Nationalist Radicalization Trends in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine

Volodymyr Ishchenko[1]
Igor Sikorsky Kiev Polytechnic Institute

Ukraine today faces a vicious circle of nationalist radicalization involving mutual reinforcement between far-right groups and the dominant oligarchic pyramids. This has significantly contributed to a post-Euromaidan domestic politics that is not unifying the country but creating divisiveness and damaging Ukrainian relations with its strategically important neighbors. The lack of a clear institutionalized political and ideological boundary between liberal and far-right forces lends legitimacy to the radical nationalist agenda. Moreover, the oligarchic groups exploit radicalizing nationalism not out of any shared ideology but because it threatens their interests less than the liberal reformers. Local deterrents are insufficient to counter the radicalizing trend; Ukraine's far right vastly surpasses liberal parties and NGOs in terms of mobilization and organizational strength. Western pressure is needed on influential Ukrainian figures and political parties in order to help shift Ukraine away from this self-destructive development.

Mass Attitudes Versus Real Politics

There are two major narratives about nationalism in post-Euromaidan Ukraine: "fascist junta" and "civic nation." The first was promoted by the anti-Euromaidan movement, pro-Russian separatists, and the Russian government. The "fascist" part is directed first and foremost at Ukrainian radical nationalists in the Svoboda and Right Sector parties, which were among the most active collective agents in the 2014 Ukrainian revolution. The "junta" part points to the unconstitutional removal of former president Viktor Yanukovych from office.

After the first Minsk agreements in September 2014, the "fascist junta" narrative disappeared from Russian media (though not from pro-separatist sources), reflecting Moscow's official strategy of negotiation with, rather than removal of, the new government in Kyiv. Indeed, at the time, there was exaggeration of the influence of far-right groups and political parties, which ended up taking relatively marginal positions

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[1] Volodymyr Ishchenko is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the Kyiv Polytechnic Institute.

in the new government, performed poorly in the presidential and parliamentary elections, and left the government altogether after October 2014.

The opposing liberal-optimistic narrative posits that a "civic nation" has been emerging as a result of the Euromaidan and the war in Donbas. This new civic identity is allegedly inclusive of the country's regions, cultures, and language groups. The main systematic evidence in support of this claim are various polls indicating an increase for "civic" rather than "ethnic" answers about Ukrainian identity.[2] However, the true nature of Ukrainian politics today is that it has been heading in the opposite direction.

The poor electoral performance of far-right parties in 2014 demonstrated that they were not capable of competing with the established political machines backed by oligarchic money and media. However, this ignores the growing—and unprecedented in contemporary Europe—extra-parliamentary power of the Ukrainian far right, which over recent years has been able to:

- Penetrate law enforcement at the highest positions;
- Form semi-autonomous, politically loyal, armed units within official law enforcement institutions;
- Develop strong positions and legitimacy within civil society, often playing a core role in the dense networks of war veterans, volunteers, and local activists.

Electoral performance is not a good measure of the influence of radical nationalists. Similarly, no one claims that Euro-optimist liberals hold a marginal position in Ukraine because of the poor electoral performance and low ratings of the liberal Democratic Alliance or People's Power (*Syla Lyudei*). These two parties are arguably the only relevant ones that take the ideology seriously rather than opportunistically exploiting it to receive approval and support from Western elites and the Ukrainian electorate. One of the reasons for the far right's poor electoral performance is that "centrist" oligarchic electoral projects exploited the issues, rhetoric, and slogans of the radical nationalists, thus shifting the political mainstream rightward.

This is not simply a patriotic, rally-around-the-flag effect in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. Ukraine has always been ethnically and linguistically diverse, has a legacy of historical conflicts with neighbors to the east and west, and encompasses plural and strongly opposing versions of historical memory about the Soviet Union and relations with Russians. Precisely because these issues were exploited by the Russian media in its information war, the wise strategy in Kyiv would have been to promote unity against Putin's government but not against Soviet legacy issues, Russophone culture, and dissenting voices.

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[2] See: Grigore Pop-Eleches and Graeme Robertson, "Revolutions in Ukraine: Shaping Civic Rather Than Ethnic Identities," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 510, February 2018.

Despite the increasing positive attitudes in Ukraine toward the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (OUN-UPA), thanks to its promotion by both the state and the far right, they are still not majority-supported (the same holds true for the de-communization policies). Moreover, the glorification of OUN-UPA, while whitewashing their crimes and ideology, puts at risk Ukraine's relations with its neighbors, such as Poland, where top-officials have threatened to block Ukraine's European integration despite Warsaw sharing Ukraine's anti-Russian foreign policy orientation. There is majority support for the Ukrainization of public institutions and media, at least in the government-controlled parts of the country. However, the passing of a new education law that reduced minority-language usage in schools provoked very strong opposition from Hungary.[3] This past February, the constitutional court of Ukraine effectively canceled the notorious 2012 law that allowed for the official status of the Russian language in certain regions. The previous (belatedly vetoed) attempt to cancel it right after Yanukovych's toppling contributed to massive anti-Euromaidan mobilizations in the southern and eastern regions.

Despite the fact that 30-40 percent of citizens in government-controlled territories of Ukraine overall and the majority of people even in the government-controlled southeastern regions do not share the governmental narrative about the "Revolution of Dignity" and the Russia-driven war in Donbas, the dominant approach has not been to seek dialogue and reconciliation, but the marginalization and repression of dissenting opinions. These voices have often been branded as a "fifth column" consisting of willing or unwilling Russian agents. Kyiv has supported this approach via:

- Media censorship and propaganda;
- Hate speech, including by some government officials, MPs, and celebrities;
- Legal and extra-legal repression of opinions, peaceful assemblies, and organizations;
- Harassment, physical violence, and legal prosecution of dissenting journalists, experts, and opposition media;
- Blocking payments and trade with areas not under governmental control.

The extra-legal part of the repression has often been carried out by far-right paramilitary and vigilante groups sometimes colluding with state forces. Political repressions have been selective and inconsistent. There have been multiple cases of prosecutions for expressing a pro-separatist or even communist opinion online, all the while some politicians and oligarchs perceived by the public as allegedly pro-Russian are not visibly harmed. This is a combined result of the different capacity of the victims to defend themselves, selective attention by the West, contradictions within pro-governmental

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[3] See: Volodymyr Kulyk, "Ukraine's 2017 Education Law Incites International Controversy Over Language Stipulation," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 525, 2018.

elites, and the weakness, corruption, incompetence, and inefficiency of Ukraine's law enforcement bodies (which are only partially substituted by patriotic vigilantes).

More broadly, the overall state approach of dealing with dissenting citizens and the opposition media and organizations has not been inclusionary but exclusionary, mostly on the basis of the pro-Euromaidan narrative about the 2014 events and nationalist interpretation of Ukrainian identity and history. The Ukrainian government has persisted in an exclusionary politics that is exacerbating internal cleavages in Ukrainian society—despite a lack of support for these narratives among a large segment of the population (sometimes even the majority of citizens), outrage from some of Ukraine's strategic neighbors, regular criticism from international human rights organizations, and the Minsk accord commitments. This is damaging for Ukraine's government in its mission to receive domestic and international support and it lowers the chances for Ukraine to solve its conflict with separatist forces and Russia.

Why Is This Radicalization Happening?

These trends are occurring because of the interaction between competing oligarchic pyramids and the competition between pro-Western liberal and far-right wings of Ukrainian civil society. The latter two forces were the two major organized pillars of the Euromaidan uprising, in addition to the formerly oppositionist oligarchic parties. It would be naive to assume that the detrimental nationalist politics of the post-Euromaidan government is driven by any ideology among the elites. The majority of the elites are no more committed radical nationalists than they are pro-Western liberal reformers. All in all, many researchers agree that Ukraine's political system has not deeply changed since the revolution, and many still describe it as a kind of hybrid regime underpinned by competing patronage pyramids led by major oligarchs.

The anti-corruption agenda of the liberals threatens the state's selective preferences—the source of Ukrainian oligarchs' major competitive advantages. In response to growing societal disappointment, primarily due to the lack of highly anticipated reforms, the oligarchic elites find it much easier to concede to the nationalist agenda than to the liberals' anti-corruption program, which directly jeopardizes the oligarchs' immediate interests. Although the nationalist agenda may be destabilizing for the regime over the long term, it gives the elites important short-term political benefits. It helps them weaken the opposition; liberal supporters become confused and split when they hear accusations from the top that "political instability helps Russia," a trick that was used, for example, against the Mikheil Saakashvili-led protests. Radicalization dynamics are fostered because Ukrainian politics is not dominated by one patronage pyramid, like it is in Russia or Belarus, but by several competing pyramids. If President Petro Poroshenko

tried to ignore the nationalist agenda, the People's Front or Ihor Kolomoiskyi, for example, would seize on this and exploit it against him.[4]

On the other side, the resources, mobilization potential, and the organizational structure of the pro-Euromaidan civil society groups explains why the dominant oligarchic pyramids choose to compete on the grounds of a nationalist agenda instead of simply avoiding it. The Ukrainian political regime was weak before the Euromaidan and afterwards it became even weaker due to both internal and external constraints. In 2014, in order to fight the Russia-supported separatist revolt, the government could not rely fully on the army (systematically underfunded and unready for combat) or on the disloyal law-enforcement officers in Donbas; it had to share the monopoly on violence with the relatively autonomous volunteer battalions.
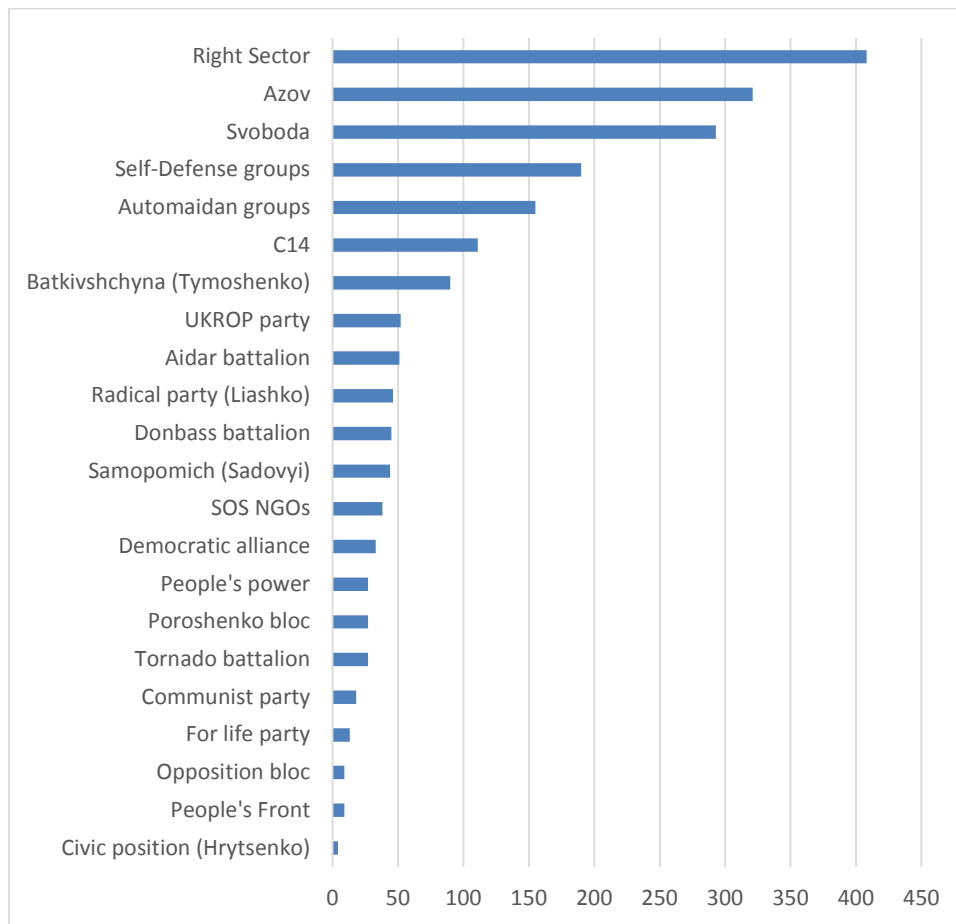
After breaking economic and political ties with Russia, Ukraine became more dependent on Western financial and political support. This relationship is used by the liberal wing to push forward the anti-corruption agenda. However, the radicalizing nationalism in Ukrainian politics has not been among the primary concerns of the Western elites. Meanwhile, far-right groups pressure the government directly, relying on their own mobilization potential and politically loyal armed units. These units are less important at the frontline now than they were a few years ago, but nevertheless, they maintain experienced and close-knit battle groups consisting of the most ideologically committed combatants (who fight not so much for the Kyiv government but for their vision of Ukraine). These communities retain close connections with other units and peers, and are able to leverage this to raise resources. They also actively connect with young radical nationalists and post-Euromaidan vigilante initiatives. These networks are influential, particularly when civic groups are actual fronts of far-right organizations, and when they mobilize against authorities, dissenters, and politicians they deem to be "pro-Russian."

Besides relying on different resources, the far right and liberal wings are organized in different ways that have a direct impact on their political mobilization potential. The far right builds ideological parties, namely Svoboda, Right Sector, and National Corps (the party of the Azov regiment). Meanwhile, the liberals are organized primarily in NGOs. Of course, some well-known liberal activists and journalists have joined pro-governmental parties (in the 2014 elections) and formed conjunctive alliances with pro-Euromaidan opposition parties (Batkivshchyna or Samopomich). However, the liberal political parties are very weak and the liberal NGOs are predominantly think tanks, media groups, and advocacy organizations rather than community mobilizers. The liberal organizations tend to make appeals to elite decision-makers, pundits, and the public-at-large but have little direct mobilization potential by themselves.

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[4] For more about post-Euromaidan far right connections, see: Denys Gorbach and Oles Petik, "The rise of Azov," OpenDemocracy, February 15, 2016.

On the contrary, the far-right parties have strived to build nationwide networks of cohesive mobilized collectives of ideologically committed activists. Their mobilization potential—not just the number of supporters but how actively and intensely followers are ready to participate in political actions—is significantly higher than that of the liberal NGOs or the opposition electoral machines. The figure below illustrates this by comparing the number of protest events in 2016 with the reported participation of the major far-right forces, paramilitaries, the parliamentary and major extra-parliamentary parties, and the best-known groups of post-Euromaidan civic initiatives.

Figure 1. Participation in Protest Events, 2016

Source: Ukrainian Protest and Coercion Data. This is based on systematic coding of all protest events reported by almost 200 Ukrainian local news web-media. Events in Crimea, Donetsk, and Lugansk regions are excluded from this figure. Data collection and methodological issues are discussed in: Volodymyr Ishchenko, "Far right participation in the Ukrainian Maidan protests: an attempt of systematic estimation," *European Politics and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 4, March 15, 2016. In the figure above, the affiliated organizations are added to the respective party figures. The AutoMaidan, Self-Defense, and SOS categories represent neither unified collective agents, nor even stable coalitions or networks; these are simply umbrella brands for local NGOs and initiatives involved in generally the same activities in different cities.

Moreover, it is easier for far-right than liberal parties to advance a narrative on the nation. Far-right parties appeal to the historical tradition of Ukrainian radical nationalism and it is clear what one can expect if they come to power: more glorification of Ukrainian nationalism, more anti-Communism, marginalization of the public presence of the Russian language, uncompromising confrontation with Russia, resistance to any reconciliation with the "fifth column," and institutionalized discrimination against the "pro-Russian" population. However, there is no strong liberal ideological party that would invent or develop, and institutionalize, a tradition of Ukrainian liberalism. Thus, it is much less clear what specifically the liberals' civic nationalism proposes regarding the crucial questions of Ukrainian identity.

Historically, the pro-Ukrainian civil society that emerged in the late 1980s as a national-democratic movement supported the interweaving of national-liberation and democratization demands. Since that time, the nationalist-liberal coalition has not really split as much as it has been rather latent, re-emerging during each crucial moment: during the Orange revolution in 2004, the Euromaidan in 2013-14, and recently the anti-corruption protests against president Poroshenko. The lack of an institutionalized political and ideological boundary between the liberal wing of civil society and the far right helps to legitimate the radical nationalist agenda and actions.

Among the most dangerous consequences is the lack of public condemnation of the government's repression and far-right extra-legal violence against dissenters (often simply branded as "pro-Russian.") For example, C14, a neo-Nazi group that was close to Svoboda but that is autonomous now, is known for violent attacks and harassment of dissenting journalists, bloggers, and activists—actions that they justify as a hybrid war against internal enemies. Despite its violent actions, C14 generally receives sympathetic or only softly critical coverage from respectable media such as BBC-Ukraine, Radio Liberty, and Hromadske Radio. Their recent violent attack on a Roma camp in Kyiv provoked a wider though still weak criticism.

Conclusion

Neither Moldova nor Georgia, which had very similar internal and external conflicts, experienced radicalizing dynamics to the same extent as Ukraine. This implies that radicalization has its roots primarily in the structure of both Ukraine's political regime and civil society. For the post-Euromaidan elites, nationalist radicalization is a tool used to consolidate power, restrain the far right, and split the liberals. At the same time, it provides legitimating cover for the far right to raise the bar of its nationalist demands, which they support with paramilitary resources and mobilization potential (effectively in the absence of a strong liberal opposition). In the short term, nationalist radicalization will be only accelerated by party competition before the presidential and parliamentary elections, in 2019. Over the long run, it will be detrimental for trust between citizens and

between Ukraine and neighboring states, as well as for Ukraine's state capacity and democracy.