

# The Ukrainian Extreme Right Seen from Inside and Out

BY ANTON SHEKHOVTSOV

*Ukraine is exasperatingly skilled at exposing itself to bitter criticism from the international community, with 2012 being an exceptional year in this respect. Anton Shekhovtsov on the rise of the ultranationalist Svoboda Party and EU's skepticism.*

In the run-up to Euro 2012, the country became the object of the somewhat hysterical attention of the British media, including the *BBC*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun*, who warned their audience of the perils of attending matches there. According to former Arsenal and Tottenham defender Sol Campbell, the country was racist and full of football hooligans, and non-white fans “could end up coming back in a coffin.” In this atmosphere of fear, thousands decided to stay away. It didn't really matter that Ukrainians turned out to be hospitable hosts and that *not one* racist or violent incident involving Ukrainian fans was reported during the tournament. The damage to Ukraine's image had been done.

But who cares about the image of a country whose authorities repeatedly violate the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law? Moreover, the fact that racism and prejudice *do exist* in Ukraine makes the country's international image even more vulnerable.

## Racial Violence without Consequences

In 2012, the international media frequently reported on ethnic, cultural and social discrimination in Ukraine. Yet not a single perpetrator of homophobic violence that took place in Ukraine last year has been prosecuted. At the same time, Olaolu Femi, a Nigerian student at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Luhansk, remains in prison. In 2011 he was charged with attempted premeditated murder after he had dared to fend off five young Ukrainians who had carried out a racially motivated attack on him and his friend.

In December 2012, the European Union drew attention to racism in Ukrainian society. In its resolution on Ukraine, the European Parliament voiced its concern about “rising nationalistic sentiment in Ukraine, expressed in support for the Svoboda Party”, and recalled that “racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic views go against the EU's fundamental values and principles.” The resolution was followed by a report entitled “2012 Top Ten Anti-Israel/Anti-Semitic Slurs,” published by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, featuring two prominent members of Svoboda.

The attention paid to the extreme right Svoboda Party—the All-Ukrainian Union “Freedom” to give it its official name—was a result of its strong performance at



Svoboda's leader Oleh Tyahnybok with an axe followed by his supporters

the parliamentary elections in October 2012. This marked a turning point in Ukrainian politics. Obtaining a startling 10.44% of the proportional vote and winning in 12 single-member districts, the Svoboda party secured 37 seats in parliament and entered Ukrainian political history as the first party to form an extreme right parliamentary faction.

Although a newcomer to the Ukrainian parliament, the party has been known to researchers since 1991, when it was still called the Social-National Party of Ukraine (SNPU). Its current leader, Oleh Tyahnybok, was twice elected as an MP (in 1998–2002 and 2002–2006), the only relevant successes in the career of the otherwise fringe party. Following the advice of the French National Front, the SNPU changed its name to the All-Ukrainian Union “Freedom” in 2004, along the lines of the Freedom Party of Austria and the Freedom Party of Switzerland (since then, extreme right “freedom” parties have also appeared in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Germany).

## Svoboda's Formula for Success

The name-change was followed by ideological and organizational modernization, and this played a significant role in the party's recent success. Above all, however, Svoboda has benefited from three factors. First, the perceived popular demand for radical opposition to the “unpatriotic” policies of the current government and President Viktor Yanukovich; second, the deep public

distrust of the national democrats (first and foremost the Fatherland party, nominally led by the imprisoned former Prime Minister Yuliya Tymoshenko) and their ability to oppose these policies; and third, growing legitimacy thanks to increased media visibility.

It is difficult to overestimate the latter point. Svoboda's success in the 2012 parliamentary elections

clan's plans. It remains to be seen whether Yanukovich's political advisors indeed conceive a “France 2002” scenario for the 2015 presidential elections. If so, Tyahnybok, playing Jean-Marie Le Pen to Yanukovich's Jacques Chirac, will advance to the second round of the election, only to be crushed by a landslide.

My survey of people who voted for Svoboda at the 2012 parliamen-

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has largely the same source as Tymoshenko's seven-year prison sentence for abuse of office and the subsequent charges brought against her early this year of the contract murder of politician and businessman Yevhen Shcherban. This source is President Yanukovich and his hatred of the national democrats, fuelled by his humiliation during the Yushchenko-Tymoshenko regime and the business interests of Yanukovich's “family” (on its way to being the wealthiest oligarchic clan in Ukraine). The rise of Svoboda is hugely beneficial to Yanukovich and his “family”, since it takes place at the expense of invidious national democrats who could thwart the

tary elections shows that the majority had cast their ballots for the mainstream national democrats in previous years. Had Svoboda not taken part in the 2012 elections, they would have cast their ballots for the Fatherland party or Vitaliy Klychko's UDAR. When asked why they supported Svoboda, most replied that it was the only party that was genuinely opposed to Yanukovich. It is true that Svoboda's political discourse is characterized by stark criticism of Yanukovich and Prime Minister Azarov, but it was the “party of power” that enabled Svoboda to communicate its message to potential voters via the media, especially national TV, which is

directly or indirectly controlled by the authorities. After gaining a miserable 0.76% of the vote in the 2007 and never represented in parliament until the 2012 election, Svoboda had never enjoyed such high visibility.

Regrettably, many other opposition leaders, in particular Tymoshenko, Oleksandr Turchynov and Arseniy Yatsenyuk, voiced acknowledgement of Svoboda's “true opposition” status. They all downplayed the ultranationalist character of Svoboda's ideas, either for instrumental reasons or simply because of negligence (Klychko seems to be the only notable opposition leader who is wary).

## The Laziest Lawmakers

Now that Svoboda is represented in the parliament, it is unlikely to moderate its positions, as some Ukrainian commentators suggest. That may appear a clever strategic move—Svoboda could keep the major part of its largely pro-EU voters, who do not share the party's most radical nationalist stances and who presumably gave it the benefit of the doubt in 2012. Yet the party is highly unlikely to challenge its own image as the only ideological and uncompromising force left in Ukraine, as well as to risk suffering a split between its various factions.

The European Parliament's concern about rising support for the ultranationalists should have a sobering effect on those who voted for Svoboda and at the same time support Ukraine's European integration. These voters need to internalize the EU's fundamental values and principles and realize that their electoral behavior adds to the negative image of the country abroad. They may also come to reason by looking at the statistics of the legislative activities of the new parliament: at the end of 2012, Svoboda's faction was the only parliamentary group that *had not registered a single draft law*. With all the intolerant noise and scandal they produce, Svoboda's MPs prove to be the laziest and most inefficient lawmakers. The empty can indeed rattles the most. ◀

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