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Voting, identity and security threats in Ukraine: who supports the Radical "Freedom" Party?



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ABSTRACT

This article investigates voters and sympathizers of Ukraine's radical right party, Svoboda. Using an original survey conducted in 2010, it shows that support for Svoboda was rooted less in extreme levels of xenophobia vis-à-vis Russians, and more in concerns about the support that the Russian minority receives from the state, fear of losing Ukrainian sovereignty, and economic anxiety. In contrast to the conventional view, the analysis suggests that support for Svoboda was not a function of inter-group ethnic hostilities; instead, it originated in perceived threats and anxieties about the character of the Ukrainian state.

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The Euromaidan events catapulted the previously marginal radical right party, All-Ukrainian Union Svoboda (the "Freedom Party"), to its short-lived prominence. Representatives of the Svoboda party have occupied cabinet posts in the interim government, which has increased anxiety among pro-Russia leaders and citizens. Yet, in the October 2014 elections, Svoboda's electoral support was cut by half. By a narrow margin, the party failed to cross the five percent threshold and to obtain seats in the parliament. It is yet to be seen, however, whether this merely represents a temporary setback or a more permanent failure of Ukrainian radical politics.

The most recent electoral results do not diminish the fact that in 2012, Svoboda amassed over ten percent, which is an impressive electoral result for a radical right party (Bustikova, 2014). Scholars have attributed Svoboda's 2012 achievement in the parliamentary elections to a complex set of factors including: dissatisfaction with the major parties, protest voting against President Yanukovich, anxieties associated with the 2012 language law, resonance of anti-establishment appeals with the voters, disappointment with economic and political corruption, xenophobia, economic downturn and the re-emergence of pre-war legacies (Cantorovich, 2013; Kuzio, 2007; Likhachev, 2013; Moser, 2014; Polyakova, 2014; Shekhovtsov, 2011a,b; Shekhovtsov, 2015; Umland, 2013; Umland and Shekhovtsov, 2013).¹

Although these explanations advance our understanding of Svoboda's recent electoral success, little is still known about the micro-level determinants of voter support for the Svoboda party, the role of inter-ethnic hostility and the specific anxieties that Svoboda voters hold. The data and the analysis presented in this article reflect the state of the Ukrainian politics before the annexation of Crimea, the outbreak of violence in the East and polarizing events of Maidan. The turbulence associated with these drastic events will have a long lasting impact on Ukrainian politics. It is nevertheless useful to step back

¹ The Svoboda party has been characterized as an ethno-centric and anti-Semitic party: "Svoboda is a racist party promoting explicitly ethnocentric and anti-Semitic ideas. Its main programmatic points are Russo- and xenophobia as well as, more recently, a strict anti-immigration stance. It is an outspoken advocate of an uncritical heroization of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists – an interwar and World War II ultra-nationalist party tainted by its temporary collaboration with the Third Reich, as well as its members' participation in genocidal actions against Poles and Jews, in western Ukraine, during German occupation. Although Svoboda emphasizes the European character of the Ukrainian people, it is an anti-Western, anti-liberal, and anti-EU grouping" (Umland and Shekhovtsov, 2010: 1).

and examine the roots of a party that is often in the international spotlight and used as evidence that the rights and lives of ethnic minorities in Ukraine are endangered.

The objective of this article is thus to shed light on the electoral profile of Svoboda voters and sympathizers, and to complement the emerging scholarship on radical right parties in Ukraine. It argues that political sympathy towards Svoboda is rooted less in extreme levels of xenophobia vis-à-vis Russians, and more in concerns about the support that the Russian minority receives from the state, fears regarding the loss of sovereignty and economic anxiety. Using an original and nationally representative survey conducted in 2010 across all regions of Ukraine, the analysis shows that support for Svoboda originated in perceived threats and anxieties about the character of the Ukrainian state rather than inter-group ethnic hostilities (Cantorovich, 2013; Olszański, 2011; Rudling, 2012; Rudling, 2013).²

Although many fringe radical right parties have emerged in Ukraine since the early 1990s, for example, KUN (Konhres Ukrainykykh natsionalistiv), UNA (Ukrainska natsionalna asambleya), OUN (Orhanizatsiya ukrainykykh natsionalistiv) and recent Pravyi Sektor – their electoral support has rarely exceeded three percent of the popular vote (Birch, 2000; D'Anieri and Kuzio, 2007; Kubicek, 1999; Kuzio, 1997; Shekhovtsov, 2011a,b; Solchanyk, 1999; Umland and Shekhovtsov, 2010; Wilson, 1997).³ In March 2009, however, Svoboda obtained 35% of the popular vote in the western Ukrainian Ternopil regional council election (Shekhovtsov, 2011a,b).⁴

Ternopil was part of the second Polish republic during WWII, and is the site of the Huta Pieniacka village massacre of 500–1000 ethnic Poles in 1944. Polish scholars have linked members of the patriotic Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) to the massacre. In 1989, a controversial monument to the massacre was built, then destroyed and then rebuilt in 2005. The Svoboda party vehemently opposed the monument, and has been vocal in its opposition to Polish–Ukrainian reconciliation since 2003 (Olszański, 2011).⁵ In 2007, a new monument was unveiled in the presence of the Polish consul in Lviv. Svoboda's leader, Oleh Tyahnybok, sent a note of protest. On February 28, 2009, Ukrainian President, Viktor Yushchenko, and Polish President, Lech Kaczyński, met to commemorate the 65th anniversary of the massacre.

Less than a month later, in March 2009, Svoboda made its first major inroads into Ukrainian politics in the Ternopil regional election. Although Svoboda failed to gain national appeal in the presidential election in 2010, it has emerged as a serious political force in Western Ukraine. Svoboda's regional success in Ternopil has been attributed mostly to its ability to exploit battles over nationalist policies between the Party of Regions and the parties of the Orange bloc (Kudelia, 2011; Olszański, 2011; Shekhovtsov, 2013; Umland and Shekhovtsov, 2010).⁶

As a testament to the importance of this “regional breakthrough” (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995: 99–100), the second wave of Svoboda's success occurred in the national election in October 2012. In 2012, Svoboda was the first radical right party to independently win seats in the parliament. Svoboda won 10.4% of the popular vote and 36 out of 450 seats. Its regional breakthrough in Western Ukraine and its success in national elections set the stage for its third success in the interim government preceded by Svoboda's activism during the Maidan protests in Kyiv.⁷ In addition to holding 8% of the seats in the Parliament in the 2012–2014 electoral cycle, Svoboda held four of the twenty posts in the interim government, which was established after the ouster of President Yanukovich.

In the parliamentary elections of 2014, Svoboda did not cross the five percent threshold (by a narrow margin) and its vote share dropped by half. Although this was not the result that the Svoboda leadership was hoping for, the loss of votes need not signal that the party is becoming politically obscure. Even the most successful radical right parties, such as the Slovak National Party or the Freedom Party in Austria, occasionally fall out of favor only to bounce back after one or two electoral cycles. Most radical right parties do not secure two digit vote shares on a regular basis; their marginal presence in the parliament is an accomplishment in itself. Svoboda's 2014 defeat can be attributed to many factors, the most important being the split of votes with Pravyi Sektor, the defeat of the former president Viktor Yanukovich – Svoboda's political adversary, the embarrassing performance of Svoboda representatives in the interim government and the loss of monopoly on fervent patriotism (Shekhovtsov, 2015).

Using an original survey, this article explores the electoral base and supporters of the Svoboda party after the regional breakthrough of Svoboda in 2009 and before Svoboda took seats in the parliament in the electoral cycle of 2012–2014. The

² The survey was conducted in twenty-six regions, including Crimea and the city of Kyiv: Ivano-Frankivsk'ska, Volyn'ska, L'viv'ska, Rivnens'ka, Ternopil'ska, Chernigiv'ska, Kyiv'ska, city of Kyiv, Cherkas'ka, Chernivets'ka, Zakarpats'ka, Lugans'ka, Vinnyts'ka, Dnipropetrovs'ka, Donetsk'ska, Zhytomyr'ska, Zaporiz'ka, Kirovograd'ska, Mykolayiv'ska, Odes'ka, Poltav'ska, Sums'ka, Kharkiv'ska, Kherson'ska, Khmel'nyts'ka oblasts and AR Crimea.

³ Other electoral blocks and movements that embraced a radical right ideology were the National Front (Natsionalnyi Front), Fewer Words bloc (Menshe sloiv) and Social-National Assembly with its recently established paramilitary wing, the Azov battalion.

⁴ The extremist Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists (KUN), one of many Svoboda's ideological predecessors, ran under the platform of Yushchenko's “Our Ukraine” (Kuzio, 1997). Between 2002 and 2006, once elected to Verkhovna Rada for the Lviv district, Andriy Shkil, (UNA leader), joined the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc faction (Verchovnaya Rada, 2009; UNA-UNSO 2009).

⁵ Currently, however, Poland is one of the strongest supporters of Ukraine's territorial integrity in the European Union.

⁶ Svoboda also benefited due to the support from V. Yushchenko and hostility toward Y. Tymoshenko/BYuT. The author would like to thank an anonymous referee for this point.

⁷ Although active in the Euromaidan events, other groups such as Pravyi Sektor gained prominence as well. Svoboda organized busing of volunteers from Lviv to Kyiv during the protests (Source: Interviews of the author with Svoboda activists, summer 2014, Lviv). Pravyi Sektor and the Social National Assembly have surpassed Svoboda's activism by forming volunteer battalions fighting in the East.

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