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# "One less traitor": Zelensky oversees campaign of assassination, kidnapping and torture of political opposition - The Grayzone

*Max Blumenthal and Esha Krishnaswamy · April 17, 2022*

21-26 minutes

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**While claiming to defend democracy, Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky has outlawed his opposition, ordered his rivals' arrest, and presided over the disappearance and assassination of dissidents across the country.**

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has framed his country's war against Russia as a battle for democracy itself. In a carefully choreographed address to US Congress on March 16, [Zelensky stated](#), "Right now, the destiny of our country is being decided. The destiny of our people, whether Ukrainians will be free, whether they will be able to preserve their democracy."

US corporate media has responded by showering Zelensky with fawning press, driving a campaign for his nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize and inspiring a [flamboyant musical tribute](#) to himself and the Ukrainian military during the 2022 Grammy awards ceremony on April 3.

Western media has looked the other way, however, as Zelensky and top officials in his administration have sanctioned a campaign of kidnapping, torture, and assassination of local Ukrainian lawmakers accused of collaborating with Russia. Several mayors and other Ukrainian officials have been killed since the outbreak of war, many reportedly by Ukrainian state agents after engaging in de-escalation talks with Russia.

“There is one less traitor in Ukraine,” Internal Affairs Ministry advisor Anton Geraschenko stated in endorsement of the murder of a Ukrainian mayor accused of collaborating with Russia.

Zelensky has further exploited the atmosphere of war to outlaw an array of opposition parties and order the arrest of his leading rivals. His authoritarian decrees have triggered the disappearance, torture and even murder of an array of human rights activists, communist and leftist organizers, journalists and government officials accused of “pro-Russian” sympathies.

The Ukrainian SBU security services has served as the enforcement arm of the officially authorized campaign of repression. With training from the CIA and close coordination with Ukraine’s state-backed neo-Nazi paramilitaries, the SBU has spent the past weeks filling its vast archipelago of torture dungeons with political dissidents.

On the battlefield, meanwhile, the Ukrainian military has engaged in a series of atrocities against captured Russian troops and proudly exhibited its sadistic acts on social media. Here too, the perpetrators of human rights abuses appear to have received approval from the upper echelons of Ukrainian leadership.

While Zelensky spouts bromides about the defense of

democracy before worshipful Western audiences, he is using the war as a theater for enacting a blood-drenched purge of political rivals, dissidents and critics.

“The war is being used to kidnap, imprison and even kill opposition members who express themselves critical of the government,” a left-wing activist beaten and persecuted by Ukraine’s security services [commented](#) this April. “We must all fear for our freedom and our lives.”

### **Torture and enforced disappearances “common practices” of Ukraine’s SBU**

When a US-backed government seized power in Kiev following the Euromaidan regime change operation of 2013-14, Ukraine’s government embarked on a nationwide purge of political elements deemed pro-Russian or insufficiently nationalistic. The passage of [“decommunization”](#) laws by the Ukrainian parliament further eased the persecution of leftist elements and the prosecution of activists for political speech.

The post-Maidan regime has focused its wrath on Ukrainians who have advocated a peace settlement with pro-Russian separatists in the country’s east, those who have documented human rights abuses by the Ukrainian military, and members of communist organizations. Dissident elements have faced the constant threat of ultra-nationalist violence, imprisonment, and even murder.

The Ukrainian security service known as the SBU has served as the main enforcer of the post-Maidan government’s campaign of domestic political repression. Pro-Western monitors including the United Nations Office of the High Commission (UN OHCHR) and [Human Rights Watch](#) have accused the SBU of

systematically torturing political opponents and Ukrainian dissidents with near-total impunity.

The [UN OHCHR found](#) in 2016 that “arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture and ill-treatment of such conflict-related detainees were common practice of SBU... A former Kharkiv SBU officer explained, ‘For the SBU, the law virtually does not exist as everything that is illegal can be either classified or explained by referring to state necessity.’”

Yevhen Karas, the founder of the [infamous neo-Nazi C14 unit](#), has detailed the close relationship his gang and other extreme right factions have enjoyed with the SBU. The SBU “informs not only us, but also Azov, the Right Sector, and so on,” Karas [boasted](#) in a 2017 interview.

### **Kiev officially endorses assassinating Ukrainian mayors for negotiating with Russia**

Since Russia launched its military operation inside Ukraine, the SBU has hunted down local officials that decided to accept humanitarian supplies from Russia or negotiated with Russian forces to arrange corridors for civilian evacuations.

On March 1, for example, Volodymyr Strok, the mayor of the eastern city of Kreminna in the Ukrainian-controlled side of Lugansk, was kidnapped by men in military uniform, according to his wife, and [shot in the heart](#).

On March 3, pictures of Strok’s visibly tortured body appeared. A day before his murder, Strok had [reportedly](#) urged his Ukrainian colleagues to negotiate with pro-Russian officials.

Anton Gerashchenko, an advisor to the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs, celebrated the mayor’s murder, [declaring on his Telegram page](#) (see below): “There is one less traitor in Ukraine.

The mayor of Kreminna in Luhansk region, former deputy of Luhansk parliament was found killed.”

According to Geraschenko, Strok had been judged by the “court of the people’s tribunal.”



**Одним зрадником України стало менше.**

**Знайдено вбитим Голову Кремінецької ОТГ Луганської області Володимира Струка, колишнього депутата Луганської облради.**

**2014 року був активним прибічником ЛНР. Потім виїхав на вільну від окупації частину Луганської області.**

**В останній тиждень активно зайняв проросійську позицію, агітуючи депутатів ОТГ до комунікації з РФ та ЛНР, збирав депутатів з цього приводу.**

**01.03.2022 була заява від дружини, що його викрали невідомі в камуфляжній формі.**

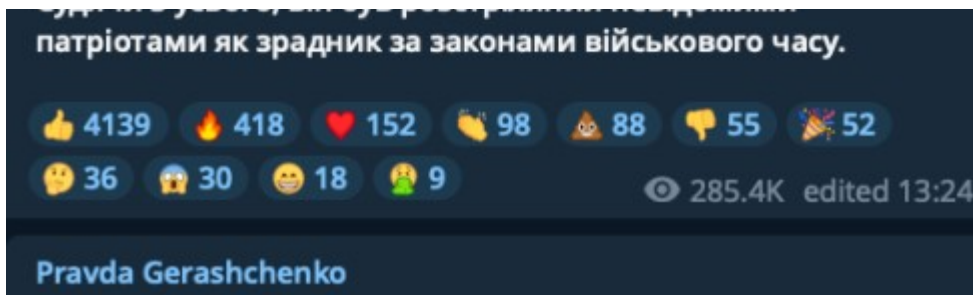
**Причина смерті (попередньо) - вогнепальне поранення в область серця.**

**Весь державний апарат України - СБУ, МВС, Прокуратура, Суди, 8 ровн нічого не могли зробити з відвертим сепаратистом Струком.**

**Бо в нього було багато грошей. Скоріш за все за підтримки з РФ.**

**Але коли російські війська підійшли за 15 км до Кремініц Володимира Струка судили судом народного трибуналу.**

**Судячи з усього, він був розстріляний невідомими**



Telegram post by Anton Gerashchenko, advisor to the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs, celebrating the assassination of “traitor” and Kreminna Mayor Volodymyr Struk

The Ukrainian official therefore delivered a chilling message to anyone choosing to seek cooperation with Russia: do so and lose your life.

On March 7, the mayor of Gostomel, Yuri Prylipko, was found murdered. Prylipko had [reportedly entered into negotiations](#) with the Russian military to organize a humanitarian corridor for the evacuation of his city’s residents – a red line for Ukrainian ultra-nationalists who had long been in conflict with the mayor’s office.

Next, on March 24, Gennady Matsegora, the mayor of Kupyansk in northeastern Ukraine, released a video (below) appealing to President Volodymyr Zelensky and his administration for the release of his daughter, who had been held hostage by agents of the Ukrainian SBU intelligence agency.

Then there was the murder of Denis Kireev, a top member of the Ukrainian negotiating team, who was killed in broad daylight in Kiev after the first round of talks with Russia. Kireev was subsequently [accused](#) in local Ukrainian media of “treason.”

President Volodymyr Zelensky’s statement that “there would be consequences for collaborators” indicates that these atrocities have been sanctioned by the highest levels of government.

As of today, eleven mayors from various towns in Ukraine are missing. Western media outlets have been following the Kiev line without exception, [claiming](#) that all mayors been arrested by the Russian military. The Russian Ministry of Defense has denied the charge, however, and little evidence exists to corroborate Kiev's line about the missing mayors.

## **Zelensky outlaws political opposition, authorizes arrest of rivals and war propaganda blitz**

When war erupted with Russia this February, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky issued a series of decrees formalizing Kiev's campaign against political opposition and dissident speech.

In a March 19 executive order, Zelensky invoked martial law to [ban 11 opposition parties](#). The outlawed parties consisted of the entire left-wing, socialist or anti-NATO spectrum in Ukraine. They included the For Life Party, the Left Opposition, the Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine, the Socialist Party of Ukraine, Union of Left Forces, Socialists, the Party of Shariy, Ours, State, Opposition Bloc and the Volodymyr Saldo Bloc.

Openly fascist and pro-Nazi parties like the Azov National Corps were left untouched by the presidential decree, however.

"The activities of those politicians aimed at division or collusion will not succeed, but will receive a harsh response," President Zelensky [stated](#).

As he wiped out his opposition, Zelensky [ordered](#) an unprecedented domestic propaganda initiative to nationalize all television news broadcasting and [combine](#) all channels into a single 24 hour channel called "United News" to "tell the truth about war."

Next, on April 12, Zelensky announced the arrest of his principal political rival, Viktor Medvedchuk, by Ukraine's SBU security services.

The founder of the second largest party in Ukraine, the now-illegal Patriots for Life, Medvedchuk is the de facto representative of the country's ethnic Russian population. Though Patriots for Life is regarded as "pro-Russia," in part because of his close relations with Vladimir Putin, the new chairman of the party has [condemned](#) Russia's "aggression" against Ukraine.

Members of the state-sponsored neo-Nazi Azov Battalion's National Corps [attacked Medvedchuk's home](#) in March 2019, accusing him of treason and demanding his arrest.

In August 2020, Azov's National Corps [opened fire](#) on a bus carrying representatives of Medvedchuk's party, wounding several with rubber-coated steel bullets.

Zelensky's administration escalated the assault on his top opponent in February 2021 when he [shuttered](#) several media outlets controlled by Medvedchuk. The US State Department openly endorsed the president's move, [declaring](#) that the United States "supports Ukrainian efforts to counter Russia's malign influence..."

Three months later, Kiev [jailed Medvedchuk and charged him with treason](#). Zelensky justified locking away his leading rival on the grounds that he needed to "fight against the danger of Russian aggression in the information arena."

Medvedchuk escaped house arrest at the onset of the war between Russia and Ukraine, but is a captive once again, and may be used as collateral for a post-war prisoner swap with Russia.



## **Under Zelensky's watch, "the war is being used to kidnap, imprison and even kill opposition members"**

Since Russian troops entered Ukraine on February 24, Ukraine's SBU security service had been on a rampage against any and all iterations of internal political opposition. Leftist Ukrainian activists have faced particularly harsh treatment, including kidnapping and torture.

This March 3 in the city of Dnipro, SBU officers accompanied by Azov ultra-nationalists raided the home of activists with the Livizja (Left) organization, which has organized against social spending cuts and right-wing media propaganda. While one activist said the Azov member "cut my hair off with a knife," the state security agents proceeded to torture her husband, Alexander Matjuschenko, pressing a gun barrel to his head and forcing him to repeatedly belt out the nationalist salute, "Slava Ukraini!"

"Then they put bags over our heads, tied our hands with tape and took us to the SBU building in a car. There they continued to interrogate us and threatened to cut off our ears,"

Matjuschenko's wife [told the leftist German publication Junge Welt](#).

The Azov members and SBU agents recorded the torture session and published images of Matjuschenko's bloodied face online.





The torture of left-wing activist Alexander Matjuschenko on March 3 in Dnipro, recorded by Azov members and posted on Telegram by the city of Dnipro

Matjuschenko was jailed on the grounds that he was “conducting an aggressive war or military operation,” and now faces 10 to 15 years in prison. Despite enduring several broken ribs from the beating by state-backed ultra-nationalists, he has been denied bail. Meanwhile, dozens of other [leftists have been jailed](#) on similar charges in Dnipro.

Among those targeted by the SBU were Mikhail and Aleksander Kononovich, members of the outlawed Leninist Communist Youth Union of Ukraine. Both were [arrested and jailed](#) on March 6 and accused of “spreading pro-Russian and pro-Belarusian views.”

In the following days, the SBU arrested broadcast journalist Yan Taksyur and charged him with treason; human rights activist Elena Berezhnaya; Elena Viacheslavova, a human rights advocate whose father, Mikhail, was burned to death during the

[May 2, 2014 ultra-nationalist mob attack](#) on anti-Maidan protesters outside the Odessa House of Trade Unions; independent journalist Yuri Tkachev, who was charged with treason, and an untold number of others; disabled rights activist Oleg Novikov, who was [jailed for three years](#) this April on the grounds that he supported “separatism.”

[The list](#) of those imprisoned by Ukraine’s security services since the outbreak of war grows by the day, and is too extensive to reproduce here.

Perhaps the most ghastly incident of repression took place when neo-Nazis backed by the Ukrainian government kidnapped Maxim Ryndovskiy, a professional MMA fighter, and [brutally tortured him](#) for the crime of training with Russian fighters at a gym in Chechnya. Ryndovskiy also happened to be Jewish, with a Star of David tattooed on his leg, and had spoken out on social media against the war in eastern Ukraine.

Ukraine’s SBU has even hunted opposition figures outside the country’s borders. As journalist Dan Cohen [reported](#), Anatoly Shariy of the recently banned Party of Shariy said he was the target of a recent SBU assassination attempt. Shariy has been an outspoken opponent of the US-backed Maidan regime, and has been forced to flee into exile after enduring years of harassment from nationalists.

This March, the libertarian politician and online pundit received an email from a friend, “Igor,” seeking to arrange a meeting. He subsequently learned that Igor was held by the SBU at the time and being used to bait Shariy into disclosing his location.

For his part, Shariy has been placed on the notorious Myrotvorets public blacklist of “enemies of the state” founded by Anton Geraschenko – the Ministry of Internal Affairs advisor who

endorsed the assassination of Ukrainian lawmakers accused of Russian sympathies. Several journalists and Ukrainian dissidents, including the prominent columnist [Oles Buzina](#), were [murdered by state-backed death squads](#) after their names appeared on the list.

Common Ukrainian citizens have also been subjected to torture since the start of the war this February. Seemingly countless videos have appeared on social media showing civilians tied to lamp posts, often with their genitals exposed or their faces painted green. Carried out by Territorial Defense volunteers tasked with enforcing law and order during wartime, these acts of humiliation and torture have targeted everyone from accused Russian sympathizers to Roma people to [alleged thieves](#).

This is the human rights that Zelensky brought to Ukrainian civilians [#Mariupol](#) [#StandWithUkraine](#) [#RussiaUkraineWar](#)  
[pic.twitter.com/EWFC048M2q](https://pic.twitter.com/EWFC048M2q)

— UN voice of Justice (@TheUN\_voice) [April 3, 2022](#)

## **Ukraine's SBU studies torture and assassination from the CIA**

Vassily Prozorov, a former SBU officer who defected to Russia following the Euromaidan coup, detailed the post-Maidan security services' systemic reliance on torture to crush political opposition and intimidate citizens accused of Russian sympathies.

According to Prozorov, the ex-SBU officer, the Ukrainian security services have been directly advised by the CIA since 2014. "CIA employees have been present in Kiev since 2014. They are residing in clandestine apartments and suburban houses," he said. "However, they frequently come to the SBU's central office

for holding, for example, specific meetings or plotting secret operations.”

Below, Russia’s RIA Novosti profiled Prozorov and covered his disclosures in a 2019 special.

Journalist Dan Cohen [interviewed](#) a Ukrainian businessman named Igor who was arrested by the SBU for his financial ties with Russian companies and detained this March in the security service’s notorious headquarters in downtown Kiev. Igor said he overheard Russian POWs being beaten with pipes by Territorial Defense volunteers being coached by SBU officers. Pummeled to the sound of the Ukrainian national anthem, the Russian prisoners were brutalized until they confessed their hatred for Putin.

Then came Igor’s turn. “They used a lighter to heat up a needle, then put it under my fingernails,” he told Cohen. “The worst was when they put a plastic bag over my head and suffocated me and when they held the muzzle of a Kalashnikov rifle to my head and forced me to answer their questions.”

Valentyn Nalyvaichenko, the first head of the SBU after the Euromaidan regime change operation of 2013-14, nurtured close ties to Washington when he served as general consul to the Ukrainian embassy to the US during the George W. Bush administration. During that time, Nalyvaichenko was [recruited by the CIA](#), according to his predecessor at the SBU, Alexander Yakimenko, who served under the Russian-oriented government of deposed President Viktor Yanukovich.

In 2021, Zelensky appointed one of Ukraine’s most notorious intelligence figures, Oleksander Poklad, to lead SBU’s counterintelligence division. Poklad is nicknamed “The Strangler,” a reference to his [reputation](#) for using torture and

assorted dirty tricks to set-up his bosses' political rivals on treason charges.

This April, a vivid illustration of the SBU's brutality emerged in the form of video (below) showing its agents pummeling a group of men accused of Russian sympathies in the city of Dnipro.

## **“We will never take Russian soldiers prisoner”: Ukraine’s military flaunts its war crimes**

While the Western media has focused squarely on alleged Russian human rights abuses since the outbreak of war, Ukrainian soldiers and pro-Ukrainian social media accounts have proudly exhibited sadistic war crimes, from field executions to the torture of captive soldiers.

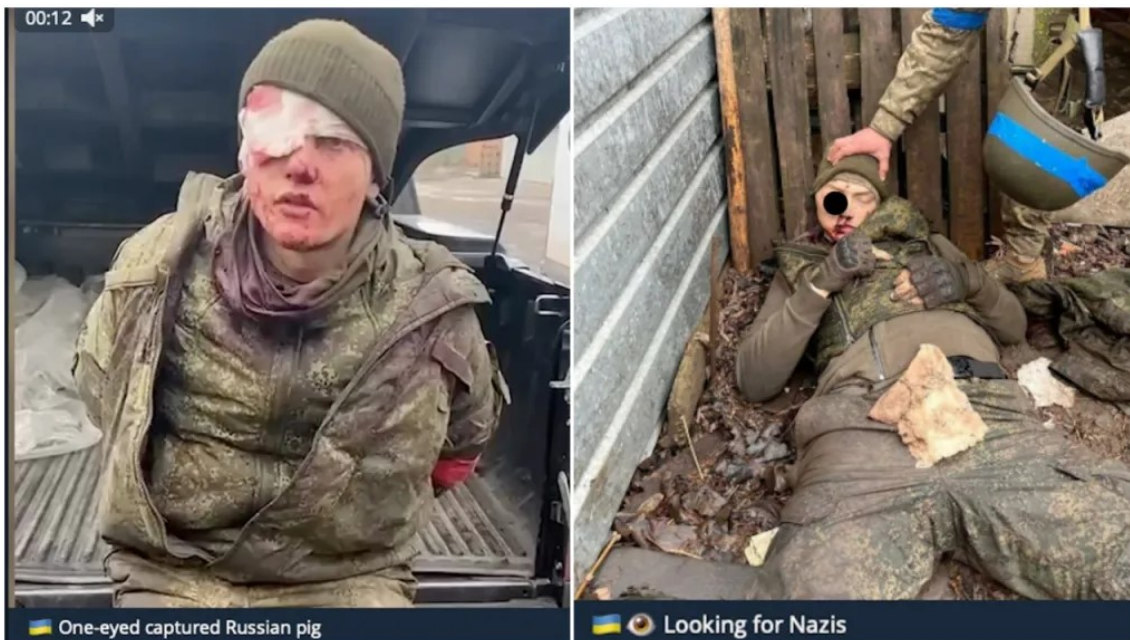
This March, a pro-Ukrainian Telegram channel called White Lives Matter released a video of a Ukrainian soldier calling the fiancée of a Russian prisoner of war, seen below, and taunting her with promises to castrate the captive.

Ukrainian soldiers' use of the cellphones of dead Russian soldiers to mock and hector their relatives appears to be a common practice. In fact, the Ukrainian government has begun [using notoriously invasive facial recognition technology](#) from [Clearview AI](#), a US tech company, to identify Russian casualties and taunt their relatives on social media.

This April, a pro-Ukrainian Telegram channel called fckrussia2022 posted a video depicting a Russian soldier with one of his eyes bandaged, suggesting it had been gouged during torture, and mocked him as a “one-eyed” pig.

Perhaps the most gruesome image to have appeared on social media in recent weeks is the photo of a tortured Russian soldier who had one of his eyes gouged before he was killed. The

accompanying post was captioned, "looking for Nazis."



Photos distributed by pro-Ukraine Telegram channels showing captured, tortured and executed Russian soldiers

Video has also emerged this April showing Ukrainian soldiers [shooting defenseless Russian POWs in the legs](#) outside the city of Kharkov. A separate video published by Ukrainian and US-backed Georgian Legion soldiers showed the fighters [carrying out field executions](#) of wounded Russian captives near a village outside Kiev.





Ukrainian and Georgian Legion fighters celebrate after executing captive Russian soldiers on video

It is likely that these soldiers had been emboldened by their superiors' blessings. Mamula Mamulashvili, the commander of the Georgian Legion, which participated in the field executions of wounded Russian POW's, [boasted this April](#) that his unit freely engages in war crimes: "Yes, we tie their hands and feet sometimes. I speak for the Georgian Legion, we will never take Russian soldiers prisoner. Not a single one of them will be taken prisoner."

Similarly, Gennadiy Druzenko, the head of the Ukrainian military medical service, [stated in an interview with Ukraine 24](#) that he "issued an order to castrate all Russian men because they were subhuman and worse than cockroaches."



## Ukrainian officials present woman tortured and killed by Azov as victim of Russia

While Western media homes in on Russian human rights violations at home and inside Ukraine, the Ukrainian government has authorized a propaganda campaign [known as “Total War”](#) that includes the planting of bogus images and false stories to further implicate Russia.

In one especially cynical example of the strategy, Ukraine 24 – a TV channel where guests have [called for the genocidal extermination](#) of Russian children – published a photo this April depicting a female corpse branded with a bloody swastika on her stomach. Ukraine 24 claimed that it found this woman in Gostumel, one of the regions in the Kiev Oblast that the Russians vacated on March 29.

Lesia Vasylenko, a Ukrainian member of parliament, and Oleksiy Arestovych, the top advisor to President Zelensky, published the photo of the defiled female corpse on social media. While Vasylenko left the photo online, Arestovych deleted it eight hours after posting when confronted with the fact that he had published a fake.

In fact, the image was pulled from footage originally recorded by Patrick Lancaster, a Donetsk-based US journalist who had filmed the corpse of a woman tortured and murdered by members of the Ukrainian Azov Battalion in a Mariupol school basement they had converted into a base.

At [2:31 in Lancaster’s video, the woman’s corpse can be seen clearly.](#)

As weapons pour into Ukraine from NATO states and the war intensifies, the atrocities are almost certain to pile up – and with

the blessing of leadership in Kiev. As [Zelensky proclaimed during a visit to the city of Bucha](#) this April, “if we do not find a civilized way out, you know our people – they will find an uncivilized way out.”