

# Two images of radicalism in Ukraine

## Between Scandinavia and the Caucasus

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### ABSTRACT

The recent events in Ukraine have stirred up a very emotional debate regarding the ideological, historical and ethno-cultural roots of Ukraine's far right Nationalist movement. This research paper will put particular emphasis on the resurgence of nationalism in Ukraine during the Soviet era and its transition during the collapse of the Soviet state, as well as on the pre-conditions pertaining to that process. Furthermore, this paper will take a closer look at the main organizations that constituted the backbone of the nationalist movement in Ukraine during the 1991-2014 period.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, nationalism, Diaspora, USSR, Euromaidan, radicalism

### RESUMEN

Los recientes acontecimientos en Ucrania han suscitado un debate muy emocional con respecto a las raíces ideológicas, históricas y etno-culturales del movimiento nacionalista de extrema derecha de Ucrania. Este trabajo de investigación pone especial énfasis en el resurgimiento del nacionalismo en Ucrania durante la era soviética y su transición durante el colapso de la URSS, así como sobre las condiciones previas correspondientes a dicho proceso. Además, este artículo examina más de cerca a las principales organizaciones que constituyen la columna vertebral del movimiento nacionalista en Ucrania durante el período 1991-2014

**Palabras clave:** Ucrania, nacionalismo, diáspora, URSS, Euromaidan, radicalismo

### RESUM

Els recents esdeveniments a Ucraïna han suscitat un debat molt emocional pel que fa a les arrels ideològiques, històriques i etno-culturals del moviment nacionalista d'extrema dreta d'Ucraïna. Aquest treball de recerca posa especial èmfasi en el ressorgiment del naciona-

lisme a Ucraïna durant l'era soviètica i la seva transició durant el col·lapse de l'URSS, així com sobre les condicions prèvies corresponents a aquest procés. A més, aquest article examina més de prop les principals organitzacions que constitueixen la columna vertebral del moviment nacionalista a Ucraïna durant el període 1991-2014

**Paraules clau:** Ucraïna, nacionalisme, diàspora, URSS, EuroMaidan, radicalisme

The recent events known as “Euromaidan”, and the tragic bloodshed in the Ukrainian Southeast that followed shortly thereafter, have produced unexpected yet somewhat contradictory results.

The visible geopolitical shift on the European map which resulted in the Crimean peninsula joining the Russian Federation was accompanied by a number of internal political transformations in the Ukraine that we have not yet understood and that shall be assessed only after a modicum of stabilization has been achieved. On the other hand, these events have brought to light processes and activities that had been deliberately shunned and even hushed down during the preceding decades. The tragedy that took place at the Maidan Square (as well as other Ukrainian regions) has uncovered signs of a phenomenon that had existed in Ukrainian historical memory even before the Second World War: the far right nationalism.

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Awkwardly concealed under slogans coined by the Soviet propaganda machine, the far right nationalism did not die away, despite the various attempts of the Soviet political and intellectual elites to portray it as a one of the traits of the exterminated anti-Soviet “kulaks” and other social strata adverse to Communist ideology.

History, however, had its own ideas on this account. The events that followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union proved wrong the above mentioned notions. Ukrainian nationalism was brewing under the artificially established “hood” of class equality and absence of ethnic and cultural differences in the multinational Soviet Union. As a result, a mere spark was enough to ignite the people’s wrath and resurrect the most radical forces that are now spreading their ideas, contaminating the unprepared minds of perplexed Ukrainians and developing new views of their national history.

However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that Ukraine as a state has adopted and endeared far right ideology principles and notions. The year 2014 Presidential and parliamentary elections in the Ukraine vividly depicted the very scarce popularity of ultra nationalism in Ukrainian society. In fact, these forces comprised rather marginal, politically, culturally and ideologically weak, unattractive

groups. The alleged exuberance of the far right ideology in Ukraine that, according to certain international mass media, was brought about by the Euromaidan, should not be over exaggerated. Nevertheless, this phenomenon needs to be addressed cautiously and with all due circumspection. After all, certain far right groups have been able to accumulate strength and have joined the Ukrainian armed forces, now comprising the most boisterous group within it.

On the one hand, decades of meticulous work was being conducted along various lines and directions, from gathering experience in physical violence to development of “intellectual” capacities, justification of actions and establishment of permanent links with leading European ultra nationalist movements and organizations. On the other hand, the deeply obscene and generally anti-popular policies implemented by the ruling elites left dissatisfied a large portion the Ukrainian population, depriving the youngest, most vulnerable and economically deprived strata of society of adequate choices and stable future.

This research paper aims to explore the policies actively implemented by the far right Ukrainian Nationalists over the last two decades. In particular, close attention will be paid to the imaginary “arch” that stretches from Scandinavia to the Caucasus and Syria. This arch may be defined as the result of protracted, pendulum-like activities, of Ukrainian ultra Nationalist forces. In addition, I will try to ascertain the most important aspects and specific traits marking the essential differences between the various groups within the far right Nationalist movement in Ukraine.

### **1. The “Resurrection” of the far right movement in Ukraine: back to the USSR**

#### **1.1 Socio- economic and political preconditions: myths and reality**

The popular Soviet myth portrayed Ukraine as occupying a position of privilege within the gigantic Soviet Empire: apart from being the second most populated (and therefore the most important) Republic, it was viewed as the agricultural and industrial powerhouse of the Union. Its proximity to the Black Sea coast made it one of the most significant spots of recreation activities. The same legend stated that the Center was ready to sacrifice and inject tremendous economic stimuli to the brotherly nation to preserve its “chosen” role and special position within the Soviet model.

However, the real state of affairs did not exactly match boastful and overoptimistic rhetorical proclamations<sup>1</sup> that would frequently conceal the truth. In fact, Ukraine was repeatedly subjected by the center to contradictory and rather unreasonable political decisions. Historians frequently find it rather perplexing how various cultural and economic experiments frustrated and in certain sense disoriented Ukrainian population, distorting its historical memory, traditions and the entire set of traits that used to conform the Ukrainian identity. For instance, the initial forceful Ukrainization conducted by J. Stalin<sup>2</sup> was followed by the very amicable policies of N. Khrushchev and his close associate P. Shelest. Incidentally, one of the most distinctive features of such policies was the attempt to “dilute” the Western part of Ukraine (that was generally not so much pro-Soviet) with ethnically Russian settlers brought from the Soviet hinterlands.

This strategy, however, was later replaced by intense and rather forceful Russification policies, primarily conducted by L. Brezhnev and his associates, which were based on their total ignorance of the most urgent needs of the local population, irrespective of ethno-cultural and linguistic differences pertinent to various parts of Ukraine. This trend increased during the 1970s (the so-called “era of stagnation”) when the remnants of cultural and historical privileges that Ukraine had enjoyed in the past were steadily curtailed. In the end, the notoriously well known thesis put forth by L. Brezhnev (firmly supported by the Ukrainian leader V. Shcherbytsky, whom L. Brezhnev envisaged as his potential successor) stated that the “national question” in Ukraine had been overcome and “solved according to V. Lenin”<sup>3</sup>. In practical terms, that statement bereft the local population of any recognized right to discuss its own internal issues and to voice any dissatisfaction about its current situation. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the entire set of measures designed and implemented by the Soviet leadership could be defined as a deliberate ideological attack against Ukrainian culture, identity and its residual autonomy.

From the economic point of view, the situation was even worse: the largely ineffective Soviet economy was artificially kept afloat by a growing addiction to the “petrodollars” that kept playing an essential role in the state budget until the very end of the Soviet Union. Similarly, the agricultural sector, that used to be the pride of Ukraine, was deteriorating quickly, which was also relevant in regard to the heavy industry and manufacture sectors. Moreover, corruption and criminali-

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see: Hurska & Sukhankin (2013)

<sup>2</sup> The first evidences thereof could be found within the period 1920- 30s.

<sup>3</sup> “Period zastoja v SSSR na primere sobytij 60-8- ch godov v Ukraine” (“Период застоя в СССР на примере событий 60-80-х годов в Украине”), *Zrada.org*, 24 липня 2013, See more at: <http://zrada.org/history/1-dati-podiyi-fakti/513-period-zastoja-v-sssr-v-60-80-gody-20-go-veka.html#sthash.RYlxPzQm.dpuf>.

ty thrived during the 1970s, which led to the emergence and swift consolidation of the first powerful criminal clans (the so-called Donetsk clan<sup>4</sup>, for instance) that were already blooming during the already mentioned historical phase. Pervasive alcoholism, general dissatisfaction, negligence and a sense of vanishing moral and spiritual postulates adopted and promoted by the Soviet ideology became a basic feature of the Soviet reality during that period. The picture of a dilapidated state would not be complete without mentioning the disastrous ecological conditions (which resulted in the depletion of the fertile black earth and in decreasing health conditions of the population) and the Chernobyl tragedy. All this, together with the ongoing war in Afghanistan, marked the final days of the Soviet Union.

However, vast masses of population were still echoing the standard and rather dated late-Soviet state Communist propaganda, and the higher officials did not want to recognize the fact that Ukraine was being subjected to tumultuous processes that favored the growth of the national liberation movement. The Nationalist forces were gaining weight and waited for a spark to destroy seemingly petrified Communist dogmas frozen in time and history and usher in revolutionary new ideas, the gravity of which Ukraine was yet to experience. Similarly, those trends were visible in culture: both in cinematography<sup>5</sup> and literature<sup>6</sup> numerous attempts to reassess Ukrainian past and the most sensitive pages of its history were made in the 1970s.

### 1.2 Ideological and cultural shifts in Ukraine (1960s – 1980s): “Not by Bread Alone...” The role of dissident movement

Various activities of ultra- conservative and largely reactionary nature conducted by the Soviet leadership, as well as worsening internal conditions, accompanied by blatant attacks against Ukrainian culture and language (marginalized to rural areas and a narrow layer of the Ukrainian intelligentsia) favored the inception of the dissident movement. This movement initially took the shape of a fight for the implementation of generally recognized human rights and universally accepted democratic principles. For this purpose, in 1976, Ukrainian human rights activists joined the Ukrainian Helsinki Group that was to supervise correct implementation of the main provisions of the Helsinki Declaration of 1975. The group's emergence was encouraged by the stern repression conducted against Ukrainian intellectuals and dissidents. Among other things, this group actively demanded more religious and public rights and more autonomy. The group had also set up

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<sup>4</sup> For more information see: <http://forbes.ua/magazine/forbes/1332856-doneckij-klan>

<sup>5</sup> For instance, the film “The White Bird Marked with Black” (1971), directed by Yuri Ilyenko. For more information see, in *IMDb*: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0165636/>

<sup>6</sup> In works of popular Ukrainian author Nikolay Dalekii

international contacts: for instance, it was actively engaged in conversations with their Lithuanian counterparts. The ruling elites reacted in typical Soviet Union fashion: in 1977, Ukraine was swept by a wave of arrests that marked the beginning of what came to be known as the “decade of arrests”<sup>7</sup>. By the year 1980, almost all members of the UHHRU had been arrested and imprisoned. Prominent actors of the movement such as V. Stus, V. Marchenko, L. Lukyanenko and A. Tihy ended up in Soviet camps. Another of the prominent leaders of the Ukrainian nationalist movement of the 1990s was V. Chornovil, one of the organizers of the *Norodnyj Rukh* party. Simultaneously, Ukraine experienced the growth of the so-called “religious dissidents” that demanded the legalization of the Greco-Catholic and Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Churches. Giving some historical perspective, it would be appropriate to highlight that these religious congregations stood behind Ukrainian nationalist movement fighting the Soviets and that they actively collaborated with the Ukrainian Insurrection Army (UPA) during the interwar and Second World War periods.

In the end, it should be recognized that Ukrainian dissident movement, even though amateurish, idealistic and largely unpopular (and mostly unknown) among the general populace, did set an important precedent that caused the awakening of both religious and secular feelings, and inflamed the growing discontent among Ukrainians. Most important, however, is the fact that many currently active members of Ukraine’s ultra nationalist movements (for instance, D. Korchynsky and D. Yarosh, who is now one of the most active members of the Nationalist movement, and has far reaching political ambitions) had gained a valuable experience in opposition activities, being able to participate in the “late wave” of dissident movement.

Therefore, we should understand that the basis of relationships between Ukrainian dissidents (and ultra Nationalist forces as a nascent element of this broader front) and Scandinavian countries began in the late 1980s. Besides, the Ukrainian Diaspora (being primarily present in Canada and the US) had been building their vision of Ukraine for decades- a vision which was a historical myth of their own<sup>8</sup>. The Diaspora had come to the conclusion that the internal conditions in Ukraine were ripe for the gradual transfer of their ideological dogmas to Ukrainian soil.

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<sup>7</sup> For more information see:

<http://www.memo.ru/history/diss/books/ALEXEEWA/Chapter2.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Hurska & Sukhankin (2014)

### 1.3 The nationalist outburst. The Diaspora vs. Perestroika: whose input was more significant?

It all started in March of 1985, when the dilapidating Soviet Union hailed M. Gorbachev as perhaps its last hope that could save it from total collapse (as many were expecting) by preserving the whole architecture but modernizing its essence<sup>9</sup> And Ukraine acclaimed M. Gorbachev's ideas – after all, his birthplace was Stavropol, which should have made him aware of the predicaments being faced by the Soviet agriculture. However, by putting ideological liberalization ahead of economic reforms, and being sincerely convinced of the existence of a "Soviet identity" free from ethnic and cultural biases, M. Gorbachev evidenced his profound inability to identify the rapidly proliferating issues affecting the Ukrainian society. Moreover, its lukewarm reforms resulted in sheer economic disaster, which (along with external factors) brought about formidable inflation and plummeting living standards that led the USSR to its catastrophic demise.

By that time, the political forces that had gained experience from their active participation in the human right movements, realized that Ukraine had reached a historical crucible. They desperately needed a new ideology that could be used as a pivot for future developments. This was accompanied with the appearance (every so often spontaneous) of early Nationalist organizations: for instance, the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists (KUN), UNA-UNSO, "Ukrainian Plast", The People's Movement of Ukraine ("Narodnyj Rukh Ukrainy"), Spadshyna, and many others. Those processes received the active support of the Ukrainian Diaspora, that provided the nascent Nationalist movement with intellectual baggage and a prepared set of ideological paradigms that would be used to create the new Ukrainian identity, based on an accurately distorted and falsified version of the past. Above all, the new ideological concepts hailed UON/UPA terrorists and justified their crimes committed against Jews, Poles and even their fellow Ukrainians on behalf of their "Insurrectionary War" against both the Nazis and the Soviets. However, I would point out that this task was significantly facilitated with the fact that the Soviet historiography had neglected and oversimplified (ignoring essential periods) the history of Ukraine, thus creating an ideological vacuum that was easily filled by that new content.

In the meantime, the leaders of the developing Nationalist movement needed to acquire international weight and practical experience – an essential component to become a powerful force on the domestic scene. This approach required new tactics and behavioral patterns primarily associated with international activities.

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<sup>9</sup> For more information see: *The Cambridge History of Russia*, - Vol.1, *The Twentieth Century* (2006)



## 2. How the steel was tempered: Ukrainian radicals in the “tinderboxes” of the post-Soviet space: first Chechen war and beyond

### 2.1 Methods, ideology and actions – formation of the “crude nationalism”

The immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union was a series of violent conflicts raging across the territories of the former Soviet republics. From Transnistria and the Caucasus through Central Asia, the implosion of the Soviet Union left a bloody trail of ethnic conflicts and separatist movements. Within this context, it would be adequate to mention that one of the forces most actively involved in these conflicts were the Ukrainian Nationalists, especially the members of the UNA-UNSO. Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the essence of Ukrainian participation in these conflicts were basically two: ideology, and money.

From an ideological perspective, one should take into account that the Ukrainian far right Nationalists had, by that time, adopted doctrines and arguments coined by historical leaders of the Ukrainian Nationalist movement such as S. Bandera, D. Lebed, O. Stecko, D. Dontsov (or, to be more precise, they adopted a deliberately distorted version of the latter’s philosophical discourse on Ukrainian nationalism and social Darwinism). Even more importantly, it seems that the nascent ultra Nationalist organizations endeavored methods and tactics that used to be employed by the Ukrainian Insurrection Army (OUN and UPA) during the Second World War. Without going into detailed descriptions, their mass atrocities and other crimes against the civilian populace constituted direct violations of basic norms of humanity and morale. One might also recall the events of the so-called “Volhynian massacre” (1943-44), which still evokes painful memories among the Polish, Ukrainian and Jewish population residing in the mentioned territory<sup>10</sup>.

Following the steps of their ideological predecessors, the new generation of Ukrainian far right Nationalists devised a theory of “perpetual warfare” against the Russian Federation, the country that is perceived as the main obstacle preventing the establishment of a fully consolidated Ukrainian nation state. On the other hand, the UNA-UNSO ideological leadership did not conceal their fear that the Russians would eventually resurrect ambitions to reinstate its “sphere of influence” (with Ukraine obviously considered part of it), by escalating tensions in the pro-Russian regions of Eastern and Southern Ukraine. Incidentally, this scenario has partially materialized in the year 2014<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Poliszczuk (1999)

<sup>11</sup> Interview with General D. Dudaev, 1995. Available at:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxdwvDePS\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxdwvDePS_k)



Therefore, the leaders of the UNA-UNSO assumed that the war should be exported to other vital parts of the former Soviet Union, that is, to any region where the Russian interests were at stake. “Always support the side opposing the Russian one”-this phrase sums up the essence of Ukrainian ultra Nationalist ideology. For instance, as one of the chief founders of UNA-UNSO, D. Korchynsky, openly admitted, tensions (and potential Russian involvement) in the South-Eastern regions of Ukraine could be avoided solely by sowing the seeds of war in the Caucasus, which was considered Russia’s “soft underbelly”<sup>12</sup>.

Therefore, it would be safe to conclude that the instability in the “southern” pole of the “North – South” arch was to be used by the Ukrainian far right Nationalists to disrupt Russia’s geopolitical designs. On the other hand, these activities helped crystallize the militant wing of Ukrainian nationalist movement, allowing it to gain more experience (we are referring here mainly to the “UNSO” wing), which would be later employed in Ukraine itself.

### 2.2 The main areas of participation and its legacy

The most important post-Soviet implosion “hot spots” having involvement of Ukrainian militants were the following<sup>13</sup>:

- Transnistria (against pro-Russian forces).
- The Nagorno-Karabakh War (late 1980s–1994, on the side of Azerbaijan).
- Chechnya (1994–96, against Federal troops).
- Kosovo (against Serbian forces).
- Russo-Georgian military conflict of 2008 (on the Georgian side).
- Syria (against Bashar al Assad and his regime).

Of all there conflicts, there are two that should receive particular attention: the military conflict in Chechnya and the civil war in Syria. The military conflict in Chechnya that took place in 1994-96 should be seen as an event of utmost importance. The participation of the so-called “Viking” group (approximately 200 members)<sup>14</sup> and that of the “Prometheus” group deserve particular attention primarily due to the fact that this military conflict was waged on the territory of the Russian Federation. The importance of Ukrainian participation is explained by the following:

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<sup>12</sup> Sevansky (2014)

<sup>13</sup> Ibídem

<sup>14</sup> “Chechenky Kapkan” (Documentary movie), part 1, 2004. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FkBQfOL0-Y>

- Sound ideological victory (war was actually waged on the territory of the archenemy).
- The members of far right Nationalist movements acquired practical military experience in the conflict against the Russians.
- New leaders appeared and gained weight (for instance, O. Muzychko, I. Mazur, V. Bobrovych, V. Mamalyha, D. Korchynsky, the Tyahnybok brothers and D. Yarosh – all of them were said to have fought in the Chechnya War).
- The participation in the war made the Ukrainian Nationalists familiar with methods and tools of propaganda successfully used by D. Dudaev and his associates.

One of the first instances of collaboration between Chechen and Ukrainian propagandists may have occurred in 1998, when D. Korchynsky organized the “Caucasus Institute” with the purpose of establishing a new “wide anti-Russian front” across the entire region. Incidentally, the Wahhabi literature published by this organization is still being disseminated in various parts of the Russian Federation, particularly in the Volga Region known for its substantial share of Islamic population, as well as in Moscow and St. Petersburg where the Muslim Diasporas are considered to be particularly strong. Besides, the organization is said to be actively cooperating with the “Kavkaz Center” (headed by M. Udugov), which is perceived as the main beacon of anti-Russian activities on the ideological front.

The Ukrainian mercenaries in Chechnya may perhaps be divided into two major groups. The first one (for instance, the “Prometheus” group) waged more sophisticated and “intellectual” forms of warfare. Their activities primarily included propaganda campaigns: issuing leaflets, brochures, interrogations of Russian soldiers as well as attempts to convince them to switch sides. As one of chief activists of the Ukrainian Nationalist movement in Chechnya, D. Korchynsky, revealed, one of its tasks was to proselytize Russian soldiers, encouraging them to join the insurgents. The main “model” followed here was Gen. A. Vlasov’ “Russian Liberation Army” formed during World War Two. The second group consisted primarily of ordinary criminals and adventurers who were trying to make a profit out of war. As it has been mentioned previously, the first Chechen conflict was used by the Ukrainian Nationalists to gain both military and intellectual capabilities.

As it has been highlighted previously, the events in Syria played a very important role in the development of the Ukrainian Nationalist movement, particularly in terms of gaining military experience and proficiency. According to various sources, there have been at least 350 Ukrainian mercenaries (predominantly members of the UNA-UNSO organization) fighting against B. al Assad and his

associates<sup>15</sup>. Given that the mercenary wages are not that high (approximately 500 US dollars per month) the real reason of this involvement might be described as an attempt to train in an “urban warfare” environment, which is a very specific type conflict that is very difficult to replicate under artificially established conditions. In this regard, the battles that took place in Grozny, Fallujah and Syria have provided valuable experience in “urban warfare”.

Military specialists underscore that those who have gained experience fighting with regular armies in an urban environment are a rare commodity that is much sought after by various radical movements: in fact, their wages skyrocket once they have accumulated experience. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to describe the Syrian experience as the most valuable one. It preceded the Euromaidan events, when its practical knowledge was implemented in conditions of street fighting in Kiev against the state police. Similarly, after the outbreak and further escalation of the military conflict in the Southeast of the country, such military skills were put to use as well. On the other hand, it is imperative to underscore that the general appearance of those who have taken part in military conflicts has changed over the last two decades. In the early 1990s, the key role was played by representatives of UNA-UNSO, whereas nowadays it is a mixed array of members of the “Right Sector”, mostly performing the role of simple mercenaries. On its contemporary stage of development the issue of “intellectual” strife has acquired additional role – it primarily steams from Northwestern part of Europe.

### 2.3 The Euromaidan events: is it compromise possible?

The entire range of events surrounding the Euromaidan may have had a crucial meaning for the ultra Nationalist movement in Ukraine, primarily due to the fact that these events witnessed the birth of a peculiar “fusion” between active street fighting (based to a substantial degree on the experience of the “militarized” wing of the movement) and primitive forms of political development, where cooperation with western Nationalist movements played a key role. The final outcome, i.e., the balanced combination of the two approaches, created a framework that has been approved and supported by certain groups within the Ukrainian society, and, in particular, by those who are young and discontent with rampant lawlessness, corruption and lack of socio-economic stability.

However, and despite its early success, very soon appeared clear evidences of discordances between key groups within the movement. For instance, frictions

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<sup>15</sup> “V Sirii protiv pravitelstvennykh sil vojuut 350 ukrainskikh naemnikov” (“В Сирии против правительственных сил воюют 350 украинских наёмников”), *LB.ua*, 27.10.2013. Available at: [http://lb.ua/news/2013/10/27/236242\\_sirii\\_protiv\\_pravitelstvennih\\_sil.html](http://lb.ua/news/2013/10/27/236242_sirii_protiv_pravitelstvennih_sil.html).

between the “Right Sector”<sup>16</sup> (headed by D. Yarosh) and VO Svoboda (with O. Tyahnybok as its leader) became most apparent. The rift occurred not only due to deeply rooted ideological differences or respective political ambitions: in fact, these tendencies became even more visible after the Euromaidan was over. The conflict became apparent when the two movements tried to dissociate from each other within the so-called *Sotnias* (militia units of the opposition movement each consisting of some 100 people). The subsequent events have revealed that the rift between the two blocks is becoming even greater, which is also a result of growing political ambitions of their respective leaders<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand, the “Right Sector”, which desperately tried to attain “democratic” and patriotic attire prior to the elections<sup>18</sup> by getting rid of the most radical and openly bandit formations, such as the “White Hammer” group, whose members have been accused of killing a police patrol near Kiev in March<sup>19</sup>. Similarly, the storming of the Ukrainian Parliament that occurred on March 27, 2014 raised a prompt reaction from the “Right Sector” leadership, which instantly denied its involvement in these events<sup>20</sup> as well as in other similar violent actions.

Therefore, this trend shows that the ultimate reconciliation between the Ukrainian ultra Nationalist forces is not likely to happen any time soon because of the visible dichotomy existing between the various groups within the Ukrainian society. One might assume instead that the most likely scenario is one of fragmentation of the far right movement, with certain groups and popular movements being able to attract more support depending on its agenda, historical background and the ethno-cultural particularities of the region in question. On the other hand, there is a chance of one group rising over the others by using new PR and propaganda methods (such as social networks, which are particularly popular among

<sup>16</sup> For more information concerning the “Right Sector” see the documentary: “Pravy Sektor. Radikal`ny sinrom”, Телеканал ICTV, Available at:

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcuUJyZ181hESMvX\\_fp6E9H88CgYZtPlo](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcuUJyZ181hESMvX_fp6E9H88CgYZtPlo)

<sup>17</sup> For more information see: “V pravoradikol`nom kryle namiechaetsja raskol: “Pravyj sektor” otmehchevalsja ot Svobody”, *NewsRU.ua*, 15.02.2014. Available at:

<http://rus.newsru.ua/ukraine/15feb2014/blizzard.html>

<sup>18</sup> This also resulted from a wave of criticisms from the top EU officials against the “Right Sector’s” violent provocations. For more information see: “Ashton condemns actions of Right Sector in relation to Ukrainian parliament”, *Kyiv Post*, 29.03.2014

<http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/ashton-condemns-actions-of-right-sector-in-relation-to-ukrainian-parliament-341312.html>

<sup>19</sup> “Udar `Belym Molotom´: raskol w pravom sektore”, *Crime.in.UA*, 23.03.2014. Available at:

<http://crime.in.ua/statti/20140323/raskol-sektora>

<sup>20</sup> For more information see: ““Pravyj Sektor” otkrestilsja ot shturma Rady”, *Agregator.PRO* or *belaruspartisan.org*, 29.03.2014. Available at:

[http://www.agregator.pro/pravyiy\\_sektor\\_otkrestilsya\\_ot\\_shturma\\_parlamenta.2418556.html](http://www.agregator.pro/pravyiy_sektor_otkrestilsya_ot_shturma_parlamenta.2418556.html); <http://www.belaruspartisan.org/politic/262467/>

the younger Ukrainians, and that are being actively used by the “Right Sector”) that would fit to the Ukrainian/regional conditions.

Judging from historical experience, one could suppose that the use of the above mentioned technologies are most likely to be learned from their western counterparts. However, the question remains: would western “recipes” be applicable to Ukrainian realities? Naturally, taking into account the clear defeats suffered by both the “Right Sector” and “Svoboda” at the presidential and parliamentary elections, the expansion process of far right orientation in Ukraine has come to a halt. Yet, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that in case of internal (and external) aggravation of the current scenario, a growth of influence of radical groups should not be ruled out completely.

### **3. The “Intellectual” approach: Ukrainian radicals on the lookout for “civilized” allies**

#### 3.1 The “western” footprint and the local environment: from Sweden to France and beyond

As the precedent examples have shown, the contemporary Ukrainian ultra Nationalism has gone through several stages that have contributed to give it its present form and shape. One might expect that the so-called “crude” militarist approach could not possibly have appealed to wide masses of ordinary Ukrainians, given its slogans and ideological content. Rather, it could be popular only within very narrow and rather marginal layers of the Ukrainian society. Nor could it have yielded the desired result and recognition among European counterparts (at least the most significant ones). Speaking literally, a reputedly sanguinary mercenary “stained in blood” was not the ideal partner that European Nationalists were looking for. Therefore, one of the most urgent tasks that the far right Nationalists had to undertake was acquiring legitimacy, both internally and abroad, by overcoming its visible penchant for violence and developing an “intellectual” section that could set up cooperative links with other similarly oriented European groups. On the other hand, it should be mentioned that the historical myth brought to Ukraine from abroad (i.e., brought by the Ukrainian Diaspora) had to be revised so that it could unite under a single banner both the East and the West of the country, something that, as historical experience has proven, was an enormously arduous task to achieve.

It would not be an exaggeration to assume that the party most “agile” at establishing international connections was VO Svoboda, which was the first to set up cooperation channels with various European Nationalist groups and movements.

Within this context, it is worth mentioning that Ukraine's Social-National Party (which would become VO Svoboda in 2004) managed to establish ties with other European far right nationalist groups as soon as the early 1990s, when this organization became a member of the EuroNat, a loosely defined association that includes a broad array of European nationalist parties and movements whose geographical locations spread from Portugal in the West to Finland in the North and Italy in the South, with the Ukrainians being the easternmost members of this forum. Later on, Ukrainian Nationalists established ties with France's National Front (FN). Incidentally, one would not be wrong to suggest that it was the National Front who played a most significant role in the process of "civilizing" VO Svoboda during the earlier stages of its formation<sup>21</sup>.

VO Svoboda attempted several times to become an active member of the European far right Nationalist movement. In 2013, for instance its representative T. Osaulenko took part and delivered a speech at the "Vision Europe" conference held on 23-24 March in Stockholm, Sweden<sup>22</sup>. It is particularly worth mentioning that the event was organized by the Party of the Swedes (headed by Stefan Jacobsson), which was widely known for its neo-Nazi tactics and ideology. Moreover, the majority of participants were Swedish groups and movements as well. We should also emphasize that the main speaker at the conference was Udo Pastörs, deputy leader of the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), the most significant neo-Nazi party in Europe to emerge after the end of the Second World War. The pool of speakers included, among others, R. Fiore from the Italian fascist New Force party, J. Le Clercq of the Land and People Association from France, D. Carlsen, leader of the Danish Party, or G. M. Garcia, head of international relations of the National Democracy Party, Spain.

Particular attention should be paid to the fact that the international activities of VO Svoboda have been relying on its Scandinavian and German "allies" with increasing frequency, and that this trend has gained particular weight during the most recent years. To further corroborate this statement, it should be noted that on 29 May 2013, M. Holovko, who is both a member of the Ukrainian Parliament and of VO Svoboda, travelled to Germany to discuss cooperation with representatives of the NPD. Svoboda and the NPD agreed to strengthen bilateral relations between their respective parties and parliamentary groups. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that VO Svoboda has been exclusively interested in promoting its "Northern ties"- During the past five years, it has explored possibilities in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe as well.

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<sup>21</sup> Rudling (2013)

<sup>22</sup> Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gb5BX\\_7BfE8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gb5BX_7BfE8)



For instance, right after his triumph in the 2009 parliamentary elections (when Svoboda was voted by more than 10% of the electorate) O. Tyahnybok toured various European countries in order to establish new connections and to demonstrate that his party was internationally recognized as the most important far right political party in the Ukraine. During its visit to Rome, in late 2009, O. Tyahnybok took part in the Fiamma Tricolore conference. In January 2010 the leadership of Svoboda held a meeting in Kiev with representatives of France's Front National. Moreover, O. Tyahnybok went to Strasbourg to take part in the first press conference of the AENM (Alliance of European National Movements) that comprised ultra Nationalist parties such as the British National Party (BNP), Spain's Movimiento Social Republicano (Republican Social Movement) and Portugal's Partido Nacional Renovador (National Renovation Party). This success led Svoboda's leadership to erroneously believe that the party had become a member of the AENM<sup>23</sup>, something that was not possible since Ukraine was not a member of the EU, and EU membership was one of the requisites for new membership. That same year, Svoboda's representative went to Graz (Austria), to hold a meeting with A. Sippel of the FPÖ and G. Grosz of the Bündnis Zukunft Österreich ("Alliance for the Future of Austria")<sup>24</sup>.

However, due to a number of reasons, both internal and external, VO Svoboda ceased to be the only ultra nationalist party in the Ukrainian domestic scene that was able to put forth a political agenda that could attract public support. Being inclined to pursue two goals (be active internationally and in Ukraine) VO Svoboda did not fully succeed in either, for it was expelled from many European associations, remaining largely a "domestic consumption" political force. Nevertheless, the ensuing Euromaidan events forced VO Svoboda to compete with a newly rising political force - the "Right Sector".

### 3.2 The "Right Sector" vs. VO "Svoboda". Whose mask is more appealing for mass "consumption"?

Contrary to various predictions and prognoses, the Euromaidan events and the crisis that Ukraine has found itself immersed in, did not facilitate the merging of major ultra nationalist groups. On the contrary, after a very short spell any sense of unity, if it did exist at all, was replaced by a situation of growing competitiveness and strive for support within Ukrainian society. As it has been discussed previously, the main antagonism erupted between VO "Svoboda" and the "Right Sector" (whose ideology is primarily based on that of the "Tryzub" political party),

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<sup>23</sup> Rudling (2013)

<sup>24</sup> Shekhovtsov (2014)



two very similar, yet distinct formations. And the gap between them has widened rapidly.

The “Right Sector” is positioning itself as a force that derives its inspiration solely from Ukrainian historic tradition and from the unique identity born out of its geo-political location – the ties with Europe and the US are perceived as detrimental for Ukraine and its historical destiny<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, by establishing closer ties between the West and East of Ukraine, the “Right Sector” is seeking to attract the vast segment of Ukrainian society that would not be prone to sympathize with Svoboda’s glaring anti-Russian and anti-Semitic ideology. Moreover, D. Yarosh has been able to show more flexibility and ability to understand the rapidly changing milieu – in his last public address he urged the nation (irrespective of one’s ethnicity) to unite for the sake of Ukraine<sup>26</sup>.

Coming out of Euromaidan as a would-be President, D. Yarosh gained ample support from teenagers, youth and middle-aged people thanks to its use of social networks for propaganda purposes, something completely new in Ukraine. Moreover, his popularity may have surged because he has not been charged with relations with oligarchic groups, thus explicitly positioning himself as a tireless fighter against the oligarchs who were the Kremlin’s associates.

“Svoboda”, on the other hand, did not abandon its rather offensive rhetoric concerning ethnic backgrounds and its openly hooligan-like behavior<sup>27</sup>, which seems to be rather counterproductive and narrow-minded within the multiethnic Ukrainian society. This is why VO Svoboda is becoming predominantly viewed as a “neo-Nazi” party that defends ethnic nationalism, whereas the “Right Sector” acquired the appearance of a national-patriotic movement allegedly fully involved in fighting the Separatists of the Ukrainian Southeast. Even the liquidation of O. Muzychko, the so-called “Robin Hood of Rivne”<sup>28</sup> who in fact was an ordinary racketeer and criminal, has been portrayed as a blatant act of aggression committed by the ruling elites against the heroes of Euromaidan, even though this person never set foot in Euromaidan, which took place in Kiev. This view was supported by many (predominantly young) Ukrainians, even by Russian-speaking ones. The funerals were personally attended by D. Yarosh and became an act of public mourning.

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<sup>25</sup> Hurska & Sukhankin (2014)

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem

<sup>27</sup> For more information see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0gMVJcmhG8;http://112.ua/obshchestvo/ntku-svobodovcy-i-vooruzhennyye-boeviki-siloy-zastavili-napisat-panteleymonova-zayavlenie-ob-otstavke-36271.html>

<sup>28</sup> Penhaul (2014)

It is therefore adequate to suggest that nowadays the Ukrainian ultra Nationalism is mostly winning the hearts and minds of young and inexperienced social groups who tend to adopt precipitate conclusions, not based on well-thought out, sober analysis of the real picture. Furthermore, it is rather difficult to calculate with precision and accuracy the extent of its popularity, due primarily to the fact that Ukraine is still an inhomogeneous country, and also because the situation in Southeastern regions remain unstable, which precludes one from being able to assess the genuine reaction of the general populace.

On the other hand, elections in Ukraine are perceived by the general populace as an activity that has little bearing on the system of internal political development. That is why the percentage of voters has been decreasing since Ukraine gained independence. Similarly, one must admit that its popularity is dwindling rapidly due to the fact that its leadership and methods are involved in “revolutionary” activities<sup>29</sup> – this is mostly why the “Right Sector” is trying to portray itself, in essence, as a democratic party, although its ideology is based on the “Tryzub” postulates, wrapped up with a democratic appearance. Having made an attempt to adopt European-style tactics, it is evident that VO Svoboda has not yet reached the necessary level of maturity that its European counterparts have shown, primarily due to the counterproductive behavioral patterns of its leadership.

### 3.3 “The Ukrainian nationalist Intermarium” – an impossible task?

The patterns of many a Nationalist movement in Central, Eastern Europe and the Balkans are frequently based on the idea of the establishment of a super-state whose imaginable territorial boundaries usually spread far beyond the respective ethnic heartlands. On numerous occasions, these aspirations have collided and led to violent ethnic clashes that have been plaguing European East Central and Balkan countries for decades.

One of the most famous instances of such ambitious projects was elaborated by J. Pilsudski during the interwar period. This project envisaged the creation of the so-called “Intermarium”<sup>30</sup>, where the Polish state should stretch from the Baltic to the Black Sea, encompassing territories that had once been united by the might of the Polish Crown. By the same token, Ukrainian Nationalists also developed ambitious plans of territorial expansion: some groups and parties have gone so far as to brand Ukraine as a new Slavic Center capable of facing Moscow and of taking the role of protector of the Slavs. In fact, should one carefully follow the foreign ties of the Ukrainian Nationalists, it would be possible to distinguish

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<sup>29</sup> Coynash (2014)

<sup>30</sup> These and similar ideas were developed during the interim years 1918-1926

their own “Intermarum” project that begins at Scandinavia, passes through Germany, Hungary, and Bulgaria and ends in the Caucasus, where Ukraine (being a significant part of the “Heartland”) becomes a sort of geopolitical pivot that should link Northern Europe with the Black Sea region.

However, the obvious question arises: would other regional players agree with the role that Ukrainian Nationalists claimed for themselves? In which way would other actors react, given that the Russian Federation has claimed for centuries the status of protector of the Slavs? What about Poland, that aspired to assume the role of a bridge between two major civilizations?<sup>31</sup>

Answers for these questions might be found in the recent events surrounding the relationship between Ukrainian Nationalists (in particular, VO Svoboda, as of today the most internationally active party) and its foreign counterparts. In January 2013, for instance, Mateusz Piskorski, a former member of the Polish national-populist Self-Defense Party, launched a rhetorical offensive against VO Svoboda, describing it as “some kind of a pathology of a Hitlerite type” as well as claiming that this party had “no friends in Europe, with the exception of German neo-fascists”<sup>32</sup>. It was evident that the Polish far right Nationalism was not comfortable with the Ukrainian aspirations, and did not agree with them. Moreover, the ensuing events have further confirmed that the Polish ultra Nationalists would rather be more inclined to cooperate with their Russian counterparts (with A. Dugin, a Russian political scientist and hidden neo-Nazi, who enjoys the full support of the Kremlin) than with VO Svoboda, whose aggressive denial of historical facts and open support for the Nazi collaborators during the Second World War caused significant irritation among their Polish counterparts.

Above all, the so-called “Crimean crisis” and the separatist rising in the South-east that should have been a windfall for the Ukrainian nationalists, did in certain way undermine them, for many Nationalist parties in Europe either produced statements that reflected the view of the Russian propaganda machine, or did not react at all<sup>33</sup>. This outcome urged O. Tyahnybok to send an official letter (it was actually signed by Oleh Pankevych, Deputy Head of All-Ukrainian Union Svoboda and responsible for international relations and Member of Ukrainian Parliament)

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<sup>31</sup> Incidentally, such a trend is visible among Polish political elites as well: it would be enough to take an example of the Kaliningrad Region to understand this trajectory

<sup>32</sup> Shkoda (2013)

<sup>33</sup> For more information see: « Urgence humanitaire en Ukraine russophone et en Crimée russe : le Front national appelle au dialogue et à l'apaisement », [WWW.FRONTNATIONAL.COM](http://www.frontnational.com/2014/03/urgence-humanitaire-en-ukraine-russophone-et-en-crimée-russe-le-front-national-appelle-au-dialogue-et-a-lapaisement/) – Le site officiel du Front National, 01.03.2014. Available at : <http://www.frontnational.com/2014/03/urgence-humanitaire-en-ukraine-russophone-et-en-crimée-russe-le-front-national-appelle-au-dialogue-et-a-lapaisement/>

that accused their European counterparts for being too much influenced by the Russian information and propaganda campaign<sup>34</sup>.

However, it would not be accurate to blame solely the “external” situation. It would be more prudent, perhaps, to suggest that VO Svoboda, being a party without solid experience and with a rather inept leadership, was not ready to assume the role they had wanted to achieve.

Their rather frivolous, distorted and radical definition of construed historical events caused a deep rift between VO Svoboda and its western allies. For instance, on March 22, 2013, B. Kovács (Deputy Chair and Treasurer in the Alliance of European National Movements) wrote an official letter to O. Tyahnybok where he expressed his deepest dissatisfaction with the fact that Svoboda’s members organized demonstrations against ethnic Hungarians in Carpathian Ruthenia, which used to belong to Hungary. Moreover, numerous assaults based on deeply rooted anti-Semitism have stirred the international Jewish community and enraged many European, Russian and Ukrainian officials, as well as ordinary citizens. Contrary to many far right European parties and movements, whose ideological basis boils down to anti-immigration laws, Ukrainian nationalists are primarily concerned with ethnic issues, i.e., activities against Russian and Jews, which leaves them with only one viable alliance: with German neo-Nazi groups, many of whose members are but open criminals and social outcasts.

Evidently, the Euromaidan events have also resulted in Svoboda’s popularity plunging on the domestic scenario as well. After not taking part in shirking the most decisive street clashes with the police (19- 22 January and 18- 19 February 2014) the majority of VO Svoboda members hailed the display of racist banners in the occupied State Administration of Kiev City. Other notoriously infamous activities such as attacking volunteer medical workers, activists and journalists (they even attacked the direction of the First National Channel, who was forcefully made to resign from his position), demolishing the Lenin monument or organizing a torch rally commemorating Stepan Bandera, produced a range of sentiments that can be described as closer to rejection than acceptance, being more related to the damage caused to its image<sup>35</sup> rather than to the facts themselves.

Interestingly enough, the “Right Sector” seems to have adopted the idea that establishing international connections could be of help to promote their agenda and to gain experience that might help boost its positions domestically. Since West

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<sup>34</sup> “Svoboda urges ‘National Front’ (France) not to distort information about the current events in Ukraine, *Svoboda* [site], 08.03.2014. Available at: <http://en.svoboda.org.ua/publications/articles/00010512/>

<sup>35</sup> Umland (2013)

European allies are not perceived as a reliable partner due to the anti-globalization rhetoric of the Right Sector leadership, the party has established links with the Chechen “Free Caucasus” organization opposing R. Kadyrov and the current Chechen administration. For instance, there are evidences that during the Euromaidan events, a “Chechen Sotnia” was present and cooperated actively with Right Sector members<sup>36</sup>. However, these relations have been developing for too short a time to be able to make firm and far-reaching conclusions. Nevertheless, the bases are now set for further actions in the future.

Therefore, it would be safe to suggest that the idea of “Ukrainian Intermarium” seems to be quite an implausible dream, at least taking into account the capacities, intellectual and otherwise, of the Nationalist forces which are nowadays present on the Ukrainian scene.

### Conclusions and further thoughts

Having appeared in the Ukrainian political firmament in a meteor-like style, the Ukrainian far right political movements of the new generation are now experiencing a similarly rapid decline in both popularity and international recognition. The pace and scope of these trends explicitly point out the multiple drawbacks and errors committed by the ultra Nationalist parties and movements. In particular, these forces overestimated the number of radical elements, while at the same time underestimating the cosmopolitanism and tolerance that has always been a distinctive feature of the multinational Ukrainian society. On the other hand, various ill-managed actions and decisions have significantly impaired abroad the image of ultra right Nationalists. For instance, on several occasions in recent months VO Svoboda (as well as the Right Sector), has suffered sound defeats on both the “domestic” and “international” fronts that have severely damaged their image and the position they had previously achieved. In regard to the domestic front, one should keep in mind that this political force used to be perceived as a key opposition to the official government. Yet, with the toppling of the previous government, it lost this advantage, becoming yet just another political force instead of one of the most powerful opposition forces.

Moreover, the events of Euromaidan (especially after the radicalization phase was reached) clearly showed that “Svoboda” was an inept and irresolute force unable to meet the challenge. On the other hand, its narrow-minded racist and

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<sup>36</sup> “OPD `Svobodnyj Kavkaz´ na Maidane v Kieve” (“ОПД `Свободный Кавказ´ на Майдане в Киеве”), in: *Golos Ichkerii*. Available at: <http://golosichkerii.com/index.php/novosti/377-opd-svobodnyj-kavkaz-na-majdane-v-kieve>

xenophobic rhetoric and actions enticed many protesters to sympathize with the “Right Sector”, especially taking into account multiethnic composition of the Maidan, that by no means could be perceived as a ethnically homogenous body. On the other hand, the European (the so-called “civilized”) allies could not accept and digest the ultra Nationalism and open racism of VO Svoboda. As the old Soviet joke goes “...he was evicted from the Gestapo because of his brutality”.

This reflects, to the fullest extent possible, the trajectory of the relationship between VO Svoboda and the most prominent European Nationalist groups. Even though VO Svoboda does have certain links with European far right Nationalists, the question of how “civilized” these allies really are instantly comes to mind when one takes a closer look at these groups/movements. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to state that the most internationally active Ukrainian far right political party has failed to achieve its goals and strategic objectives. The defeats on the home front have been going hand in glove with failed “international” enterprises.

Regarding the “Right Sector”, the second most important far right political group in Ukraine, whose hour of triumph coincided with the radical phase of the Euromaidan, one must admit that in the final analysis this political party appears to be a “King for a day” rather than a force with a clearly identified program, ready to engage in constructive policies. It is worth mentioning that the rate at which its popularity skyrocketed was almost exactly the same with which it plummeted. Having become a national symbol for revolution, it soon became an example of greed, banditry and armed marginal forces that are now being frowned upon by both the domestic public and the European community<sup>37</sup>. In addition, it is beyond doubt that the ample range of scandals and tensions has not boosted either of the Nationalist candidates in both the presidential (the leader of Svoboda won a mere 1.16 percent and D. Yarosh a meager 0.70 percent of votes) and parliamentary elections (with 4.71 and 1.80 percent, respectively).

In the final analysis, we should acknowledge that for the past two decades Ukrainian ultra Nationalist forces have largely remained a marginal and rather underdeveloped fraction of the Ukrainian society, which does not enjoy massive public support even despite the recent actions of the Russian Federation (that in theory should have had a unifying effect) the still increasing socio-economic instability, or the Anti Terrorist Operation going on in the Ukrainian Southeast.

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<sup>37</sup> For instance, the clandestine meeting that took place between D. Yarosh and V. Yanukovich (that was initially said to have never occurred and later would be acknowledged by D. Yarosh himself) engendered a great deal of doubts in the “Right Sector” and its integrity and concern for the common good.



Nonetheless, it would be a great mistake not to treat this phenomenon without all due concern and attention. Ukrainian historical experience has shown how much suffering could be brought about by a mere 2 percent of the population: the tragic events that occurred on Western Ukrainian lands during the Second World War have left behind a deep, perpetually bleeding scar in the historical memory of Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian nations; they have left as well a solid source of anti-Ukrainian propaganda that is being exploited by the Kremlin in its attempt to vilify the Ukrainian nation. Therefore, it is imperative not to forget, or throw into the dustbin of history, the lessons of the past.

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