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FAR-RIGHT MOVEMENTS AND IDEOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY UKRAINE: formidable image vs. weak essence

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Representatives of far-right parties and social movements – mainly the notorious VO Svoboda (All-Ukrainian Union "Freedom") – attacked the Ukrainian National Guard in late August 2015, leaving four dead and dozens hospitalised. This tragic event came as a shock to Ukrainian society and boosted anti-far-right feelings among its citizens. And, against the backdrop of Russia's accusation that Kiev's new government is in the hands of "fascists", it also brought again the far right in Ukraine back into focus. But who are they and more importantly what is their real influence?

Only concrete indicators – such as popular support, influence on the decision-making process and actual political weight – allied to the recall of how Ukrainian historical memory has been shaped can provide, beyond emotional reactions and politically-motivated propaganda, a reliable picture of the success or otherwise of this phenomenon in Ukraine.

Who wants Ukraine to look radical? Nationalists have never belonged to the large financial capital / political elite, which largely explains their inability to have a decisive say in the decision-making process.

Ukrainian nationalism should be perceived as a complex phenomenon the roots of which need to be discovered back in the times of imperial Russia and the interwar period.

Over the past decade since 2004 Russia has invested handsomely in the creation of the image of a "fascist Ukraine" ruled by weak and strongly anti-Russian elites as the antagonist to a staunchly anti-fascist, conservative, Christian Rus.

In some sense Ukrainian political elites significantly facilitated Russian efforts by committing strategic blunders.

Starting from the mid-2000s Russian public consciousness was increasingly accustomed to making associations between such notions as "Ukraine", "ultranationalism", "ethnic nationalism" and "neo-fascism".

Violent provocations, explicit antisemitism and indiscriminate ethnic nationalism precipitated a dramatic collapse in the popularity of the far-right nationalist parties.

From Moscow's perspective, the portrayal of Ukraine as a semi-fascist state is meant to ensure public mobilisation around the president granting him unprecedented levels of public support for actions that might have been disapproved of otherwise.

What does history say about Ukrainian nationalism?

Amply filled with numerous myths and semi-legendary stories, Ukrainian nationalism should be perceived as a complex phenomenon the roots of which need to be discovered back in the times of imperial Russia and the interwar period. Therefore, a brief historical insight into the Ukrainian nationalist movement is instrumental in order to underscore its diverse and multifaceted nature. Interestingly enough, even in the beginning the major centres of Ukrainian nationalism were Kharkov (in the east of Ukraine) and Kiev, which wielded significant intellectual power (through the Brotherhood of Saints Cyril and Methodius). Ukrainian proto-nationalism was conceived in the eastern part of the country because, being parts of the Russian Empire, these cities contained influential historical schools and managed to preserve

aspects of historical memory that implied a dispute with the Russian school of history over certain chapters of common historical legacy. It is worth mentioning that the two most noticeable theoreticians of Ukrainian nationalism at the time (Dmytro Dontsov and Mykola Mikhnovsky), whose legacies are often misinterpreted and deliberately distorted also came from the Ukrainian southeast. However, under the pressure of the Tsarist "iron hand" in the field of national policy, many Ukrainian nationalists had to move west (to Prague and Vienna), where many of them received full, comprehensive education and absorbed the ideas of European nationalism that was already gaining power and winning the hearts and minds of both intellectuals and ordinary Europeans. In the final analysis, it was the city known as Lemberg/Lvov/Lviv that emerged as a new centre of nationalist aspirations and a new "cultural capital" in the interwar period.

The growth and proliferation of nationalist sentiments and feelings among Ukrainian intellectuals were also supported by the cruelties and atrocities that the Ukrainian population experienced at the hands of both Poland and Russia. The regime of Josef Pilsudski imposed "Polonisation" and so-called "pacification" policies that would later be overshadowed by unspeakable crimes committed by the Soviets, resulting in millions of human lives lost to man-made famine, wars and repression. These dramatic chapters of historical experience were hushed up during the Soviet times, yet, as it turned out, not completely.

Even during the times of crisis (1991, 2008, 2013/14) radicalism has never really been on the agenda for the large majority of Ukrainians.

However, empirical evidence suggests that the breakdown of the Soviet Union did not result in a nationalist surge in Ukraine, despite the fact that the overall number of nationalist organisations grew. Statistical data reflects the real scope of public support enjoyed by the newly-emerged far-right nationalist organisations within the period 1991–2004. Among the most well-known were UNA-UNSO (the Ukrainian National Assembly–Ukrainian People's Self-Defence), the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists (with its paramilitary formation named the Stepan Bandera All-Ukrainian Organization "Tryzub") and the Social-National Party. Public support for these parties and groups during various elections (Hursha and Sukhankin, 2014) fluctuated from 0.17% to 2.71%, which was not enough for them to enter the Ukrainian parliament.

The 2000s brought about noticeable changes in the domain of radical movements in Ukraine. First of all, 2004 witnessed the birth of the most successful Ukrainian ultranationalist party – VO Svoboda with its national populist ideology – which was able to gain 10.44% of the popular vote in the 2012 elections (which, incidentally, coincided with the presidency of allegedly pro-Russian V. Yanukovych) and entered parliament. Secondly, within this period, the Ukrainian nationalist movement experienced the emergence and proliferation of far-right nationalism in the east of the country mainly in the form of the "Ukrainian Patriot" (officially registered in Kharkov in 2006) that preached in favour of Slavic nationalism. Naturally, this type of nationalist ideology had very little to do with the one that received its definite shape in the west of Ukraine, being more in line with patterns of ethnic nationalism found in Russia (in the activities of skinheads and other far-right radicals). Moreover, ties between this group and their Russian neo-fascist "colleagues" were established even prior to 2008.

The idea that contemporary Ukraine is being permeated with ultranationalist ideology overlooks most of the vital aspects that help this country avoid the prospect of being swamped by the wave of ethnic nationalism, xenophobia and intolerance. First and foremost, Ukrainian society has generally maintained a very high level of cosmopolitanism, tolerance and respect for the other ethnic groups that have for centuries resided on its territory. Moreover, even during the times of crisis (1991, 2008, 2013/14) radicalism has never really been on the agenda for the absolute majority of Ukrainians. From my perspective, as a Russian-speaking citizen of Ukraine and a historian, the most important and frequently depreciated fact about the improbability of far-right nationalism finding fertile ground in this country is deeply engrained in Ukrainian culture and historical memory: as a multi-ethnic and extremely diverse society, the Ukrainian population has always expressed a high level of cosmopolitanism and tolerance and provided greater room for independent opinions than many post-Soviet states.

Nationalists have never belonged to the large financial capital/political elite, which largely explains their inability to have a decisive say in the decision-making process. Moreover, not a single Ukrainian president has come from reportedly "nationalist" regions. The only exception is the first president of independent Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk, who was born in what was then Poland (currently Rivne Oblast in Ukraine, which has always been one of the most culturally, religiously and ethnically diverse regions of Ukraine).

Moreover, the methods and tactics used by both VO Svoboda and the Right Sector (as well as their predecessors such as UNA-UNSO and organisations of similar ideology) turned out to have had a repelling – rather than appealing - effect on Ukrainians. But the mentioned events in August have caused a new wave of anti-Ukrainian propaganda within Russian society where an image of Ukraine as a "latent fascist state" sliding into the abyss of anarchy and radicalism began to be put about.

Indeed over the past decade (2004–2014/15) the Russian Federation has invested handsomely in the creation of the image of a "fascist Ukraine" ruled by weak (and strongly anti-Russian) elites as the antagonist to a staunchly anti-fascist, conservative, Christian Rus.

When and how did Ukraine turn into the "fascist state"?

It would be a mistake to assume that Euromaidan became the Rubicon after which Russia's official mass media started a crusade accusing Ukraine of "harbouring fascist sentiments" and attempts to renounce the shared historical and cultural legacy with Russia (and the "Russian World"). The first attempts began in the late 1990s and early 2000s via extensive application of mass culture, the rhetorical escapades of individual Russian public figures (at that time, mainly from radical/conservative voices), through to the resurrection of "old historical grievances" and the necessity of rectifying "injustices of history". Naïve, irrelevant, highly prejudiced and often openly fabricated, these attempts managed in the end to change the perception of Ukraine/Ukrainians held by the Russian public: the most vivid proof being various results of opinion polls conducted by leading Ukrainian and Russian institutions and agencies even prior to the allegedly anti-Russian Orange Revolution (2004–2005). Facts and figures agreed on the most essential aspects: Ukrainian perception of Russia/Russians was much more positive than vice versa[1]. Interestingly enough, the Russian side did not shy away from using the Russian Orthodox Church in the campaign aimed at depicting Ukraine as a state where the rights of ethnic minorities were being downtrodden and radical elements were on the rise. For instance, back in 1994 the Russian Patriarch Alexy II, delivering a speech at the University of Helsinki (Hurskainen, 2013), blatantly accused Ukraine (and Estonia) of violating the rights and freedoms of the Russian-speaking minority. This appeared especially awkward in the light of the forceful eviction at the beginning of the 90's of the Russian population in Chechnya (reflected in the materials of the so-called "Govorukhin Commission"[2]) and the republics of Central Asia – with Moscow doing practically nothing about those tragic events.

> Euromaidan was presented by the Kremlin propaganda as an explicit anti-Russian provocation orchestrated by the West, and not as an evidence of Ukrainian aspirations for democracy.

The Orange Revolution and the Kremlin's growing assertiveness in the domain of foreign and security policy introduced a new chapter to the cultural and ideological policies conducted by Moscow. In this context the role of Ukraine was to change dramatically. The anti-Ukrainian aspect of the ideological campaign that began in roughly 2004 specifically aimed to represent Ukraine as a state and Ukrainians as a nation that had been inherently tilted towards far-right nationalism, xenophobia, ethnic hatred and anti-Russian sentiments that were deeply engrained in historical memory. The Russian Federation invested substantial financial means in ideology, propaganda and the re-establishment of the image of the Russian Federation. This sophisticated campaign employed various tools and strategies that were to target various elements and social groups within Russian society. In some sense Ukrainian political elites significantly facilitated Russian efforts by committing strategic blunders (such as the notorious decision of the outgoing president Viktor Yushchenko to proclaim Stepan Bandera[3] a hero of Ukraine) that damaged their internal and international reputation and made the issue of far-right radicalism look much more alarming than it actually was.

The high confidence of Russian society in the information distributed by official outlets and the mass media easily explains the outcome of this systematic disinformation: the idea of the Orange Revolution was not understood by the overwhelming majority of Russians. In the final analysis, the events that took place in Kiev (and in other regions of the country) were presented as an explicit anti-Russian provocation orchestrated (and artificially organised with financial and ideological support) by the West, and not evidence of Ukrainian aspirations for democracy. Moreover, starting from the mid-2000s Russian public consciousness was increasingly accustomed to making associations between such notions as "Ukraine", "ultranationalism", "ethnic nationalism" and "neo-fascism". On the other hand, specific emphasis was placed on the inherent inability of Ukraine to maintain the status of independent state and actor in international relations. This assumption was based on several major factors which more or less boiled down to unacceptably high level of diversity between regions (cultural, historical, religious, linguistic and economic). Western Ukraine was depicted as being historically prone to far-right sentiments and ideas, whereas south-eastern Ukraine preserved "brotherly" ties with Russia (despite "pressure" from the West and Kiev). Therefore, the events in Kiev at the end of October 2013 and their portrayal by Russian mass media did not break new ground for a Russian audience that had already been prepared for the "inevitable" collapse of Ukraine as a state and a potentially hard austere reaction from its nationalist elements.

Despite the precedents of the Orange Revolution and the internal protests in Bolotnaya Square (2012) the Euromaidan has had a profound impact on the Russian elites who are unable to comprehend how ruling elites can be evicted by the

1. The dynamics of mutual relations between Russians and Ukrainians within the period 2008 – 2015 see: http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=rus&cat=reports&id=442&page=5&t=10, http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=rus&cat=reports&id=550&page=1&t=10.
2. Available at: http://zlobnig-v-2.livejournal.com/193824.html
3. For more analysis and information on the controversial figure of S. Bandera, see among others: Snyder, Timothy. "`To Resolve the Ukrainian Question Once and For All´: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ukrainians in Poland", 1943-1947. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *Working Paper* #9. November 2001. http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/migration/pubs/rrwp/9_resolve.html. Katchanovski, Ivan. *Terrorists or National Heroes? Politics of the OUN and the UPA in Ukraine*. Canadian Political Science Association. Montreal, June 1-3, 2010. https://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2010/Katchanovski.pdf. Lassalle, Pascal G. Stepan Bandera (1909–1959). Europe Maxima. 23 May 2010. http://www.europemaxima.com/?p=1242

people. Hence state-sponsored mass media, scientists, politicians, public figures and many others engaged in a campaign of unprecedented scale against Ukraine and the democratic aspirations of its population. The situation reached boiling point with the initiation of the anti-terrorist operation (launched by Kiev on April 15th) and open military fights between Ukrainian army and militarised groups of separatists in south-eastern Ukraine. The unlawful secession of Crimea and explicit involvement of the Russian Federation in the war in Ukraine were easily concealed under the mask of the necessity to "protect" Ukraine's Russian-speaking minority against raving "fascists". As a result, within a very brief period Russian public opinion became convinced of "dramatic" shifts in Ukraine, which was clearly evolving into havoc, anarchy and state-sponsored radicalism.

On the other hand, given deeply rooted anti-Jewish sentiments present in Russian society, Russian semi-official means (whose impact is not to be underestimated) seemed to have reached the zenith of absurdity by defining so-called "Kiev authorities" as a "Judeo–fascist coup"[4] installed by the West. This move, however, was a "win-win" for Russian ruling elites: it combined all major phobias and fears deeply engrained in Russian historical memory and traditions (anti-semitism, anti-Americanism, anti-fascism, the complex over the lost cold war and many others).

In the 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections, Svoboda and the Right Sector received 1.16% and 4.71% respectively, confirming the very low level of public support.

Similarly, the revisionist policies of the Kremlin in respect to contemporary history, where "Soviet" was practically equivalent to "Russian" (very similar to the cultural policies conducted by the Soviet authorities in the domain of historical policy in the 30s) provided Moscow with the "monopoly" on the narrative of the Second World War (basing it on the outstanding role of the Soviet/Russian military achievements and huge human losses of Soviet/Russian people). In this regard, contemporary Russia indulged itself with a "right" to define which party/country should be perceived as neo-fascist. For instance, when speaking about the "Ukrainian factor" in the Second World War, the Kremlin and its ideologists conveniently "forget" to mention that the total number of Ukrainians fighting in the Red Army was incomparably higher than the number of those fighting in the ranks of nationalist military formations.

4. For instance, extremely popular figures in the post-Soviet area of social mass media such as "Odnoklasskini" widely disseminated articles that "accused" many Ukrainian politicians of being Jewish (Yulia Tymoshenko, *V. Klitschko*, O. Tiahnybok, A. Yatsenyuk, Petro Poroshenko, Oleksandr Turchynov, Dmytro Yarosh and many others). For more information, see: https://ok.ru/video/16964389603; http://www.1-sovetnik.com/articles/article-1232.html.

The rise and fall of the ghost of far-right nationalism in Ukraine during and after Euromaidan

Euromaidan started as a peaceful protest against the decisions of the ruling elites that tried to suppress the will of the people that was portrayed as a new chapter in the narrative of far-right nationalism in Ukraine and was primarily associated with a long desired (by certain external forces) transformation of Ukraine into a "fascist state". Nevertheless, I would argue that this period simultaneously became an hour of triumph and a major graveyard of currently existing far-right political parties and movements in Ukraine.

It should be mentioned that the creation of the so-called "Maidan self-defence" that was primarily associated with ultranationalism and the violent phase of the protest movement was indeed triggered and in many respects provoked by the abuses committed by the riot police (the Berkut) against student protesters. Unsurprisingly, growing radical moods emanating from both sides were skilfully used by certain forces in order to promote interests and agendas of their own.

For instance, the radicalisation of events during Euromaidan substantially inflated the role of VO Svoboda and the Right Sector (which consisted of several semi-militarised groups and was in fact one of many "units" that comprised the "Maidan self-defence") putting them at the forefront of the events in Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti). The reportedly astounding success of these ultranationalist forces was greatly owed to the enormous efforts of the international mass media (especially those from the Russian Federation), which placed Oleh Tiahnybok, the leader of Svoboda, along with Vitali Klitschko and Arseniy Yatseniuk as one of the key members in the opposition, and which did not correspond to the real course of events in Kiev.

Moreover, it was under the leadership of VO Svoboda that a mob of radicals (and numerous romantically misled youth) conducted the "torch procession" in Kiev (January 2014) which provided all ideological adversaries of Euromaidan with "concrete arguments" underscoring the apparent far-right tilt of the protests. This image was extensively covered and repeated on numerous occasions by both Russian and European mass media, which for various reasons (some deliberately, others due to lack of understanding) painted Euromaidan in brown and red colours.

Similarly, the emergence of the Right Sector (which identified its ideology as "revolutionary nationalism", which associated it with S. Bandera) with aggressive nationalist rhetoric and formidable appearance created a ferocious image of Euromaidan and provided external forces with "evidence" of Maidan turning into the kind of armed ultranationalist revolt

that attacked both legitimate ruling elites and national minorities. Numerous representatives of the international mass media, intellectuals and politicians hastened into defining the situation in Kiev as a new turn towards *Petliurovshchina*, *Makhnovshchina* or *Banderovshchina*.[5]

Actually, the reality was very different to how it looked on the TV screens. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that it was Euromaidan that in many respects dealt a severe blow to the image of Ukrainian far-right nationalism. Violent provocations, explicit antisemitism (and indiscriminate ethnic nationalism), outrageous populism, the inability to put forth political demands based on Ukrainian national interests – all these factors precipitated a dramatic collapse in the popularity of VO Svoboda (that was said to have reached its maximum support at the beginning of Maidan) and disqualified the Right Sector as a political force.

In this respect the main indicator to look at is the level of public support received by two forces in the electoral process. In presidential and parliamentary elections that took place in the year 2014 both VO Svoboda and the Right Sector suffered a complete and humiliating defeat that clearly signified the real extent of ultranationalism's popularity as an ideology in Ukraine. VO Svoboda received 1.16% and 4.71% and the Right Sector managed to obtain 0.7% and 1.8% of the popular vote during parliamentary and presidential elections, respectively. This extremely insignificant level of public support for the nationalist parties and organisations in post-Euromaidan Ukraine was also supplemented by another fact which refuted the Russian propaganda by itself: in the May 2014 presidential elections, the ethnically Jewish candidate Vadim Rabinovich gained more votes than Dmytro Yarosh, former leader of the far-right "Right Sector" organization, and Svoboda's leader, O. Tiahnybok, combined.

The recent local elections (October 2015) could give the impression of renewing the issue of a "right" turn in Ukrainian society with the unexpected success of UKROP (the Ukrainian Union of Patriots) and VO Svoboda, in addition to the almost halving in popularity of the Bloc of Poroshenko/UDAR-Solidarity when compared to the 2014 parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, these elections can hardly be construed as an event that signifies a new epoch in Ukrainian political life. On the one hand, the growth in popularity of the ultra-right political groups is primarily related to their populist agendas, which seem to have appealed to many Ukrainians who are sick and tired of worsening economic conditions and the disarray in which Ukraine has been submerged since Euromaidan. Similarly, one should keep in mind that the mentioned success also stemmed from the decreasing popularity of the ruling political forces that (for obvious and quite understandable reasons) have not been able to produce a miracle and rapidly achieve economic stabilisation. Moreover, sound populist proclamations find a vivid response within broad layers of Ukrainians when it comes to the situation in the south-east of the country – these forces tend to offer simple solutions to very complicated and sensitive issues, thereby giving a good pretext for accusing the incumbent president and government of indecisiveness and treasonous behaviour.

Who wants Ukraine to look radical?

For a number of clearly identifiable reasons the most interested party is the Russian Federation. Severe economic predicaments, the structural development crisis and worsening relations with the outside world have urged the Kremlin to fall back on a tool that is frequently used at times of crisis – the search for external/internal enemies that hinder the successful development of "the motherland". The deliberate portrayal of Ukraine as a semi-fascist state is meant to ensure public mobilisation around ruling elites that are granted unprecedented levels of public support for actions that might have been disapproved of otherwise. On the other hand, morbid hyper-concentration on events in Ukraine enables the Kremlin to conceal internal problems with its own far-right movement and growing radicalism. The image of "radicalising" Ukraine elaborated by the mass media of certain orientations caters to the interests of other parties aside from Moscow. Some European capitals would find this argument appealing for various reasons, all related to their policies towards Moscow. One of them is the growing influence of far-right ideology in Europe that has found its reflection on various levels. Aggravated by the crisis with migrants from the Middle East and North Africa this tendency will persist in the future. Moreover, the issue of far-right radicalism, its alleged popularity and the lack of stability in Ukraine could be used as a suitable pretext for new demands put forth by certain members of the EU addressed to Kiev as a main condition (indeed an effective deterrent) stipulating the slow pace of Euro-integration processes.

What next: between past and future

Taking a deeper look into history and applying this experience to today's Ukraine, it would be safe to suggest that the image and actual scale of public support for far-right radicalism has been greatly overestimated. Taking into account the main criteria that were identified at the beginning of the paper, ultranationalists have always represented weak and unpopular margins of Ukrainian society. Likewise, it should be kept in mind that nationalists (even though their ideologies do/did converge to a certain extent) have never been able to assume common positions. In the end, historical evidence suggests that various forces are prone to engaging in mutually destructive competition rather than finding a common denominator. Incidentally, this trend has been present from the times of the interwar period through the Second World War and is clearly traceable right up to the present day. On the other hand, it is unlikely that ultranationalist parties and groups will succeed in Ukraine in the medium term: the "Revolution of Dignity" has vividly shown the adherence of broad layers of Ukrainians to the idea of European integration and stressed the commitment of the majority of the

5. Pejorative forms to refer to the movements headed by Symon Petliura (a staunch anti-Soviet Russia Ukrainian figure), Nestor Makhno (a Ukrainian anarchist who fought against the Red Army during 1918–1921) or Stepan Bandera (see Note 5).
For more information see: Sukhankin, Sergey and Hurska, Alla. "Russian Informational and Propaganda Campaign Against Ukraine Prior to the Euromaidan (2013-2014): Denying Sovereignty". *Securitologia* No 1/2015, Warsaw – Krakow, p. 43.

Ukrainian population to European norms and values, which does not reflect the ideological convictions of the far right.

The Kremlin's reaction to the Ukrainian struggle to take a democratic path shows how quickly irrational can overtake rational and how arguments based on logic, history and informed knowledge can bring about little (if any) effect. Not to mention how distorting the past cripples the present and jeopardises the future.

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