

Assessing the role and consequences of the far right's involvement in the Ukrainian revolution

By Anton Shekhovtsov

THE PARTICIPATION OF far-right movements in the Ukrainian revolution has been a topic of heated debate in the West. Those publicists and commentators who were critical of the Euromaidan protests often attacked them through emphasising the role of the Ukrainian ultranationalists and arguing that Euromaidan was essentially about the far right coming to power in Ukraine or, at *least*, that the far right took centre stage of the protests.

It was indeed easy to spot the ultranationalists taking part in the revolution: the All-Ukrainian Union "Freedom" (Svoboda) was one of the three major opposition parties that backed the pro-EU grassroots movement, while the Right Sector was formed during the initial Euromaidan protests by incorporating small right-wing groups ranging, ideologically, from national-conservative to clearly extremist. Despite the fact that the far right were much less numerous than other protesters, they were put in the international media's spotlight.

An intrinsic (and disturbing) characteristic of almost all the reports and analyses condemning the far right's participation in the Ukrainian revolution is that they do not discuss Ukraine as a country willing to become a full member of the liberal democratic community. Ukraine as such is absent from these debates, yet these commentators would be discussing topics such as "Western expansionism", "US involvement", "enlargement of Nato", "EU-Russia

relations", "Russian sphere of influence", "Russian legitimate interests". In this context, the Ukrainians are deprived of agency; they are objectified into non-subjectivity, into a mob allegedly manipulated by the West against Russia.

However, these publicists and journalists still need to focus on the far right to secure a rhetorical retreat in case someone would indeed be willing to discuss the Ukrainians' agency. The line of argumentation – adopted especially by some left-wing circles in the West – was as patronising as it was revealing intellectual laziness: it is the West that is trying to divorce Ukraine from Russia, but even if it is the Ukrainians themselves, then they are all fascists anyway and cannot be supported. For the far left, these two arguments blended together: the West conspires against Russia and *deliberately* supports the Ukrainian far right because the West itself is a non-democratic imperialistic monster. Google "fascist Nato"; the search results are amusing.

For fairness' sake, not everybody coming from the left adopted this patronising and disdainful tone, and the writings of Timothy Snyder, Slavoj Žižek and some other leading left-leaning intellectuals are indicative of a different perspective on the Ukrainian revolution.

So, how can we assess the far right presence on Kyiv's Maidan? My own argument is based on the following premise. Viktor Yanukovich's regime

was a corrupt, semi-authoritarian and nepotistic system that stood in the way of Ukraine's democratisation and modernisation. When the initial student peaceful protest was brutally dispersed by the police, it became evident that the regime was going in the direction of even less democracy and even more authoritarianism. Then – and, even more so, later – it also became increasingly clear that it was impossible to negotiate with the regime, because it rejected all the changes that the protesters demanded: these changes implied the end of the whole system of fraud, corruption and betrayal of national interests. By kidnapping, torturing and killing protesters, the regime came out in its true colours, so the revolution was seen as the only way to have at least a chance for a brighter democratic future for Ukraine.

The participation of the far right in the revolution was made possible not because it was a "fascist coup", but because it was – perhaps too – democratic. The 2014 revolution was a bottom-up, horizontal effort of extremely heterogeneous segments of the Ukrainian society. Moreover, the far right itself was a heterogeneous amalgamation of different groups with different ideas, agendas and strategies. However, all the elements of the revolutionary movement came together to fight against the cynical and brutal regime that could suppress all of them regardless of their ideological convictions.

Unity of the revolutionary movement was one of the major values, and this is exactly why the centrist forces could not afford to distance themselves from the far right: facing an existential threat from the repressive state machine, every person willing to confront the regime counted. However, there were particular far-right elements that occasionally undermined this unity by attacking and/or antagonising other protesters and engaging in polarising practices such as staging a march in remembrance of the highly controversial ultranationalist leader Stepan Bandera (1909-1959).

At the same time, far-right activists contributed to the defence of Maidan that was several times attacked by the police: their nationalist fervour made them stern and intrepid fighters that the revolutionary movement badly needed. Yet, at some other times, this very fervour had a negative impact on the strategy and tactics of the revolution: sometimes, far-right activists provoked a violent reaction from police upon other protesters. These cases made some observers suggest that certain far-right groups

and individuals deliberately played into the hands of the regime and, thus, were *agents provocateurs* – a suspicion not without plausible grounds.

While the far right evidently contributed to the violent confrontation with the police that has advanced the fall of Yanukovich's regime, the latter would have happened at some point anyway. Among more than a hundred fallen protesters, only ten could be "assigned" to the far right milieu. Moreover, the revolutionary violence as such was far from being an exclusive practice of the ultranationalists. The radicalisation of the initially peaceful protests took place without the influence of the far right; rather, it was a desperate response to the escalating state and police repressions against the protesters.

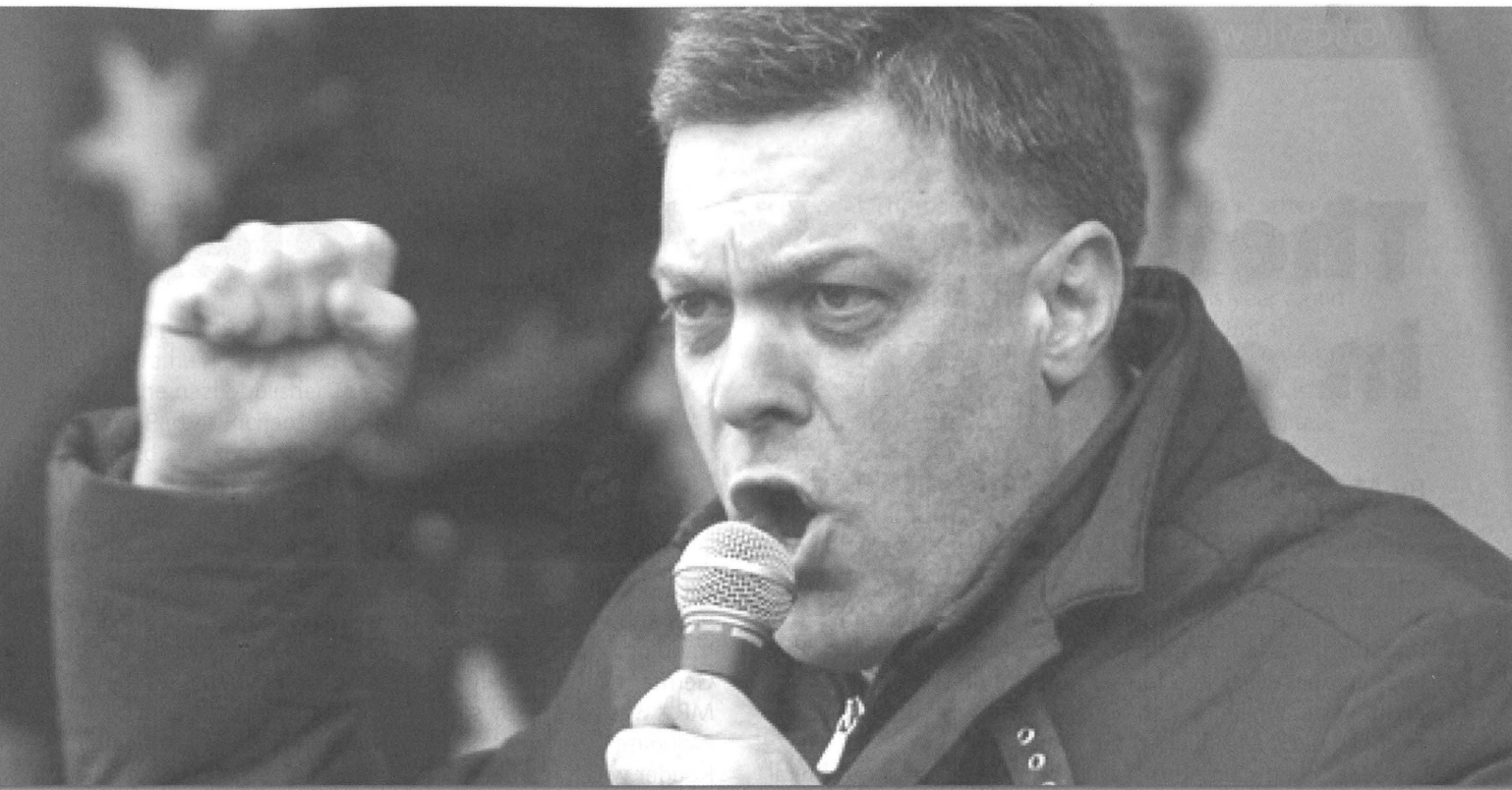
It is still difficult to fully understand whether the far right were among the beneficiaries of the revolution. Some may argue that giving Svoboda four posts in the interim government was indicative of the far-right turn in Ukrainian politics. However, this was

almost a technical decision. One half of the interim cabinet had to be formed by the three former opposition parties, but Vitali Klitschko's UDAR refused to take part in the interim government because it was going to enact unpopular measures and UDAR was afraid of losing popular support. Had Svoboda been not given ministerial posts, then it would have been a one-party government – an obvious political disaster.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that Svoboda, which lost one ministerial post within a month, exerted "far right influence" on the workings of the interim government. Not that Svoboda was in the minority and *because of this* was unable to exert such an influence. Rather, the interim government was essentially dealing with problems – economic crisis and Russian invasion – the gravity of which eclipsed potential ideological demands of Svoboda. Beyond that, these potential ideological demands belonged to the parliamentary, and not governmental, sphere. In parliament, Svoboda still has a group of 36 MPs, but this is a result of the 2012 parliamentary



Phony populist Oleh Lyashko posturing with the Ukrainian military



No matter how noisy Svoboda's leader Oleh Tyahnybok, his party failed to recover its popular support

elections and not of the revolution.

Others may argue that the far right were, eventually, the losers of the revolution. The votes for Svoboda's Oleh Tyahnybok and Right Sector's Dmytro Yarosh at the presidential election in May 2014 (1.16% and 0.70% respectively) partly corroborate this argument. The irony of the far right's pathetic performance in the election is that another presidential candidate, Vadym Rabinovych, president of the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress, obtained 2.25% of the vote – more than Tyahnybok and Yarosh together! It should be noted, however, that popular support for Svoboda had dwindled already before the revolution – the party simply failed to take advantage of the revolution and recover the support it had in 2012.

Moreover, the results of the presidential election cannot be fully indicative of the far right being the losers of the revolution, because the vote in the presidential election was largely tactical. The idea of electing a new president in the first round of the election became increasingly pervasive among Ukrainians, especially against the background of Russia's ongoing aggression. Many Ukrainians felt that "doing away" with the presidential election as soon as possible in order to focus on anti-terrorist activities would

be good for the country, so they voted for Petro Poroshenko as the most popular candidate. These included adherents of the far right. For example, in Kyiv, where the presidential election took place simultaneously with the election to the Kyiv Council, some Svoboda supporters preferred to vote for Poroshenko for president, but they still supported Svoboda for the Kyiv Council. At the same time, Svoboda has clearly lost many of its former supporters in Kyiv: in 2012 they obtained 17.33% of the votes in the parliamentary election in Ukraine's capital, but only 6.5% of Kyivans voted for Svoboda in 2014.

It may be useful to discuss the faith of the Ukrainian far right in two different perspectives. In the short-term – and perhaps mid-term – perspective, the far right can be considered the losers of the revolution because, with the fall of Yanukovich's regime, they have lost the major source of negative voter mobilisation. They have also lost the "monopoly" on patriotism: in the context of the Russian aggression, all the country's democratic parties are patriotic, so there is no "need" to vote for the far right as allegedly the only patriotic force.

The long-term perspective is dependent on the outcome of the

Russian aggression: if it continues and the Ukrainian democratic authorities fail to defend the country, popular patriotism may radicalise and degenerate into ultranationalism. However, if this happens, Svoboda and the Right Sector will not necessarily be the beneficiaries: new far-right formations and coalitions may emerge, for example around the dubious populist Oleh Lyashko, who obtained 8.32% of the votes in the presidential election in May.

Svoboda may not recover from its failure, while the Right Sector that has presumably distanced itself from some extreme elements – namely the Social-National Assembly which now prefers to cooperate with Lyashko – may moderate and move closer to the mainstream right.

One way or another, the outcome of the Russian aggression holds the key to Ukraine's future development. If the Kremlin stops attacking Ukraine and supporting the separatist activities in Donbas with arms, money and manpower, Ukrainian society will be able to concentrate on building a liberal democratic state and will have a chance to marginalise the far right. If Russian aggressive activities continue, the potential damage that the far right can do to Ukraine's democracy may turn out to be not the worst problem.