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THE UKRAINIAN FAR RIGHT AND THE UKRAINIAN REVOLUTION

Abstract

The article discusses two far right movements that took part in the Ukrainian revolution in 2014. The author argues that, although the fact of the involvement of the far right in the revolution cannot be denied, the Russian media deliberately exaggerated this involvement to discredit the opposition to former President Viktor Yanukovych. Thus, the articles provides a more nuanced picture of the Ukrainian far right before, during and immediately after the revolution. This research draws on the interviews conducted by the author, video and photographic evidence, online and offline publications, results of public opinion polls, and secondary literature on the Ukrainian far right.

Keywords: far right, Ukraine, Euromaidan, Ukrainian revolution, Svoboda, Right Sector

Introduction: The Ukrainian Far Right through the Distorted Lens of the Information War

Both during and after the 2014 Ukrainian revolution,[1] the issue of the Ukrainian far right became a hot topic of debates on the international level. What was once only the subject of a limited number of academic studies suddenly became a key point of the information war unleashed by the Kremlin and Russia's state-controlled media first against the pro-European protesters and the party-political opposition to former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych and, later, against the new Ukrainian authorities established after contemporary President Viktor Yanukovych's flight to Russia.[2]

The exaggerated focus on the far right element in the protests, known collectively as Euromaidan, and the consequent revolution

aimed at advancing three major interconnected and mutually sustaining propagandistic narratives.

First, it intended to present the opposition to Yanukovych as a neo-fascist movement that could be supported neither by Russian citizens, nor by Ukraine's highly generalised ethnic Russian/Russian-speaking community, nor by the European Union (EU).

Second, constant references to the "neo-fascist" or "ultranationalist nature" of the Ukrainian revolution served as an evidence of an anti-Russian and hence, xenophobic conspiracy led by the USA and NATO against Russia and the "Russian World". This was also part of a larger, conspiracy-theorist narrative that insisted that the anti-government protests in Ukraine had been inspired by the West in general and the USA in particular to further Western expansionism and the enlargement of NATO, as well as undercutting the Russian sphere of influence.

The combination of the first and second narratives also formed a mythical idea of the anti-Russian NATO using Ukrainian fascists to destroy ethnic Russians in Ukraine and undermine Russia's legitimate interests in its natural sphere of influence. This idea was used as one of the arguments to justify the occupation and consequent annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea in March 2014.

Third, the promotion of an idea of a "fascist junta in Kyiv" aimed to revitalise the heroic Soviet imagery and the rhetoric of the "Great Patriotic War" to mobilise the population in Eastern and Southern Ukraine (dubbed by the Kremlin as "Novorossiya") to start an alleged anti-fascist struggle against the newly established Ukrainian authorities. After the EU and USA adopted sanctions against particular Russian individuals, businesses and industries, the same narrative was used to portray Russia as a victim of the Western aggression, replete with references to the USSR similarly being "a victim" of the Third Reich. This propagandistic narrative has found particularly fertile ground in Germany with its *Kollektivschuld* (collective guilt) that overwhelmingly "singles out as the object of German guilt only Russia but not Ukraine as the legitimate heir to the Soviet Union".[3]

The Kremlin's narratives about Ukraine became relatively successful in particular circles in the West. These – predominantly far right and (far) left – were ready to adopt the line on the "fascist junta in Kyiv" and condemn the Ukrainian revolution as a NATO/CIA/US/EU-inspired coup.

An intrinsic characteristic of almost all the Western critical reports and analyses focusing on – and inevitably exaggerating – the role of the Ukrainian far right in the revolution was that they did not discuss

Ukraine as a country willing to become a full member of the liberal democratic community. Ukraine as such was absent from those debates, yet those commentators would be discussing topics such as "Western expansionism", "US involvement", "enlargement of NATO", "EU-Russia relations", "Russian sphere of influence", "Russian legitimate interests". In this context, the Ukrainians were deprived of agency; they were objectified into non-subjectivity, into a mob allegedly manipulated by the West against Russia.

However, those publicists and journalists still needed to focus on the far right to secure a rhetorical retreat in case someone would indeed be willing to discuss the Ukrainians' agency. The line of argumentation was as patronising as it was revealing intellectual laziness: it was the West that was trying to divorce Ukraine from Russia, but even if it were the Ukrainians themselves, then they were all fascists anyway and could not be supported. For the far left, those two arguments blended together: the West conspires against Russia and deliberately supports the Ukrainian far right because the West itself is a nondemocratic imperialistic monster.

For fairness' sake, not everybody coming from the left adopted that patronising tone, and the writings of Timothy Snyder,[4] Slavoj Zizek[5] and some other leading left-leaning intellectuals were indicative of a different perspective on the Ukrainian revolution.

Not that the Ukrainian far right element was absent from the revolution or further political process. On the contrary, it was very visible and apparent. However, not only were ultranationalist elements far from dominant, but the circumstances of their presence were much more complex than those presented either by the Kremlin, Russian state-controlled media, or Moscow's sympathisers in the West. Furthermore, while attacking the Ukrainian far right involvement and even associating the revolution and the post-revolutionary authorities with Ukrainian ultra-nationalism, Moscow preferred to deliberately ignore the far right element amongst pro-Russian separatists and Russian volunteers in the war in Eastern Ukraine, as well as the growing cooperation between the Kremlin and the far right in particular EU member states.

This article aims at providing a more nuanced – although still sketchy, due to limited length – picture of the Ukrainian far right before, during and immediately after the revolution. One inevitable major limitation of this article is that it focuses only on the more significant far right actors that have been involved in the recent developments in Ukraine.

Methodologically, this article draws on the interviews conducted by the author with the representatives of Ukrainian far right organisations, video and photographic evidence collected since the beginning of the Euromaidan in November 2013, far right online and offline publications, results of public opinion polls, as well as secondary literature focusing on the Ukrainian far right.

The Case of Svoboda

Two major far right movements took part in the pro-European protests and the consequent revolution: the political party All-Ukrainian Union "Freedom" (Svoboda)[6] and a coalition of minor far right groups and organisations that became collectively known as "Right Sector".[7]

Svoboda was founded in 1991 in Lviv as the Social-National Party of Ukraine (SNPU), under the leadership of Yaroslav Andrushkiv. The SNPU was officially registered as a political party in 1995 and, thereafter, took part in several parliamentary elections to no avail. The SNPU's only relevant political success was the election of one of its leaders, Oleh Tyahnybok, to the Ukranian parliament or Verkhovna Rada (literally, "supreme council") in 1998 and 2002, representing single-member districts in the Lviv oblast. However, it was Viktor Yushchenko's national democratic electoral bloc "Our Ukraine" and not the SNPU that nominated Tyahnybok in 2002, a sign that the organisational decline of the SNPU had started to set in. Tyahnybok made an attempt to revive the party: following the SNPU congress in 2004, it changed its current name (All-Ukrainian Union "Freedom"), replaced Andrushkiv with Tyahnybok as the head of the party and made several other changes intended to reinvigorate the organisation and make it more respectable in the eyes of voters. Despite these changes, Svoboda's results in the 2006 and early 2007 parliamentary elections, 0.36% and 0.76% respectively, provided no evidence of growing popularity.[8]

Following its relative success in the regional elections in 2009 and 2010, Svoboda made headlines in 2012 when it obtained 10.4% of the proportional vote and won in 12 single-member districts in the 2012 parliamentary elections, and subsequently formed the first ever far right faction in the Ukrainian parliament.

That was indeed a breakthrough for Ukrainian ultranationalists: for more than twenty years of Ukraine's independence, no Ukrainian far right

party had ever succeeded in having members elected to the Ukrainian parliament through the party-list system, although a few ultranationalists from various far right parties had been elected in single-member constituencies. Their numbers, however, had never been sufficient to form their own parliamentary faction, and they had allied themselves with other, mostly national-democratic, factions.

Moreover, rather than being genuine subjects of the political process, the Ukrainian far right were largely fake actors in Ukrainian political life, at least on the national level. Various far right forces were often pulled out of the political fringes by more powerful political actors to be exploited in different political games.[9] As political parties, the Ukrainian far right organisations can provide three major types of services for manipulation purposes. First, they can be employed by more powerful (and usually incumbent) political subjects, to pose as "scarecrow" or "bigger evil" actors to mobilise popular support for the incumbents presented as "lesser evil". Second, during elections of any level, far right parties, which have very limited chances of success, yet are entitled to have representatives in electoral commissions, may financially gain by either exchanging their own representatives for those who represent other parties or participating in electoral fraud themselves to the benefit of more popular candidates. Third, more powerful political actors may promote far right parties, for example by covertly investing in their campaigns, in order to weaken or undermine major competing players, in particular of the mainstream right.

Being a stark opponent of President Yanukovych and his Party of Regions, Svoboda, however, was successful in 2012 exactly because it was manipulated and nurtured by Yanukovych as a "scarecrow" party. When, in 2010, Yanukovych was elected President of Ukraine and Mykola Azarov of the Party of Regions was appointed Prime Minister, the media visibility of Svoboda dramatically increased, especially on TV-channels either directly or indirectly controlled by the Presidential Administration and the new government.[10] Even though it was not represented, at that time, in the Ukrainian parliament, Svoboda's top officials enjoyed a media spotlight which other extra-parliamentary parties only dreamed of. Yanukovych and his associates wanted to damage the mainstream opposition by elevating the significance of Svoboda.

However, Yanukovych's regime – by manipulating and instrumentalising Svoboda – did not only aim at damaging the opposition, but also at securing the re-election of Yanukovych in the 2015 presidential election. Since 2010, it was increasingly clear that Yanukovych and his associates were

trying to promote Svoboda's leader Oleh Tyahnybok in order to have him as Yanukovych's contender in the second round of the presidential election. Until the Euromaidan protests, of all the more or less popular opponents of Yanukovych's regime, Tyahnybok was the only one who, according to the public opinion polls, would have been crushed by Yanukovych in the second round.[11] Two top members of the Party of Regions virtually confirmed the existence of the "Tyahnybok-in-the-second-round" scenario. At the end of 2010, when asked if he preferred Tyahnybok to Yuliya Tymoshenko as an opposition force, then first deputy chairman of the Party of Regions Volodymyr Rybak replied that Tyahnybok was "a model nationalist who worried about Ukraine" thus indirectly giving preference to Tyahnybok.[12] More explicitly, in February 2013, then first deputy head of the Party of Regions' parliamentary faction Mykhaylo Chechetov declared that Yanukovych would win the 2015 presidential election and that "Tyahnybok would be his contender. We know about this".[13]

Thus, at the 2012 parliamentary elections, Svoboda benefited both from its inflated image of the most radical opposition to Yanukovych's regime and from the fact that the regime itself promoted this image through the controlled mass media.

Once in parliament, Svoboda allied itself with the two other opposition parties: Arseniy Yatsenyuk's Fatherland and Vitaliy Klitschko's UDAR. However, Svoboda failed to live up – in the parliament and elsewhere – to the image of the most radical opposition to Yanukovych and started losing popular support already in 2013.

Svoboda's active participation in the pro-European, pro-democratic protests that unfolded in late November 2013 as a response to Yanukovych's U-turn on the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU, may seem a paradox: Svoboda used to criticise the EU and reject Ukraine's European integration. As Svoboda MP Andriy Illenko argued in 2010, Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU implied "acceptance of a cosmopolitan ideology, dissolution of the modern liberal empire, and submission to the [...] gradual loss of national identity".[14]

Why, then, did Svoboda support the pro-democratic and pro-European revolution? What compelled Svoboda's leadership to support those Ukrainians who aspired to "dissolve" Ukraine in "the ocean of transnational capital and migration flows"?[15] The following three explanations seem most viable: (1) Svoboda viewed Ukraine's European integration as a definitive turn away from all Russia-led Eurasian integration projects; (2) the party recognised the pro-European attitudes of its voters; and (3)

Svoboda viewed Euromaidan, which quickly evolved into a revolution, as a platform for self-promotion and propaganda. Let us consider these explanations in more detail.

The prospect of signing of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU was widely seen, not only by Svoboda's leadership, as an almost irrevocable withdrawal from the Russian sphere of influence as represented by the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, as well as the Eurasian Economic Union that was launched in 2015. From the very beginning, Ukraine's choice between the EU and Customs Union was presented as a "zero-sum game". In February 2013, contemporary European Commission President José Manuel Barroso said that "one country [could not] at the same time be a member of a customs union and be in a free trade area with the European Union".[16] In October that year, then Austrian ambassador to Ukraine Wolf Dietrich Heim also said that Ukraine could not "work simultaneously in two areas: as part of the agreement on the creation of a free trade area and as part of the Customs Union".[17] The same argument was acknowledged by Russian President Vladimir Putin.[18]

As the perceived Russian threat to Ukraine had always been the most powerful mobilising element in Svoboda's ideology, the party had no other choice than actively support the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU. Thus, as the "zero-sum game" unfolded, the "modern liberal empire" was seen as a lesser evil than the Customs Union, "a soap bubble for the revival of the Russian Empire in the new old Soviet Union".[19]

It was, therefore, hardly surprising that Svoboda enjoyed the support of the most pro-European electorate among any Ukrainian party elected into the Verkhovna Rada in 2012. According to the opinion poll conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation,[20] 71.4% of Svoboda's voters were in favour of Ukraine's integration with Europe. At the same time, the numbers for the electorates of UDAR and Fatherland were 69.5% and 63.8% correspondingly. When asked whether they considered themselves Europeans, 51.2% of Svoboda's voters gave a positive reply; the numbers for the electorates of UDAR and the Fatherland were 44.5% and 40.6%.

Moreover, when asked to choose three out of eight options in a reply to the question "What is needed for you to feel a European", 46.2% of Svoboda's voters chose "To respect democratic values and human rights", while 31.7% chose "To have fair democratic elections". The numbers for the electorates of the Fatherland and UDAR were 39.5% and 38.4%

for the former option, and 21.9% and 19.2% for the latter. It might seem surprising or even confusing that supporters of the far right party at the 2012 parliamentary elections turned out be more pro-European and pro-democratic than voters for the two democratic parties. However, that problem appeared confusing only at first sight: for many Ukrainian voters, the rejection of Russia-led integration projects was underpinned by the rejection of authoritarianism and the collapse of the rule of law usually associated with the contemporary Kremlin's policies. Thus, Svoboda's radically negative attitudes towards Putin's Russia were re-interpreted by many Ukrainian pro-democratic voters as radical opposition to authoritarianism and backwardness. Svoboda's leadership could not ignore the distinctly pro-EU stances of the majority of its voters, and abandoned the anti-EU rhetoric that might have alienated most of its electorate.

To Svoboda, the Euromaidan protests seemed to be a good opportunity to reclaim the popular support that they had lost within a year of the party's electoral success in 2012. Svoboda obtained 10.44% of the vote in October 2012, but only 5.1% of the voters would have cast a ballot for this party in November 2013.[21] Even more dramatically, Tyahnybok's presidential rating fell from 10.4% in March[22] to 5.8% in May[23] and to 3.6% in November 2013.[24]

At first, Svoboda resolutely plunged into the revolution. The courage and valour that their members (but not only they) showed during the defence of Independence Square (Maidan) – the heart of the revolution – against the riot police on 9 December 2013 contributed to the morale of the protesters. However, Svoboda's fighting units were reluctant to take part in the most significant clashes with the police forces between 19 and 22 January and 18 and 19 February 2014, although individual members of the party participated, while some of them died in the infamous Maidan shootings.

For the most part, Svoboda made a negative impact on the revolution. The party, and especially its paramilitary wing called C14 under the leadership of the notorious neo-Nazi Yevhen Karas, became involved in a number of divisive activities. Displaying racist banners in the occupied Kyiv City State Administration, attacking journalists, volunteer medical workers and other Euromaidan activists, demolishing the Lenin monument, staging a torch-lit march commemorating controversial Ukrainian ultranationalist Stepan Bandera – all these activities damaged the unity, as well as the image, of Euromaidan and the revolution.[25] Furthermore, according to documents revealed by Hennadiy Moskal,[26] the contemporary Fatherland

MP and former deputy chairman of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), the security services then controlled by Yanukovych's regime actively recruited agents and informants among many parties and movements, and from Svoboda in particular. Out of 19 agents and informants presumably recruited by the SBU, nine were members of Svoboda.

Moreover, the Euromaidan protests presented Svoboda with an unexpected problem: from the very beginning, the protests were a grassroots initiative. The majority of the protesters were very suspicious of the involvement of the three major opposition parties (Fatherland, UDAR and Svoboda) in Euromaidan. Little more than 5% of participants in Euromaidan in Kyiv were mobilised by the calls of the opposition leaders in December 2013; and by January 2014, the figure had decreased to less than 2%. Furthermore, only 3.9% of the Kyiv protesters in December 2013 and 7.7% in January 2014 were members of any political party.[27] The protesters' concerns that the leaders of the opposition parties might betray the protests and simply use Euromaidan to secure their own bargaining power applied to all opposition parties, but Svoboda was particularly affected. Even in Lviv, Svoboda's long-time electoral bulwark, the MP Yuriy Mykhal'chyshyn was booed by the students who organised a local Euromaidan rally at the end of November 2013.[28]

Tyahnybok's party, which coordinated most of its activities with the other two opposition parties represented in the parliament, yet at the same time clashed with various elements of the civic movement, was increasingly seen as a noisy nuisance, whose radical rhetoric did not match its actions.[29] As Ostap Drozdov put it in his article on Svoboda's "parasitic role" in the revolution, "within just a few weeks, the country has witnessed a real fiasco for the party that blatantly promised to lead the revolution, but, instead, not only became its obstacle, but also its most flawed element".[30] Two months after the start of Euromaidan, less than 3% of Ukrainians thought that Tyahnybok ought to become a leader of the protests[31] – a figure that suggested Svoboda had effectively failed at Euromaidan. Even if it was not a complete fiasco, Svoboda seemed to have failed to make amends as regards its dwindling popular support: at the end of January and beginning of February 2014, only 3.8% of voters were prepared to cast their ballot for Tyahnybok at the presidential elections, and 5.6% for Svoboda – at the parliamentary elections.[32]

Thus, when Svoboda's members were given four ministerial posts in acting Prime Minister Yatsenyuk's interim government formed after the flight of Yanukovych to Russia in February 2014, this was clearly

inconsistent with the then level of support for the party. However, half of the interim cabinet had to be formed by the three former opposition parties, and Klitschko's UDAR refused to take part in the interim government because it was going to enact unpopular measures and UDAR was afraid of losing popular support. Had Svoboda been not given ministerial posts, then it would have been a one-party, i.e. Fatherland-controlled, government – an obvious political disaster.

The involvement of Svoboda in the interim government eventually became yet another blow to the party's popularity (for example, Svoboda's Minister of Defence Ihor Tenyukh was dismissed within a month of his appointment) that further contributed to the demise of the party on the national level, especially after the early presidential and parliamentary elections in May and October 2014 respectively (see below).

Furthermore, there was no evidence that Svoboda exerted any "far right influence" on the workings of the interim government. Not that Svoboda was in the minority and because of this was unable to exert such an influence. Rather, the interim government was essentially dealing with problems – economic crisis and Russian invasion – the gravity of which eclipsed potential ideological demands of Svoboda. Beyond that, those potential ideological demands belonged to the parliamentary, and not governmental, sphere. In parliament, Svoboda still had a group of 36 MPs, but that was a result of the 2012 parliamentary elections, rather than the revolution.

The Case of Right Sector

Partly because of the unwillingness of Svoboda to match its radical rhetoric with radical action during the revolution, some of the protesters' sympathies shifted to Right Sector.

During the revolution, Right Sector was a broad coalition of far right organisations and groups that came together at the end of November 2013, a few days after the start of the pro-European protests. Then, Right Sector comprised of "Tryzub" (Trident), the Ukrainian National Assembly – Ukrainian Self-Defence (UNA-UNSO), "Patriot of Ukraine" (PU), "White Hammer" (WH), as well as smaller groupuscules and individual activists. At the end of January 2014, when the author interviewed activists from Right Sector, they said that their movement had around 300 members.

Their numbers apparently grew to 500 in the course of the more violent part of the revolution, i.e. in late January – February 2014.

Ideologically, these organisations ranged from radical national-conservatism of "Tryzub" to the right-wing extremism of the UNA-UNSO to the neo-Nazism of the PU and WH.[33] However, none of these ideological strands was a unifying force for Right Sector activists, while the neo-Nazis – due to the lower position of the PU and WH in the hierarchy of Right Sector – constituted a fringe element in the movement. What united these sometimes conflicting groups at the grassroots level was a combination of vehement opposition to Yanukovych's regime, which was widely considered as anti-Ukrainian and pro-Kremlin, the desire for "national liberation" and romantic militarism. This consensus was reinforced by the leadership of Dmytro Yarosh, the head of "Tryzub" and Right Sector as a whole: contrary to the demonisation of Yarosh in the (pro-)Russian media, it was he who, at the time of the revolution, tried to moderate the movement by publicly denouncing racism and anti-Semitism.[34]

For the outside world, Right Sector had two different faces. First, for the (pro-)Russian and pro-Yanukovych media, Right Sector was a neo-Nazi movement, and it was indeed easy to spot neo-Nazi imagery employed by the activists of Right Sector who belonged to the PU and WH, and then make a time-honoured generalisation. Second, the minimum consensus structure made Right Sector an increasingly inclusive movement, and activists of various ethnic backgrounds joined the movement in the second half of the Euromaidan protests. Around 40% of the movement was comprised of ethnic Russians/Russian-speakers.[35] Right Sector seemed to be a disciplined and efficient fighting unit, and while there were several fighting units during the revolution, some activists preferred to join Right Sector in January-February 2014 exactly because of its efficiency and militaristic image that attracted many a young protester.

Yet Right Sector had a third face that was concealed from outside observers, the face that revealed particular elements of political manipulation. To comprehend these elements, we need to look closely at the histories of some of the groups and individuals involved in Right Sector. However, before turning to these histories, it is important to discuss particular general trends in the extra-political and non-ideological activities of far right social movements in Ukraine.

As was argued earlier, Ukrainian far right political parties are often manipulated and instrumentalised by more powerful political forces.

Yet the spectrum of the services that the far right can offer as social organisations or groupuscules is even wider than those of the far right parties, although the level of reward is lower than in the second case. Most of the services provided by the far right can be grouped into often overlapping four major categories concisely named "illegal economic developments", "protection and security", "fake protests" and "violence".

First, far right activists are sometimes hired as strong-arm men to provide support during illegal takeovers. In Ukraine, redistribution of assets, property, businesses and wealth sometimes take place outside the legal space, and the rule of law is replaced by the rule of force. Far right activists who often practice martial arts and/or bodybuilding are, thus, useful in these situations, especially when an interested party needs to physically break through and occupy particular enterprises and/or offices. While activities such as these are predominantly non-ideological, ideology may play a mobilising role when a far right group is hired to drive out a business run by people of non-Slavic origin from a market. To mobilise their rank-and-file for such an operation, "pragmatists" leading a far right group may interpret it as a part of the "racial holy war", while in reality the original "need" to force out a business from a market has nothing to do with ethnicity.

Second, some far right groups can be characterised as criminal gangs running protection and/or extortion rackets. In the case of the protection racket, far right activists would offer to protect a business against a real threat, for example an illegal takeover or aggressive competitors. In the case of the extortion racket, the far right would threaten to attack a business if it refused protection.

Third, and this point is similar to the extortion racket, far right activists sometimes organise or threaten to organise protests against particular political, social or cultural developments or events in order to extort a reward for stopping them.

Fourth, far right activists can be hired by an interested party to perform acts of violence against its political opponents without giving away the connection between the "customer" and the "contractors". More often than not, "customers" are incumbents who would be interested in disrupting opposition protests or demonstrations that can potentially pose a serious challenge to the incumbents. The violence may be either direct, i.e. physical attacks, or mediated. In the latter case, far right activists would infiltrate the opposition protests without disclosing either their political affiliation or their "customers" and radicalise them to the degree where

a police action against the entire protest would be legitimate. In most cases, far right activists would attack the police to provoke them into using violence against the genuine protesters.

As many other Ukrainian far right activists, certain members and even leaders of Right Sector during the Euromaidan and revolution had been involved in some of the above-described activities.

The main point of reference is the year of 2004 which is commonly associated with the presidential election and the "Orange revolution" – a two-month stand-off between pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych and pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko that resulted in the victory of the latter in the re-run of the presidential election on 26 December.

Electoral fraud was one of the factors which set off the "Orange revolution", but then President Leonid Kuchma's regime employed other methods of political technology in an attempt to damage Yushchenko and hand over the reins of power to Yanukovych. Kuchma's Presidential Administration, then headed by Viktor Medvedchuk, as well as Yanukovych's advisers carried out several acts of political technology that involved the Ukrainian far right. On the basis of their immediate aims, these acts can be divided into two sets: the first set was aimed at inventing or using "scarecrow" individual and parties to discredit Yushchenko in the eyes of the Ukrainian pro-democratic voters and Western observers; the second was aimed at depriving Yushchenko of nationalist votes through the employment of "technical" presidential candidates.

The most infamous act was the "fascist march in support of Yushchenko". It was staged by Kuchma's Presidential Administration and involved an invented "scarecrow" extreme right party Ukrainian National Assembly (UNA) led by Eduard Kovalenko. In the beginning of summer 2004, Kovalenko declared that his party would hold a march in central Kyiv in support of Yushchenko as a presidential candidate. Yushchenko's office immediately replied that they never needed that support and did their best to distance from Kovalenko's scandalous initiative. Yet Yushchenko's office could not hamper that march and, on 26 June 2004, the march, which was supersaturated with Nazi imagery and Nazi salutes, proceeded. This was the first time the authorities granted permission to hold a mass extreme right march in central Kyiv.

Kovalenko's UNA was then closely associated with the UNA-UNSO which, in the beginning of the 2000s, split into several factions following the crackdown on the organisation during the anti-government "Ukraine without Kuchma!" campaign in 2001. In 2004, Kovalenko still cooperated

with some of the members of the original UNA-UNSO, and Andriy Shkil, the leader of one of the factions, expelled several members, including Ihor Mazur and Andriy Bondarenko, for collaboration with Kovalenko whose "fascist march" was unanimously seen as an act of political technology against Yushchenko.[36]

Kovalenko's UNA was not the only splinter group from the original UNA-UNSO that was offered collaboration with pro-Yanukovych's spin-doctors. As one of the members of the UNA-UNSO faction led by Yuriy Tyma recalls, when Kovalenko's "masters" decided to intensify the defamation attack on Yushchenko, they turned to them: "These people offered financial support in exchange for our support for Yushchenko... Moreover, we would have to radicalise our slogans and actions".[37] Thus, the pro-Yanukovych political technologists needed to produce a media picture of the "most extreme neo-Nazis" supporting – but, eventually, damaging mainstream support for – Yushchenko. Tyma's faction of the UNA-UNSO presumably refused to collaborate, but they were involved in a different scheme against Yushchenko.

With the backing from the authorities, several "technical" nationalist candidates were registered for the elections.[38] Among them were: Bohdan Boyko, leader of the invented People's Movement of Ukraine for Unity (one of several parties that used the word "movement" (Rukh) to confuse the voters and steal votes from the original People's Movement of Ukraine); Yuriy Zbitnyev, leader of the virtual far right "New Force" party; Roman Kozak, leader of the fringe far right Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists in Ukraine; and Dmytro Korchyns'ky, former leader of the original UNA-UNSO and then leader of the invented far right "Brotherhood" party. These candidates' aim was to steal votes for Yushchenko from the right segment of the political spectrum and provide the electoral fraud machine with loyal representatives controlled by the regime. In the context of this article, it is important to note, in particular, Boyko and his political initiative to form a coalition named "The Movement of Ukrainian Patriots" that was joined, in July 2004, by his own party, as well as Tyma's UNA-UNSO, "Tryzub" under the leadership of Yevhen Fil, and a few smaller groups.

The leadership of Right Sector during the revolution included many of the former and actual UNA-UNSO members who were directly and/ or indirectly involved in the above-mentioned pro-Yanukovych and pro-government political technology projects. Among them were Andriy Bondarenko, Ihor Mazur and Mykola Karpyuk who, after the failure of the

"Ukraine without Kuchma!" campaign in 2001, turned the UNA-UNSO – together with Kovalenko and Tyma – into an organisation loyal to Kuchma.

The dubious past was also present in the PU that was part of Right Sector during the revolution. The PU was formed in Kharkiv in 2005-2009 and led by Andriy Bilets'ky and Oleh Odnorozhenko. In Kharkiv, the PU cooperated with the authorities who used neo-Nazi activists for their own business purposes.[39] In return, the PU was allowed to stage torch-lit marches and intimidate Asian and African students – because of their loyalty to the authorities, they were rarely confronted by the police. The activities of the Kyiv-based branch of the PU, known as the Social-National Assembly (SNA) and led by Ihor Mosiychuk, Volodymyr Shpara and Serhiy Bevz, were similar. They collaborated with the pro-Yanukovych authorities to perform a wide range of activities: blocking observation of local elections, scheming with lease of land, disrupting social and anti-government protests, etc. PU/SNA activists were also involved in attacks on Kharkiv and Kyiv region markets where a lot of Vietnamese people sold their goods, but while these attacks might have been presented to rank and file as a struggle against "illegal migrants", in reality they were simply violent attempts at regulating business interests to the benefit of "patrons" of the PU/SNA.

One of the neo-Nazis who closely cooperated with the PU/SNA was Oleksandr Vakhniy. A leading figure of the neo-Nazi skinhead movement in Kyiv in the late 1990s and a convicted criminal, Vakhniy also cooperated with Korchyns'ky's virtual "Brotherhood", Kovalenko's UNA, as well as being a member of SPAS – an invented pan-Slavic and anti-Crimean Tatar far right party formed by Kovalenko after the UNA. During the revolution, Vakhniy was also a leading member of the WH that was part of Right Sector. Before Euromaidan, the WH was known for attacking and destroying casinos which are illegal in Ukraine. Ideologically, the destruction of casinos might have been driven by social conservatism and arbitrarily interpreted sense of law and order, but the activities of Vakhniy and the WH had also mundane implications, as they stole large amounts of money from the casinos they attacked. After the revolution, two members of the WH were allegedly involved in murdering three road policemen. In March 2014, following the statement issued by the General Prosecutor Office that the murders of the road policemen might have been carried out by Euromaidan activists, the Right Sector leadership expelled the WH from the organisation.

It would be, however, an exaggeration to say that the entire Right Sector was a fake movement or part of "political technology" in the service of Yanukovych's regime or various business projects. However, in the course of the protests and the revolution, there were several episodes when Right Sector's activists, most likely, deliberately attacked the police to provoke a violent response upon other protesters.

In March, the party-political wing of the UNA-UNSO, namely the Ukrainian National Assembly (UNA), was renamed into Right Sector with Dmytro Yarosh as its leader, but later Right Sector – already a political party – parted ways with many members of the UNSO.

Svoboda and Right Sector at the Presidential and Parliamentary Elections

The early presidential and parliamentary elections in Ukraine that took place in May and October 2014 respectively proved to be disastrous for Svoboda's Oleh Tyahnybok and Right Sector's Dmytro Yarosh.

Tyahnybok obtained 1.2% and Yarosh 0.7% in the presidential election. One irony of their performance, especially against the background of the Kremlin's continuous disinformation campaign, was that Vadym Rabinovych, president of the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress, obtained 2.3% of the votes – more than Tyahnybok and Yarosh together.

In the parliamentary elections, Svoboda secured only 4.71% of the vote and, therefore, failed to pass the 5% electoral threshold and re-enter the parliament, although six members of Svoboda were elected in single-member districts. Right Sector fared even worse: it obtained 1.80% of the votes, but Yarosh was elected in a single-member district.

The popular vote in the presidential election was in large part tactical. Every poll since March 2014 put Petro Poroshenko ahead. In April 2014, the idea of electing a new president already in the first round of the election became increasingly pervasive, especially against the background of the separatist activities in Eastern Ukraine and Russia's ongoing invasion. Many Ukrainians felt that "doing away" with the presidential election as soon as possible in order to focus on the anti-terrorist and anti-separatist activities in eastern Ukraine would be good for the country, so they voted for Poroshenko as the most popular candidate. These included adherents of the far right. For example, in Kyiv, where the presidential election took place simultaneously with the election to the Kyiv Council, some adherents

of Svoboda preferred to support Poroshenko for president, yet they still supported Svoboda for the Kyiv Council. In general, far right leaders, as representatives of populist, anti-establishment forces, often benefit from their opposition to existing elites. Ukraine in May 2014, however, still lacked a full-fledged political establishment to oppose. The times were more suited to the demagogic populist, Oleh Lyashko, who railed against unseen enemies on behalf of unseen oligarchic sponsors, and won 8.3%. The same populist narratives allowed Lyashko's Radical Party to attract 7.4% of the votes in the 2014 parliamentary elections.

The unsuccessful performance of Svoboda and the Right Sector in the parliamentary elections requires a more elaborate explanation. Naturally, an element of tactical voting was present during the parliamentary election too. According to public opinion polls conducted before the election, Svoboda was on the verge of passing the electoral threshold and many voters decided not to risk supporting this party. At the same time, the popularity of Right Sector was very low, to the extent that some sociological companies often did not mention it. However, the tactical voting cannot fully explain the far right's failure.

Why did the far right, in particular Svoboda, fail in the parliamentary election? First, as was mentioned earlier, Svoboda's popularity started to decrease already in 2013, as their former supporters became disappointed with its work in the parliament. Second, Svoboda and Right Sector split the nationalist vote; Svoboda was affected the most, as some of its former supporters presumably swung to the Right Sector. Third, Svoboda's success in 2012 was a success of a political force that was considered the most radical in its opposition to contemporary President Yanukovych. Svoboda was largely an "anti-Yanukovych party", but with Yanukovych gone, Svoboda lost the major source of negative mobilisation. Fourth, in 2012, Svoboda was also considered almost the only patriotic party, but since the Russian invasion forced all the democratic Ukrainian parties to turn to patriotic rhetoric, Svoboda lost its "monopoly" on patriotism. Last, but not the least, the questionable conduct and dubious activities of Svoboda's top members (including those who were ministers in the provisional cabinet of Yatsenyuk) in spring-summer 2014 drove off many of their former supporters.

The electoral failure of Svoboda and Right Sector did not mark "the end of history" of the Ukrainian far right. In addition to several members of Svoboda and Right Sector, the PU's leader Andriy Bilets'ky was elected to the parliament in a single-member district in Kyiv.

After the PU distanced from Right Sector in spring 2014, it briefly cooperated with Lyashko's Radical Party. Furthermore, in May, the PU formed the core of the Azov battalion, a volunteer detachment governed by the Ministry of Interior headed by Arsen Avakov. A member of Yatsenyuk's People's Front party, minister Avakov promoted the Azov battalion and granted the rank of police Lieutenant Colonel to its commander Bilets'ky in August. The People's Front also brought Bilets'ky into the military council of the party and apparently planned to officially support his candidacy in the parliamentary election, but, due to the opposition to such a move from the Ukrainian expert community and representatives of national minorities, it was forced to re-think its decision. However, the People's Front, in particular Avakov and his advisor Anton Gerashchenko, still supported Bilets'ky unofficially and contributed to his election to the parliament.

The support for the PU as the core of the Azov battalion, which was transformed into a regiment in late autumn 2014, coming from Ukraine's Ministry of Internal Affairs was a worrying development. However, if had nothing to do with the ideology of the PU. Rather, this was a legacy of nepotism: minister Avakov knew, and cooperated with, the leaders of the PU since 2009-2010 when he was still the head of the Kharkiv regional administration. The cooperation between Ministry of Internal Affairs and the PU seemed to be driven by Avakov's trust in the organisation that he worked with in the past.

Conclusion

The Kremlin's focus on the Ukrainian far right and its allegedly dominant role in the 2014 revolution and the post-revolutionary developments was a part of Moscow's information war that attempted to delegitimise the national-democratic opposition to Yanukovych's regime and, later, the newly established Ukrainian authorities. This information war had three audiences. First, it was aimed at Russian society, including the opposition to Putin's regime, to level down its potential support for protests and upheavals. Second, it appealed to the generalised Russian ethnic/Russian-speaking community in Ukraine to either undermine its trust towards, or reinforce their scepticism of, the pro-European, pro-democratic political forces in the country. Third, it sought to undermine the Ukrainian revolution and post-revolutionary developments

internationally to neutralise Western criticism of Russia's interference in and invasion of Ukraine, as well as the annexation of Crimea.

The success of the Kremlin's disinformation campaign varied in different societies, but it was not particularly successful overall. Moscow's arguments were undermined not only by the low electoral results of the Ukrainian far right, but also by Russia's use of ultranationalists in its invasion of Ukraine, as well as Moscow's flirtations with the European far right that require a separate discussion and were not addressed here.

While the far right is present in Ukraine and, in the case of Svoboda, was even briefly relatively successful on the national level in 2012, it is important to stress the element of political manipulation in its rise. Far right parties and organisations were often exploited in different political games, either as "scarecrow" parties, or fake opposition, or as private "security firms" employed by various, more powerful political actors. Hence, for all the bluster around them, it is possible to predict that Ukrainian ultra-nationalism will most likely remain an extra-parliamentary force – as it was in the 1990s – until the day comes when it is involved in one or another "political technology" project.

NOTES

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[2] On the Kremlin's information war see Peter Pomerantsev, Michael Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality*: *How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money* (Princeton: Institute of Modern Russia, 2014).

[3] Anna Veronika Wendland, "Levy neoimperializm i sostoyanie 'rossiyskikh' issledovaniy: Participant Observation nemetskogo diskursa ob ukrainskom krizise", *Ab Imperio*, No. 3 (2014), pp. 183-194 (193). See also Timothy Snyder, "Fascism, Russia, and Ukraine", *The New York Review of Books*, 20 March (2014), http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/mar/20/fascism-russia-and-ukraine/.

[4] Timothy Snyder, "A Way Out for Ukraine?", *New York Review of Books*, 5 December (2013), http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2013/dec/05/ukraine-protests-way-out/.

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[7] On Right Sector see Vyacheslav Likhachev, "'Pravy sektor' i drugie: natsional-radikaly i ukranskiy politicheskiy krizis kontsa 2013 g. – nachala 2014 g.", *Forum noveyshey vostochnoevropeyskoy istorii i kul'tury*, Vol. 2 (2014), pp. 75-116.

[8] For more on the electoral insignificance of the Ukrainian far right, see Andreas Umland, Anton Shekhovtsov, "Ultraright Party Politics in Post-Soviet Ukraine and the Puzzle of the Electoral Marginalism of Ukrainian

Ultranationalists in 1994-2009", *Russian Politics and Law*, Vol. 51, No. 5 (2013), pp. 33-58.

9   On political manipulation, in particular, in Ukraine see Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

10   On the increased media visibility of Svoboda in the period since 2010 see Anton Shkehovtsov, "Vseukrainskoe ob'yedinenie 'Svoboda': problema legitimnosti bor'by za vlast'", *Forum noveyshey vostochnoevropeyskoy istorii i kul'tury*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2013), pp. 22-63.

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