



Ukraine's Far Right Today

Continuing Electoral Impotence and Growing Uncivil Society

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Since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, independent Ukraine's system of political parties—like those of most other European states—has featured a small number of far-right political parties. Unlike in numerous other Eastern and West European states, however, these parties have remained largely marginal. This has been all the more surprising since political and social domestic tensions in Ukraine have been consistently high for the past 30 years. Moreover, since 2014, a major factor—perhaps even *the* major factor—in Ukrainian society's increased receptiveness to various forms of nationalism, including radical ethno-centrism, has been Russia's attacks on Ukraine.

Russia's thinly disguised "delegated interstate war" on Ukraine since 2014 has provided—and is still providing—fertile ground for political radicalization and mobilization. Intra-Ukrainian confrontations about how to respond to the Kremlin are dividing Ukrainian society and opening up entry points for extremists. In some respects, therefore, Ukraine has become similar to Italy and Germany in the 1920s or to Serbia and Russia in the 1990s. Like these states, Ukraine has suffered from massive real or perceived war-related deprivations. Ukrainians have witnessed loss of life, health, territory, homes, income and

wealth, and infrastructure. Nonetheless, all this has failed to generate a powerful ultra-nationalist movement in Ukraine. Nothing even remotely similar to Italian or German inter-war or Serbian and Russian post-Cold War developments has happened on the far-right scene in Ukraine to date.

At the national level, radical right-wing parties in Ukraine have fared miserably in all presidential and almost all parliamentary elections—whether in the 1990s, the early 2000s or after Euromaidan (see Table 1). The electoral weakness and low level of political legitimacy of Ukraine's ultra-nationalists are historically and comparatively remarkable. It is particularly surprising seen against the background of favourable conditions for the rise of Ukraine's far-right since 1991. Moreover, in the two most recent nationwide elections of 2014 and 2019, large parts of Ukraine's Russophone non-nationalist electorate in Crimea, in the Donbas and in Russia were unable to cast their votes for their preferred presidential contenders, parliamentary lists or single-member district candidates because of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Nonetheless, these additional favourable conditions did not lead to an electoral breakthrough for party political ultra-nationalism.



Table 1. Vote shares of major Ukrainian far-right parties in presidential elections and in the proportional-representation parts of parliamentary elections, 1998–2019

Party or alliance	Bloc "Natsionalny front" [National Front] (KUN, UKRP & URP) / URP / KUN	UNA / Pravyi sektor [Right Sector]	Bloc "Menshe sliv" [Fewer Words] (VPO-DSU & SNPU) / VOS
National election			
1998 (parliamentary)	2.71 (NF)	0.39 (UNA)	0.16 (MS)
1999 (presidential)			
2002 (parliamentary)		0.04 (UNA)	
2004 (presidential)	0.02 (Kozak, OUN)	0.17 (Korchyns'kyi)	
2006 (parliamentary)		0.06 (UNA)	0.36 (VOS)
2007 (parliamentary)			0.76 (VOS)
2010 (presidential)			1.43 (Tiahnybok)
2012 (parliamentary)		0.08 (UNA-UNSO)	10.44 (VOS)
2014 (presidential)		0.70 (Iarosh)*	1.16 (Tiahnybok)
2014 (parliamentary)	0.05 (KUN)	1.81 (PS)	4.71 (VOS)
2019 (presidential)			1.62 (Koshulyns'kyi)
2019 (parliamentary)			2.15 (VOS)**

* In the 2014 presidential election, Dmytro Iarosh formally ran as an independent candidate but was publicly known as the leader of Pravyi sektor (PS).

** The 2019 Svoboda list was a unified bloc of most of the relevant Ukrainian far-right political parties, but was officially registered only as a VOS list.

Notes: KUN: Konhres ukrains'kykh natsionalistiv (Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists); UKRP: Ukrains'ka konservatyvna respublikans'ka partiia (Ukrainian Conservative Republican Party); URP: Ukrains'ka respublikans'ka partiia (Ukrainian Republican Party); VPO-DSU: Vseukrainske politychne ob"ednannia "Derzhavna samostiynist' Ukrainy" (All-Ukrainian Political Union "State Independence of Ukraine"); SNPU: Sotsial-natsionalna partiia Ukrainy (Social-National Party of Ukraine); OUN: Orhanizatsiia ukrainskykh natsionalistiv (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists); UNA: Ukrains'ka natsionalna asambleia (Ukrainian National Assembly); UNSO: Ukrains'ka narodna samooborona (Ukrainian National Self-Defense); VOS: Vseukrains'ke ob"ednannia "Svoboda" (All-Ukrainian Union Svoboda).

Svoboda's Brief Rise, 2012–2014

Throughout Ukraine's post-Soviet period, for only two years has a far-right party – the All-Ukrainian Union "Svoboda" (Freedom), led by Oleh Tiahnybok – had a small group in Ukraine's unicameral national legislature, the Verkhovna Rada (Supreme Council). Between 12 December 2012 and 27 November 2014, it held 37 of the parliament's 450 seats. Among other things, Svoboda's brief advance in national politics was a function of Russia's intensified media campaign and diplomatic activism against

Ukraine's turn to the West, following the Orange Revolution and the election of the moderate nationalist, Viktor Iushchenko, as president in 2004. It was also a result of the organizational disarray in the National Democratic Party camp. Its parliamentary factions had enough seats to form a majority in the Supreme Council in 2010–2012, but the "Orange forces", named after the Orange Revolution, could not keep their deputies together after they lost the presidency to Viktor Yanukovich in the spring of 2010.



Following the victory of the Revolution of Dignity in early 2014, Svoboda was able to join Ukraine's first post-Euromaidan cabinet and given a small number of ministerial positions. For nine months, Tiahnybok's Svoboda largely followed the national democrats' political lead in government. In September 2014, for example, Svoboda's parliamentary faction unanimously voted in favour of ratifying Ukraine's Association Agreement with the European Union – a fairly unusual decision for a European far-right political party.

This and a number of other developments amounted to a public move to the political centre by Svoboda, both during and after Euromaidan. Nevertheless, Svoboda lost more than half of its support in percentage terms in the October 2014 parliamentary elections, compared to its result in the previous national vote of October 2012. In the July 2019 parliamentary elections, in spite of its successful cooperation with its far-right competitors during the campaign and formation of a unified list, Svoboda's support more than halved once again to just 2.15%.

The Stalled Rise of the Right Sector and National Corps

For much of Ukraine's post-Soviet history, most Ukrainian far-right activists have been unable, or at least able only temporarily, to enter national politics. They have therefore engaged with various "uncivil society" entities, especially since 2014 when civil society more generally started to play a larger role in Ukraine following Euromaidan. Associations such as the Right Sector and the National Corps, for instance, are obviously seeking political power, but have not been able to enter, as organizations, parliament and government, and are forced to operate in the societal rather than political realm.

Dmytro Yarosh, the former leader of the Right Sector and Andriy Bilets'kyi, the current leader of the National Corps, are from eastern Ukraine. Both were directly elected deputies to the eighth post-Soviet Ukrainian parliament of 2014–2019. Like most far-right political activists, however, they were unable to take up a position in a state institution, have not been in parliament any more since 2019, and are therefore now active in civil society.

Both the Right Sector and the National Corps derive much of their recognition and fame from their members' voluntary participation in Ukraine's war against Russia in the Donets Basin in 2014–2015. Their marginal pre-Euromaidan predecessor organizations were hardly known to Ukrainians and escaped the attentions of most political analysts. Yarosh, Bilets'kyi and other former lunatic fringe figures have become Ukrainian national heroes since 2014 as a result of their highly publicized participation in the Donbas war. Yarosh was even wounded in battle. The far-right activists' participation in the war – often within their own volunteer battalions – has led to a significant increase in their public profiles and social standing – and in the legitimacy of their political parties – in Ukraine. Paradoxically, however, a steep rise in the international visibility and national acceptability of Ukraine's ultra-nationalists – supported, not the least, by the frequent attacks on them in Kremlin-directed mass media – has not translated into political success at the ballot box, at least in nationwide elections.

The Far Right's Growing Societal Embeddedness

In spite of Ukraine's relatively positive record in terms of the weakness of ultra-nationalists in national polls, the close monitoring and partial containment of far-



right activities remain on the agenda for non-governmental watchdogs and governmental law-enforcement agencies. Although electorally impotent, Ukraine's far-right activist community remains numerically, organizationally and tactically strong, and has been present on Ukraine's streets since Euromaidan. Being largely excluded from national politics, many ultra-nationalists have switched to various projects within Ukrainian "uncivil society", in a variety of fields ranging from World War II memory affairs and anti-LGBT activism to promoting ecological issues and animal rights. Far-right groups have sometimes even managed to receive various types of governmental support for their activities, such as for certain security-, armed forces veterans'- and education-related programmes.

The most dangerous such phenomenon for Ukraine's young democracy could be the multifaceted Azov movement, which has its own regular National Guard regiment, links to the leadership of the interior ministry, an all-Ukrainian party National Corps and an unarmed vigilante wing, National Fellowship. While it would go too far to classify the Azov movement as a terrorist organization, as has been recently suggested in Washington, DC, its various political and "uncivil" spin-off associations probably represent the largest long-term domestic right-wing extremist threat to Ukraine's democracy. Unlike previous Ukrainian far-right projects, the Azov movement has managed to create a multidimensional and distinctly modern (and partly postmodern) identity that appeals especially to the young and is not regionally limited. It also cooperates closely with like-minded groups abroad. Such foreign cooperation even includes contacts with certain Russian neo-Nazi groups.

Conclusions

The weak electoral performance thus far of Ukraine's far-right has been encouraging. The low level of popular support for Ukrainian party political ultra-nationalism is especially noteworthy when seen against the background of the recent successes of right wing populists and extremists in other parts of Europe. Nonetheless, there are at least four features of or developments in Ukraine's post-Euromaidan ultra-nationalist environment that give cause for concern. First, as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine, there is a growing public tolerance of historical and contemporary radical nationalist organizations, their actions and personnel, in Ukrainian society and among its elite.

Second, since 2014, through the foundation of volunteer units, certain far-right organizations have been given permanent access to guns and even in some cases heavy weapons. Some still control minor irregular armed groups such as the Volunteer Ukrainian Corps of the Right Sector, or the Volunteer Army of Dmytro Yarosh's Statist Initiative party. It is important to note, however, that terms such as "corps" and "army" are highly hyperbolic when applied to these organizationally marginal and publicly almost invisible paramilitary units.

Third, there is a continuing presence of far-right organizations in the realms of Ukraine's extra-parliamentary party politics, NGO sector, local affairs and, in some respects, foreign relations. Following the cutting of most of Svoboda's earlier ties to far-right parties in the European Union in 2014, the latter point is linked to the Azov movement's growing international ties. Some smaller far-right groups are also building links with other European racist or ultra-conservative associations.



Fourth, as a result of Ukrainian society's generally greater permissiveness of the far-right since the events of 2014, there have been repeated incidents of cooperation between various governmental institutions and parts of the far-right. This has not yet become a general pattern, however. It thus far has only involved certain state organs such as the security services or the veterans ministry. Such cooperation, moreover, can be expected to decrease under the new Ukrainian leadership that took control of the presidency, the government and parliament in 2019.

In conclusion, Ukraine's ultra-nationalist parties remain far less relevant politically than has been alleged in Russian propaganda and was feared by some international experts on generic right-wing extremism following the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014. Nonetheless, in early 2020, the radical right's role in Ukrainian public life is still characterized by a high level of activity in realms such as civil society, the mass media and cultural affairs. The various permutations of contemporary Ukrainian ultra-nationalism therefore require careful monitoring and continuing analysis by independent researchers and law enforcement agencies.



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