

Why did the Ukrainian far right support Euromaidan?

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In Kyiv's Maidan protests, the blue and yellow flags of the far-right ultranationalist party, Svoboda, blended in with European Union (EU) banners. When the violence broke out, far-right protesters of the "Right Sector" and Svoboda stood side by side with liberal democratic activists, throwing Molotov cocktails together at riot police. Svoboda and the Right Sector have been at the center of Ukraine's revolution.

Svoboda, the ultra-nationalist opposition party in the Ukrainian parliament, is odious to many people inside and outside Ukraine. It was called the Social Nationalist Party of Ukraine prior to 2004 — a nod to fascism. Its leaders have called for the reinstatement of "ethnic passports," which would allow for government discrimination based on ethnicity. Svoboda's leader, Oleh Tyahnybok, blamed the "Muskovite-Jewish mafia" for Ukraine's economic problems in an infamous 2004 speech. Svoboda activists were also behind one of the most dramatic scenes of the Euromaidan on December 8th when they destroyed the remaining Lenin statue in Kyiv while waving Svoboda's flags.

The image of far-right activists waving EU flags and protesting alongside civil-rights activists may seem confusing. For aspiring and newly minted members of the European club, part of the appeal of EU membership lies in the EU's respect for universalist human rights and civic values. So why would members of right-wing nationalist groups who want to deny such rights to minorities risk their lives in a pro-EU demonstration? Why would Svoboda leaders stand on the Euromaidan stage in support of the protests rather than rejoicing in Yanukovich's rejection of the European Association Agreement?

In short, isn't a pro-EU far-right nationalist movement an oxymoron?

From a Western European perspective, it is. All Western European far-right parties have one thing in common: they oppose EU integration. But in Ukraine, it is not. The Ukrainian far right supports EU integration. Its reasoning is simple: my enemy's enemy is my friend. To the Ukrainian far right, Yanukovich and his Party of Regions is the enemy because his regime is considered a continuation of Soviet politics, which the nationalist far right historically opposed. He represents the opposite of the far right's vision for an ethnically pure Ukrainian homeland and national identity. Thus the far right's participation in the Maidan represented much less a pro-European stance than an anti-government, anti-Soviet, and anti-Russian one. Even beyond the far right, it is a mistake to understand the 2014 Ukrainian revolution first and foremost as a pro-European movement. The mass Ukrainian mobilization was never primarily about the European Association agreement as such. Although Yanukovich's rejection of the European Association agreement was indeed a trigger, the mobilization represented a culmination of years' frustration with Yanukovich's blatant corruption, cronyism, and incompetence since the 2010 elections. Photos of Yanukovich's opulent compound, Mezhyhirya, with its zoo of rare animals, golf courses, and gold-footed toilets, have gone viral.

Between 2010 and 2012, I interviewed a wide range of Svoboda activists, leaders, and supporters. Time and again, I found that my interviewees' anger at the Yanukovich government's corruption and pro-Russian stance blended seamlessly with their xenophobic ideas and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. As one young Svoboda activist in L'viv told me in the Fall of 2011, "the Yanuk government does not

represent us. It is an occupation regime run by Russians and Jews.” In 2012, Svoboda’s success in national elections made it the first far-right nationalist party to win seats in the Ukrainian parliament. Svoboda is still a minority movement, holding only 36 seats out of 450 in parliament. Yet it won 10.4% of the popular vote nationwide, scoring as high as 34.7% in the western Ternopil region. To be sure, some Ukrainians voted to put Svoboda and its leader, Oleh Tyahnybok, in parliament not because they supported its racist and ethnonationalist agenda in full, but as a protest against the corrupt Yanukovich regime, which many Ukrainians call the ruling “family.”

The strong support that opposition parties garnered in 2012 marked the beginning of the process that we now refer to as Euromaidan, purely because the government’s rejection of the European agreement was the final slap in the face to a public that was growing tired of a political elite’s self-enrichment. In the final analysis, the Ukrainian far right is on the Maidan in 2014 because of the mandate it won in the 2012 parliamentary election. It was at that moment that frustrated Ukrainians began to make their voices heard — partly in favor of Europe, but primarily against Yanukovich. The fact that Svoboda and the Right Sector participated in the Euromaidan movement does not diminish the historic character of the 2014 revolution. Nonetheless, it has raised problems for opposition leaders who have had to face Party of Regions’ allegations that the opposition is full of neo-Nazis and “bandits.” And now that opposition leaders like Vitali Klitschko face dissent from the opposition’s grassroots for having agreed to a deal with President Yanukovich on February 21st, tensions within the opposition — including those between the far right and opposition groups more palatable to the West — may bubble to the surface.