

Far-right thugs attack prominent Ukrainian journalist Ruslan Kotsaba

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In another of many recent assaults on the press in Ukraine, pacifist journalist Ruslan Kotsaba suffered a chemical attack from far-right thugs on June 25 while exiting from a train in the Western city of Ivano-Frankivsk, Kotsaba's hometown.

Kotsaba was later treated for extensive chemical burns to his eyes and doctors warned he may suffer permanent vision loss as a result of the attack.

Among the 15 suspected attackers who threw a green chemical substance at Kotsaba and yelled “Glory to Ukraine!,” Kotsaba recognized one as leader of the infamous neo-Nazi Right Sector paramilitary group. The Right Sector was prominently involved in the US- and EU-backed coup in Kiev in February 2014, which toppled the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich.

Following the attack, another far-right paramilitary group called “Trident” claimed responsibility for the attack. Members of the country's numerous other fascist gangs expressed support for the assault.

The attack in many ways resembles the 2018 killing of Ukrainian activist and politician Kateryna Handziuk. Handziuk was horribly burned with acid by members of the Right Sector and ultimately died from her injuries.

Despite the horrific nature of Handziuk's murder, her killers have never been convicted.

In almost all cases involving such fascist elements in Ukraine, the culprits are rarely prosecuted or receive light sentences due to their usefulness to the right-wing Ukrainian government in carrying out the war in Eastern Ukraine and crushing political opposition.

Since the installation of a pro-NATO government in Kiev in 2014, eleven journalists have been killed according to International Press Institute (IPI) data.

The fact that Kotsaba's attackers were waiting on the train platform suggests that his attackers had either

trailed Kotsaba or were tipped off by elements within the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), which is controlled by Interior Minister Arsen Avakov who himself is notorious for his ties to Ukraine's neo-Nazis.

Previously, Kotsaba had been targeted several times by right-wing thugs due to his well-known pacifist stance towards the ongoing civil war in eastern Ukraine that has killed 14,000 and displaced tens of thousands. In addition, Kotsaba opposes Ukraine's accession to NATO, a goal which is now central to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

In 2015, Kotsaba was arrested and imprisoned for “treason” after he posted a YouTube video opposing the war mobilization initiated by then President Petro Poroshenko against the breakaway provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk in the eastern Donbass region of the country.

“I would rather go to prison than go into civil war now and kill my compatriots who live in the East. I will not take part in this fratricidal war,” Kotsaba declared in the video that was viewed over 500,000 times at a time when opposition to war was virtually outlawed by the capitalist Ukrainian media.

Kotsaba himself had previously been a right-wing Ukrainian nationalist and supported the 2004 US-backed “Orange Revolution”. On videos on his YouTube channel, he has made blatantly anti-Semitic and anti-Communist statements. In one of them, he described the Holocaust, which claimed over a million lives in Ukraine alone, as “punishment” for “the Jews” allegedly having brought forth “Trotsky, Kamenev, Zinoviev” as well as Nazism, indicating his far-right political orientation at the time.

Today, he describes himself as a libertarian. Following the outbreak of the civil war in the East in 2014, he became an outspoken and prominent opponent

of the Ukrainian government's military action against the Russian-backed separatists and civilian population.

While working as a national TV correspondent in 2014, Kotsaba reported on the escalating hostilities in the Donbass region and was horrified by the seemingly wanton violence carried out by the Ukrainian army against civilians in Eastern Ukraine. "The smell of rotting human flesh haunts me from the beginning of summer when my first trip to the area of hostilities began. I spent too many sleepless nights and saw too many smoldering corpses to be silent after that," Kotsaba wrote while behind bars awaiting trial.

Kotsaba would ultimately spend 524 days in jail awaiting trial before being acquitted in 2016 and then retried and acquitted again in 2017.

In January this year, Kotsaba was attacked by a far-right mob and sprayed with a fire extinguisher while attending yet another hearing in the still unresolved case against him by the Ukrainian government.

Unlike the case of the extremely right-wing anti-Putin oppositionist Alexei Navalny in Russia, who receives near weekly coverage from the *New York Times*, Kotsaba's case is almost unknown outside of Ukraine as it is being purposefully ignored by the bourgeois press.

Within Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelensky has notably failed to comment on the attack. Instead, he has spent the past week sending out tweets supporting the Ukrainian national soccer team in this year's European Championships. Apart from their on-field performance, Ukraine's national team made international news by jingoistically placing a map of Ukraine on their jersey that includes Crimea, a peninsula in the Black Sea that Russia annexed in March 2014, following the far-right coup in Kiev.

The attack on Kotsaba takes place as the Zelensky government continues to engage in blatant jingoism and provocative moves towards Russia in the wake of the confrontation between a British destroyer warship HMS Defender and Russian patrol ships in the Black Sea. At the time when the attack occurred, the US and Ukraine were also in the middle of co-hosting the massive Sea Breeze naval exercise in the Black Sea despite official requests by Russia to cancel it.

While the government of Zelensky was elected above all because of popular opposition to the nationalist, militaristic regime of Poroshenko that had come to

power after the 2014 coup, Zelensky has in many ways gone even further than Poroshenko in bringing Ukraine to the brink of war with Russia.

Earlier this year, Zelensky announced an overtly aggressive policy to retake Crimea, undemocratically cracked down on the press and sanctioned and prosecuted pro-Russian oligarch and opposition politician, Viktor Medvedchuk.

Recently, Zelensky acknowledged that peace negotiations over the breakaway provinces were going nowhere and floated the idea of totally blockading the separatist regions and cutting off all ties. He spoke of a necessary "Plan B" that "we are in," and threatened to build a "wall in all relations," including communications and cutting off waters supplies to cities like Mariupol.

Zelensky is well aware that in order to enforce such a blockade, he would need the backing of both NATO and the far-right, who continue to play an oversized role in conducting the war against Donbass and in crushing any potential political opposition by the working class.



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