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END NOTE

NEW EVIDENCE POINTS TO HIGH-LEVEL INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICAL MURDERS IN  
UKRAINE

By Taras Kuzio

Since the murder of opposition journalist Heorhiy Gongadze in fall 2000 the Ukrainian authorities have been incompetent in their handling of this case or have been unable to resolve it (or a mixture of the two). This is surprising because of the degree to which the Gongadze case has negatively affected both President Leonid Kuchma and Ukraine's domestic and international standing.

From November 2000 to April 2002, one factor why the Gongadze case was not resolved was the role of then Prosecutor Mykhailo Potebenko, who shielded Kuchma from accusations that he was directly involved in the crime. Potebenko, his staff, his successor Sviatoslav Piskun, as well as Ministry of Interior (MVS) chief Yuriy Smirnov have all arrived at contradictory and often bizarre explanations for Gongadze's murder.

Yet, there are four facts that have been known for a long time which have been again authenticated by MVS sources. Firstly, it has now been admitted by the authorities that Gongadze was being followed prior to his death by the MVS. According to the 9-15 August edition of the respected weekly "Zerkalo nedeli" the documents pertaining to this were subsequently destroyed after the removal of MVS chief Yuriy Kravchenko in February 2001.

Second, Kuchma was allegedly recorded by security guard Mykola Melnychenko as demanding that Gongadze be dealt with. Present at the meeting were then-presidential administration head Volodymyr Lytvyn (now parliamentary speaker), Kravchenko, and Security Service chairman Leonid Derkach. The recording shows that Kuchma ordered Gongadze to be beaten up (but not murdered). Many other journalists have testified since then that they were also beaten by the MVS and warned to halt their critical reporting. In the Gongadze case, we can only assume that something went wrong when he was beaten up, leading to his death (i.e. manslaughter). Ihor Honcharov, an officer in an MVS special forces' unit that was involved in political and criminal kidnappings, testified that, "These crimes were perpetrated on the direct instruction of the Ministry of Interior," and later "The highest officials of the state knew about these kidnappings and murders and were associated with them" ("Zerkalo nedeli," 9-15

August).

Third, the units responsible were from the special forces of the MVS Directorate to Combat Organized Crime (UBOZ). The UBOZ has units called "Sokil" (Falcon) who have also been nicknamed "Werewolves." Kravchenko bragged at the meeting recorded by Melnychenko that he had vicious units who would do anything he ordered. It was officially admitted in 2000 by the Prosecutor's Office that Sokil members did not combat organized crime but worked alongside them or terrorized them for protection money. And, the Kyiv daily "Segodnya" on 1 August 2002, followed by "ITAR-TASS" on 8 August, reported that the Prosecutor's Office had arrested Sokil members who had cooperated with organized crime (see "End Note," "RFE/RL Newsline," 22 August 2002).

Fourth, a leading member of a "Sokil" unit, Honcharov, was one of a number of people arrested in May 2002. After their arrests, Sokil members leaked information anonymously to the opposition socialist <http://www.Grani.kiev.ua> on 17 February 2002 that dealt with the involvement of their colleagues in the Gongadze murder. Prosecutor Piskun admitted in an interview in the same month in "Zerkalo Nedeli" that their involvement was one of the three theories being investigated. Honcharov compiled further evidence of the involvement of Sokil in the murder of Gongadze, which was released after Honcharov's mysterious death.

After being arrested, Honcharov claimed in statements published by the "Ukrayinska Pravda" website on 6 August and 10 September that he was ordered not to testify against other officers and claimed he had been tortured and beaten in prison, which is thought by many to have led to his death on 1 August. Honcharov was the second Sokil member to have died recently in prison, which conveniently removed two potential witnesses in any future court case. Suspiciously, Honcharov was quickly cremated two days after his death.

Honcharov was not a pleasant person. He was himself accused of eight murders and, as "Zerkalo Nedeli" points out, he was "in the epicentre of the criminal group of militia officers." Nevertheless, MVS officers implicated by Honcharov, such as Serhiy Chamula, the former head of Kyiv's UBOZ, continue to work in other UBOZ field offices.

After his death, Honcharov's documents and testimony were sent to a Kyiv nongovernmental organization, the Institute for Mass Information, which represents Reporters Without Frontiers. At first, the Prosecutor's Office denied their authenticity and Deputy Prosecutor Oleksandr Medvedko said the papers revealed nothing new about Gongadze. Honcharov had complained about political pressure from the Prosecutor's Office. A month later, Prosecutor Piskun changed his tune and admitted in an interview in the "2000" newspaper that the Honcharov papers are genuine and contain new facts in the Gongadze investigation.

Incredibly, at the same time, Deputy Prosecutor Viktor Shokin continued to claim that "Melnychenko does not know anything [about the Gongadze affair]." Adding Melnychenko's tapes to testimony by MVS officers would be presumably too dangerous for the authorities.

These new revelations may shed light on other political

murders in Ukraine.

These include former National Bank Chairman Vadym Hetman, who offered to finance Viktor Yushchenko's 1999 presidential campaign (he declined, in the end, to stand), and Viacheslav Chornovil, the former leader of Rukh, who died in a suspicious car accident. Hetman, Chornovil, and former Prime Minister Pavlo Lazarenko were the three main individuals blocking a potential reelection of Kuchma in 1999 for a second term. Only Lazarenko escaped by fleeing to the U.S., where he is soon to go on trial for money laundering. A car carrying Vladimir Efremov, a newspaper and television editor, collided with a KAMAZ truck on 14 July and killed the journalist. The accident occurred just a month before Efremov was due to give testimony in the U.S. in the Lazarenko case. KAMAZ trucks have featured regularly in such "accidents."

The Chornovil case is particularly intriguing. "Ukrayinska Pravda" reported on 25 January 2001 that after Chornovil's car accident in March 1999 special forces MVS officers, who may have also been from a Sokil unit, provided video of an interview in which they admit organizing Chornovil's "accident." Omelchenko said the video was given to then-opposition presidential candidate Yevhen Marchuk, "Ukrayinska Pravda" reported on 11 December 2000.

But Marchuk was co-opted by Kuchma in the second round and he then claimed he lost the video, the "Kyiv Post" reported on 26 January 2001. After four years as secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, Marchuk was named defense minister in May. On 10 September, "Ukrayinska Pravda" reported that the head of the parliamentary commission investigating the Gongadze murder, Heorhiy Omelchenko, as linking the initials "YKM" (which are Marchuk's initials) to Honcharov's papers, as someone to whom details of the Gongadze affair were passed.

The issue of political murders, including that of Gongadze, will not go away. The Gongadze Commission in parliament has concluded that Kuchma and Kravchenko are the "organizers of the abduction of Heorhiy Gongadze which led to the tragic result of his murder."

The fear of being out of power after the October 2004 election is fueling various machinations surrounding "political reform" initiated by Kuchma. One central issue is that of Kuchma's immunity when he is out of office. While high-level corruption, election rigging, and even illegal arms sales may be quietly forgotten, the issue of involvement in violence and murder will continue to haunt Kuchma after he leaves office. As recent examples have shown in Peru, Argentina, and Chile, immunity is never forever.

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