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ANTISEMITISM IN THE 2010 UKRAINIAN PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTION CAMPAIGN

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Introduction

The presidential elections in Ukraine in January 2010 came at a time of political, social and economic instability. President Viktor Yushchenko's policy of de-Sovietization, undisguised rivalry with Russia and closer relations with the West did not gain the support of most of the population which, moreover, was suffering from the effects of the global economic crisis. Eighteen candidates ran in the elections, including Yushchenko, who chose to play the nationalist anti-Russian card. Other strong contenders were the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich (Party of Regions), Yulia Tymoshenko (Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc – BYuT, prime minister at the time of the elections), who supports both good relations with Russia and a Ukrainian nationalist line, and the pro-modernization technocrats Arsenii Yatseniuk (Front of Changes Initiative) and Sergiï Tigipko (Labour Ukraine, former head of the Ukrainian Central Bank). Another candidate, Oleg Tyagnibok (All-Ukrainian Union Svoboda (“Freedom”), who is known for his antisemitic views,² focused on anti-Russian and anti-immigrant issues.

Election campaigns in Ukraine tend to trigger a rise in antisemitic propaganda. Two explicitly antisemitic and racist parties, for example, took part in the March 2006 parliamentary elections: the Ukrainian Conservative Party (UKP) and the abovementioned All-Ukrainian Union Svoboda.³ The campaign for the presidential elections of January 17, 2010 was no exception. In mid-November 2009 the Ukrainian Central Elections Committee confirmed the candidacy of the mayor of Uzhgorod, Sergiï Ratushniak, as an independent

¹ Doctoral candidate and researcher, Stephen Roth Institute.

² See, for example, Ukraine, *ASW 2004, 2005 & 2007*.

³ See *ASW 2006*.

candidate,⁴ despite his reputation for antisemitic statements and violent behavior. Indeed, no presidential candidate in Ukraine had ever conducted such a blatantly antisemitic campaign.

In August 2009 a criminal investigation was opened against Ratushniak for attacking a 21-year-old woman who was distributing leaflets for Arsenii Yatseniuk near the Faculty of Chemistry of Uzhgorod National University. According to eyewitnesses, he grabbed the woman by the throat and pushed her to the ground. She was treated for various injuries and concussion.⁵

In an interview he gave on August 7, 2009 to the newspaper *Ukrainskaya Pravda*, Ratushniak said that Yatseniuk (who is not Jewish) was an “insolent little Jew” who was “successfully serving the thieves who are in power in Ukraine and using criminal money to forge ahead toward the Ukrainian presidency.” He also maintained that,

the criminal Jew Yatseniuk has apparently decided that these are elections to a village council somewhere in Israel. So, using criminal money, he gathered drug traffickers and smugglers, and without the permission of the city council is showering our city with the garbage.⁶

An interview with Ratushniak published on the news site www.from-ua.com on December 4, contained many virulently antisemitic statements. For example, he claimed that Zionism was a form of Nazism, and that,

All their lives they were Yids and they are Yids. The word Jew was invented by the Yids' clique headed by Blank [the surname of Lenin's maternal grandfather], nicknamed Lenin, and Bronshtein [Trotsky's original surname], nicknamed Trotsky, who in 1917 made a Jewish state revolution... They controlled the finances, mass media, prisons, shootings... We must clearly explain to them that the titular nation here [is] Christian Slav... They know that Israel will be exterminated by the Arabs and they are looking for a territory for relocation... The 2000 [years] era of Jewish rule of the world is coming to an end.⁷

Nevertheless, Ratushniak denied that he is an antisemite. In an interview to Associated Press after the abovementioned incident, he said: “Is everyone obliged to love

⁴ “Ukraine OKs presidential run for controversial mayor,” <http://jta.org/news/article/2009/11/18/1009289/ukraine-approves-anti-semitic-candidate-for-president>

⁵ “Mayor of Uzhgorod alleged to have beaten girl campaigner of Front of Changes,” <http://www.kyivpost.com/news/nation/detail/46595>

⁶ Wagner Matthew, “Anti-Semitic Ukraine mayor to run for president,” <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1258027306987&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>; “Ukrainian Jews want mayor charged for slurs,” <http://jta.org/news/article/2009/08/10/1007138/ukrainian-mayor-reportedly-makes-anti-semitic-statements>; “Prosecutors charge Uzhgorod mayor with inciting ethnic hatred after antisemitic diatribe,” <http://www.ucsj.org/news/prosecutors-charge-uzhgorod-mayor-inciting-ethnic-hatred-after-antisemitic-diatribe>

⁷ “Sergeii Ratushniak: “Kravchuk, Kuchma, Iushchenko and the Jewish clique are conducting a pre-planned genocide of Ukrainians,” <http://www.from-ua.com/adds/print.php?politics/d737acba64531>

Jews and Israel? If I don't like Jews and Israel, does that make me an antisemite?”⁸ As he had asserted to www.from-ua.com, he simply wanted to prevent the destruction of “our state by this clique.”

Responses

On August 9, 2009, the Jewish Forum of Ukraine petitioned the general prosecutor to investigate Ratushniak's conduct. In addition, the chief rabbi of Odessa and South Ukraine Avraham Wolf sent letters to EU secretary general Javier Solana, Israel's foreign minister Avigdor Liberman, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, and US secretary of state Hilary Clinton, asking them to bar Ratushniak from entering their countries.⁹

Ratushniak was charged in August with incitement of ethnic hatred, as well as hooliganism and exceeding his authority, for making antisemitic insults and perpetrating the assault.¹⁰ He was interrogated several times and banned from leaving Ukraine till the end of the investigation.¹¹

Although Ratushniak's candidacy and behavior were condemned by many, there was no reaction from the authorities or from other candidates – not even from president Viktor Yushchenko who himself was a candidate. Possibly they thought that exposing Yatseniuk's alleged Jewish origins would weaken his leading position in the elections. Alternatively, they might not have seen Ratushniak as a serious threat, and therefore did not bother involving themselves in the issue. And finally, no one would want to be regarded as pro-Jewish. Yatseniuk himself said in late November that Ratushniak was acting on orders from the headquarters of prime minister and presidential candidate Yulia Tymoshenko, who herself was accused of being Jewish (see below):

They in fact played the ethnic hatred card, even though it is very costly for the country...
They will invent everything they want... They do not understand that afterwards it will be

⁸ Wagner Matthew, “Anti-Semitic Ukraine mayor to run for president,” <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1258027306987&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShoFull>

⁹ “Ukrainian Jews want mayor charged for slurs,” <http://jta.org/news/article/2009/08/10/1007138/ukrainian-mayor-reportedly-makes-anti-semitic-statements>; “Rabbi Wolf to world leaders: Act against the antisemitic mayor,” <http://www.shturem.net/index.php?mod=print§ion=news&id=37988>

¹⁰ “Prosecutors Charge Uzhgorod Mayor With Inciting Ethnic Hatred After Antisemitic Diatribe,” <http://www.ucsj.org/news/prosecutors-charge-uzhgorod-mayor-inciting-ethnic-hatred-after-antisemitic-diatribe>

¹¹ “Mayor of Uzhgorod is not allowed to leave Ukraine during the time of pre-trial investigation,” <http://www.interfax.com.ua/rus/main/18775>

very hard for the country... Antisemitism, racism, the collapse of the country in general – these are all connected to each other.¹²

Anna German, speaker of the Party of Regions (headed by Viktor Yanukovich), declared on November 23, that use of “the antisemitic card” during the elections was a “strong blow” to the Ukrainian wish to be part of the European community. She also demanded, to no avail, that the Central Elections Committee revoke Ratushniak's candidacy.¹³

On the international front, the Israeli Foreign Ministry submitted an official protest, on November 17, against Ratushniak's candidacy, stating that it contravened the declared commitment of the Ukrainian authorities to combat Holocaust denial and antisemitism.¹⁴ On November 18, 20 members from the main parties in the Israeli parliament (Knesset) (Likud, Avoda, Shas, Kadima and Israel Beytenu), sent a letter to Ukrainian President Yushchenko and Prime Minister Tymoshenko. They expressed their concern at the “new wave of antisemitism in Ukraine that has come to a peak” with the confirmation of Ratushniak as a candidate. “[He] has the viewpoint of a Nazi,” the letter said, “He denies the Holocaust, and has threatened the Jewish community. He caused an outbreak of hatred toward our people and the State of Israel.”¹⁵

In response, Ratushniak demanded an end to Ukrainian-Israeli diplomatic relations because of the latter's interference in Ukraine's internal affairs. “The Israeli authorities should attend to the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, whom they hold in inhuman conditions,” he said.¹⁶ In addition, a demonstration was held by Ratushniak's supporters (headed by Ihor Harkavenko who in 1997 was sentenced to nine years imprisonment for an arson attack on the Israeli center in Kharkov) in front of the Israeli embassy in Kiev, on November 30, against the “intervention of Israeli politicians and the State of Israel in Ukraine's internal affairs.”¹⁷

Democrat Party members of the US Congress from New York sent letters of protest both to the Ukrainian ambassador to the US and to the American ambassador to Ukraine in mid-December. They urged the Ukrainian authorities to take steps against any bias and intolerance in the country in general, and against Ratushniak as a candidate in particular.

¹² “Yatseniuk: Ratushniak and other antisemites are splitting Ukraine,”

http://izrus.co.il/print_news.php?news=18798

¹³ “Ukraine: A harsh reaction to Ratushniak's antisemitic statements,”

http://izrus.co.il/print_news.php?news=18561

¹⁴ “20 Knesset Members: Ukraine swamped by wave of antisemitism!,”

http://izrus.co.il/print_article.php?article=7298

¹⁵ Ibid; Galili Lily, “MK to Ukraine: Election heralds new peak in anti-Semitism,”

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/1129099.html>

¹⁶ “Ratushniak is demanding severance of diplomatic relations between Ukraine and Israel,”

<http://ru.proua.com/news/2009/11/18/095613.html>

¹⁷ Onoprienko Valerii, “Israel Under Siege,” <http://tribuna.com.ua/articles/politics/214218.htm>

On December 23, Ratushniak posted an anti-American and anti-Israel article by Ukrainian journalist Viktor Kopanets on his personal website. Among other things, Kopanets wrote that the Jews were “a stubborn nation.” They had not been successful in removing Ratushniak from his candidacy “with the power of Israeli Jews” so they were also using “Israeli Americans.” The article was accompanied by a well-known Russian antisemitic cartoon, showing a fat Jew with a Star of David on his chest, a yarmulke and ear locks, holding the head of a Christian child against the background of a fire.¹⁸ The caption reads “You are next.”



Election Results

Despite all the protests, Ratushniak took part in the elections, but won only 0.12 percent of the vote. A second round was scheduled for February 7, 2010, between Viktor Yanukovich (35.32 percent in the first round) and Yulia Tymoshenko (25.05 percent). President Yushchenko received only 5.45 percent of the vote, less even than Arsenii Yatseniuk (6.96 percent).¹⁹

¹⁸ Kopanets Victor, “Either Israel has its nose in sovereign Ukraine, or Israel...,” http://www.ratushnyak.org/2009/12/blog-post_23.html

¹⁹ “Voting results in Ukraine,” <http://www.cvk.gov.ua/vp2010/wp0011.html>

Antisemitism was present even during the campaign for the second round. Now, it was Yulia Tymoshenko who was accused of being Jewish. During the first week of February 2010 antisemitic leaflets were distributed in mailboxes and on the streets in west Ukrainian cities, with a photo of Tymoshenko and a call not to vote for a Jewess (using the derogatory word for a female Jew – *Zhidovka*). Although the leaflets were not signed, Tymoshenko's deputy, Grigorii Nemiria, blamed her rival, Viktor Yanukovich. The latter's campaign headquarters denied issuing the leaflets. Tymoshenko herself did not react.²⁰ Yanukovich won the second round with 48.95 percent of the vote.

Conclusion

Antisemitism is very common during election campaigns in Ukraine. However, there is no doubt that the 2010 presidential elections witnessed a peak in antisemitic incitement since one of the candidates, Sergei Ratushniak, made it a key issue in his campaign. The fact that Ratushniak, and another candidate known for his antisemitic opinions, Oleg Tyagnibok, received only 0.12 percent and 1.43 percent of the votes, respectively, demonstrates that such views do not win much support in contemporary Ukraine.

²⁰ Natalia A. Feduschak, “Campaign gets dirty: Leaflets smear Tymoshenko as ‘Jew’”, <http://www.kyivpost.com/news/nation/detail/58739>