

END NOTE

DID UKRAINIAN DEATH SQUADS COMMIT POLITICAL MURDERS?

By Taras Kuzio

The Kyiv newspaper "Segodnya," owned by Tax Administration and Donbas clan head Mykola Azarov, published a sensational report on 1 August claiming that death squads have existed in Ukraine since 1996. The new Ukrainian prosecutor-general, Svyatoslav Piskun and Interior Ministry State Secretary Oleksandr Gapon subsequently confirmed that at least one such squad exists.

Gapon said the death squad is composed of nine members and includes the former head of Kyiv city's Interior Ministry directorate for the struggle against organized crime and another Interior Ministry colonel. The remaining members were former criminals. According to Gapon, all members of the squad are now in custody. The death squad is accused of undertaking 10 murders.

According to later official information, similar death squads also existed in Odesa and Lviv. Nine former Interior Ministry militiamen are soon to go on trial in Kharkiv accused of belonging to a death squad that operated in that city and the Donbas. The squad is accused of committing eight murders with their own service weapons. The Prosecutor-General's Office is investigating another 330 Interior Ministry personnel for a range of offenses.

According to Gapon, an investigation into the activities of death squads began in 2000 but the material that was collected was only handed to the Prosecutor-General's Office this year. In 2000, the head of the Kyiv Interior Ministry department, Yuriy Smyrnov, hinted that one such death squad existed. In May 2001, then-Prosecutor-General Mykhaylo Potebencko claimed that a Kyiv organized-crime boss had told his office that two of his gang had taken a Georgian, who they said may have been Heorhiy Gongadze, to a forest near Kyiv on 16 September 2000 because he owed them money.

There are two likely reasons why the existence of death squads is being revealed now. First, Prosecutor-General Piskun may have been instructed to clean up President Leonid Kuchma's image at home and abroad by finding a scapegoat for Gongadze's murder. Pinning the blame for Gongadze's death on organized crime would deflect attention away from the more plausible culprits in the higher echelons of Ukrainian politics.

Second, when the Interior Ministry and prosecutor-general initially claimed that organized crime was behind the death of Gongadze they were ridiculed, especially after the two gangsters ("Cyclops" and "Matros") who are supposed to have abducted Gongadze produced an alibi saying they were participating in a wedding at the time of the crime, one of them as the groom. Neither of the two men are alive today. Gongadze was followed by unmarked cars for months prior to his abduction. When he reported their license plates to the police he was told they were police vehicles.

Other journalists and opposition leaders were subjected to similar harassment and some died under suspicious circumstances. Since 1997 there have been at least eight suspicious car accidents involving large KamAZ trucks. The most suspicious of these was that in which Rukh leader Vyacheslav Chornovil was killed in March 1999. In October of that year, two opposition deputies,

Hrihoriy Omelchenko and Anatoliy Yermak, a former Security Service (SBU) officer, were shown a videocassette by Yevhen Marchuk, then an anti-Kuchma presidential candidate who was trying to woo national-democratic voters. The video included an interview with a colonel of the special-purpose MVS unit "Orly" (Eagles) who described the purpose of his unit as dealing with individuals on behalf of the authorities and admitted that the "Orly" were behind Chornovil's murder. The "Orly" colonel said he was ready to give evidence if his safety was assured.

Were the "Orly" the same as the death squads that the authorities now admit have existed since 1996? It is difficult to believe that death squads -- which the authorities now admit included high-ranking Interior Ministry officers who used official cars and weapons -- would go unnoticed by the National Security and Defense Council (RNBO), the SBU and even President Kuchma for seven years.

The tape recordings made illicitly in Kuchma's office by his security guard Mykola Melnychenko led to the "Kuchmagate" crisis of November 2000 and reawakened interest in the evidence of malpractice in Chornovil's death. A fragment on the Melnychenko tapes includes a conversation between Kuchma and then-Interior Minister Yuriy Kravchenko in which Kravchenko gloated about the existence of his "Orly" unit. "I have such a unit who have their own methods and have no morality or anything. So, God help anybody," Kravchenko was recorded as saying. Vyacheslav Chornovil's son, Taras Chornovil, a member of Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine, is convinced that the "Orly" were behind his father's "accident" and Gongadze's abduction, as are many other members of the opposition.

It may be significant that the existence of officially sanctioned death squads in Ukraine was confirmed only after Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka admitted in October 2001 the existence in Belarus of a special unit named "Zubr" drawn from the Presidential Protective Service. The first unconfirmed reports of Zubr's existence surfaced one year earlier, in November 2000. Although Lukashenka insists that "Zubr" only targeted criminals, it is believed to have also murdered leading opposition figures and a Russian television cameraman.

Dr. Taras Kuzio is a resident fellow at the Centre for Russian and East European studies, University of Toronto.