

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3999>



Ukraine

Maidan, the Right-Wing and Violence in Protest Events Analysis

- Debate - 2022 - Ukraine -

Publication date: Monday 27 April 2015

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

How significant was the participation of the far right in Maidan? Unfortunately, this question quickly falls victim to extreme politicization due to two phenomena: first, active propaganda aimed at discrediting Maidan by its opponents, including the Russian media, and second, by whitewashing attempts by Maidan's (left-)liberal or moderate nationalist supporters. Despite the hot polemics there are very few attempts to systematically assess the participation of the far right in Maidan. Typically arguments are supported with survey results conducted among participants of the Maidan showing that only a tiny minority of the protesters were members of any political party (3.9% in December 2013, and 7.7% in January 2014), or with data from electoral polls and presidential and parliamentary election results showing little electoral support for Svoboda, the Right Sector party or their leaders.

However, we do possess data that can provide a better estimate for the participation of the far right parties, organizations, and initiatives in Ukrainian protests, including Maidan. For 5 years our team, now working in the [Center for Social and Labor Research](#), has tried to systematically employ data collection and analysis of protest events following an established methodology in social movements and contentious politics research. The goal is to create a database of all protest events (as well as either positive or negative reactions to them) taking place on the whole territory of Ukraine, which involves coding a set of variables for each event including all the identified participants mentioned in any reports. Our analysis is based on monitoring the news-feeds of almost 200 web-media outlets covering local news in all Ukrainian provinces (oblasts), as well as some major Ukrainian national media and some activist web-sites representing all major sectors of social-political activity. Over 80% of the sources are local oblast-level news. The data about each protest's negative or positive reaction includes the date and location of the events, their agents and targets, forms of protest and repression, conflict issues, number of protesters and state forces involved, among other coded information, as well as full-text media reports. At the moment our database consists of around 25,000 events, covering the period from October 2009 till February 2014 and, in addition, August and September of 2014 (after a break). It means now we possess a database covering all events of protest and repression during the whole period of Viktor Yanukovych's rule.

How does Maidan look in a wider perspective of protest event data, and how significant was the far right's participation? By "Maidan period" I refer to a period starting from November 21, 2013 (when the first Euromaidan camp began in the evening) and ending on February 23, 2014 – Sunday of the last week of Viktor Yanukovych's rule. As expected, we see a huge splash of protest events in this period. If during the almost 11 months of 2013 from January 1 till November 20 there were reported 3,428 protest events, during three months of the Maidan period there were 3,949 reported. In other words, it was a relative increase by more than 4 times. But not all of those 3,949 protest events were connected to Maidan. Among them 3,234 were specifically in support of Maidan, while 365 could be attributed to anti-Maidan mobilizations. At least 350 protests during Maidan period were related neither to Maidan nor to anti-Maidan.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/V1A-300x225.jpg>]

For each event we try to code every protest participant mentioned in the related media reports. In many cases the participants are named only in a generic way: for example, citizens, activists, protesters, students, workers, etc. But in many cases media reports mention specific political parties, non-governmental organizations, informal initiatives or their members who organized or participated in the protest.

Among participants of Maidan the far right Svoboda party was most frequently reported by the media. The participation of this party was mentioned in at least 18% of the protest events in support of Maidan. Other parties participated in a smaller number of Maidan protests. In particular, participation of the Batkivshchyna party

(Tymoshenko/Yatseniuk) was reported in only 13% of the protests, the UDAR party (Klychko) in 10%, Democratic Alliance (a new Christian Democratic party) in 3%, the Radical party (Lyashko) in 1%. Participation of unspecified "opposition parties" was reported in 2% of the Maidan protests, and those might include Svoboda. In 5% of the Maidan protests participation of only unidentified politicians or local officials was reported. Among the non-partisan participants and initiatives, Automaidan (6%), Right Sector (6%) and Maidan Self-Defense (4%) were the most notable.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/V1_1-300x225.jpg]

It is important to keep in mind that these are participation levels that were reported by Ukrainian media. Often participants were described in very general terms, for example, "Euromaidan activists." This is why for 50% of Maidan protest events there was no information about the participation of any particular political party, formal organization, trade-union or ideological initiative, although it might mean that their participation was simply not recognized or not reported by the journalists. It is also important to note that these data are specifically about protest participation. Humanitarian initiatives that were not oriented to protest activity were, therefore, not reported in the messages about protest events. Finally, these data do not differentiate between various scales and types of participation in the protests. We cannot tell from them the number of participants from each organized agent and what precisely their role was in the protests. The most conservative way to look at these figures would be to treat them as an estimation of how visible and recognizable the specific participation was for the mass-media.

In general, the far right's participation (including Svoboda, Right Sector and other ultranationalist parties, organizations or initiatives) was mentioned in 25% of Maidan protests. This percentage was higher for Maidan protests than for the protests in 2013 before the start of Maidan (mostly because of the rise of Right Sector). However, the share of protests with participation of Svoboda did not increase much during Maidan. In fact Svoboda was the most active political party in protest events from 2010, and increased its protest activity from year to year both in absolute numbers and in relative share of total number of protest events (from 12% in 2010 to 17% in 2013).

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/vi2-300x225-2.jpg>]

Our data also shows that the protest coalition of the far right with the moderate opposition parties started to form much earlier before the beginning of Maidan. In fact each year from 2010 the number of protest events where both Svoboda and another major opposition party participated (either Batkivshchyna or UDAR or Front Zmin) was growing.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/v13-300x225.jpg>]

In addition, the visibility of Svoboda and Right Sector were much higher than that of other identified organizations/initiatives during the particularly violent events during Maidan. By violent tactics we refer to protest actions causing (or threatening to cause) direct damage to people or property.

Among the identified participants Right Sector was the most visible initiative in violent Maidan protests; its participation was reported in more than 16% of violent Maidan protest events. Next, there is Svoboda with participation in at least 10% of violent protests. The participation of Maidan Self-Defense initiatives was reported in 7% of violent protests; other parties and initiatives participated in less than 3% of violent events each. The participants of the majority of violent events were described only in a generic way or the actions were attributed to groups of unknowns.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/vi4-300x225.jpg>]

Generally far right parties and groups were mentioned in 26% of violent Maidan protest events, although the far right participation in violent protests before Maidan was not very much lower (20%).

In our data we can also see some important dynamics of participation in Maidan protests. Political parties (including

Svoboda) were clearly losing dominance in the protest as it became more and more radical. At the same time, participation of Right Sector and Maidan Self-Defense became highly visible, especially during the last stage of Maidan, starting on February 18 with breaking the truce with Yanukovych followed by the “snipers’ massacre.”

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/vi5-300x225.jpg>]

Finally, the far right’s participation in Maidan had an important regional diversity. Counter-intuitively, after Kyiv (32%), the highest participation of the far right was at local maidans not in the western region, but in the eastern region and Donbas (29%). The lowest participation (except for Crimea) was in the central (24%) and western regions (23%). The same is true for the participation of other opposition parties and/or politicians at local maidans. In the Donbas (54%), southern (51%) and eastern (40%) regions it was higher than in Kyiv (37%), Central (34%) and Western (29%) regions. This regional difference evidently reflects not the local support for the parties and the far right, but rather the local support for maidans. Where the local majority was against Maidan, the more the local maidans were dependent on the organized structures of the opposition parties, including Svoboda. At the same time, the opposition parties and the far right, which already had a very low level of trust from the residents of the southern and eastern regions, might have only pushed those people even further away from Maidan, making a genuine nationwide movement against Yanukovych and approval of Maidan almost impossible.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/vi6-300x225.jpg>]

This preliminary analysis indicates that the far right’s participation in Maidan was anything but insignificant. The far right groups were the most visible identified collective actors among Maidan participants, with the largest share of reported participation in Maidan protest events and specifically in violent events, which had a crucial significance and usually attracted the most attention. The far right groups were the most frequently mentioned collective actors at all stages of Maidan. Despite the decline in Svoboda’s participation in the last days of the armed insurrection, Right Sector took first position. Against all expectations, the far right groups (as well as political parties or politicians in general) were more frequently mentioned at the local maidans in the eastern and in the southern regions than in the western or central, i.e. precisely where they had the lowest support among the local residents.

Why did this happen at all? Our data indicates that significant far right involvement in Maidan protests were hardly an invention of hostile Russian media. On the contrary we can see a natural and inevitable continuation of the previously formed protest coalition between the moderate opposition parties and Svoboda. This protest coalition was formed during Yanukovych’s rule when moderate opposition parties were cooperating more and more with Svoboda. These parties were possibly interested in the higher mobilization potential of Svoboda, which had more ideological activists and a wider network of genuinely committed local activist cells. At the same time the moderate opposition, even before Maidan, legitimized the far right as a part of “normal” Ukrainian politics without any serious challenge to their reactionary and anti-democratic ideology. With this history and with their mobilization resources Svoboda’s later entrance on Maidan, and its shaping Maidan’s image and rhetoric, was more than natural. Despite some criticism, it went without serious challenge. This general tolerance of the far right against the “greater evil” of Yanukovych allowed Svoboda to play the most visible role in Maidan protests and later helped to de-legitimize them for the majority of the population in southeastern Ukrainian provinces, thus forming the ground for the civil war.

But examining the low electoral results of both Svoboda and Right Sector shows the need for more specific research in order to understand why these groups lost their opportunity to become the true vanguards of the Maidan uprising and convert their high visibility into strong power positions. In any case we should not forget about other dimensions of the far right influence on Ukrainian politics beyond electoral results: mainstreaming slogans previously used only in the nationalist subculture, popularizing radical figures of the past and their ideologies, making an impact on the rhetoric of other major political actors, their paramilitary and military affiliated structures and their potential to take arms against the state.

November 10 2014

[Left East](#)