escalation of the war, both domestically and against Russia, which continues to be the policy direction of substantial sections of Ukrainian ruling circles, and of the US foreign policy establishment.



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