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 its 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 Tot- tenham defender Sol Campbell, the country was racist and full of football hooligans, and non-white fans “could end up coming back in a cof-
fín.” In this atmosphere of fear, thou- sands 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 in- volving 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 repea-
tedly violate the principles of democ-

cy, 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 perpet- rator of homophobic violence that took place in Ukraine last year has been prosecuted. At the same time, Os HUDI Pem, a Nigerian student at the Taras Shevchenko National Uni-

versity of Luhansk, remains in pris-
on. In 2011 he was charged with at-
tempted 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 Europe-

ian Union drew attention to racism in Ukrainian society. In its resolution on Ukraine, the European Parliament voiced its concern about “rising na-
tionalistic sentiment in Ukraine, ex-

pressed in support for the Svoboda Party,” and recalled that “racist, an-
ti-Semitic and homophobic views go against the EU’s fundamental values and principles.” The resolution was followed by a report entitled “2012 Top Anti-Israeli/ Anti-Semitic Slurs,” published by the Simon Wies- enenthal Centre, featuring two prom-
inent members of Svoboda.

The attention paid to the ex-

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

the parliamentary elections in Oc-
tober 2012. This marked a turning point in Ukrainian politics. Obtain-

ing a startling 10.44% of the propor-
tional vote and winning in 12 sin-
gle-member districts, the Svoboda party secured 37 seats in parliament and entered Ukrainian political his-

tory as the first party to form an ex-

treme 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-

Nationalist Party of Ukraine (SNP).

Its current leader, Oleh Tyahnybok, was twice elected as an MP (in 1998–
2002 and 2002–2006), the only rel-
vant successes in the career of the other fringe party. Following the 2002 and 2002–2006, the only rel-
vant successes in the career of the other fringe party. Following the advice of the French National Front, the SNP changed its name to the All-

Ukrainian Union “Freedom” in 2014, along the lines of the Freedom Par-
ty Party of Austria and the Freedom Party of Switzerland (since then, extreme right “freedom” parties have also ap-

peared in the Netherlands, the Unit-
ed 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, Svobo-
da has benefitted from three factors. First, the perceived popular demand for radical opposition to the “unpa-

triotic” policies of the current gov-
ernment and President Viktor Ya-
nukovych, second, the deep public
distrust of the national democrats (first and foremost the Fatherland party, nominally led by the impris-

oned former Prime Minister Yuliya Tymoshenko) and their ability to op-
pose these policies, and third, grow-
ing legitimacy thanks to increased media visibility.

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