



From the provinces to the parliament: How the Ukrainian radical right mobilized in Galicia



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ABSTRACT

This article traces the on-the-ground mobilization and recruitment strategies of Ukraine's radical right party, Svoboda (Freedom) in the years prior to its 2012 electoral breakthrough. Ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with Svoboda party leaders and activists in Galicia show how party leaders strategically created an organizational structure aimed at recruiting young people, making linkages with pre-existing nationalist groups, and shifting the ideological focus away from cultural and toward economic issues. Interviews with party activists reveal how personal networks were key in the recruitment and radicalization process, showing that radical right activists were radicalized, or "made," through political participation. Consequently, Svoboda's organizational capacity allowed the party to take advantage of a political opportunity – Yanukovich's unpopularity and weakened national democratic parties – in the 2012 parliamentary elections.

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1. Introduction

Ukraine's otherwise predictable parliamentary elections in the fall of 2012 had one surprising outcome: the radical right party, Svoboda (Freedom), became the first such party to gain national representation in Ukraine's post-Soviet history with 10.4 percent of the popular vote. This high electoral result was particularly unexpected because prior to 2012, Ukraine's history with radical right parties and nationalist movements was characterized by failure (Shekhovtsov 2011)—not one of Ukraine's radical right parties managed to mobilize support at the national level. In addition, due to the Svoboda's poor showing in the previous 2007 parliamentary elections (.76%), the party seemed bound to go the way of its predecessors as a strong, but ephemeral, regional political movement with unfulfilled national electoral aspirations.

To understand how Svoboda broke the pattern of similar preceding political movements, it is not enough to examine the institutional or contextual determinants of radical right parties' electoral successes or the characteristics of voters, as political scientists have done. Elections are just one part of political mobilization, which does not occur over night or in the weeks prior to the elections. Rather, political mobilization is a long-term process that requires resources, political leadership, and above all, willing and active participants. As all social movements, radical right movements depend on an effective organizational strategy and individuals who are willing to commit their time and resources to attend demonstrations, hand out leaflets, and recruit new members. While political opportunities may provide an opening for mobilization, without individual and collective actors to organize support on the ground, mobilization would stall.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with Svoboda party leaders and activists in Galicia in the years prior to Svoboda's electoral breakthrough (from 2009 to 2012), this article is the first study to examine the on-the-ground processes of political mobilization behind Svoboda's rapid electoral rise. Using insights from social movement theories in sociology, I examine how Svoboda developed its political mobilization strategy in its electoral stronghold of Galicia. Political mobilization involves two interrelated sets of actors: (1) the political party itself comprised of the party leadership, organizational structure, and political ideology, and (2) the individual rank-and-file activists—the “boots on the ground”—whose initial participation and continued commitment are crucial to the party's political longevity. By focusing on the social actors, both collective and individual, who comprise the political movement, this research directly addresses a previously unexamined but central piece of the radical right phenomenon: namely, how radicalization occurs on the ground. Svoboda also benefitted from a political opening: the growing societal disapproval of former president Viktor Yanukovich, who was elected in 2010 and deposed by the Euromaidan protests in February 2014, and the absence of national democratic alternatives with the decline of Viktor Yushchenko and the imprisonment of Yulia Tymshenko, that provided political space for a nationalist challenger. However, without a *pre-existing* organizational structure based on grassroots mobilization, Svoboda would not have been able to take advantage of this opportunity.

2. Political opportunities and social movement mobilization

2.1. Demand and supply side explanations

Scholarly interest in radical right movements has been steadily increasing since the 1980s (Betz, 2003; Bustikova and Kitschelt, 2009; Mudde, 2007; Ignazi, 2003; Norris, 2005; Ramet, 1999). Focusing on radical right political parties in Western Europe, and to a much lesser degree, Eastern Europe, political scientists have sought to explain why such parties are more electorally successful in some countries than others (Minkenberg, 2002, 2013). Explanations come in two types: demand side approaches analyze how changes in voters' attitudes affect support for radical right parties, while supply side approaches examine how political institutions and opportunity structures can facilitate or deter the radical right's electoral chances. From demand side studies, scholars have learned a great deal about voters' characteristics. For example, we know that young men without a higher education tend to be overrepresented among the radical right's electorate (Norris, 2005). Yet, demand side approaches have not been able to prove their main thesis: that socio-economic changes, such as economic downturns or increasing immigration, have an effect on radical right parties' electoral results (Rydgren, 2007).

On the other hand, supply side explanations have posited that the structure of electoral institutions, the response of other parties, and the media's treatment of radical right parties can influence radical right's parties' ability to gain entry into parliament (Art, 2011; Koopmans, 1996; Duverger, 1954). However, these studies have produced contradictory results as well. For example, one central hypothesis in supply side explanations is that majoritarian electoral systems that allot representatives on a winner-take-all basis make it difficult for radical right parties (and all small parties) to garner enough support for representation. Proportional representation systems are thus seen as more favorable to radical right parties. Studies have found mixed results when testing this hypothesis: some find a positive connection between share of votes for radical right parties and proportional representation systems (Swank and Betz, 2003; Jackman and Volpert, 1996), while others show no such connection (Van der Brug et al., 2005; Carter, 2005). In Ukraine, the electoral system hypothesis finds little support as well: Svoboda gained entry into national politics in an unfavorable mixed majoritarian-proportional system in 2012 and failed in a purely proportional electoral system in 2007.

2.2. Political opportunities

Electoral systems cannot, on their own, explain the electoral outcomes of challenger political parties. Rather, electoral rules constitute one part of the broader “political opportunity structure” (POS), which includes formal institutional factors but also the structure of the political space defined by the relational positioning between parties (Art, 2011; Tarrow, 1994). POS is a broad concept. Tarrow (1994:85), for example, defines political opportunity structures as “consistent—but not necessarily formal or permanent—dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure.” Challenger political parties from the left, or the right, face high barriers to political entry in stable political systems with strong incumbents. The United States' political system is one example of a “closed” political space: formal electoral rules and strong incumbent parties (Democrats and Republicans) prevent entry of political alternatives. For this reason, challengers like the Tea Party, enter institutional politics as a faction of an existing political party, in this case the Republicans. In more volatile political systems, characterized by weak incumbents and frequent changes in structure of political space, challenger parties with the right combination of resources and leadership may find an opportunity to enter.

In the case of Svoboda, the political opportunity presented itself in two ways. First, the election of Viktor Yanukovich as president in 2010 gave Svoboda an enemy to position itself against. Yanukovich received highest support in the Russian speaking eastern and southern regions. In my interviews, Svoboda leaders saw Yanukovich's regime as an extension of Russian domination and referred to Yanukovich's Party of Regions as illegitimate occupants of Ukrainian land. Yanukovich's cultural and educational policies, such as the 2012 language law that elevated Russian to the level of an official language and the Minister of Education Dmytro Tabachnyk's reforms that reintroduced Soviet terminology into school history books and

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