

The Radical Left in Ukraine since Maidan: The Case of a ‘Nationalist’ Anarchist Movement

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Abstract

With political fringe groups gaining momentum during the Euromaidan Revolution in 2013, much scholarly attention has been given to actors of the radical right while dynamics within the ‘New Radical Left’ have been left understudied (Ishchenko, 2010); (Channell-Justice, 2017). While the Ukrainian ‘New Radical Left’ had a small revival in the 2010’s with the emergence of the student-Union ‘Direct Action’, the lefts attempt at creating cultural hegemony diminished when actors within the movement developed severe ideological cleavages before, during and after Maidan (ibid.). With an ideologically divided ‘New Radical Left’ one new group, ‘National Anarchists’, have emerged in Ukraine’s political arena reappropriating aspects of Ukrainian nationalism while simultaneously remaining committed to ‘traditionally’ progressive talking points such as pro-LGBTQ+, pro-Feminist, pro-drug legalization. While some actors on the ‘New Radical Left’ have chosen to declare Ukraine’s anti-imperial struggle against Russia its main goal, other groups have adopted post-anarchist stance that has adopted a more critical stance to Ukraine’s current political trajectory questioning recent decommunization laws and instances of historical revisionism. This paper addresses how social movements and radical groups have adapted their strategies and outlook on national and international as well as geopolitical issues based the transformative political events of Maidan. While political opportunity structures matter, internal dynamics within movements are often stronger indicators for the movement’s political course and path of alliance building. Posing the question of how and why internal cleavages within the pre-Maidan Ukrainian radical left have led to a fragmentation of the movement, this paper additionally seeks to address how this dynamic has led to the seemingly contradictory merger between anarchist and nationalist activists. By analyzing how different social movements active on the political fringes of the Ukrainian presidential democratic system operate, the paper seeks to map out the different radical political players operating in contemporary Ukraine.

Key words

Social Movements; Contentious Politics, New Radical Left; Ukraine; Anarchism

Biographical note

Alexandra Wishart is PhD student at the University of Ottawa, at the Department of Political Science and the Chair of Ukrainian Studies. She holds an International Double Degree in Central, Eastern European, Russian and Eurasian Studies and Sociology from the University of Glasgow (UK), the University of Tartu (Estonia) and Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (Ukraine). Moreover, she was a Guest-contributor to the Krakow based bi-annual magazine New Eastern Europe and a former intern with Hromadske Radio.

Introduction

When in November 2013, a small group of students protested the Ukrainian government's refusal to sign the Free trade and Association Agreement with the European Union, it kicked off a series of events later known as the Euromaidan Revolution¹. Protesting for more political participation, human rights and socioeconomic stability and against corruption, large parts of the Ukrainian society mobilized²³. The sheer endless sea of opposition parties, social movements and later self-defense battalions that originated at this time would unify under the banner of fighting for Ukrainian dignity and against what they perceived as a return into the Russian orbit. While many researchers have analyzed the origins of the revolution and actors driving the Revolution, little to nothing is known about a small group of activists that has fought for the underlying values of self-determination, human rights, socioeconomic rights as well as freedom of expression and movement for over a decade. Although the Radical Left in Ukraine has been historically weak since the country's independence in 1991, internal cracks related to differences in norms and values came to the forefront pre- and post-Maidan⁴.

Like much of the Ukrainian population pre-Maidan, the heterogeneous Radical Left at the time was split on the issues of how to interpret the events of Euromaidan. Often the question hinged on an interpretation of which proximity to Russia was deemed permissible (ibid.). The events of the Euromaidan, later the annexation of Crimea and the Russian-backed separatist war in Ukraine's East have all contributed to the accumulation of ideological cleavages within an already diverse group of actors. In some cases, already existing cleavages we linked to linguistic issues and often driven by questions surrounding identities and belonging. This meant that the question of what it meant to be Ukrainian, and especially who belonged and who did not were starting to translate into a diverse set of political goals. While some anarchist groups highlighted that no state should be trusted, they withdrew their support of Euromaidan (ibid.). Others saw themselves in the direct lineage of radical left writers and intellectuals such as Mykhailo Drahomanov, Ivan Franko and Mykhailo Pavlyk who were key figures in the creation of the Ukrainian nationalist-socialist movement. By placing themselves in this already existing social political tradition these groups connected the preexisting historical intellectual Ukrainian left and the Ruthenian-Ukrainian Radical Party's legacy in verbalizing the Ukrainian political struggle for independence with their own political objectives. One can argue that the socialist Ukrainian-leftist tradition which preceded the Soviet Union, later became interwoven with the legacy of Nestor Makhno's Black Army. Seeking to create a linearity in Ukraine's anti-imperial struggle, both Makhno's legacy and Drahomanov, Franko's and Pavlyk's tradition became incorporated into a new leftist framework⁵⁶.

In 2013 already existing pre-Maidan cleavages openly erupted over the question of political support for Euromaidan and led consecutively to the breakup of Ukraine's biggest anarchist organization - the Autonomous Workers Union. With its splinters of different factions being thrown into a variety of new organizations, initiatives and movements, individual activists continued their

¹ Onuch, Olga. "EuroMaidan protests in Ukraine: Social media versus social networks." *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, no. 4 (2015): 217-235.

² Onuch, Olga, and Gwendolyn Sasse. "The Maidan in movement: Diversity and the cycles of protest." *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 4 (2016): 556-587.

³ Averre, Derek; Wolczuk, Kataryna "Introduction: The Ukraine Crisis and Post-Post-Cold War Europe" *Europe-Asia Studies*, June 2016, 68:4, 551-555.

⁴ Ishchenko, Volodymyr. "The Ukrainian left during and after the Maidan protests." *Study requested by the DIE LINKE delegation in the GUE/NGL* (2016).

⁵ Zak, Mark. "Errinert euch an mich" Über Nestor Makhno, Nautilus Verlag, 2018

⁶ Skirda, Alexandre. *Nestor Makhno--anarchy's Cossack: The Struggle for Free Soviets in the Ukraine 1917-1921*. AK Press, 2004.

work.⁷ One anarchist group emerging from the remnants of the Autonomous Worker's Union that gained notoriety for its support of Russia and separatists was the group Borotba. Having adopted a political agenda close to Stalinism, they too claimed the narrative of fighting an 'anti-imperial' struggle and based on this sentiment joined separatists in the DNR⁸. With them the framework on the Ukrainian government representing a 'fascist junta' first enters the picture while they stuck to a narrative depicting the separatists in the east as fighting to protect their sovereignty and relationship to Russia (ibid.). This sparked a direct outcry within the remaining radical left for a new 'pro-Ukrainian' anarchist movement. While some activist self-labelling themselves as 'national-anarchist' and others who refrain from it, one can however deduce member organizations belonging to this new social movement to one core criteria. For them, the fight for a 'Ukrainian national liberation struggle' and against a perceived neo-imperial Russia is central. For them their core concern is fixing the branding problem of the 'New Radical Left' especially rejecting being labelled separatists. They represent an illuminating case-study into how Ukraine's history lends itself for the active creation and continuity of a Ukrainian radical left tradition.

The key objective to study National Anarchists within the framework of a 'marginal political group' is that they lend themselves as a fascinating case-study for observing micro-dynamics within social movements after they have been exposed to external shock events such as the Euromaidan. Ukraine's unique geography, being flanked by the Russian Federation as well as the European Union, and its political dynamics as a result of Euromaidan catapulted Ukraine into the center of academic research⁹. Much of the literature preceding Euromaidan focused on the existence of far-right paramilitary groups such as Azov, Right Sector and others, thereby creating the idea of Ukraine being a 'hotbed' of political extremism¹⁰¹¹¹²¹³. With only a handful of scholars working on the Ukrainian Radical Left such as Volodymyr Ishchenko, Denys Gorbach, Denys Pilasch and Emily Channell-Justice, the topic of the Ukrainian Radical Left has received only marginal attention within the academic literature¹⁴. This paper seeks to address the gap within the literature particularly in regards to political fringe groups and seeks to rectify some of the errors of conventional studies of radical actors attempting

⁷ Ishchenko, Volodymyr. "The Ukrainian left during and after the Maidan protests." *Study requested by the DIE LINKE delegation in the GUE/NGL* (2016).

⁸ Gorbach, Denys, "Left between a swamp and a hard place," Open Democracy, August 10, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/denys-gorbach/ukraine%E2%80%99s-left-between-swamp-and-hard-place>

⁹ Onuch, Olga. "EuroMaidan protests in Ukraine: Social media versus social networks." *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, no. 4 (2015): 217-235.

¹⁰ Hume, Tim "Far Right extremists have been using Ukraine's civil war as training ground. They're returning home," Vice Media, August 2nd, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/vb95ma/far-right-extremists-have-been-using-ukraines-civil-war-as-a-training-ground-theyre-returning-home

¹¹ Colbourne, Michael „Friday night fights with Ukraine's far right,“, The New Republic, August 17th, <https://newrepublic.com/article/154434/friday-night-fights-ukraines-far-right>

¹² Colbourne, Micheal "Inside the extremist group that dreams of ruling Ukraine," Haaretz, August 2nd, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/.premium-inside-the-extremist-group-that-dreams-of-ruling-ukraine-1.6936835>

¹³ Bennets, Marc "Ukraine's far-right national militia: 'We're not Neo-Nazis, we just want to make our country better,'" The Guardian, August 13th, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/13/ukraine-far-right-national-militia-takes-law-into-own-hands-neo-nazi-links>

¹⁴ Channell-Justice, Emily S. "'We're Not just Sandwiches': Europe, Nation, and Feminist (Im)Possibilities on Ukraine's Maidan" *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, March 2017, 42:3, 717-741.

to measure them via political parties or formal institutional representation and instead 'go beyond ordinary politics and take a form of 'groupuscular' organizations'¹⁵ (p 86).

The research question addressed in this paper is: to what extent have internal cleavages within the Ukrainian radical left prior and following 2013 Euromaidan affected the creation of a new national-anarchist movement? I attempt to answer this question with the help of the following sub questions:

1) How did these existing cleavages as perceived by members of the movement facilitate the birth of a new 'national-anarchist' movement? And: 2) What are the dominant historical and political narratives members of the 'national-anarchist' position themselves and the movement in?

(Un)Civil Society in Ukraine

One of the key theoretical debates this paper aims to contribute to pertains to the nature of Ukrainian Civil Society. Scholars such as Volodymyr Ishchenko point out that traditional research on contentious politics in the Ukrainian context continues to build upon the truism of civil society's weakness in the Post-Soviet sphere¹⁶. Arguing that this methodological fallacy stems from the fact that conventional data sets such as the World Values Surveys (1995-1997) mostly aim at measuring institutionalized, formalized civil society organizations while disregarding the more common bottom-up, grassroots protest initiatives overall more common within Ukraine¹⁷. This split between 'non-institutionalized civil society' continues to be of relevance in contemporary Ukraine, due to the fact that political fringe groups in Central and Eastern Europe exhibit different mobilization patterns and operate in the sphere of informality. Often tightly knit personal connection and social networks, are being disregarded. Among other Micheal Minkenberg argues that political fringe groups in Central and Eastern Europe therefore demand a different approach when being studied^{18,19}. Moreover, disregarding tightly knit personal connection and social networks leads to inaccuracy when assessing the actual size and scope as well as strength of anti-systemic oppositional movements (ibid.).

According to Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein, most academics agree that 'civil society 'refers to uncoerced associational life distinct from the family and institutions of the state.'²⁰ (p 359). While there is some dispute between liberals and libertarians on whether or not to include markets in this definition, one can say that most researchers focus lies on civil societies' associational qualities which they conceptualize as a distinct sphere 'distinct but in a special relationship with the state' (ibid.). While some scholars include the market such as Gellner (1994) and White (1994), others 'proposed narrower definitions' such as to include the following-up to 'liberal democratic principles' (Howard, 2003 p. 41 in Celichowski, 2004)^{21,22,23}. Applying strong normative standards to the concept of civil

¹⁵ Froio, Caterina, and Pietro Castelli Gattinara. "Neo-fascist mobilization in contemporary Italy. Ideology and repertoire of action of CasaPound Italia." *Journal for Deradicalization* 2 (2015): 86-118.

¹⁶ Howard, Marc Morjé, and Marc Morjé Howard. *The weakness of civil society in post-communist Europe*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

¹⁷ Ishchenko, Volodymyr. "Fighting fences vs fighting monuments: politics of memory and protest mobilization in Ukraine." *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 19, no. 1-2 (2011): 369-395.

¹⁸ Minkenberg, Michael. "The radical right in postsocialist Central and Eastern Europe: comparative observations and interpretations." *East European Politics and Societies* 16, no. 2 (2002): 335-362.

¹⁹ Minkenberg, Michael. *Transforming the transformation?: The East European radical right in the political process*. Routledge, 2015.

²⁰ Chambers, Simone, and Jeffrey Kopstein. "Civil society and the state." *The Oxford handbook of political theory* 1 (2009).

²¹ Gellner, Ernest. *Conditions of liberty: Civil society and its rivals*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994.

²² White, Gordon. "Civil society, democratization and development (I): Clearing the analytical ground." *Democratization* 1, no. 2 (1994): 375-390.

²³ Celichowski, Jerzy. "Civil Society in Eastern Europe." *Exploring Civil Society: Political and Cultural Contexts*. New York: Routledge (2004): 62-72.

society Schmitter goes as far as to only include groups that 'agree to act within pre-established rules of 'civil' or 'legal' nature (Schmitter, 1995 p. 4/5 in Celichowski, 2004). Within the literature this a normative stance on civil society as inherently good is taken (ibid.). Changes within the focus of scholars studying civil society mostly center around different relationships between the state and the realm of civil society (ibid.). Chambers & Kopstein outline six major approaches within the literature. (1) civil society apart from the state; (2) civil society against the state; (3) civil society in support of the state; (4) civil society in dialogue with the state; (5) civil society in partnership with the state and (6) civil society beyond the state. This paper aims to contribute mainly in the domain of (2) civil society against the state and (4) civil society in support of the state. Traditional literature within civil society (henceforth referred to as CS) against the state within the Central and Eastern European region highlights the existence of 'anti-politics', describing small enclaves in which everyday citizens were able to establish their own political agency within a totalitarian system.

Studying national-anarchists within the framework of CS will shed light on their self-understanding and how they position themselves vis-a-vis the state (ibid.). Historically the Eastern European region has been associated with anti-Soviet dissidence fighting an oppressive totalitarian system. However, ever since the collapse of the USSR this view of activism against totalitarianism does not hold true, as the political systems of the regions have been increasingly modelled after Western democracies²⁴. Nevertheless, this does not prevent scholars of mostly Western governance and political science to overdraw the pro-democratic effects of civil society on a given system and associating liberal opposition in similar ways than previous anti-Soviet dissidence²⁵. With scholars questioning the direct link between the strength of CS in the region and the subsequent overthrow of the communist regimes, a follow-up question has been raised by scholars in the field. Is contentious civil society good or bad for the state of democracy? The inherent assumption of CS as inherently positive is challenged by scholars such as Sheri Berman's, whose work on the demise of the Weimar Republic demonstrates that strong CS does not guarantee positive democratic consolidation. She convincingly argues quite the opposite – an active flourishing civil society had a direct facilitating effect on the successful rise of the Nazis²⁶. It was the exact existence of a strong civil society that posed an imminent threat to political institutions.

While in functioning societies' 'anti-democratic' ideologies often tend to be consolidated in the Ukrainian case political, expressions such as protests could additionally weaken the already politically instable system²⁷. Moreover, Ukrainian groups identified as political fringe groups frequently utilize violent means for their political goals. With the utility of studying political fringe groups frequently questioned based on their size and informal organization structure, I will continue with an elaboration on why the opposite is true. Cas Mudde and Petr Kopecký's analysis of civil and uncivil society demonstrates how the concept of civil society has inherent normative biases. CS is often assumed as having a direct impact on democracy-building; however, one should instead study the nature of the relationship between organizations and movements rather than assume it. This misconception leads the authors to believe that including so-called 'uncivil society' in studies on civil society is vital as their public expressions and self-organization are as much a sign of a functioning democratic discourse than mainstream political groups²⁸. This tendency of overlooking political fringe groups leads to ethno-nationalist movements, anti-liberal and anti-democratic movements being excluded when studying civil society in the region. It is often argued that fringe groups lack basic 'civility', using violent means to pursue political goals which justify their exclusion.

²⁴ Kopecký, Petr, and Cas Mudde. "Rethinking civil society." *Democratization* 10, no. 3 (2003): 1-14.

²⁵ Kopecký, Petr, and Cas Mudde. "Uncivil society." *Contentious politics in post-communist europe* 1 (2003).

²⁶ Berman, Sheri. "Civil society and the collapse of the Weimar Republic." *World politics* 49, no. 3 (1997): 401-429.

²⁷ Ekiert, Grzegorz, and Jan Kubik. *Rebellious civil society: Popular protest and democratic consolidation in Poland, 1989-1993*. University of Michigan Press, 2001.

²⁸ Kopecký, Petr, and Cas Mudde. "Uncivil society." *Contentious politics in post-communist europe* 1 (2003).

CS actors that are modeled after Western-centric models are often perceived by the local population as elite driven, detached from their living realities and society and are suspected to 'be bought' by Western donors (ibid.). 'Uncivil society', on the other hand, is seen as 'true social movements', grassroots driven and based on advocacy networks that push contentious politics (ibid.). Having a binary view of CS as good and bad therefore does not reflect the empirical realities on the ground and only contribute to speculations about how these groups operate. Traditional definitions of CS state that civil society is 'everything operating between the state, the household, the family and economic production' while simultaneously stipulating civil society to be independent from the state (ibid.). Often this dichotomy does not hold, as dimensions frequently overlap such as in cases where political parties are not financially independent (ibid.). CS is frequently only deemed legitimate if it operates within the political mainstream, is long-established and has a particular organizational density. In contrast, most groups engaged in protest activities operate within non-hierarchical, self-organizing structures, and thus not recognized. Often CS groups that are against the state are assumed to integrate into the state when being successful. This, however, remains problematic as these groups are not homogenous but heterogeneous, and able to mobilize independently from one another. This can lead to groups mobilizing in line with the state or against it, while allegiances can change abruptly and are not path-dependent (ibid.).

In conclusion, the social capital that political communities such as anarchist groups and far-right groups possess openly challenges the notion that civil society groups are inherently 'good' or 'civil'. Dismissing them from the political arena is equally dangerous as they do represent voices and opinions of citizens that seek to engage with their political superiors. While civil society groups are not heterogeneous or necessarily foster democratic consolidation in a given country, there is an increasing need to understand why they feel it necessary to polarize society. Contentious politics as a source of social capital in Ukraine can therefore only be researched properly when including 'uncivil society'.

Methodology

For the purpose of this paper, I have employed Ethnography as the guiding methodology. Stemming from the discipline of Cultural Anthropology, Ethnography is used to gain insights into 'native's point of view' within a given culture, also described as 'emic perspective' as well as seeking to construct meaning and cultural practices from the 'inside out'²⁹. In order to avoid applying one's own biases onto the research strict conceptual and theoretical frameworks were avoided in the initial phase of the research³⁰. In the Ukrainian case-study this methodological strength of ethnography helped to prioritize 'local interpretations of events and actions' as well as provided the tools to sketch a snapshot of the phenomena in question, the political community and its internal mechanisms (ibid.);³¹. By focusing on the self-understanding of various groups and their relationship with the Ukrainian state and Ukrainian society as a whole, This helped to prevent the mapping of crude applications of western-centric modes of political thinking such as the political horse-shoe theory onto the Ukrainian case. Regarding positionality, my role as a researcher is that of an active participant in these communities, adopting a position within methodological situationism which aims to synthesize subjectivists views with objectivists approaches.

In order to reflect on biases, it is necessary to be transparent while collecting data and outlining existing limitations of study. One of the major limitations experienced by the researcher throughout the data collection period between 2018 – 2019, was the inability of the researcher to conduct entire interviews in Ukrainian or Russian. To prevent linguistic and cultural misinterpretations inter-researcher triangulation was utilized. Having fellow Ukrainian researchers and translators verify coding

²⁹ Hammersley, Martyn and Atkinson, Paul (1992). *Ethnography. Principles in Practice*. London/New York : Routledge.

³⁰ Eriksson, Päivi, and Anne Kovalainen. "Qualitative Research Materials." *Qualitative Methods in Business Research* (1st ed., pp. 77–94). London: SAGE Publications Ltd (2008).

Emirbayer, Mustafa, and Jeff Goodwin. "Network analysis, culture, and the problem of agency." *American journal of sociology* 99, no. 6 (1994): 1411-1454

³¹ Geertz, Clifford. *The interpretation of cultures*. Vol. 5019. Basic books, 1973.

schemes and concepts as well as interview transcripts, linguistic and cultural biases were mitigated.

Among the data sources and methods utilized for the research were 1) Participatory Observation (PO); 2) Semi-open Interviews and Participatory Appraisal techniques (PA) Social Network Analysis. Participatory Observation in communities related the 'New Radical Left' proved particularly useful as it gave insight into activist's actual behaviour vs. how they portray themselves. Overall, data triangulation of both the semi-open interviews, PO and PA helped to account for deviations found in-between what was said in interviews and the factually observed data. The researcher's priorities for the selections of respondents was based on the following criterion: the respondent had to be affiliated with an anarchist group and or another group, collective or organization that belongs to the umbrella of the 'New Radical Left'. During my field research my forebodings materialized as indeed matters of self-identification were complex. Within the pool of Ukrainian anarchists, I experienced how not all activists would self-identify as anarchist or belonging to a specific collective/group or organization (1). Often the lines between anarchist groups, loose congregations of individuals belonging to the 'New Radical Left' such as socialists, self-declared Trotskyists and Marxist were extremely blurry. (2). In the end, I kept to a very loosely defined definition of anarchists and included other members belonging to the Ukrainian radical left. I based my judgement on (1) them ascribing to the label of political activist (2) their partiality to full self-identification (3) some sort of affiliation to the collective/group/organization politically congruent with anarchist values. While some were more affiliated with more formalized political organizations or even parties, others were operating within collectives organized along DIY-principles.

Most respondents (95%) self-identified as political activists while a smaller group (5%) had left the movement or no longer felt affiliated with any active group/collective or organization. Regarding the geographical stratification of respondents, all respondents of this research were based in Kharkiv, Lviv, Vynnytsia or Kyiv at the time of the interview. All of them have Ukrainian citizenship, and around 80% of the interviews that were not conducted in English were in Russian. A smaller majority, mostly from respondents in Lviv and Vynnytsia were in Ukrainian. In total over 50% percent of the interviews were translated from Russian or Ukrainian, while the other half was conducted in English. Most of my respondents were highly educated, having university degrees from Ukrainian universities. Out of the eleven interviews conducted four were women within the movement and six were men. The age range was between 20 and 45 years of age. Many shared the common characteristic that they were already politically active before Maidan even though some of them were members of far-right groups/organizations or otherwise affiliated. Out of the eleven respondents, three were formerly connected to the far-right. The final dataset derived from the 2 Participant Observation Sheets, 10 Semi-open Interviews, Videos and Texts were transferred and analyzed the following a coding procedure via Atlas.ti. Interviews were translated from Ukrainian or Russian to English and verbatim transcribed. To ensure confidentiality all research participants were anonymized and were allowed to re-read relevant passages within the transcript before further analysis.

Relevance of Anarchism and Left-Wing Social Movements in Ukraine

The Ukrainian history with anarchism has been long and complex. One of the world's first and largest real existing anarchist project, the so-called 'free territory' from 1917-1922 also known as 'Makhnovia' (Махновщина), existed in Ukraine during the civil war period³². Named after its leader Nestor Makhno, the territory and his Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army stretched from its center Huliaipole to modern-day Ukraine's Zaporizhia oblast. Makhno's 'Black Army' consisted out of 30.000 volunteers and ruled over around 7 million people. The Makhnovia was organized along anarchist principles such as freedom of movement, press and self-organization (ibid). Makhno's forces became notorious for combatting the Russian tsarist forces the 'Whites' by employing guerrilla tactics and even joined the Bolsheviks for a short-lived amount of time³³. Ultimately, the Bolsheviks turned on Makhno in 1920 and drove the movement until its extinction in 1922. Nestor Makhno who was able to escape into Parisian exile, and has since brandished himself into the collective memory of Eastern Ukraine (ibid.). The adoption of black as the colour of Makhno's Army and its referral by popular memory as 'Black

³² Skirda, *Nestor Makhno--anarchy's Cossack*

³³ Zak, *Errinert euch an mich.*

Army' led to the overall adoption of black as the colour of the anarchist movement which exists to this day³⁴. Affectionally referring to Makhno as 'Batko' – father, Ukrainian anarchists alike as Ukrainians living in the former free territory continue to remember his legacy³⁵.

With the eruption of the Maidan protests, we see Makhno and his imagery experiencing a revival. Denys Gorbach, who chronicled this time in recent left history argued that it often appeared confusing to Western onlookers that self-declared anarchists openly spoke out in favour of the creation of a mono-ethnic state³⁶. He attributes the split back to the times of the Soviet Union and the effectiveness of its anti-anarchist propaganda (ibid). With the Black Army defeat in 1920 he argues all other political movements were reframed as lawless bandits, or peasants who unrightfully saw themselves as representatives of the working class (ibid). In popular culture and 1950 movies, anarchists were frequently depicted as authoritarian and anti-Semitic while Makhno was made out to be a 'Fuehrer type' leader. Going against all historical factuality, the framing however stuck and it led to average Ukrainians associating anarchists with merciless criminals. Another frame that stuck was the 'Makhnovists' as separatist one, as in 1917 Ukraine remained a part of the Russian Empire. Overall, the framing anarchism underwent during Soviet times have endured into the post-Soviet period and remain highly relevant to this day³⁷³⁸³⁹

Because anarchism as a political ideology slowly became synonymous with the aspirations with the intelligentsia and young nationalist state, it became incorporated by the new states need for a foundational myth. Meaning Makhno who had fought both the Whites and the Bolsheviks throughout the civil war became reframed as a hero of Ukrainian independence (ibid.). One can argue that the notion of the anti-imperial struggle became the most stylized element of popular history to be incorporated into contemporary Ukrainian state myth-making as well as a milestone in post-independence historiography. Weaving in the image of Makhno as the patriotic and strong Ukrainian independence fighter with another even stronger romantic national sentiment, the one of the Cossacks, helped to complete the picture (ibid.). Gorbach who describes the mythology of the semi-autonomous Cossack territory of the Zaporozhian Sich in the 15th-18th century argues that it was combined with a strong myth connected to Makhno. Similar to Makhno, the Cossacks were seen as 'freedom' and 'independence' loving, a progressive republic that never seized to defend their autonomy. The reason this myth has become so potent is, that maps well onto the aspired linearity of Ukrainian historiography and state-making process that in reality bases itself on a shaky foundation after Kievan Rus was destroyed by the Mongols. ibid).

Particularly the stereotypical view of anarchists as anti-communist and anti-Semities started to become useful in the post-Soviet Ukrainian context where some of these elements were woven into local patriotism (ibid.). In a climate of a popular fight against the 'corrupt elites and politicians' Makhno's imagery became particularly relevant. With a high demand for anti-establishment candidates and figureheads, the hunger for alleged 'anti-systemic' forces within the Ukrainian society has not yet exhausted itself. Some of the 'contradictory' messaging of anarchist fighting for the creation of a nation-state returned with a vengeance with the Maidan Revolution. However, the interpretation of Makhno's legacy remains divided to this day.

³⁴ Zhadan, Serhij "Anarchy in the UKR". Edition Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2007

³⁵ Kriwoschij, Aleksandr "Die Frauen in der Armee von Nestor Machno", Ukraine Nachrichten, 2014, https://ukraine-nachrichten.de/frauen-armee-nestor-machno_4120.

³⁶ Gorbach, *Left between a swamp and a hard place*, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/denys-gorbach/ukraine%E2%80%99s-left-between-swamp-and-hard-place>

³⁷ Zak, *Errinert euch an mich*.

³⁸ Gorbach, *Left between a swamp and a hard place*, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/denys-gorbach/ukraine%E2%80%99s-left-between-swamp-and-hard-place>

³⁹ Gorbach, Denys "*Anarchism in Makhno's homeland: the adventures of the black and red flag*," Open Democracy, August 10, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/denys-gorbach/anarchism-in-makhno%E2%80%99s-homeland-adventures-of-red-and-black-flag>

The Split of the Ukrainian Left

In answering the question to which extent internal cleavages existing within the Ukrainian radical left prior and following 2013 Euromaidan affected the creation of a new national-anarchist movement, one can assess that cleavages played a key role in the creation of the national-anarchist movement. In particular, internal issues regarding organizational hierarchy, attitudes towards the war and the military, attitudes towards Nationalism and changes after Euromaidan contributed to the ongoing divide.

With the onset of Euromaidan and Russian led aggression in Ukraine's East, it was not only the Ukrainian political left that became divided, but it also split the 'Global Left' as a whole⁴⁰. While one side joined the Kremlin narrative of the DNR as defending themselves against the 'Ukrainian fascist junta' in what they claim was an 'anti-imperial struggle', the same narrative has been claimed by a fraction of the Ukrainian left that sees themselves in the direct lineage of Nestor Makhno and the Ukrainian social-nationalist political tradition of the 1920s and 1930s. Most cleavages pre-existed Euromaidan and burst out in 2014 during Euromaidan. The key event was when the Autonomous Workers Union split in 2011-2012. Prior to Maidan, the Ukrainian left-wing sphere consisted of a mosaic of initiatives, political parties and heirs to the former Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU), the successor of the Soviet-Communist Party of Ukraine⁴¹. Among the existing groups were anarchists, Marxists, Trotskyist, and other anti-fascist or labour union-oriented organizations (ibid.). Uniting them under the label of the 'New Radical Left', Volodymyr Ishchenko created the term to specifically refer to groups and organizations that operate within a political tradition of the left that differentiated itself from post-Stalinist parties (ibid.). Pre-Maidan, most of the groups operated within Ukraine's subculture and fundamentally relied on inter-group cooperation. Often these meetings provided the foundation for informal networks, friendships and personal connections within the scene. The importance of these networks cannot be understated, as most participants mention the vitality of these connections to this day. Even though a multipolarity of political opinions existed between the groups, cooperation was still a key feature before 2012. Ultimately, changes started when the Autonomous Workers Union (Автомонна Спілка Трудящих/Автономна Спілка Трудящих) (АСТ) a key organization, internally fragmented into a libertarian/anarchist and a Stalinist/Marxist camp. Later the Stalinist wing of the organization, later known as *Borotba*, had strong ties to Russian nationalists and attempted a takeover of the union. Fraternizing against activists from the anarchist and Trotskyist camp, the internal split led to the Union's demise. After 2014, *Borotba* rose to notorious fame within the Ukrainian left when their activists joined the separatists of the DPR and LPR.

'But the contradictions within the left-wing groups made us propose to exclude some groups of Trotskyists and Stalinist because of their toxicity for the movement. We had a deal inside the 'Soviet' [General Assembly] but a few days before the general assembly the socialist wing betrayed us. They made a separate deal with Borotba and totally changed their mind about their position. And they intimidated us. We had a deal! We signed it and how can you break it? Our group visited the general assembly and it was like some old-school [CPU] party gathering. Like people with large bellies, with leather folders. These people and these groups were the ones who in the future created Borotba. They were proto-Borotba (...) Therefore, yes, we had a large split'. (R9)

As many left-wing groups were initially skeptical towards the positions of the Maidan, Borotba finally broke away from the Ukrainian left when violence in January 2014 spiralled out of control⁴². They openly declared their support with the formation of the AntiMaidan, a group of pro-government activists that later would join the forces of the DPR and LPR. Being ousted by the majority of the remaining left groups within Ukraine, they have not been able to implement their political goals in the DPR as they have been shunned and repressed by separatist authorities within the Eastern territories. While currently most organizations on the left spectrum agree that Putin's foreign policy ambitions of the Russian

⁴⁰ Gorbach, *Left between a swamp and a hard place*, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/denys-gorbach/ukraine%E2%80%99s-left-between-swamp-and-hard-place>

⁴¹ Ishchenko, *Ukrainian new left*, 211-229.

⁴² Gorbach, *Left between a swamp and a hard place*, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/denys-gorbach/ukraine%E2%80%99s-left-between-swamp-and-hard-place>

Federation do not align with their idea of egalitarian and progressive values, the time around the Euromaidan was murkier. Being divided on the issue of attitudes towards the Russian Federation and issues of Russian-speaking Ukrainian's identity and belonging, the violence against Euromaidan supporters and the prominence of pro-Russian forces within the AntiMaidan's often motivated activists to side with the pro-Ukrainian camp. Additionally, it wasn't only the Kyiv-based organizations and groups that had these internal divisions, but similar tensions arose all around Ukraine, as one activist from Kharkiv (R3) remembers:

'We had a big problem with views like this, I think around five years ago. Since then we have no different views of [these issues]. All our activists are anti-imperial in ideology and all of us understand that Russia is the aggressor. Because we saw [what happened] five years ago when pro-Russian activists tried to make its own [in Russian] Republic here [in Kharkiv] similar to the DPR. [...] And we fought them five years ago, you know some organization like Borotba we fought against [them]'

Cult of Personality and the successor of the old Left

In order to accurately comprehend which factors have led to the existence of strong hierarchy-based cleavages within the Ukrainian far left, it helps to understand the historical reality of the Ukrainian Left. There are two particularly relevant developments within the movement that occurred in the Ukrainian Socialist Republic, and both lie at the heart of the schism between the 'old' and the 'New Radical Left'⁴³. Often the cleavages regarding the interpretation of anarchist principles and ideology derive from a particular interpretation of what being 'left' means politically and are in direct contrast to how anarchism is defined and understood in the West. Again, going back to how the anarchist movement was rephrased during Soviet times explains much of its current dynamics.

Protests during Soviet times were understood as being headed by liberals, and often 'real' left-wing movements did not join forces with them. In the Ukrainian Soviet tradition, conservatives that backed the authoritarian state were referred to as 'right-wing', while throughout the perestroika period 'left-wing' was reserved for liberals in the political opposition (ibid.). This conceptual distinction grew weaker when the CPU returned to a socially-conservative position encapsulating Soviet nostalgia within Ukraine. Therefore, much of the Ukrainian societies disdain of what the political left stands for directly stems from the successors of communist and post-Stalinist parties such as the Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU), the successor of the Soviet Communist Party of Ukraine; the Socialist Party of Ukraine (SPU); and the Peasant Party of Ukraine (ibid.). Very successfully, Stalinist successor parties managed to marry Slavic nationalism, social conservatism, orthodoxy and approval of the Soviet political project with one another (ibid.). One recent example would be the Party of Regions under Viktor Yanukovich that featured prominent connections within the 'old' left.

Many prominent left-wing organizations replicated patterns of authority and hierarchy from the Soviet tradition into their political programs, often replicating the exact stereotypes that historically they were have been framed with. A good example of the later is the existence of the SAU, 'Union of Anarchist of Ukraine' in Odessa or the 'Revolutionary Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists' (RKAS) in Donetsk. While the first is an openly conservative, self-declared 'anarcho-capitalist' group with little hesitations of the state and an openly homophobic agenda, RKAS is known for its strong 'Führercult' around its martial arts enthusiast leader 'Samuarai'. Both of the groups cultivate a strong cult of personality, physical strength and subordination (ibid.). The tendencies of dogmatic leadership within what is understood to be 'old-school' types of anarchist groups within Ukraine is exemplified by the RKAS, the SAU, Borotba but also a fairly new group called 'Revolutionary Action'. Regarding their beginnings an inner workings R9 elaborates:

'They (RevDia) stabbed someone a while ago, but the guy survived. The leader of this organization is a Belarusian who sat in jail. (...) After five years, he was released from jail and from the very beginning started a new organization. His name is Alexander

⁴³ Gorbach, *Left between a swamp and a hard place*, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/denys-gorbach/ukraine%E2%80%99s-left-between-swamp-and-hard-place>

Fanzkevitch and he is trying to be anonymous. He is a 'Fuehrer type', he is a single person who is making all decision together with his inner circle, some advisers. And he delivers his orders to the outer circle of anarchists. And he went to Kyiv and tried to build up a militant anarchist group in 2015'

The existence of a group such as Revolutionary Day (RevDia) visualizes exactly the areas in which the disagreements between different anarchist groups in Ukraine originate. With their old-school hierarchical structures and reliance on strong masculine leadership, they are frowned upon by newer post-anarchist groups that are located predominantly in Ukraine's West and Central parts. The continuous build-up of cleavages between members of National-Anarchist groups and groups such as Revolutionary Action was however reliant on another issue – their differing attitudes towards the war.

Attitudes towards Russia and the War

When in 2013-2014 Euromaidan protest broke out one major cleavage was added into the already pre-existing mix of cleavages in-between groups. Every single of the interviewees, whether during the Participant Observation nor through informal conversations highlighted the relevance of the Russia question for causing even larger ideological rifts within the movement. This is due to the fact, that most contemporary Ukrainian Radical Left groups differ in fundamental questions on the causes, effects and attitudes that have created the basis for the Anti-Maidan protests and later the Donbas and Lugansk insurgency. Before Maidan most cleavages that were predominant within the groups were mostly related to the above discussed issues such as questions of hierarchy, attitudes towards sexism and regular infighting within groups. Meanwhile after Euromaidan the cleavages shifted more towards the question of how to position themselves vis-à-vis the state and how to understand the use of political violence in a context where Ukraine's territorial integrity had been violated. Additionally, the discussion and understanding of who was perceived as the biggest political threat and what to prioritize fed into the already existing split between the groups.

When asking members of Nihilist, Autonomous Action, Black Committee or former members of Black Rainbow, they often stated that the major issues they had with other anarchist organizations would be the lack of outspokenness against the 'Russian threat'. Allegations of being 'pro-Russian' or 'pro-separatists' were common characterizations used against one another. In their own self-promotion video depicting members of Revolutionary Action in the woods shooting guns and training they state that they view Russia as the aggressor and that their attempted militarization is as much a preventive measure against a possible invasion as it is meant in reaction towards the Ukrainian state. Revolutionary Action continues to get framed by other groups, predominantly by national-anarchists as a pro-Russian group. The latter highlights that the question lying at the heart of the split is a philosophical disagreement over the causes of the conflict. Members of groups such as Ecological Platform and Black Flag would argue the main threat that Ukraine is dealing with are its own corrupt elites, who profit from the ongoing war with Russia. Existing conflicts are interpreted mostly through the lens of power relations in which the Ukrainian state suppresses its citizens. Class struggle as well as issues such as racism and sexism are prioritized. The current Russian regime under Putin is interpreted as equally disastrous to its citizens based on the strength of nationalist sentiments employed by Putin what they understand as a highly statist, turbo-capitalist system. They argue that in the case of Ukraine the issues are similar; for them the issue of ethnic identity is seen as a strawman. While talking to members of these groups the argument would be something along the lines of that Ukrainians and Russians are very similar in terms of culture and that all efforts to foster this socially constructed divide of nationality is contributing to the problem of conflict rather than solving it. While this argument has certainly had its validity within the Ukrainian Radical Left it is still met with strong disregard. Or as one member of an affiliated group would exclaim within an informal conversation: "How can we engage with post-identities, post-borders and post-nations if we don't even have an existing nation? Because the one we have is under direct existential threat by Russia"

Or, as one respondent (R9) put it:

'I mean they are trying to avoid this question here. To call out an aggressor. When I told you about the Autonomous Worker's Union which split up due to the internal scandal when one part tried to

exclude the other one. They argued the internal division was due to 'nationalism' and labelled us 'nationalists' because we stood up for pro-Ukrainian positions and said that the best way to combat and stop military aggression is to kill the Russians that enter Ukrainian territory with weapons. And they said you're a fascist because you want to kill Russians and no rational argument worked'.

With the war fostering sentiments of patriotism and nationalism, it does not come as a surprise that traditional anarchist philosophy, which seeks to deconstruct the borders, nationalities and the state, has a hard time holding in contemporary Ukraine. Within the political arena, the New Radical Left has been additionally confronted with a challenge. Not only is the terminology of socialism, communism and overall being associated with the term 'left' highly stigmatized within Ukraine due to its Soviet past, but also the perceived 'lack of outspokenness against the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea' has contributed to their weakening. Or as one respondent (R10) gets to the heart of it:

'Now the situation with leftists in Ukraine became worse than before the revolution. Because many left-wing activists took part in the pro-Russian side in this conflict and in this war. So, there was some reputation loss for leftist ideas in Ukraine, because of this collaboration of some leftist activists with Russia. So, the situation is worse'.

The Origins of Contemporary Ukrainian National Anarchism

After 2015, the Ukrainian New Radical Left was confronted with a multitude of challenges ranging from their bad image within the political mainstream to the intensity of infighting between various groups. Out of this difficulty to brand themselves led them to become creative. As R10 highlights, the support of the DNR and LNR through the Autonomous Worker's Union splinter Borotba had left a vacuum for a pro-Ukrainian political left:

'They haven't had any confrontation with Borotba or any other organizations. But they tried to produce a pro-Ukrainian discourse in Ukraine. Because no rightwing organization in that times had actual values for Ukraine and was actual for Ukraine's situation, nor a leftist organization. So, they were trying to find new versions something to fit to that situation'.

In order to construct something new that does not replicate the old, many activists searching for a new stream within the Radical Left were more aware of what they wanted to position themselves against. Many prominent groups within the spectrum of the National-Anarchist movements originally started out as nationalist groups or even belonged to the spectrum of the far-right. One group that serves as the most clear-cut example of such a change in ideology is the group Autonomous Action. One member of Autonomous Actions (R7) describes their groups ideological trajectory the following way:

'Avtonomy Opir was starting its activity, Yuriy Timocheschin was a leader of Svoboda and at this time he said that Avtonomy Opir is just like a young organization, like a daughter of Svoboda. But it in reality is being like this, like he expected Avtonomy Opir to be and I remember this time when Svoboda distributed papers to vote in favor of them in regional elections and then in parliamentary elections'.

With the group originating as an official sister organization to the far-right Neo-Nazi group Svoboda, it was only after 2013 that people started calling Autonomous Action a left-wing group. Inspired by left-wing academia and circles, prominent members of Autonomous Action started engaging with socioeconomic theories of the left and slowly changed the group's overall ideological outlook. Focusing more on human rights, issues of anti-corruption and minority rights, the group synthesized these with their original nationalist ideology. One respondent (R8) summarizes it the following way:

'I mean I told you here in Ukraine we have a mixed history from an ideological perspective. Yes, we have Avtonomy Opir, they combine fighting for independence, social rights, socialism which was interesting for me'.

Trajectory of National-Anarchist Ideology

The ideology of national-anarchism is therefore strongly connected to the re-emergence of the anti-imperial struggle and fight for national independence of the Euromaidan. Respondent (R1) summarized it the following way:

‘These changes of patriotism and so-called nationalist anarchism is that something that is connected to the events after 2015’.

When asked about the fundamental differences between them and Ukrainian nationalist and traditionalist groups, respondents from Nationalist-Anarchist group answer that for them, it is only natural and understandable that there has been a surge in patriotism and nationalism within the Ukrainian society due to the war and the occupation in the East. They argue, however, that the main difference is that right-wing groups generally do not stop with patriotism, but aim to sell conservative values along with them. For them, questions of identity and belonging as well as what it means to be politically left does not clash with their understanding of being a Ukrainian patriot. Or as R1 summarizes her experience:

‘For them it is inherently connected but for me it is not. You can be Ukrainian; you can write in Ukrainian and be against Russia but not be a nationalist or a conservative person. Of course, the war made people more patriotic, and Maidan too! Maybe it is a natural process of, when some empire splits and some parts the former empire are striving for independence. These types of developments are very natural, so for activists it is important to be patriots. And I know many people who are now veterans, because of all this war. And they are leftist’.

The same rhetoric and self-understanding came forward from the interviews and data collected with members of Autonomous Resistance. When asked about how the group was able to combine values that seemed to be at odds with one another, they responded that even though there would be frequent contentious debates, the way they managed was by implementing traditional anarchist DIY techniques. One respondent (R7) explains the procedure:

‘In Avtonomy Opir, they are really trying and managing to find this connection and common ground and consensus between such different people and actually it works out [like with this guy]. For our internal structure [Avtonomy Opir] we have no formal leadership, and we organize ourselves in collective gatherings. We decide the agenda and important points for the organization together. I really enjoy this spirit of anarchy, in which we are self-managing the organization by the principle of self-organization because you feel like you a part of a bigger picture.’

Describing how for most members of National-Anarchist Groups are committed to the national liberation struggle and Ukraine’s territorial integrity comes first, many prioritize issues surrounding the war and support the military. Describing again the split between the groups and how they self-define their ideology as ‘Social-Nationalist’ due to the ideologies infusion with socialist and Marxist principles. Respondent (R7) describes it like this:

‘Right now, we have a national liberation struggle in the East. And we have a lot of members and activists AO that are involved in fighting this war and there are called the veterans of ATO. And we are talking about the war, and for example our Lviv feminist group ‘Feministischna Masternya’ ‘Feminist Workshop’ who have actually two sides on the question of the war. The first part of their group says we are having a war right now in Ukraine and second camp talks about an internal struggle and a civil war. Our organization can be named social-nationalistic but not in the meaning that we have seen throughout the course of history, but it is the same story with Marxism. If you call yourself a Marxist in Ukraine or in Germany it will be two different types of Marxism.’.

One major finding from the data was that in terms of the group’s ideology and political convictions, they were mostly adapting to the current climate. A pragmatic attitude towards the state and the government was therefore one of the most striking attributes the group exhibited. One example is the

group's attitude towards the Ukrainian state. Even though they agree with traditional anarchist principles that reject the state authority and prefer smaller self-organizing communities instead, they view the current situation with a strong sense of pragmatism. Or as respondent (R10) perceives the situation when asked about his views of the Ukrainian state:

'The main reason is the aggression of Russian foreign policy. Without the Ukrainian state, it would be a Russian state. They want that the state of Ukraine will be soft and doesn't restrict any political rights. the power will be decentralised and so on. But the state has to exist to protect the Ukrainians from the Russian aggression'.

The Role of Historical Narratives

During the field research period, much of the groups focus on an anti-imperial struggle was linked to Ukrainian historiography. As touched upon Makhno was frequently referred to as one of the most foundational figures for the movement. Showing how Makhno is reinterpreted in the light of the current Ukrainian struggle of independence, respondent (R10) summarizes it the following way:

'Machno is an example of real Ukrainian tradition. Because Machno demonstrates the ideas of decentralization and anti-authoritarianism. These are core elements of the Ukrainian tradition. This freedom-love. So, the use again Machno's views. The traditional Ukrainian values of freedom-love and anti-authoritarianism.'

As one of the earlier quotes elaborated on the links between so-called 'Socialist-Nationalism' and the infusion of the groups ideology with Marxist ideas and principles, another historical period stuck out from the data. As mentioned previously the Civil War period became an important anchor point for post-Soviet Ukrainian historiography and among the points of referral has also been the short-lived Ukrainian People's Republic of 1917, which effectively was socialist in nature. The tradition of Ukrainian intellectuals of that period gets mentioned multiple times by a variety of different respondents during the field research period. When asked about the canon of these writers and inspirations to the current national-anarchist movement (R9) responds that:

'It was long before Hvuili Vui, at the time of Shevchenko who was one of them. They were Enlightenment thinkers and writers. Give knowledge to the people, take down the tsarist government, anti-imperial, anti-establishment, liberal and democratic values of course with a kind of ethnic and confessional elements. [...] And close to the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century all the nationalists, nearly all of them were socialist. Socialists, Social Democrats just some of the figures were what we considered right-wing [in the meaning of that time] meaning integral nationalists.'

One can summarize that by positioning themselves within a tradition of progressive socialist-nationalist figures, members of the national-anarchist movement seek to create additional legitimacy. They are very strategic about how to market themselves to the Ukrainian political mainstream, as they are aware of the need within the Ukrainian society for a strong foundational myth. By tapping into this need, these groups have slowly but surely evolved since their birth in 2015. While their member base is still small, they describe their movement as continuing to grow and emphasize the structural gap within the contemporary Ukrainian political scene that they seek to fill. With the geopolitical dilemma Ukraine finds itself in, it is understandable how the Ukrainian historical heritage of combining strong socialist elements with nationalist elements becomes useful to current National-Anarchists. For a radical left struggling to find its place within the current war dominated discourse, delving back into history serves as a way to create newfound political legitimacy and repurpose the concept of the anti-imperial struggle.

Conclusion

Contributing to a deeper understanding of the existing micro-dynamics in the contemporary Ukrainian New Radical Left since Maidan in 2013 – 2014, this paper aimed to shed light on the pre-existing

cleavages that premeditated the Maidan Revolution and how the acceleration of the protest dynamics led to a further cleavage between both camps. With one group emphasizing the need for the Ukrainian Radical Left to take a strong political stance against Russia's annexation of Crimea and aggression in the Eastern territories, the group labelled 'National Anarchist' frames the current Ukrainian geopolitical dilemma as an ongoing anti-imperial struggle. The second group, more conventional anarchists, fails to share the first group's sentiment. Generally taking a more intermediary position in the war discourse, they instead argue that vulture capitalism of both Russia's and Ukraine's elites as well as ongoing corruption schemes are the main drivers for the war in the East. Their key argument is that the working-class is being instrumentalized to view the war as an ethnic issue between Russian and Ukrainian culture, and they generally reject the Ukrainian military and state apparatus. Both groups operate within the current movement of the Ukrainian Radical Left since 2014, and overall can be labelled political fringe groups. While most scientific literature thus far except few scholars have neglected this area of research, little information about the movement remains accessible. Broad generalizations about the movement's function, size and ideology prevail while one could argue that the micro-dynamics exhibited by the groups map well onto cleavages and divisions that affect Ukrainian society as a whole since the events of 2014.

Following the effects of Euromaidan in 2014, one can clearly link the existing pre-Maidan cleavages with the subsequent development of the phenomena of national-anarchism. Cleavages pre- and post-Maidan on issues such as internal hierarchy and the interpretation of anarchist ideology and principles led to fights in-between the camps and was mostly based on who got anarchism 'right' and who got it 'wrong'. Post-Euromaidan, the discourse changed heavily with the beginning of the war and the involvement of Russian battalions supporting the separatists. From there, the main cleavage between the groups was about issues such as militarization, the Ukrainian state and overall strategy on how to deal with Russia's aggression. As Ishchenko argues, the Ukrainian left was unable to distance itself clearly from Russian politics and the flirtations by some of its members with the anti-Maidan protests⁴⁴. When Borotba appeared on the stage of Ukrainian politics supporting the so-called 'anti-imperial struggle' of the DNR and LNR, the movement suffered a heavy blow in credibility from which it did not fully recover until this day. Arguing that it was hard for individual activists to accurately assess the situation at the beginning of the insurgency, they acknowledge that their often-hesitant reaction partially contributed to the movement's weakening. In particular, the interpretation of the war and consequential needed actions became increasing points of contention.

After the split of the Autonomous Worker's Union and later Euromaidan, voices demanding a strong pro-Ukrainian position of left-wing groups were becoming louder, explaining why national-anarchist groups that emerged after 2014 filled a structural gap within the Ukrainian political spectrum. Many young people that were interested in progressive political topics such as social inequality, minority rights and fighting corruption saw that these issues were inseparable from fighting Russian aggression. To them, Putin's regime represents an even more restrictive, oppressive, culturally conservative climate, even superseding the Yanukovich era. By adopting strong pro-Ukrainian rhetoric, a focus on Ukrainian language and progressive politics, they argue they can provide a credible alternative for the whole Ukrainian political system. By making themselves the anti-thesis of everything they consider Russian, national anarchists have reframed the political debate in their favor. As many activists have highlighted, they are positive about the future potential of such a political movement as they are attempting to provide a viable alternative to the social conservatism propagated by the Ukrainian far-right.

So why did the term nationalism become appropriated by them? Basically, the movement attempted to avoid the stereotypical negative framing of left-wing politics. By actively helping to co-construct a historical narrative of Ukrainian statehood, they created a historical linearity between the anti-imperial struggles of 20th century Ukrainian intellectual such as Mykhailo Drahomanov, Ivan Franko, Mykhailo Pavlyk and Nestor Makhno against an aggressive Russia, imperial or Soviet. By actively pushing an emporium of progressive Ukrainian heroes, they attempted to appeal to average Ukrainians. Attempting a synthesis of Ukrainian history that allows for a more nuanced understanding

⁴⁴ Ishchenko, *The Ukrainian new left*, 211-229.

of history, they aimed at reseizing narrative control from the radical right or the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance.

Activists belonging to so-called national-anarchist groups fit the definition of ‘uncivil society’ as outlined by Kopecký & Mudde⁴⁵. This means that they operate against the political status quo, form anti-systemic opposition, are predominantly engaged in grassroots activism and operate within a non-formalized organizational structure. What is interesting is their high willingness and pragmatic approach to cooperate with the state. Part of their ideology and the particular way they interpret anarchist and traditional left-wing political values leads them to prioritize the concept of the anti-imperial struggle in which they see defending Ukraine’s territorial integrity against the Russian aggressor as taking precedence over other issues. With many members of the nationalist-anarchist groups actively joining ATO and becoming veterans, they highlight the need to be attractive to the mainstream and to actively decrease the negative branding and stereotypes surrounding the word ‘left-wing’. Moreover, often activists that fell under the umbrella of the Ukrainian ‘New Radical Left’ are in practice an extremely ideologically diverse group of actors and groups that can be classified both as a social movement and/or part of civil society.

Overall, the case-study of national-anarchists raises interesting questions regarding the question as to how far ‘anti-systemic opposition’ can really exist. Going back to Chambers & Kopstein’s critique that the concept of ‘anti-politics’ is based on an overemphasized division between the state and the sphere of civil society, we can assess that in our case-study of national-anarchist groups, they operate both within the boundaries of being ‘anti-systemic’ opposition as well ‘cooperate’ with the state (2009). Coming back to the argument laid out by Sheri Berman, who rightfully questions the assumption that an active and strong civil society is by default beneficial to democracies, one can argue that in the case of national-anarchist groups they neither constitute an active threat to the political institutions nor are they entirely politically passive⁴⁶. However, because they view the Ukrainian state as necessary to protect Ukraine’s territorial independence against Russian aggression, they overall exhibit pragmatism towards the current political system.

This paper provides a first step in shedding light onto communities such as the National-Anarchist groups and attempting to position their unique existence. To understand more in-depth how radical fringe groups operate within contemporary Ukraine, more ethnographic research would be beneficial. As most groups operate in zones of ‘informality’ and offside the formalized political processes, one needs to ‘go beyond ordinary politics’⁴⁷ to which ethnographic research can contribute profoundly.

⁴⁵ Kopecký and Mudde, *Rethinking civil society*, 1-14.

⁴⁶ Berman, *Civil society and the collapse of the Weimar Republic*, 401-429.

⁴⁷ Froio and Gattinara, *Neo-fascist mobilization in contemporary Italy*, 86-118.

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