

# **The Maidan Massacre in Ukraine: A Summary of Analysis, Evidence, and Findings**

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## Short Bio

Ivan Katchanovski teaches at the School of Political Studies and the Department of Communication at the University of Ottawa. He was Visiting Scholar at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University, Visiting Assistant Professor at the Department of Politics at the State University of New York at Potsdam, Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto, and Kluge Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Kluge Center at the Library of Congress. He is the author of *Cleft Countries: Regional Political Divisions and Cultures in Post-Soviet Ukraine and Moldova* and co-author of *Historical Dictionary of Ukraine* (2d edition) and *The Paradox of American Unionism: Why Americans Like Unions More Than Canadians Do, But Join Much Less*. He received his Ph.D. from the School of Policy, Government, and International Affairs at George Mason University.

## **Abstract**

This chapter presents a summary of analysis, evidence, and findings of a study of the “snipers’ massacre” of “Euromaidan” protesters and policemen on the Maidan in Ukraine on February 20, 2014. This mass killing was a turning point in the Ukrainian politics and a tipping point in a conflict between the West and Russia over Ukraine. This massacre led to an overthrow of the government of Viktor Yanukovich and a Russian annexation in Crimea, a civil war in Donbas in Eastern Ukraine, and Russian military intervention in support of separatists in these regions. The question is which side was involved in the “snipers’ massacre.” This study relies on rational choice and Weberian theories of rational action. It employs interpretative and content analyses of a large number of different sources. The analysis shows that armed groups of concealed Maidan shooters first killed and wounded policemen on the Maidan and then protesters. Armed groups of “snipers” and parts of leadership of the far right organizations, such as the Right Sector and Svoboda, and oligarchic parties, such as Fatherland, were involved in various capacities in the massacre. This mass killing was misrepresented by the media and the governments in Ukraine and the West.

This summary presents key elements of analysis, evidence, and conclusions of the first academic study of the massacre of more than 50 “Euromaidan” protesters and policemen in the Maidan area of Kyiv in Ukraine on February 20, 2014 (Katchanovski, 2015). This mass killing was a turning point in Ukrainian politics and a tipping point in the escalating conflict between the West and Russia over Ukraine. The mass killing of the protesters and the police led to the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Viktor Yanukovych and gave a start to a civil war in Donbas in Eastern Ukraine (Katchanovski, 2014). The conclusion promoted by the post-Yanukovych governments and the Ukrainian media that the massacre was perpetrated by government snipers on a Yanukovych order has been nearly universally accepted by the US and other Western governments, as well as the media, at least publicly, without concluding an investigation and without all evidence being considered (see, for example, Wilson, 2014). These conclusions were mainly based on the manifest content of videos and media reports on the Berkut special company firing live ammunition at unarmed protesters and the absence of similar evidence for armed groups of protesters.

The question is which side was involved in the “snipers’ massacre.” This study relies on the rational choice theoretical framework and the Weberian theory of rational action, and it employs interpretative and content analyses of a variety of sources. The rational choice theory views people as acting in a calculated and self-interested manner. The Weberian theory of social action regards instrumentally-rational type of action as one ideal type of action alongside value-rational, traditional and affectual types of action. The instrumentally rational type of action involves “the attainment of the actor’s own rationally pursued and calculated ends.” (Weber, 1978). The widely accepted narrative of the massacre presents the actions of the Yanukovych government, the police, and the protesters as irrational from both rational choice and Weberian

instrumentally rational action perspectives, since Yanukovych and his associates lost all of their power and much of their wealth, and fled from Ukraine as a result of this mass killing, the police fled from their positions at Maidan, and advance on the unarmed protesters under live ammunition fire would amount to a collective mass suicidal action.

The investigation of the “snipers’ massacre” by the Prosecutor General Office in Ukraine and by other government agencies, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Security Service of Ukraine, concluded that commanders and members of a special Berkut company killed 39 out of the 49 protesters on February 20. The investigators announced that this was done primarily with AKM assault rifles and hunting ammunition used in their pump rifles, even though it would have been irrational to use such ammunition because it was unfamiliar and less powerful and precise than their standard Kalashnikov rifles of 7.62mm caliber. At least 25 protesters were killed with 7.62mm caliber bullets, including 16 from AKMS. In addition, at least 17 protesters were killed with pellets; one by a 9mm bullet from a Makarov gun; and six by other ammunition, such as hunting bullets, but no information about which ammunition killed which protesters was revealed. The official investigation concluded that Yanukovych and his top officials in the SBU and Ministry of Internal Affairs organized the massacre. However, no such evidence was provided. On November 19, 2014, the Prosecutor General Office claimed during its press-conference devoted to this issue that their extensive investigation produced no evidence of “snipers” at the Hotel Ukraina, Zhovtnevyi Palace and other locations controlled by Maidan. The Ukrainian government failed to investigate the killing and wounding of policemen on February 20 and on two previous days.

The study employs interpretative and content analyses of various sources of evidence concerning the Maidan massacre. Such evidence includes the following: publicly available

videos and photos of the massacres of protesters and the police, as well as of suspected shooters; recordings of live statements by the Maidan announcers; radio intercepts of the Maidan “snipers” and of snipers and commanders from the special Alfa unit of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU); ballistic trajectories; eyewitness reports by both Maidan protesters and government special unit commanders; public statements by both former and current government officials; information on the bullets and weapons used; and the types of wounds among both protesters and the police. Other cases of violence during and after “Euromaidan,” such as violent dispersals of protesters on November 30, 2013; the killings of police and protesters on February 18 and 19, 2014; the Dmytro Bulatov case; and the Odessa Massacre are briefly examined since they help to establish that the Maidan massacre was a part of a pattern of politically motivated misrepresentations of violence.

The study uses content analysis of all publicly available videos of the massacre, many of which were unreported, suppressed or misrepresented. It establishes a timeline of various events during the massacre, as well as the locations and presence of both the shooters and the government snipers, based on the synchronization of the sound on the main Maidan stage, images and other sources of evidence that independently corroborate each other. It also, for the first time, matches the identities, locations and timeline of 48 specific protesters’ killings. This analysis is based on social media sources, specifically videos posted on YouTube and similar sites; Ukrainian Facebook groups, which include many protesters who personally witnessed the killings; relatives of the killed protesters; collections of various materials concerning the massacre; and time-stamped Twitter and Facebook posts in different languages by various correspondents and observers who witnessed the massacre on February 20.

This study examines about 30 gigabytes of intercepted time-stamped radio exchanges from the Security Service of Ukraine's Alfa unit, Berkut, the Internal Troops, Omega and other government agencies during the Maidan protests. These files were posted by a pro-Maidan Ukrainian radio amateur on a radio scanners forum, but they were never reported by the media or acknowledged by the Ukrainian government.<sup>1</sup> In addition, time-stamped radio intercepts of SBU Alfa snipers from another pro-Maidan website are used.

This investigation also relies on various media reports by Ukrainian and foreign correspondents based in Kyiv on the day of the massacre, as well as videos and photos from such reports. It also uses analyses of live Internet and TB broadcasts on February 20 and on-site research on the site of the Maidan massacre itself and on Instytutska Street. Approximate directions of live ammunition fire and entry wounds are established on the basis of specific evidence, such as videos, photos, eyewitness and media reports, and bullet impact points in trees and poles.

The analyses of various sources of evidence indicate that the cease-fire agreement was broken by the Maidan side in the early morning, when small groups of armed protesters started to shoot from the Music Conservatory building with live ammunition at the Berkut units besieging the protesters at Maidan. A Berkut commander there informed that his unit's casualties included 21 wounded and three killed.

Similarly, reports in the morning of February 20 by the Internal Affairs Ministry; interviews by the former heads of the SBU and the Ministry of Internal Affairs; radio intercepts from Internal Troops; videos; and eyewitness accounts by the protesters, including a 5<sup>th</sup> Channel interview by a protester on the day of the massacre and an interview by a Swedish neo-Nazi volunteer, independently confirm that the police units at Maidan were shot with live ammunition

from the conservatory and Trade Union buildings before 9:00am and that they swiftly retreated as a result of this fire and the many casualties that they suffered. Volodymyr Parasiuk, a special Maidan company commander, admitted that his unit was based in the conservatory building at the time of the massacre and that his company was formed following negotiations with the Right Sector, an alliance of radical nationalist and neo-Nazi organizations and football ultras groups (Kovalenko, 2014). Therefore, a rational explanation supported by various sources is that the police retreated because of the use of live ammunition by small armed protestor units, who were using live ammunition against the police from concealed positions in these two buildings.

The subsequent advance of the protesters was guided by commands announced from the Maidan stage, specifically an order for four companies of the Maidan Self-Defense, to advance to Zhovtnevyi Palace at the time when a Berkut special company was there shooting with live ammunition fire in order to provide cover for a retreat of Internal Troops.

The analysis of the various evidence of killing and wounding of specific protesters indicates that they were shot from the Maidan-controlled locations, such as the Hotel Ukraina, Zhovtnevyi Palace, Kinopalats, the Bank Arkada, the adjacent buildings on Muzeinyi Lane and Horodetskoho Street, and the Main Post Office, which served as the headquarters of the Right Sector. Videos show that a large group of protesters armed with AKMs and hunting rifles under the command of Parasiuk and in presence of Svoboda deputies entered the Hotel Ukraina during the massacre and shot in the direction of the protesters and exact time when many of them were killed and wounded. Maidan leaders denied that any snipers were there and claimed that several searches at conducted by Maidan Self-Defense, headed by Andrii Parubii from the Fatherland party, and the Right Sector did not find any of the “shooters.” Several leaders of the opposition parties, such as the Fatherland, Svoboda, and the Radical Party, were speaking on the Maidan



stage during the very time or shortly after numerous gunshots fired from nearby buildings on the Maidan and from the Hotel Ukraina.

It was the same company commander who called from the Maidan stage on February 21, 2014 to reject an agreement, which was mediated by foreign ministers of France, Germany and Poland and a representative of the Russian president and signed by Yanukovych and the “Euromaidan” leaders. Parasiuk issued a public ultimatum for the president to resign by 10:00am of the next day, and Yanukovych fled from Kyiv shortly after this ultimatum was issued. The same armed unit pressured some deputies of the Ukrainian parliament during the votes that removed Yanukovych and his government and elected the new government. (Kovalenko, 2014).

The study puts “Euromaidan” and the conflict in Ukraine into a new perspective. The seemingly irrational mass shooting and killing of the protesters and the police on February 20, 2014 appear to be rational from self-interest based perspectives of rational choice and Weberian theories of instrumentally-rational action. This includes the following: the Maidan leaders gaining power as a result of the massacre, President Yanukovych and his other top government officials fleeing from Kyiv and then from Ukraine, and the retreat by the police. The same concerns Maidan protesters being sent under deadly fire into positions of no important value and then being killed wave by wave from unexpected directions. Similarly, killings of unarmed protesters and targeting foreign journalists but not Maidan leaders, the Maidan Self-Defense and the Right Sector headquarters, the Maidan stage, and pro-Maidan journalists become rational.

The various evidence analyzed from such a theoretical perspective indicates that armed groups and parts of leadership of the far right organizations, such as the Right Sector and Svoboda, and oligarchic parties, such as Fatherland, were directly or indirectly involved in various capacities in this massacre of the protesters and the police. The massacre of the protesters

and the police was a key part of the violent overthrow of the government in Ukraine and a major human rights crime. This study also provides a rational explanation for the failure of the government investigation to find and prosecute those directly involved in this mass killing and for falsification of the investigation. The study also concludes that the involvement of the special police units in killings of some of the protesters cannot be ruled out, because the specific moments and locations and other information concerning killings of all protesters are either not available or not made public.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See “Radioscanner,” <http://www.radioscanner.ru/forum/topic47258.html>.