The Greek government's responsibility for violent attacks on Russians in Athens

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Words are followed by deeds, the saying goes. Spurred on by the nationalist howls of war that have permeated every TV channel and newspaper around the world since the start of the Ukraine war, more and more right-wing radicals in Europe feel emboldened to commit violent and racist attacks.

A shocking incident occurred at the end of April during the Orthodox Easter festival in Greece. Ten to 12 Ukrainian nationalists beat up three people of Russian origin who were celebrating Easter on the beach in Athens. Among the victims was Oksana Maryakhina, a historian and archaeologist who studied at Athens' Kapodistrias University and has lived in Greece for 20 years, where she also works as a tour guide.

Maryakhina described to the Greek news website *The Press Project* how the group of Ukrainian nationalists shouted the far-right slogan "Slava Ukraini" ("Glory to Ukraine") and attacked her and two friends after they identified themselves as Russians. One of them hit her in the face with a knuckle duster, she said. "They kicked and punched my arms, legs and ribs so that I collapsed covered in blood." Police were called but were late in arriving, she said. In a video posted on her Facebook page the day after, she showed the wounds on her eye, cheek and head.

"This is clearly a fascist attack just because we are Russians and we support our country," she said in an interview with *The Press Project*. "Not only do we feel threatened, but now we are afraid to speak Russian in the street." There have been many attacks, and Russian restaurants are also being threatened, Maryakhina said. The newspaper refers to screenshots it has showing that Ukrainian nationalists have created lists of "pro-Russian separatists" in Greece.

There were right-wing extremist attacks in Greece in the first weeks after the war began. In mid-March, neo-Nazis desecrated the monument to the Soviet soldier in the Athens district of Kallithea, dedicated to three Red Army prisoners of war who were executed by the Nazi occupiers in the summer of 1944. Unknown persons daubed the monument with the word "Azov," a reference to the far-right Ukrainian Azov battalion fighting Russia, the SS symbol of the "Wolfangel," used by Azov, and the Celtic cross, an identifying symbol of Greek and international far-right groups.

In early April, violent attacks took place against a pro-Russian motorcade protest in central Athens, injuring two people and damaging cars. According to the daily *Kathimerini*, criminal proceedings were initiated against two suspects of Georgian origin for attempted murder, racism, violation of the weapons law and other charges.

Such acts of violence against the backdrop of the Ukraine war are not limited to Greece. In Bulgaria, clashes broke out a few days ago after the parliament voted in favour of "military-technical support" for Ukraine. Pro-Ukrainian demonstrators demanding arms deliveries tried to cover the Soviet Army monument in the capital Sofia with the Ukrainian and Bulgarian flags, which pro-Russian counter-demonstrators prevented. A member of the Stalinist Bulgarian organisation "Movement 23 September" was allegedly beaten up by right-wing radicals wearing the Azov symbol on their clothes, *The Press Project* reported.

In Germany, too, attacks are taking place in connection with the Ukraine war, which are hardly reported by the media. On April 19, the Federal Criminal Police Office reported that around 200 crimes were being committed per week, including threats, insults and damage to property, which are directed "mostly against members of our society of Russian origin, but also against members of our society of Ukrainian origin."

As the WSWS warned in its first statement after the war began, Putin's reactionary invasion is dividing the Russian and Ukrainian working class and playing directly into the hands of US and European imperialism. The Western governments have since unleashed a rapid arms build-up and anti-Russia smear campaign. They are deliberately escalating the conflict which threatens to develop into a nuclear war.

Greece plays a key role in NATO policy because of its strategically important geopolitical position. The government under the right-wing Nea Dimokratia (ND) fully supports NATO's war course and the sanctions of the European Union (EU), despite historically close cultural and economic ties to Russia. Greece was one of the first EU countries to promise arms deliveries to Ukraine, sending mainly rifles and anti-tank missiles. The Greek armed forces are also represented in NATO's Rapid Reaction Force (NRF), which was activated after the Russian invasion and deployed to the Eastern flank.

An important hub for NATO's Eastern flank is the northern

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Greek port city of Alexandroupolis, through which weapons and armaments from other NATO states are transported towards Ukraine. Two nuclear-powered aircraft carriers—the USS Harry S. Truman from the US and the Charles de Gaulle from France—have been transferred to Greece in the Mediterranean.

Greece had already strengthened military relations with the US and Europe before the war. From 2017, the pseudo-left Syriza government, in coalition with the far-right Anel, had pushed military cooperation with Washington under then-President Donald Trump.

Last autumn, a military agreement with France was signed, and the Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement (MDCA) with the US was renewed. This new agreement will enter into force for five years, unlike the previous ones which were renewed annually. It allows the expansion of the four US bases in Souda, Larissa, Volos and Alexandroupolis, while committing Greece to provide further bases according to the strategic requirements of the US.

To push through its foreign policy line, the government is trying to create a climate hostile to Russia. Greek Culture Minister Lina Mendoni implemented sanctions against Russian cultural institutions as early as the beginning of March and canceled all planned performances of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* with the Bolshoi Ballet, causing a storm of indignation.

On April 7, the government invited Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to address the Greek parliament by video. Zelensky then ceded the stage to a Greek-born member of the fascist Azov battalion in Mariupol who appealed to Greek nationalism in a repulsive video message.

In the embattled regions of eastern Ukraine, especially in Mariupol, Donetsk and Odessa, there are many members of the Greek minority who have settled on the Sea of Azov for centuries and today still number about 100,000 inhabitants. The fate of these people, who are now suffering from the catastrophic destruction of their towns in the proxy war between NATO and Russia, is cynically misused by the Greek government for its nationalist war rhetoric.

The fact that a member of a fascist fighting organisation was courted in the Greek parliament caused widespread horror in the working class. In a poll, 65 percent gave a negative assessment of the Ukrainian president's appearance in parliament, only 11 percent reacted positively.

Then, a week ago, Greek state television ERT broadcast an exclusive interview with Zelensky in which he downplayed the role of the Azov Battalion to allay concerns among the Greek population. In 2014, volunteer battalions still dominated, making "quite radical" statements against Russia, Zelensky said. But that had allegedly changed now that the Azov regiment is officially part of the Ukrainian armed forces. So, the incorporation and arming of the neo-Nazis is said to have tamed them!

Ukrainian Ambassador Sergei Shutenko in Athens was also given the opportunity to defend the Azov orator in an interview on ERT last week, complaining of an allegedly great influence of Russian propaganda on the Greek public.

What is troubling the ruling class is that despite all its efforts, antiwar sentiment among the population continues to grow. This is evidenced in two polls on the Ukraine war published by the Greek polling institute Public Issue on March 21 and April 18. According to these polls, 68 percent of respondents expressed displeasure with the government's policy on the Ukraine issue in March and 74 percent in April. The number of those who advocated that Greece adopt a neutral position also rose from 65 to 71 percent, while only 20 percent argued in favour of supporting Ukraine.

The negative assessment of the presidents of Russia, Ukraine and the US also continued to rise: for Vladimir Putin from 72 to 74 percent, for Joe Biden from 60 to 69 percent and for Volodymyr Zelensky from 56 to 68 percent.

The Greek ruling class is sitting on a powder keg. It is trying to pass on the costs of the war to the working class, which is already living from hand to mouth after 10 years of austerity dictates. The Greek statistics authority expected inflation to rise to over 10 percent in April. At the end of March, a survey by Alco for the trade union federation GSEE showed that 59 percent of respondents had to save on basic foodstuffs. The figure was as high as 74 percent for heating costs and 80 percent for leisure activities. In addition, the pandemic has officially claimed almost 30,000 lives in Greece.

Opposition to the course of the war and its social consequences already erupted at the beginning of April in a general strike that paralysed the whole country. In the weeks before, Greek railway workers had blocked the transport of NATO armoured military vehicles to the Ukrainian border with a strike. At the end of April, dockworkers went on strike because of the unacceptable working conditions at Cosco at the port of Piraeus.

On Tuesday, a demonstration took place in Athens against the draconian new labour laws which, among other things, restrict the right to strike. Private sector workers and transport workers stopped work from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

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