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The electoral success of the Svoboda Party – the consequences for Ukrainian politics

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The All-Ukrainian Association 'Svoboda' scored an unexpected success in the parliamentary elections, winning support from over 10% of the voters and entering the select group of Ukrainian parliamentary parties which operate at a national level. Svoboda's manifesto is nationalist and anti-liberal, in both economic and political aspects. It is in fact the anti-liberal component of this party's manifesto which it can thank for achieving such a big electoral success. The faction formed by Svoboda's 37 representatives in the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament) will have a small impact on legislative work, but their activity may add further to the brutalisation of parliamentary life. Furthermore, Svoboda will attempt to make other opposition groupings adopt a more radical approach, which may trigger the disintegration of the United Opposition Baktivshchyna. A new wave of public protests is likely to emerge in Ukraine in the coming months. Therefore, it can be expected that Svoboda will make efforts to join in or even incite them, in order to promote its social and nationalist messages. This may contribute to increasing the popularity of nationalist ideas and to a further radicalisation of sentiments in Ukraine.

The road to success

The Svoboda Party was established in October 1991 as the Social-National Party of Ukraine (SNPU)¹. It has combined radical nationalism with radical social slogans since it came into existence. The key principles of its ideology include unequivocally equating the nation with a community which has been formed naturally by a single ethnic group, the primacy of the nation's collective rights over individual human rights, the need to build an 'ethnoeconomy' and the openly racist rhetoric claiming superiority of the 'white race', etc.

In 1998, Oleh Tyahnybok, the deputy head of the SNPU, who was in charge of organisational

issues in the party, won a seat in the majority election to the Verkhovna Rada. When he repeated this success in 2002 (the support for the SNPU was marginal), he was already strong enough to lead the party and significantly reduce the role of neo-Nazi and racist circles within it. In February 2004, this party was renamed the All-Ukrainian Association Svoboda. However, the "large social-nationalist movement" (according to the definition in party documents), formed by various organisations centred around the Social-Nationalist Association established in 2008, is still - albeit unofficially - linked to it. Yuri Mykhailyshin, who won the election in one of the single-member constituencies in Lviv, appears to be the person in the party leadership responsible for supervising this movement.

Following these changes, Svoboda began to gain strength. It won 0.36% of the votes in the parliamentary elections in 2006 (2.16% on average

¹ For more on the background and detailed agenda of the SNPU-Svoboda, see: Tadeusz A. Olszanski, 'Svoboda party – the new phenomenon on the Ukrainian right-wing scene', *OSW Commentary*, no. 56, 4 July 2011, http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary_56.pdf

in Eastern Galicia²), and 0.76% in early parliamentary elections in 2007 (3.30% in Galicia). In the presidential election in 2010, Tyahnybok was backed by 1.4% of the voters (4.71% in Galicia). Finally, on average 25.75% of the electorate in Eastern Galicia cast their votes for Svoboda in municipal elections the same year, and its candidates won the elections in most single-member constituencies. In effect, Svoboda formed majority coalitions in the district councils and gained sufficient majority to govern by itself in Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ternopil and a number of smaller towns. However, it holds real power only in Ternopil, where the mayor is also a representative of the party. The recent parliamentary elections in these oblasts brought about a further increase in support for Svoboda, indicating that its rule has been rated favourably.

Before the parliamentary elections in 2012, Svoboda struck a deal with the United Opposition *Batkivshchyna*, as a consequence of which the two groupings fielded joint candidates in single-member constituencies. As a result, Svoboda's 35 candidates had no competitors in these constituencies from – what one may conventionally term – the patriotic camp (this is the sole reason why Svoboda was able to win the seat in Poltava). In the campaign, the party employed a rhetoric which was more socially oriented than nationalist, together with a catchy slogan which proved to be one of the most effective of the campaign: “Our power – Our ownership – Our dignity on Our Own, God-Sent land” (“*na SVOiei BOgom DAnoi zemli*” in Ukrainian, with the emphasised letters spelling out the party's name - “Svoboda”). Svoboda played primarily on anti-oligarchic and anti-liberal sentiments, and sometimes resorted to populist ideas, such as the nationalisation of key companies, imposing statutory limits on bank loan interest rates or scrapping reform of the pension system. Never-

theless, the party's agenda presented during the election also included ideas whose implementation would be beneficial for the country, such as the stipulation that all real estate should be inventoried or that taxes on small and medium companies should be reduced. A significant part of these proposals differed minimally from those included in the agenda of the Communists, who are treated by Svoboda (with full reciprocity) as enemies, with whom no compromise is possible. According to pre-election polls, Svoboda could count on 4–5% support in the proportional elections and between 5 and 8 seats in the majority elections. Meanwhile, their real level of support level turned out to be 10.44% (2.13 million votes in comparison to 179,000 in 2007), which gave them 25 seats in the proportional elections. Its candidates also won the elections in 12 single-member constituencies. The degree of support for Svoboda clearly

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grew in all Ukrainian constituencies, and the party crossed the 5% electoral threshold in 18 of the 28 constituencies (including the foreign constituency). It is worth noting that support for this grouping has grown clearly in the central districts and to a lesser but still significant extent in the east of the country, although it should be taken into account that many residents of Eastern Galicia have recently moved to the large industrial centres in eastern Ukraine. Less surprising is Svoboda's high popularity in Kyiv (17.3%), where during the previous elections its level of support was similar to that in Volhynia. According to exit polls, almost half of

² Here and further below in the text, the average result from three oblasts is given, without taking into account the differences in the number of voters. However, the support level has been the highest all the time in Lviv Oblast, where the population number is the largest.

Svoboda's electorate have university degrees and live in oblast capital cities (and only one quarter of them live in the countryside). The age structure of Svoboda's electorate is well balanced: there is no overrepresentation of young people or pensioners among them.

The reasons for electoral success

The magnitude of Svoboda's success seems to have taken its leaders by surprise. However, since the first hours after the elections, the party has been building an image of strength which is both constructive (a declared readiness to collaborate in the new parliament not only with Batkivshchyna but also with Vitaliy Klichko's

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UDAR party) and radical (the initiation of protests in front of the Central Electoral Commission's office, putting direct pressure on the members of the local electoral commissions during the vote counting).

Experts and sociologists agree that this increased support for Svoboda does not equate to a correspondingly large increase in support for a radical version of Ukrainian nationalism. A significant part of those who cast their votes for this party did so in order to express their disillusionment with Batkivshchyna's policy, especially its alliance with Arseniy Yatsenyuk's Front for Change, which was viewed with suspicion among the national-democratic circles to put it mildly. The image of Batkivshchyna as an opposition party was also tarnished due to the fact that it had ruled the country in 2007–2010. Thus the voters who were searching for a 'new force'

could choose between Svoboda and UDAR, the latter of which was unacceptable to nationalists and also to those discouraged by the unclear agenda of Klichko's party. It is conceivable that the refusal to agree on candidacies in the key single-member constituencies turned out at the last moment to be disadvantageous to both UDAR and Batkivshchyna.

Some of the public who cast their votes for Svoboda saw it not as a nationalist party, but as a radically socialist or at least anti-liberal one. One of the commentators wrote that "voters from the south and east of Ukraine voted for Svoboda out of hatred towards the Party of Regions [thinking] let those Banderites beat the faces of the Regionals"³. Other observers highlighted the fact that part of the electorate were under the impression that only Svoboda could stop the Party of Regions. All these elements taken together resulted in success for Svoboda, both in its traditional stronghold and in the centre and east of the country.

It seems that the present degree of support for Svoboda's radical nationalism can be estimated at 4–5% (within the ranges which pre-election polls indicated). However, even this level of support represents a very serious increase in the popularity of their message and proves that Svoboda has pushed the traditional western Ukrainian nationalist parties out of the political arena and taken control of this political 'niche'.

Svoboda in Ukrainian politics

As it has entered the Verkhovna Rada, Svoboda will now participate in politics at the national level. However, its substantial electoral success does not change the fact that it will be unable to implement the main tasks on its agenda: the reconstruction of Ukraine into an ethnocentric welfare state, banning the propagation of

³ Vitaliy Skorokhodov, 'Komu nuzhna „Svoboda“?', 13 November 2012 www.from-ua.com/adds/print.php?politics/72fc034b03b9b This author represents strong anti-Western and pro-Russian views.

Communist ideology (including a ban on the Communist Party of Ukraine), large-scale nationalisation, etc. However, it will put forward similar projects in parliament for propaganda purposes – Svoboda will use the parliamentary tribune as an important channel for promulgating its agenda. Svoboda’s representatives in parliament will vote against motions brought by the Party of Regions, actively oppose them in debates and stymie them in commissions (it is still not known which commissions its representatives will be put in charge of). At the same time, Svoboda is likely to spur the radicalisation of the Batkivshchyna faction. It will likewise strive to push out members of the Front for Change, Yatsenyuk in the first order, from the Batkivshchyna faction and to put an end to co-operation between Batkivshchyna and UDAR. Svoboda does not regard UDAR as an opposition party and is claiming that in the present situation “any third force today will be the fifth column tomorrow”⁴. It is also emphasising UDAR’s links with some oligarchs. Such moves on the part of Svoboda will be in line with the Party of Regions’ desire to weaken the two key opposition factions, which does not necessarily mean that these will be coordinated.

Svoboda’s strong faction, consisting predominantly of young people, may readily be used to disrupt parliamentary debates by provoking rows and even fights, especially given that the Communist faction (which has also been rejuvenated) will now behave more assertively than during the previous term. Both of these factions may be used in the political game between the key parliamentary parties (the Party of Regions and the United Opposition). They may also decide to act on their own initiative, so as to maintain the image of radical and uncompromising forces. The expectation that disputes and conflicts in the new Verkhovna Rada will become more numerous and more brutal is widely shared among Ukrainian commentators.

⁴ Statement made by Yuri Mykhailishin during the election campaign. www.mykhalchyshyn.info/diyalnist/po-diyi/0000343

However, a more significant consideration is the line Svoboda will take in extra-parliamentary politics. The deteriorating economic and social situation, the anticipated and probably unavoidable cuts to existing social benefits, in combination with hikes in utility bills and the prices of basic goods, will in all likelihood provoke a new wave of public protests. Though such protests may start spontaneously, they will then likely

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attract the support of numerous organisations which are themselves weak in terms of organisation and intellectual potential. Ukraine is lacking a strong trade union movement with a clear sense of its objectives. There are also no strong left-wing parties that are not involved in collaboration with the government party. In turn, neither the United Opposition Batkivshchyna nor UDAR are trustworthy enough to mobilise the public and hold mass demonstrations. This will open up an opportunity for Svoboda to take charge of the protests and gain a new voter base in the centre and east of the country.

Until recently, support for Svoboda was concentrated in Eastern Galicia, and to a lesser extent in Volhynia and Kyiv. Now, the situation may change significantly. Svoboda, by emphasising the leftist and populist elements of its manifesto, may reach out to middle-aged and young Ukrainians from the centre, east and even south of the country (with the exception of Crimea). This is particularly true for that segment of the Ukrainian public for whom the language problem is of minor significance and who – owing to the moderate, state-centred nation-

nalism which has been promulgated in school for twenty years – have ‘unlearned’ the Soviet conception of Ukrainian history and identity. Others can be swayed by anti-immigrant (racist), anti-gay and pro-family slogans, etc.

Svoboda will be unable to appeal to the oldest generation and those who share a Soviet mentality, predominantly immigrants from other regions of the former USSR and their descendants. The Communists and UDAR will vie to exploit any protests in such circles for their own political needs (it is no coincidence that the leader of one of the Afghanistan war veteran groupings was handed one of the top places on UDAR’s party list). It also conceivable that some of the protesters from western Ukraine will be reluctant to accept political patronage from Svoboda – the growing support for Communists in Eastern Galicia⁵ is thought-provoking in this context.

This situation may lead to competition between the two radicalisms: the nationalist and the post-Soviet (the latter one could be led by Russo-phile groupings, such as the Fatherland Party from Odessa, which are of marginal significance

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at present; the Communist Party will also be active behind the scenes). Svoboda may use the wave of protests to spread Ukrainian national consciousness and nationalist ideology, which could appeal to those sections of society who have a ‘diluted’, unformed national identity.

⁵ The support levels for the Communist Party of Ukraine were 1.99% as compared to 1.03% in 2007 in Lviv Oblast, 1.78% versus 0.78% in Ivanofrankivsk Oblast and 1.92% versus 0.69% in Ternopil Oblast. Its electorate increased much more rapidly in Volhynia: it was at 6.97% versus 2.72% in Volhynia Oblast, and 6.21% versus 2.40% in Rivne Oblast.

It is also worth noting that, unlike with the Party of Regions and Batkivshchyna, most leading politicians in Svoboda are under forty years old (Tyahnybok himself is 44 and Mykhailyshin is 30). Thus, on the one hand, they have no political experience, but on the other, they have time and do not need to be focused on achieving a decisive success in the nearest future.

Svoboda’s success has provoked a new wave of criticism against the party. It is being attacked by its opponents (predominantly the Party of Regions, the Communists and other left-wing parties) as a “Nazi threat” and a puppet in the hands of the Party of Regions. Allegations have also been made that this party is financed by some oligarchs, especially Ihor Kolomoysky, a Ukrainian oligarch (and a key activist in the Jewish community)⁶. However, there is no doubt that Svoboda’s success is convenient for the Party of Regions, which favoured its election campaign with the intention of undermining the position of the United Opposition (and, to a certain extent, the Communists), and secondly to consolidate its own voter base by capitalising on the threat of the ‘brown revenge’ (similar rhetoric was used against Viktor Yushchenko in 2004). Similarly, a Tyahnybok campaign for presidency in 2015, preceded by a strong showing from Svoboda’s candidate in Kyiv’s election for mayor, might appear beneficial from the point of view of the Party of Regions’ tactics (although the notion that he is to be a convenient challenger for Yanukovych to face in the presidential runoff seems to be premature).

This, however, does not mean that the leadership of the Party of Regions or, for example, the Presidential Administration controls Svoboda. The fact that this party is ready to accept assistance from its enemies is a sign of political cynicism and not of a covert deal or subordination. Co-operation with the oligarchs is a similar case. Svoboda may accept money from

⁶ For example, Vlad Khmurny, ‘Osobennosti natsionalnykh vyborov. Svolota’, 19 October 2012, www.from-ua.com/adds/print.php?politics/b6e79deab99c9 and Skorokhodov’s text quoted in footnote 3.

anyone, and even make certain undertakings to its sponsors⁷. Still, this does not mean that any of the sponsors are capable of controlling the party's activities, at least as long as it maintains its idea-centred character.

Possible developments

The All-Ukrainian Association Svoboda has become an essential element of the Ukrainian political scene. It is difficult to expect that it could easily be marginalised or broken up in the coming years. It will continue to play a major role in parliamentary life and may even become a political patron of public protests, which are set to return. The fact that the leaders of this party are young will contribute to its building a long-term strategy, which will not be restricted to focusing on the closest election.

Young people, who are willing to actively air their views in public, predominate among Svoboda's membership and supporters. Since its manifesto implicitly includes consent for using violence, one should be wary that disturbances during its public pronouncements will reoccur (either on their own initiative or in response to actions taken by opponents).

⁷ It is possible that the protest by its representatives in Lviv Oblast council this November against granting Chevron a shale gas exploration licence, together with demands for granting the licence to a domestic entity, was the result of a suggestion from one of its sponsors.

Svoboda's success is a consequence of the need for a radical, populist and anti-liberal agenda and organisation, and partly for a radical nationalist agenda, which has been intensifying in Ukrainian society. This need also fits in with the broader trend of social changes in Europe and it can be assumed that this will remain so for some time.

The presence of Svoboda in the Verkhovna Rada and, more broadly, on the political scene, is beneficial for the Party of Regions, because it intensifies internal disputes within the opposition and makes it difficult for the opposition to become united (for the upcoming presidential election also). It is difficult to expect that Svoboda will refrain from putting up its candidate in the election and thereby relinquish the opportunity to promote its ideas. However, this does not mean that it is under the control of the Party of Regions (or its putative oligarch sponsors). Svoboda is an independent political force, with clearly defined goals (albeit not necessarily with well-planned tactics) and the will to pursue them to fulfilment.

Svoboda's activity will give rise to tension in Ukrainian-Russian and Ukrainian-Polish relations, especially in connection with the commemoration of the UPA's victims in Ukraine. However, this will not have any major impact on bilateral relations at the state level, since it can be assumed that the present Ukrainian government will not allow Svoboda to influence its foreign policy.

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