



The Death of Andriy Portnov: Political Context and Consequences

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The persistent occurrence of political assassinations, extrajudicial killings and mysterious deaths among high-ranking Ukrainian politicians, journalists and public figures, reveals a deeply entrenched culture of impunity and violence within Ukraine's political system. The recent assassination of Andriy Portnov—a key figure in Ukraine's judicial and political elite—underscores the continued use of lethal force to resolve political rivalries, raising concerns about the stability of Ukraine's institutional framework. As Ukraine moves closer to potential membership of the European Union, those unresolved political crimes and the apparent absence of accountability represent a serious threat to the Union's legal and democratic foundations. Integrating a state where political murder remains a viable instrument of power could import instability into the EU's decision-making processes, judicial cooperation and fundamental values.

A POLITICAL PORTRAIT OF ANDRIY PORTNOV

Andriy Portnov went from [theoretical lawyer](#) to the most influential behind-the-scenes curator of the judicial system under the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich. He was the main architect of Yanukovich's judicial policy—it was Portnov who oversaw the development of the new Criminal Procedure Code [adopted in 2012](#). He has been credited with the informal status of “supervisor of the courts,” a person who placed loyalists in the judicial and prosecutorial system, creating a corrupt management model. Many experts called Portnov “[the king of the judicial-prosecutorial-investigative mafia](#)” in Ukraine.

After fleeing Ukraine on February 24, 2014, immediately after Yanukovych's escape, Andriy Portnov unexpectedly returned to Ukraine in 2019 following Volodymyr Zelensky's victory in the presidential election. Using his [influence](#) over the controlled security forces and judges, Portnov became the [coordinator](#) of the campaign of legal persecution of Poroshenko, and he won numerous lawsuits against right-wing and liberal media outlets, which had accused him of crimes during the presidency of Yanukovych and "pro-Russianness."

Under the presidency of Joe Biden, the United States imposed sanctions on him—he U.S. Treasury accused him of bribery and the undermining of democracy through [corrupting the courts](#). Activists within Ukraine also registered a petition demanding that the National Security and Defense Council impose restrictions on Portnov, and that collected the required 25,000 signatures. However, the government of Denys Shmyhal refused to do anything about it did not "contain sufficient data" [for sanctions](#).

PORTNOV'S MURDER AND THE PUBLIC REACTION

On May 21, 2025, Andriy Portnov was [shot dead](#) by unknown persons in Spain, where he had recently lived since [fleeing Ukraine again](#) following the Russian invasion. The attack took place in the morning in the elite Pozuelo de Alarcon suburb of Madrid near the gates of a [private American school](#), where Portnov took his children to study. According to the Spanish police, the killers lay in wait for the victim until he put the children into the car and was about to drive away. 51-year-old Portnov died [on the spot](#). Both criminal and political motives are being [considered](#).

The news of Andriy Portnov's murder instantly became a main topic in the Ukrainian information space, causing a storm of reaction. His death became a kind of litmus test, revealing a societal split in the values: Some are guided by the principle of the rule of law and others by the principle of revolutionary expediency.

Representatives of the pro-European camp, for whom Portnov had long been the embodiment of corruption and pro-Russian revenge, did not hide their relief. Journalists and activists wrote openly on social networks that "a traitor was eliminated" and recalled how the deceased "intimidated the press" and "turned the law into an instrument of dictatorship." Black jokes and memes were circulated in the information space, and some even published footage

from the scene of the murder with [snide captions](#). In fact, a significant part of the patriotic public approved of the elimination of Portnov, believing that otherwise he would have escaped the punishment he deserved.

At the same time, officials and moderate commentators reacted cautiously. The official authorities of Ukraine refrained from public assessments—neither the Office of the President nor the Ministry of Foreign Affairs made any [emotional statements](#) and simply confirmed the murder. The authorities expressed their readiness to cooperate with Spain in the investigation through diplomatic channels. Representatives of the opposition—in particular, Petro Poroshenko’s entourage—also did not openly celebrate the death of their opponent. On the contrary, some emphasized that although Portnov was their ideological enemy, it was unacceptable to act by reprisal. There were opinions that it would be better for him to appear before a Ukrainian court for his actions rather than to be killed in a foreign land without trial or investigation.

Anti-Western commentators used the murder of Portnov as a pretext to attack the Ukrainian authorities. Russian state media and pro-Kremlin resources have been spreading conspiracy theories. The newspaper Rossiyskaya Gazeta maliciously noted that the greatest joy from the murder was shown by “Poroshenko and Zelensky’s service personnel”—journalists and bloggers close to pro-Western circles. Russian propaganda attempted to present the incident as a manifestation of the “Nazi” nature of the Kyiv regime, which allegedly encourages killings without trial.

WHO BENEFITS FROM PORTNOV’S DEATH?

Portnov’s assassination has important political consequences. An iconic figure with significant influence on the judicial system has disappeared, which could trigger a new internal war for control over the judicial system. The balance between the elites within Ukraine could shift. Poroshenko and other pro-European figures could personally benefit, as their main persecutor has gone. The scandal could also hit the position of the current government, causing an erosion of trust. A link between Viktor Yanukovich’s entourage and Russian interests and the interests of Volodymyr Zelensky’s team and Western conservative circles could potentially mean a compromise for the future reorganization of Ukraine.

The murder has raised important questions. While the official investigation in Spain is in full swing and has not yet announced any culprits, analysts and commentators have put forward a number of hypotheses. One version is that Portnov was removed by his own close associates or influential Ukrainian figures whose interests were threatened by his activities. It is often suggested that Portnov had dangerous information about the current Ukrainian government, and that he could blackmail or harm someone at the top. [Shariy's statement](#) that Portnov was preparing to publish compromising information is cited in support of that version.

Another working theory relates to business and criminal showdowns not directly related to politics. The Spanish media, citing the police, indicate that one of the reasons for the murder could have been Portnov's major [debt problem](#). While living abroad, he may have been involved in dubious financial transactions. Portnov could have fallen into debt to influential people or, conversely, taken possession of other people's funds. The criminal version is also supported by the style of the murder—there was a professional “gangster” clean-up: several killers, cold-blooded shooting in broad daylight on the street, and a quick escape. If true, this could expose the existence of criminal networks involving former Ukrainian officials and transnational organized crime, which is also very alarming.

A separate discussion focuses on whether Russian or other special services or proxy groups were involved in the murder. At first glance, Moscow has few motives to eliminate Portnov. He was not their ardent enemy, rather the opposite, he was considered pro-Russian. However, in the intricacies of the hybrid war, provocation cannot be ruled out: the murder of an odious character could have been arranged to sow discord in Ukraine, cause mutual accusations within the country and discredit the Ukrainian authorities in the West by presenting them as supporters of extrajudicial killings. However, there is no concrete evidence of “Moscow's hand” yet.

The murder of Andriy Portnov has become a resonant event that has highlighted the sore points of Ukrainian politics: the ongoing tradition of reprisal, the weakness of the institutions, and the depth of elite and social divisions. In the long term, though, it poses a challenge to that very government: Will it be able to prove its commitment to the rule of law by conducting an investigation and preventing the escalation of violence as a method of dispute resolution? The answer will show whether Ukraine truly lives up to

its proclaimed democratic ideals. This is important because the European Union has signaled its willingness to fast-track Ukraine's accession process. Such a political concession risks eroding the EU's credibility and diluting the normative framework that has guided its enlargement policy for decades. The EU must ask itself whether it can afford to grant membership to a state in which political killings remain unpunished, and the shadow of lawlessness looms large.