

A daily report of developments in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia prepared by the staff of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

END NOTE

RUSSIA AND THE WEST COMPETE OVER UKRAINE'S FOREIGN ORIENTATION IN THE POST-KUCHMA ERA

By Tares Kuzio

The holding of Ukraine's third parliamentary elections on 31 March is only the prelude to presidential elections to be held in 2 1/2 years' time when Leonid Kuchma will step down after his second presidential term ends. Russia and the West already have their respective favorite candidates, with Russia preferring Viktor Medvedchuk, head of the Social Democratic Party Ukraine-united (SDPU-o), and the West favoring Viktor Yushchenko, head of Our Ukraine. Both candidates are in their 40s and the election of either will represent a changing of the guard from the older generation that has ruled Soviet and independent Ukraine to this point.

Russia is backing Medvedchuk because, of all the oligarchic parties, only the SDPU-o is able to enter Ukraine's elections as an independent force and still win more than the party of power For a United Ukraine (ZYU), which is composed of five parties. The SDPU-o is also the only oligarchic party with a recognizable leader who has presidential ambitions, and has strong ties to Russia through its heavy involvement in Ukraine's energy market. Ironically, the SDPU-o includes former President Leonid Kravchuk in its top ranks, someone who has always been disliked in Moscow.

Russia is strongly supporting Medvedchuk through Gleb Pavlovskii's Fund for Effective Politics (Pavlovskii is Russian President Vladimir Putin's image-maker). The fund aims to show Medvedchuk as a "statesman" and in a softer light, and has launched an image campaign depicting a casual Medvedchuk, sans tie and wearing a sweater, in an attempt to overcome his image as a cold leader who is distant from the public.

The use of Russian public relations experts in Ukraine began in the 1999 presidential elections, and they are likely to play an increasingly active role in the 2004 presidential elections. The difference between their activities and those of Western organizations and countries who have provided funds for Ukraine's civil society, media, and election monitoring is that Russian involvement is nontransparent, never openly discussed, and unaccountable.

Ukrainian pro-presidential election blocs, which are the main

customers of Russian image-makers, therefore have double standards when they only accuse the West of interference in Ukraine's affairs (the only pro-presidential bloc to use a Western PR company is the Greens). Western assistance to Ukraine's elections was characterized in an interview in "Holos Ukrayiny" by the head of ZYU, Volodymyr Lytvyn, as "international administrative resources." Lytvyn was trying to evade the question of ZYU monopolizing "domestic administrative resources" in the elections. U.S. Helsinki Commission members have ridiculed this as harking back to the Soviet era, when Western criticism of human rights abuses was condemned by the Soviet Union as "interference in internal affairs."

Oligarchic parties such as the SDPU-o and ZYU are fanning anti-Western sentiments on television stations they control by accusing the United States of interference in Ukraine's internal affairs and of being behind a so-called "Brzezinski Plan" to replace Kuchma with Yushchenko. "Rossiiskaya gazeta" argued that Western assistance to the Ukrainian elections is merely a cover to support Our Ukraine and obtain a pro-U.S. parliament that "would drive a wedge between Moscow and Kyiv." Such was the theme of the film "PR" aired on ICTV and directed by Charles Clover, a former Kyiv correspondent for the "Financial Times." In his coverage for the "Financial Times," which has since been disowned by the daily, Clover had accused Yushchenko of financial malpractice while serving as chairman of the National Bank.

Russian officials have yet to overcome their penchant for intervening in the internal affairs of CIS states, as evidenced by Viktor Chernomyrdin. The Russian ambassador to Ukraine acts more like a regional governor than an ambassador when he complains about U.S. resolutions on the Ukrainian elections, clearly an area that is normally the preserve of the domestic Foreign Ministry, not a foreign ambassador. Russia would like to see Ukraine continue its tilt toward Russia that began even prior to the "Kuchmagate" scandal in 2000. In the last two years, presidents Kuchma and Putin have met a record 18 times. Russian -- not Western -- capital is becoming increasingly active in the Ukrainian economy, and by 2005 it will influence the production of 70 percent of the goods manufactured in Ukraine.

In the current elections, Russian officials have openly declared their hostility to Yushchenko's Our Ukraine as an anti-Russian, pro-Western, and nationalist bloc. Dmitrii Rogozin, the head of the Russian State Duma's International Relations Committee, has used Soviet-era rhetoric to reintroduce allegations that "Ukrainian nationalists" who are members of Our Ukraine were involved in "criminal activities" during and after World War II.

Russia's open support for the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) and oligarchic/pro-presidential parties in the 2002 elections is due to its prioritization of geopolitical issues in the CIS, as witnessed by its support for Sovietophile and authoritarian regimes in Belarus and communist Moldova. Russian presidential administration chief Aleksandr Voloshin has admitted that Moscow backs ZYU, the SDPU-o, and the KPU, and is hostile to Our Ukraine.

The 2002 parliamentary elections have therefore laid out the framework for the presidential elections in two years' time. As Russia's concern is only geopolitical, it is supporting two of the

three political groups in Ukraine -- the communists and oligarchs. In contrast, the West has an interest in both geopolitical and reformist issues in Ukraine and is thus backing the reformist camp; that is, Yushchenko and Our Ukraine.

The first political group that Russia supports in the CIS is made up of communists and Sovietophiles; as is the case in Belarus and Moldova. However, this option is unlikely to be successful in Ukraine. Therefore, Russia is also lending its support to the second oligarch camp, which has been implicated in corruption, prefers a nontransparent economic and political system, and can only envision Ukraine's return to Europe "together with Russia." Russia's favored presidential candidate from this second political group is the SDPU-o's Medvedchuk, who heads Ukraine's most vilified oligarchic group.

Neither the Communists nor the oligarchs are favored by the U.S. and Western organizations such as the EU, and the West is left only with the reformers represented by Yushchenko and Our Ukraine. In contrast to Medvedchuk, Yushchenko has no corrupt past, supports a transparent reform process that the West has long asked Ukraine to implement, and backs Ukraine's integration into the EU and NATO independent of Russia.

All three of Ukraine's political groups (communists, oligarchs, and reformers) support Ukraine's membership in the EU. Nevertheless, only the reformist Our Ukraine camp is willing to undertake the necessary domestic policies that would replace rhetoric with real reform.

Over the next two years, both the West's favorite Yushchenko and especially Russia's favorite Medvedchuk will attempt to ingratiate themselves with President Kuchma to obtain his blessing as his successor. As with former Russian President Boris Yeltsin and his appointed successor Putin, Kuchma's price for his blessing will be immunity from prosecution, something that Medvedchuk will more easily be able to grant than Yushchenko would.