

Svoboda party – the new phenomenon on the Ukrainian right-wing scene

Tadeusz A. Olszański

Even though the national-level political scene in Ukraine is dominated by the Party of Regions, the west of the country has seen a progressing increase in the activity of the Svoboda (Freedom) party, a group that combines participation in the democratically elected local government of Eastern Galicia with street actions, characteristic of anti-system groups. This party has brought a new quality to the Ukrainian nationalist movement, as it refers to the rhetoric of European anti-liberal and neo-nationalist movements, and its emergence is a clear response to public demand for a group of this sort. The increase in its popularity plays into the hands of the Party of Regions, which is seeking to weaken the more moderate opposition parties (mainly the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc). However, Svoboda retains its independence from the ruling camp. This party, in all likelihood, will become a permanent and important player in Ukrainian political life, although its influence may be restricted to Eastern Galicia.

Svoboda is determined to fight the tendencies in Ukrainian politics and the social sphere which it considers pro-Russian. Its attitude towards Russia and Russians, furthermore, is unambiguously hostile. In the case of Poland, it reduces mutual relations almost exclusively to the historical aspects, strongly criticising the commemoration of the victims of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army's (UPA) crimes. This may cause tension in Polish-Ukrainian relations, where they are affected by decisions made by local governments controlled by the Svoboda Party.

From Social-Nationalist Party of Ukraine to Svoboda

Svoboda was founded as the Social-Nationalist Party of Ukraine (SNPU) in October 1991, and among its founders were members of anti-communist organizations from Lviv. Its emergence was a part of the process of the Ukrainian independence movement branching off into national democrats and radical nationalists. The national democrats tried to combine liberal and nationalist rhetoric whereas the radical nationalists questioned or simply rejected liberal solutions. The party advocated the social nationalist ideology by combining radical nationalism with equally radical social rhetoric. Among the canons of its ideology there was: a vision of the nation as a natural community, the primacy of the nation's rights over human rights, the urge to build an 'ethnic economy', but also an openly racist rhetoric concerning

'white supremacy'. Therefore, it seems justified that this programme has been compared to National Socialism from its very beginning, and not to the traditional ideology of radical Ukrainian nationalism. This parallel was reinforced by the party's symbol – the letters I + N (Idea of the Nation), that is graphically identical with the 'Wolfsangel' rune – one of the symbols of European neo-Nazi organisations.

In 1998, Oleh Tyahnybok, the deputy head of the SNPU (in charge of organisational issues) was elected member of Verkhovna Rada, the Ukrainian parliament, winning a seat in a single-member district. After his re-election in 2002 (while his party, the SNPU, received only marginal support), he was already strong enough to lead the party. A year on, the 'Wolfsangel' disappeared from the party's symbols, and in February 2004 it changed its name to All-Ukrainian Union 'Svoboda'. The party changed its symbol to a hand with three fingers stretched that symbolised a Tryzub (trident), a popular gesture during pro-independence demonstrations in the late 1980s. The radical neo-Nazi and racist groups were pushed out from the party.

However, Tyahnybok never concealed that these changes were made primarily for image purposes. The party remains associated with the 'wide social nationalist movement' comprised of numerous organisations (and websites) and gathered around the Social-Nationalist Assembly which was set up in 2008. The Internet 'Joseph Goebbels Political Research Centre' (the centre later changed Goebbels for Ernst Jünger) was founded in 2005 by Yuri Mykhailyshyn,

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Tyahnybok's adviser, who topped the Svoboda party list in the elections to Lviv's municipal council in 2010¹. Ukraine's Patriot, a paramilitary organisation disbanded in 2004 and re-established in 2005 in a different legal form², is still associated with Svoboda. This organisation still uses the 'Wolfsangel' symbol, although transformed in such a way that its interpretation as 'I + N' is no longer possible.

Back in the mid-1990s, the SNPU established contacts with European parties and movements from the extreme right: open contacts with the National Front of France, and covert ones with neo-Nazi organizations. In the autumn of 2009, Svoboda joined the Alliance of European National Movements as the only organisation from outside the European Union.

Having introduced the aforementioned changes, Svoboda has begun to gain force. In 2004 it declared a membership of five thousand, but by 2010 this number increased threefold to 15 thousand. In the parliamentary elections of 2006 the party won a mere 0.3% of votes (an average of 2.1% in Eastern Galicia), in the early parliamentary elections in 2007 – 0.7% (3.3% in Galicia), and in the presidential elections in 2010 Tyahnybok was supported by 1.4% of voters (4.7% in Galicia). The 2010 municipal elections brought a breakthrough: Svoboda gained an average of 25.7% votes in Eastern Galicia, and its candidates won in most of the single-member districts. As a result, Svoboda co-formed majority coalitions in regional councils, and in Lviv, Ternopil, Ivano-Frankivsk and several smaller towns the party has an independent majority. Ternopil remains, however, the only city where the party can govern independently because its mayor is the member of this party.

Following the municipal elections in 2010, Svoboda was faced with new challenges – after taking over power, it had to demonstrate its competence and incorruptibility, as well as

¹ For details see: <http://2000.net.ua/2000/derzhava/ekspertiza/71527>. The centre's website (<http://nachtigall88.livejournal.com>) was closed in the spring of 2011 and has probably reappeared under a changed name. The website had published translations of articles by Alfred Rosenberg, Ernst Röhm and Joseph Goebbels (from Russian versions). The number 88 in the name of the website is a digital equivalent of the abbreviation HH (Heil Hitler), commonly used by European neo-Nazis.

² SNPU established this organisation in 1999 as an Association of Support for the Armed Forces and Navy of Ukraine.

the ability to reach compromises and to balance conflicting local interests (including economic ones). Meanwhile, Svoboda's staff potential is rather modest – many councillors' mandates were taken over by students. At the moment it is difficult to assess how Svoboda's representatives manage in the representative bodies of local government; it is worth noting that they continue to present themselves in the media as the opposition. Allegations of corruption that appear from time to time do not seem very credible, one reason being that these bodies have a limited range of decisions to make.

How Svoboda handles its 'governance' test, will affect the future of the party, especially its results in the parliamentary elections of 2012; entering parliament currently seems to be the party's main goal. According to the polls available, the party can be sure to enter parliament even in if the electoral threshold is raised to 5%, it may also win over ten mandates in single-member districts.

Svoboda's anti-liberal programme

According to Svoboda's official program dated 2009³ and its draft constitution of 2007⁴, the party aims to build 'a powerful Ukrainian State based on the principles of social and national justice'. The 'rights of the nation' are to be given primacy over human and civil rights. The form of government is to be presidential, and Ukraine is to be a unitary state, with Crimean autonomy abolished. The economic program is explicitly statist; many ideas run counter to the trends that are prevalent in developed countries (such as the demand to abolish VAT). Farmlands are to be state-owned and given to farmers in hereditary use. The state is to implement a firm pro-family policy and attach importance to health care.

Svoboda is the only influential political force in Ukraine to call for a radical de-communisation of the state administration that would eliminate those employees of state structures who had been active before 1991. This demand, designed to force a generation change, significantly reduces the party's chances of attracting new supporters from the older generation. This demand is accompanied by an appeal for a thorough de-communisation of the public space (monuments, names of streets and places, etc.) and a demand that Russia apologise for its communist crimes.

Anti-Polonism remains an issue of secondary importance both in Svoboda's rhetoric and programme: the party considers its main and indeed dangerous enemy to be Russia and Russians.

The strategic direction of the state is to be 'European Ukraine-centrism' which should guarantee Ukraine's status as 'not only geographical, but also a geopolitical centre of Europe'. Ukraine is to leave the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and other post-Soviet structures, demand an explicit guarantee of accession to NATO within a set period of time, and to once again become a possessor of tactical nuclear weapons. The European Union is not even mentioned in the programme.

Ethnocentrism is a pivotal element of Svoboda's program. The nationality of a citizen is to become a public category. An ethnic census is to be implemented in the bodies of executive power, the armed forces, education, science, and even in the economy: their national composition is to strictly correspond to the proportion of Ukrainians and ethnic minorities. Similarly, the share of the Ukrainian language in the media is to be no smaller than the proportion of ethnic Ukrainians in society. The only official language of state structures

³ For details see http://svoboda.org.ua/pro_partiyu/prohrama/ accessed on May 25, 2011.

The document has been registered in the Ministry of Justice and is therefore an official document.

⁴ http://svoboda.org.ua/pro_partiyu/prohrama/konstytutsiya/ accessed on May 25, 2011.

(including the sphere of education) is to be Ukrainian, and the rights of national minorities are to be restricted to the creation of associations. On the other hand, Svoboda's policy documents contain no racist elements.

Apart from the official program, there is also an unofficial one, not written down in document form, but implicit in statements and actions by members of Svoboda. It is much more radical, and racist⁵. In their outlook upon the nation, the 'new' nationalists reject the previous, biologicistic concept of a national community (the nation as equivalent to species) and opt for the idea that the nation is an 'incarnation of the idea of history in the dialectical development of the spirit'⁶. This kind of neo-Romantic approach, consistent with the spirit of postmodernism, makes it practically impossible to hold rational debates with Svoboda's programme.

Other references to Svoboda's unofficial programme are their large-scale propaganda actions taken on the anniversary of SS Division 'Galizien', repeated attempts to interrupt the celebrations in honour of Poles murdered by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in Huta Pieniacka, appeals to Russian residents of Lviv to 'Ukrainise' the names of their children, attacks on demonstrations for the legalisation of marijuana, acceptance of controversial statements on the party forum that approve of Hitler's activities⁷, etc.

However, the fact that the activity of Svoboda is convenient for the Party of Regions in the short term does not mean that Svoboda is controlled by the Party of Regions. Svoboda is undoubtedly an independent political force.

Svoboda is definitely negatively disposed towards the 'historical dialogue with Poland' (as well as with any other of Ukraine's neighbours). According to the party, whatever Ukrainians did to the representatives of other nations in the past was at the very least justified, whereas whatever Russians, Poles, Hungarians and others did to Ukrainians, was unjustified or usually criminal. Hence the activi-

ties such as picketing Polish commemoration ceremonies in Ukraine, questioning their right to erect monuments in honour of murdered Poles, and accusing Poles of mass murders of the Ukrainian population, etc. This has caused friction in Polish-Ukrainian relations and will continue to do so in the future, whenever these ceremonies will be attended by representatives of local authorities controlled by Svoboda. Despite these actions, anti-Polonism remains an issue of secondary importance both in Svoboda's rhetoric and programme: the party considers its main and indeed dangerous enemy to be Russia and Russians.

Svoboda in Ukrainian politics

Svoboda's political success has caught the attention of media and political analysts. Two trends are particularly clear – the demonisation of the party as a 'Nazi menace', and the tendency to disregard it as a puppet organisation. The former opinion was promoted by the media associated with the Party of Regions, the Communists and Russophile groups, and the latter by groups related to the national-democratic parties in western Ukraine and the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc, who even claimed that the pro-government media's marked interest in Svoboda was proof that the party is a puppet if not a spy ring.

⁵ A song popular among Svoboda activists refers to attempts to reconstitute the Ukrainian state in the summer of 1941, under the patronage of the Third Reich: 'Nachtigal and Roland army liberate the Aryan country / Aryan country, Ukraine...'. For details see: Ostap Kryvydyk, Neyakisyntsi natsionalizm, http://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2011/04/20/6122719/view_print/, accessed on April 21, 2011.

⁶ A statement by Andriy Ilyenko, a member of the Svoboda leadership, quoted after: <http://www.unian.net/news/print.php?id=321062>, accessed on April 21, 2011.

⁷ See: http://www.forum.vosvoboda.info/viewtopic_10853.php, accessed on June 8, 2011. This is a discussion forum thread on Svoboda's official website.

Despite these allegations, there is no doubt that the SNPU and Svoboda owe their success to the growing social demand for a radically chauvinist programme and organisation. The possible inspiration of the secret services (which is always difficult to prove) could have played only a secondary part in this case, and could have resulted from a belief that the social-national movement has significant potential.

The same can be said about the suggestions that Svoboda's leadership is manipulated by the Party of Regions. It is true that the expansion of Svoboda is currently (at least until parliamentary elections next year) convenient for the Party of Regions. On the one hand, it reduces the possibility of the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc taking over the nationalist electorate, and thus weakens this party. On the other hand, it is an excellent way to consolidate the electorate of the Party of Regions, who may begin to turn their backs on the ruling party because of the adverse effects of the reforms planned.

Svoboda's success illustrates the growing demand of Ukrainian society for a new right-wing party with anti-democratic, xenophobic, pro-social and pro-family views.

The voters from the eastern and southern parts of the country (especially the elderly and the less educated) are attached to the Soviet 'historical narrative' of the Great Patriotic War, and are therefore implacably hostile to the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the

Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). It would not take much effort to convince them that Svoboda is an inheritor of the Nazi invaders and a threat to peace, and that the Party of Regions should be voted for as the only force capable of stopping the 'brown revenge'.

However, the fact that the activity of Svoboda is convenient for the Party of Regions in the short term does not mean that Svoboda is controlled by the Party of Regions. Svoboda is undoubtedly an independent political force with clearly defined objectives, determined to seek their implementation. It is ready to accept help from its enemies (e.g. by accepting invitations to major political TV programmes, with probable consent from the government), including financial assistance (the common belief is that Svoboda's campaign before Ternopil district council elections in 2009 was financed by an oligarch, Ihor Kolomoyskyi, who was in conflict with Yulia Tymoshenko at the time, although the party itself denies this)⁸. However, it is a manifestation of political cynicism from both sides, rather than evidence of a secret agreement or subordination.

Svoboda's popularity among the residents of western Ukraine is rising thanks to actions by the current government such as the support for recognising Russian as an official language, promotion of a vision of history (in school textbooks) wherein the Ukrainian 'historical narrative' is likened to the Russian one, and the celebration of Moscow's Patriarch's subsequent visits to Ukraine. Such actions are unacceptable for Ukrainians from the western part of the country, as they consider linguistic, cultural and religious independence the 'apple of the eye' of the national existence. However, the focus on these demands limits Svoboda's chances of expanding beyond the area indicated above, which would mean that the best it can achieve is to control local government in three districts of Galicia and create a minor faction in the national parliament. It seems that the Party of Regions can tolerate this. However, if Svoboda had a chance to significantly extend its influence beyond this 'stronghold', the ruling camp would definitely counteract it.

⁸ Compare Aleksei Mustafin, 'Osvobozhdeniye' po naimu?, <http://www.zn.ua/1000/1550/70655/?print-preview> accessed on October 25, 2010.

Conclusions

The All-Ukrainian Union 'Svoboda' has become an important element of the Ukrainian political scene and it is hard to expect that it could be marginalised within the coming decade. However, its possible expansion is limited to the Lviv, Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk districts and to the Galician diaspora in other centres, where it does not make up a significant part of electorate (perhaps apart from Kyiv). Svoboda will remain an important player in Ukraine's political life, regardless of whether it becomes a parliamentary party. Its chances in parliamentary elections in 2012 mainly depend on how voters evaluate its rule in Galicia, and on whether the leadership of the Party of Regions retain their consent for Svoboda's limited success.

Svoboda's success illustrates the growing demand of Ukrainian society for a new right-wing party with anti-democratic, xenophobic, pro-social and pro-family views. A further increase in its popularity may trigger the creation and development of groups with a similar programme, who would disregard the traditions of Ukrainian nationalism or even openly defy them.

Members and supporters of Svoboda are predominantly young people, willing to actively demonstrate their beliefs. And as the party's programme contains an implicit consent to violence, it cannot be ruled out that force will be used repeatedly during different actions (on the party's initiative or in response to the actions of opponents).

Svoboda's activity has raised serious tension (and will continue to do so) between local authorities in Poland and Ukraine. In some cases – such as the participation of leading Polish politicians in ceremonies commemorating the victims of the UPA in Ukraine – this may lead to frictions in Polish-Ukrainian bilateral relations. However, this will not affect bilateral relations at the state level; in all likelihood, the current government will not allow Svoboda to influence Ukraine's foreign policy.



Centre for Eastern Studies
Koszykowa 6A,
00-564 Warsaw
e-mail: info@osw.waw.pl

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Editors: Adam Eberhardt
Katarzyna Kazimierska
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Translation: Jadwiga Rogoża
Co-operation: Nicholas Furnival
DTP: Wojciech Mańkowski