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The "Right Sector" and others: The behavior and role of radical nationalists in the Ukrainian political crisis of late 2013 – Early 2014

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ABSTRACT

Civil protests of Ukrainian citizens during winter 2013–2014 were accompanied by an intense informational campaign, which had not always corresponded to the reality. In the course of this campaign, Maidan's activists, the political opposition – and, correspondingly, the new government that was formed after the revolution ended in victory – were depicted as ultra-nationalistic, extremist, and xenophobic. Under these circumstances, it is extremely important for both Ukrainian citizens and foreign observers to understand the real role of national-radicals in the Maidan protests and the events that followed. What were the reasons for the Ukrainian people to begin the protests? Is it true that the "banderovtsy" [1] made up the bulk of the protesters? Is the victory of the Maidan also the victory of the political ultra-right? Does the Ukrainian ultra-nationalism have a strong support in the society, according to the results of the elections? What kind of future does the far right have in the new Ukrainian political reality?

1. Presenting the problem

In the first two dozen years of recent Ukrainian political history, the national-radical parties and movements remained at the margins of social processes. They were unable either to gather any kind of significant electoral support (Umland, 2008; Umland and Shekhovtsov, 2010), or to influence society and the ruling elite with their ideas. This made the Ukrainian situation markedly different from most other post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, including Russia, where the national-radicals had in some cases been able to achieve significant success at elections,[2] being a noticeable part of the political system and political elites.[3]

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[1] *Banderovtsy* – literally the followers of Stepan Bandera (1909–1959), leader of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists; broadly, in Soviet and post-Soviet Russian parlance– all the Ukrainian radical nationalists. During Soviet times and in contemporary Russian political discours, "*banderovtsy*" are equated with Fascists and the word used exclusively with pejorative meaning. The term also was broadly used for the Ukrainian democratic government after the Maidan's victory, for example, by Russian president Vladimir Putin.

[2] In many countries, ultra-nationalistic political powers similar to the Ukrainian "Svoboda" were able to gather significant support when in a fortuitous situation. For example, the "Great Romania" party received 19.48% of votes in 2000, and Jobbik got 14.77% in 2009. The Russian LDPR with its 22.93% in 1993 and "Fatherland" (Rodina) with 9.02% in 2003 are very much in the same vein. The more radical, practically openly Greece neo-Nazi Golden Dawn received 6.97% in the 2012 elections.

[3] In some Eastern European countries, the ultra-right were part of the government. For example, the Slovak National Party received 11.73% of voices in 2006, became part of the government and received three minister offices. The League of Polish Families was also part of the ruling coalition in 2005–2007, having gained 7.97% of the votes at the elections.

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To some extent, the fringe position of the Ukrainian far right can be explained by subjective factors, such as an absence of good leaders, talented ideologists, and convincing authors of propaganda material. Nonetheless, it is also a product of objective peculiarities of the Ukrainian political context. The very appearance of an independent Ukraine on the political map meant the achievement of the major goal the Ukrainian nationalists had set for themselves throughout the entire XX century.[4] However, the achievement of statehood had not in any way been a result of the nationalists' efforts. They did not even have the real opportunity to delegate their representatives into the political elites, and were condemned to an existence on the political fringes. The crisis of the Ukrainian far right had been worsened by the fact that they were unable to provide an adequate agenda for society in response to changing circumstances.

Moreover, while the moderate nationalists (the national democrats, first and foremost of the People's Movement of Ukraine, *Narodniy Rukh Ukrainy*) were useful to the former Soviet party elite as people who could provide ideological legitimization of their dominant status, the ultra nationalists, who had insisted on changing the natural status quo that had come into place with the fall of the Soviet Union, were perceived both by society and the leaders of the state as a destructive element. Large-scale financial and industrial corporations and regional economic elites, who had been largely in control of the Ukrainian political processes and the main media, had remained for a long time rather disinterested in investing into the radicals due to their unpredictability and fringe status. As the political studies scholar Alexander Kynev (2002) correctly notes, "Ukraine's party system is largely a system of 'lobbyist parties,' financial and industrial groups, and regional clans (or, as some Ukrainian political scientists say, 'a system of oligarchic parties') rather than a system of 'ideological parties.'" While the popular leftist forces and their significant electoral resources – acquired mostly through the use of retro-Soviet rhetoric – were generally able to fit into this system, the radical right had been failing at the same task for quite a long while.

The success of the ultra-right party "All-Ukrainian 'Svoboda' [Freedom] Union" (VO "Svoboda") at the parliamentary elections of late 2012, which I will focus on later (Likhachev, 2012b), has provoked a lively discussion among the scholars, experts, and everyone interested in Ukrainian political life in general, of the potential of the ultra-nationalistic movement in Ukraine. The discussion even went far beyond the experts and became a media phenomenon (or even a political technology phenomenon) unto itself.[5] However, the discussions of 2012–2013 did not even come close to the volume and intensity of the discussion about the Ukrainian nationalists' roles in the events and processes of the Maidan Revolution and the war with Russia. At the very beginning of the political crisis of late 2013 – early 2014, the media in Ukraine itself (especially while the protest movement opposed President Yanukovich) and beyond its borders (especially in the Russian media upon the victory of the Ukrainian opposition) have been emphasizing the participation of the national-radicals in the vents at hand. Many journalists, experts, and politicians asserted that the radical right formed the basis of the protest movement, wrote its agenda, and forced their scenario of escalation unto both their partners in the opposition, the government, and, in the end, unto society as a whole. Books are being written about the role of national-radicals or, as the authors would have it, "neo-Nazis", in the winter of 2013–2014 events (Byshok and Kochetkov, 2014).[6]

Moreover, according to certain official evaluations, neo-Nazis have overthrown the Ukrainian government in an armed coup in February and are currently terrorizing the populace.

For example, on March 18 Vladimir Putin gave the following interpretation of the events in Kyiv in his historic speech to the Federal Assembly about the annexation of the Crimea: "The main perpetrators of the coup were nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites. It is these people who are still defining, even today, life in Ukraine" (Obrashenie Prezidenta, 2014). It is very telling that this evaluation of the political processes in Ukraine serves as justification for Vladimir Putin to involve himself in the internal affairs of Ukraine and to annex the Crimean peninsula. Understanding the logic of the official Russian discourse helps to better comprehend the reasons for such evaluation of the Maidan and its consequences. The former head of the Ukrainian state Victor Yanukovich is unanimous with the Russian leaders. For example, during his March 11 press-conference in Rostov-na-Donu (Zayavlenie Viktora Yanukovicha, 2014) he stated that Nazis came to power in Ukraine after an illegitimate coup.

The "Right Sector" – an ad-hoc union of a number of small radical right groups that had been formed at the Maidan – became the symbol of the neo-Nazi and Bandera followers who came to govern in Kyiv. The absolutely disproportionate amount of attention given to the Ukrainian national radicals in the Russian media has had unforeseen effects and the Right Sector has become one of the more popular political brands in Russia. According to the study by public.ru, in April 2014 the

[4] The first and chief thesis of the "Decalogue of the Ukrainian Nationalist" (a brief foundational text of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, written as a result of internal discussion in 1929–1936) stated that "you will achieve the creation of a Ukrainian State or die fighting for it" (Zaytsev, 2013, p. 282–283).

[5] The political technologists who worked for Yanukovich consciously employed a strategy in which the entire opposition was described as extremist and national-radical, and the government itself thus mobilized its supporters under "anti-Fascist" banners. This strategy was what caused the situation of winter–spring 2014, when the so-called "Georgian ribbon" (a visual symbol of the Soviet ideological construct of "the Great Victory," spread in Russia and the rest of post-Soviet territory since 2005) became the telling mark, firstly, of the Maidan's opponents, and then of the participants of the pro-Russian and separatist movements. The first part of the propaganda campaign was implemented in spring 2013. Its peak was at the "anti-Fascist" rally of May 18, during which fighters hired by the government attacked an opposition rally. The second part of the PR campaign began simultaneously with the passing of the repressive "anti-extremist" and "anti-Fascist" laws of January 16, 2014. (Likhachev, 2014a).There are also certain documents, depicting how the "anti-Fascist" informational strategy employed by the Party of Regions had been formed (Tematicheskie materialy, 2013).

[6] The English version of the book is titled even more strongly: "Neo-Nazis & Euromaidan: from Democracy to Dictatorship". Notably, both authors are rather well-acquainted with contemporary neo-Nazism. Alexey Kochetkov hails from the *Russkoe Natsional'noe Edinstvo* (Russian National Unity), and Stanislav Byshok from the *Russkiy Obraz* ("Russian Image").