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UKRAINE

Right-Wing Thugs Are Hijacking Ukraine's Liberal Uprising

The liberal, pro-European Union protests that first rocked Kiev have taken a darker turn, with right-wing vigilante groups rising to prominence amid violence and police crackdowns

By Simon Shuster / Kiev @shustry | Jan. 28, 2014

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Not long before midnight on Sunday, a few dozen men in ski masks and camouflage surrounded the headquarters of the Ministry of Justice in the center of Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, and smashed out the first floor windows with baseball bats. They made short work of the bars over the windows, prying them out of the walls with their clubs, and climbed inside. It was the third federal ministry the group had seized in a week.



Darko Vojinovic / AP

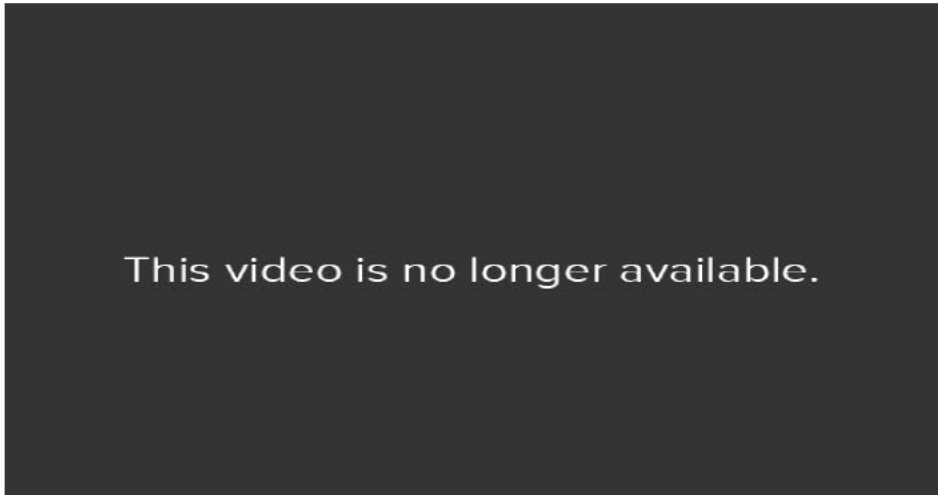
A Ukrainian protester guards a barricade in Kiev, Ukraine, on Jan 27, 2014

Calling themselves members of Spilna Sprava, or Common Cause, the group has emerged as one of about a dozen obscure organizations competing for distinction, if not outright leadership, in the uprising against President Viktor Yanukovich. These groups range from right-wing radicals and soccer hooligans to military veterans and mobs of stick-wielding goons. And to the gall of more-established opposition figures, like the world boxing champion Vitali Klitschko, they have become the revolution's most commanding presence. Anyone with a stake in resolving Ukraine's political crisis — including the diplomats watching fretfully from the E.U. and U.S. — will likely have to reckon with the role of these groups. But they are becoming increasingly hard to control.

Two months ago, few people in Ukraine had ever heard of Common Cause. In the vibrant patchwork of activists that make up the country's civil society, they were a minor presence, best known for picketing against corruption, monitoring elections and rallying for human-rights and democratic change. In late November, when President Yanukovich turned away from an integration deal with the E.U., mass demonstrations broke out against him in Kiev's Independence Square, and the activists of Common Cause joined the crowds to call for closer ties with Europe.

But the government's attempts to clear the streets over the past two weeks have marked a dark turn for this uprising. Several protesters have been killed in clashes with police, and the revolt has become increasingly violent, erratic and unpredictable. The radicalization of Common Cause is so far the starkest example in this shift.

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Its leader, Oleksandr Danylyuk, a clean-cut and eloquent lawyer, responded to the crackdown with a brazen strategy: seize as many government buildings as possible. "We are out to paralyze the work of this corrupt dictatorship," he told me outside the captured ministry building just after midnight on Sunday. It was his third conquest in as many days. On Jan. 24, his fighters captured the Ministry of Agriculture — far from a dusty, bureaucratic post in a country whose grain harvests once made it the bread basket of the Soviet Union. The next day, Common Cause briefly seized the Energy Ministry, which oversees some of the most vital transport routes for Russian natural gas to Europe, but abandoned it after just a few hours.

The following night, the Justice Ministry became Danylyuk's most symbolic trophy. Not only did it contain legal documents and sensitive case files going back years, but the woman in charge of it, Justice Minister Elena Lukash, is one of the most hated members of the cabinet. "We need justice in Ukraine, and we need peace in Ukraine," Danylyuk said near the entryway. "And right now, unfortunately, our President is a threat for justice and for peace. That's why there is only one way to stop the violence in Ukraine and to stop this very dangerous situation for Europe." And what is that? "The immediate and unconditional capitulation of the state."

That demand doesn't leave much room for negotiations, at least not the kind that Klitschko has been trying to hash out for days. Along with two of his fellow opposition leaders, the retired boxer has had the unenviable job of restraining the more radical wings of the revolution while also trying not to seem like a sellout or a softy. At the same time, he has been in marathon talks with the government, talks predicated on the idea that he can speak on behalf of the revolution and implement any peace accord he manages to reach with the state. But on Sunday night, Klitschko was unable to stop Common Cause from taking command of the Ministry of Justice.

When he arrived after midnight, a few ministry workers were still barricaded in their offices inside the building, whose entrance was guarded by a row of masked men brandishing clubs and bats. Flanked by two bodyguards, Klitschko took in the scene with a pained expression, and after refusing to speak to the press, he uttered only one phrase — "What have you done?" — to the activists of Common Cause before walking briskly back to his Range Rover. "Clown!" one of the activists shouted after him. "Stop posing for the cameras and start building the barricades!"

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Among the revolutionary bands in Kiev, such slurs against Klitschko and his fellow politicians have become the norm. That includes more-militant groups like the Afgantsy, an informal network of veterans from the Soviet war in Afghanistan, who have emerged as one of the most authoritative in the uprising. Before dawn on Saturday, they helped seize another government building in Kiev, the Ukrainian House, a massive convention hall where a large detachment of government troops had been stationed. The storming of that building involved the use of Molotov cocktails and fireworks hurled inside. But thankfully, no lives were lost, as Klitschko managed to negotiate the surrender of the troops blockaded inside.

"The younger guys wanted to flood the floor with gasoline and burn [the troops] alive," says one of the Afgantsy who participated in the siege, Oleksiy Tsibko. But after a standoff lasting hours, the protesters created a corridor to let the officers leave in peace. The building was then turned into another revolutionary bastion, complete with a canteen, sleeping rooms and a club house for the Afgantsy on the second floor. Sitting in the makeshift cafeteria in the basement, Tsibko told me that the Afgantsy are readying a lethal arsenal in case the uprising turns into a civil war. "The battle is already underway," he says. "And if [police] fire so much as one live round into one of our guys, we have enough to respond in kind. Believe me, it won't just be a couple of hundred who lay down dead when its over."

It was impossible to tell how much of this was braggadocio. Tough talk and extravagant threats are part of the banter in Kiev these days. But the seizure of the Ministry of Justice on Sunday showed that such boasts among the fringe groups of the uprising are not always empty. "Common Cause just up and decided to do this, without asking anyone," says Igor Yankiv, a member of the federal parliament for the right-wing party Svoboda (Freedom), whose activists have also been on the front lines of the revolution. "It's a dangerous precedent. Next we'll have marauders going around. We can't let it come to that," he told me.

So, on Monday afternoon, Yankiv arrived at the Ministry of Justice with a group of other revolutionary lawmakers to help convince Common Cause to stand down. After a few hours they agreed. The band of toughs who had been guarding the entrance all night was then replaced with another one — the right-wing youth group of the Svoboda party, also dressed in ski masks and fatigues, also brandishing bats and knives. By lunch time, they invited a ministry official to enter the building and survey the damage — a middle-aged woman rushed past the guards with a look of abject terror. But her presence didn't make it much more apparent who exactly was in charge.

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Brendan Hoffman / Getty Images

Men carry a casket containing the body of Mikhail Zhiznevsky, 25, an anti-government protester who was killed in clashes with police, outside Mikhailovsky Cathedral after a memorial service there in his honor on Jan. 26, 2014 in Kiev.

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