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UKRAINE'S RADICAL RIGHT

Anton Shekhovtsov and Andreas Umland

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Until recently, the radical right in contemporary Ukraine was an obscure topic, little known even among specialists in East European affairs. Today, it takes center stage in many international assessments of Ukrainian politics. Ukraine's radical right-wingers have been fervently featured in the Kremlin's massive international media campaign against the EuroMaidan protests in Ukraine and the government that has arisen in Kyiv since the fall of President Viktor Yanukovych. Russian officials, diplomats, and pseudojournalists, as well as the Kremlin's Western lobbyists, use hyperbole and alarmism about the radical right in their efforts to discredit Ukraine's pro-European revolution as an undertaking tainted by "fascism."

Thanks largely to the Kremlin's information war, Ukraine's ultranationalists have become global media stars of a sort, depicted in Western and other reports as key players in Ukraine's third major political upheaval in less than a quarter-century.[1] How do we explain the paradox of ultranationalist parties becoming involved in a protest movement whose thrust is toward greater integration between Ukraine and the European Union? And are the fears that swirl around these parties justified?[2]

As the EuroMaidan protests turned more violent in early 2014, they also became characterized by the increasingly visible participation of a pair of far-right movements. The better known of the two is the All-Ukrainian Union "Freedom" (Svoboda), which has 37 seats in the 450-member unicameral parliament and a loose association with some

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marginal extraparliamentary grouplets such as C14 (a play of letters and numbers that can, in Ukrainian, be read as "Sich," a reference to the historical Cossack military force) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army.

During the EuroMaidan, Svoboda and its associates used as their base the occupied building of the Kyiv City State Administration on Khreshchatyk Street near the Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square). As an organization, Svoboda did not take part in violent clashes with the police, but individual members did, and several of them fell victim to the shootings in February 2014. At the same time, Svoboda leader Oleh Tyahnybok, at age 45 a veteran of the 1990 Granite and 2004 Orange revolutions, emerged as one of the most frequent and accomplished open-air speakers addressing the crowds gathered in Independence Square.

Founded in 1991 as the Social-National Party of Ukraine and renamed Svoboda in 2004, the party has become in many though not all regards a typical European party of the far right. It mixes classic right-wing themes (anti-Semitism, national monolingualism, militarism, ethnocentrism, cryptoracism, homophobia, opposition to abortion) with economically left-wing appeals, calling for a sizeable state role in the economy (including partial nationalization of some sectors), reinforced social-support programs, and limits on land sales. This may seem illogical, but the mixing of politically radical right-wing and economically left-wing themes has been a habit of not only East but West European ultranationalist parties for at least the last century.

Along with Svoboda, the other far-right movement that was a prominent presence on the Maidan was the more diverse, less studied, and now notorious fringe organization that calls itself Pravy Sektor (Right Sector). Although as late as January 2014 it appeared that only about three-hundred people belonged to it, Right Sector claims that in the face of armed state assaults, it formed the core of violent resistance on behalf of the EuroMaidan. During the protests, this coalition of tiny groupuscules (none of which ever held seats in parliament) made its headquarters on the fifth floor of the clocktower-topped Trade Unions Building that overlooks the Maidan's northeastern side and was set afire on the night of 18–19 February 2014. Today, Right Sector has maybe several thousand members, yet no central coordination. It seems to have morphed into a "brand name" that is being used by local groups bereft of ties to the initial alliance that made the label popular.

That alliance came into being in late November 2013 as a loose collection of extraparliamentary minigroups from an ultraconservative and partly neo-Nazi fringe. They had names such as the Stepan Bandera All-Ukrainian Organization "Trident" (a moniker meant to combine the memory of a controversial nationalist leader who died in 1959 with the three-pronged heraldic symbol of Ukraine), the Ukrainian National Assembly, the Social-National Assembly, and White Hammer. Their purpose in banding together was to fight Yanukovych's regime by force.

After he fell, this umbrella group of ethnonationalist militants would transform into a political party and aspire to gain seats in parliament. As of this writing in early June 2014, however, no survey has shown Right Sector and its leader Dmytro Yarosh (also the leader of "Trident") as likely to collect the 5 percent of the nationwide popular vote needed to achieve this goal (in Ukraine's proportional electoral system, passing a 5 percent barrier is necessary in order for a party to gain parliamentary representation).

Since its rise in 2012, Svoboda has become an increasingly open supporter of Ukraine's closer integration into Europe. Although there is some diversity of views regarding the EU among Right Sector's various components, on the whole they lean more Euroskeptic (not to say EU-hostile) than Svoboda. Whatever their ideological differences, all the groups, factions, and groupuscules associated with both Svoboda and Right Sector were active in the pro-EU protests—whether nonviolently or violently. Even though their members formed only a small part of the EuroMaidan's "self-defense forces,"[3] they managed to shape the protest movement's international image to a considerable degree.

The prominent participation of Ukraine's two major far-right movements in the democratic, pro-EU Maidan protests seems to present a puzzle. The EU's official values and principles are implicitly if not explicitly antinationalist. The Ukrainian far right's ambivalent, soft, or even positive stance toward the EU and NATO makes it an outlier among similar European parties. In both the EU and Russia, far-right parties tend to be vocally antiliberal, plainly anti-American, and more or less anti-EU.[4]

The Far Right versus Imperialism

The most obvious explanation for the Ukrainian far right's ardent participation in the EuroMaidan may be found in the primary goal shared by all Ukrainian nationalists, radical and moderate alike: to liberate Kyiv from the Kremlin's hegemony. The signing of the EU Association Agreement has been understood by most Ukrainian nationalists—but also many in Brussels, Washington, and Moscow—as a move in a zero-sum game between the West and a neoimperial Russia: The more Ukraine integrates with the EU, the less will Kyiv belong to the Russian orbit. This paramount consideration has been enough to turn large parts of Ukraine's far right into supporters (however reluctant) of the Association Agreement. Getting out from under Kremlin tutelage is a crucial precondition for an independent evolution of the Ukrainian nation—in whatever direction that development may go.

To be sure, it is not their pro-EU stance, but their social conservatism, heterosexism, and populist nationalism—all attitudes commonly found among Europe's far-right parties—that constitute the distinctive

features of Ukraine's radical right. And yet the national liberationism that Ukraine's ethnonationalists also hold dear was a publicly salient and politically consequential feature of the EuroMaidan that held together the protesters' broad alliance from the radical left to the extreme right. Only some avowedly neo-Nazi groups such as the Social-National Assembly were and are clearly anti-EU. Yet they are marginal even within the far right.

The small size of the neo-Nazi section of the Ukrainian nationalist movement also seems to be a reason for the relatively low number of hate crimes in Ukraine. The latter runs counter to a common Western stereotype of Ukraine as a seething hotbed of ultranationalist violence. When the country cohosted the European football championship tournament in 2012, for example, British tabloids and some left-wing German outlets luridly warned that Ukrainian neo-Nazis would attack nonwhite fans at games in Kharkiv, Donetsk, Lviv, and Kyiv. Yet there was no significant violent racial incident involving Ukraine fans at or after any match of Euro-2012.

According to Viacheslav Likhachev, who monitors xenophobia for the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, about forty people suffered from racist attacks in Ukraine during 2012 and 2013.[5] In Ukraine, the last time a person was reported to have been murdered out of ethnic hatred was in 2010; the victim was a Roma woman whom her murderers suspected of dealing drugs. By comparison, according to London's Institute of Race Relations, an average of about four people a year are murdered in xenophobic or homophobic attacks in the United Kingdom[6]—a country whose population of 63 million is not that much larger than Ukraine's of 46 million. Other West and East European countries too have hate-crime statistics that are more like the United Kingdom's than Ukraine's. In both relative and absolute terms, the greatest number of violent hate crimes in Europe are committed year on year by neo-Nazi skinheads and other racists in Russia.[7]

For twenty years after Ukraine declared its independence from the Soviet Union, the far right counted for surprisingly little in Ukraine's elections and national legislature. It was only in 2012 that this changed. In the parliamentary elections that year, Svoboda won 10.4 percent of the vote in the proportional-representation portion of the balloting, good for 25 seats. It managed to add another dozen seats in the races held in single-member districts, giving it control of slightly more than 8 percent of parliament.

The Ukrainian ultranationalists' long parliamentary drought was surprising in light of two circumstances. The first was the European context—parties of the far right had emerged as significant electoral forces not only in Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Russia, but also in Western Europe. The second was the situation inside Ukraine. For years after the USSR collapsed, Ukrainians endured some of the most

profound and severe socioeconomic crises (complete with an economy shrinking by a staggering 15 percent in 2009 alone) that any European country has ever seen.

Svoboda's ability to win parliamentary seats in 2012 may have stemmed less from a rightward turn in Ukrainian society than from a desire on the part of voters to register their discontent with current political conditions. These included the pro-Russian policies of Viktor Yanukovych and his ruling parliamentary coalition as well as the weak discipline in the legislature's two major democratic factions, the Our Ukraine alliance and former premier Yulia Tymoshenko's bloc. Beginning in 2010 (the year Yanukovych won the presidency), sizeable numbers of deputies from both these groups had defected to Yanukovych's Party of Regions and the government of Prime Minister Mykola Azarov.

We estimate that as many as half of Svoboda's 2012 voters may have backed it not out of radical ethnonationalism or homophobia, but because they saw it as the most thoroughgoing opposition to Yanukovych. It was Svoboda's strong (even revolutionary) rhetorical stance and coherent public image as such, rather than the details of its extremely right-wing ideology, that drew to it many nationally conscious and often democratic voters. They interpreted (or misinterpreted) Svoboda's ultranationalism in national-liberationist rather than racist or xenophobic terms. And with regard to party discipline at least, Svoboda has delivered: None of its legislators has ever taken part in the well-known Ukrainian parliamentary practice of floor-crossing.

Will Ultranationalism Stay Marginal?

The reasons behind the rise of the far right since 2012 may also explain why Svoboda's Tyahnybok and Right Sector's Yarosh together totaled less than 2 percent of the vote in the 25 May 2014 presidential election. The EuroMaidan has won, Yanukovych is gone, and the intense polarization that he bred has passed its peak. Some conditions that initially attracted many voters to disciplined extremists seem to have waned.

In a March 2014 public-opinion poll conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 5.2 percent of respondents said that they would back Svoboda for parliament. That is half what the party received in 2012, and would be barely enough to get it into the legislature. Svoboda's support now seems to consist of its traditional hard-core loyalists plus moderately nationalist voters in the region of Galicia in western Ukraine, where the party has come to be considered part of the political mainstream.

Svoboda's ability to pass the 5 percent parliamentary threshold is by no means assured, however. If it splits the ultranationalist vote with Right Sector, there may be a situation (similar to one seen before in

other European countries) where the radical right as a whole receives more than 5 percent, but with a division among parties (say 4 percent for one and 3 percent for the other) that leaves them all below the entry barrier and thus with no seats in parliament.

Then too, Svoboda could find its voters growing demotivated if its foil, the pro-Russian Party of Regions (Yanukovych's old party), remains stuck in its current fragmented, disoriented state. In that case, Svoboda's leaders will have to find another way to rally nonextremist voters—perhaps by fervently taking up the cause of defending Ukraine against ongoing Russian aggression. If Svoboda cannot attract moderate voters and must split the ultranationalist vote with Right Sector, the Ukrainian far right could find itself returned to the extraparliamentary fringes of political life.

NOTES

1. The first two were the 1990 Granite Revolution and the 2004 Orange Revolution.

2. Relevant earlier or forthcoming publications include Anton Shekhovtsov, "The Creeping Resurgence of the Ukrainian Radical Right? The Case of the Freedom Party," *Europe-Asia Studies* 63 (March 2011): 203–28; Andreas Umland, ed., "Post-Soviet Ukrainian Right-Wing Extremism," special issue of *Russian Politics and Law* 51 (September–October 2013); Viacheslav Likhachev, "Right-Wing Extremism in Ukraine: The Phenomenon of Svoboda," Kyiv, 2013; "Pravyi radikalizm v segodniashnei Ukraine," special section in *Forum noveishei vostochnoevropeiskoi istorii i kul'tury* 10 (2013): 7–150; Natalia Belitser, "Vseukrainskoe ob''edinenie 'Svoboda' i ego elektorat, 2012–2013," *Ideologiia i politika* 2 (2013): 8–92; Anton Shekhovtsov, "From Electoral Success to Revolutionary Failure: The Ukrainian Svoboda Party," *Eurozine,* 5 March 2014; Alina Polyakova, "On the March: The Coming Rise of Ukrainian Ultra-Nationalists," *Foreign Affairs.com*, 11 May 2014; Viacheslav Likhachev, "'Pravyi sektor' i drugie: natsional-radikaly i ukrainskii politicheskii krizis kontsa 2013 g. – nachala 2014 g."; Alina Polyakova, "From the Provinces to the Parliament: How the Ukrainian Radical Right Mobilized in Galicia," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47 (June 2014): 211–25.

3. This defense force (or Samooborona) consisted of dozens of small, lightly armed groups called "hundreds." Some put heavy stress on ideology; others were vaguer. All resisted the Yanukovych regime's security cadres with force.

4. Over the last decade, the only significant far-right party outside Ukraine to take a relatively pro-EU stance has been Greece's Popular Orthodox Rally. During its stint in the Greek parliament from 2007 to 2012, this party strongly criticized a number of the EU's basic principles yet remained openly supportive of Greece's continued membership.

5. Viacheslav Likhachev, "Statistika soobshchenii o zhertvakh napadenii na pochve nenavisti v Ukraine, 2006–2013," available at *http://eajc.org/page451*.

6. See the Institute for Race Relations project on "Racial Violence in the UK" at *www.irr.org.uk/research/geographies-of-racism*.

7. These statistics on Russian and Ukrainian hate crimes do not include possible killings committed by radical rightists within larger violent conflicts, for instance, during clashes in the Russian North Caucasus or the skirmishes in eastern and southern Ukraine in 2014.