

END NOTE: CHECKMATE! UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT OUTMANEUVERS THE OPPOSITION

By Taras Kuzio

The appointment on 12 June of oligarch Social Democratic Party-united (SDPU-o) leader Viktor Medvedchuk as the head of Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma's presidential administration, a position vacant since 29 April, means that Kuchma has finalized his post-election chess match by checkmating both the Rada and the opposition. Kuchma's latest move highlights the failure of Our Ukraine leader Viktor Yushchenko's policy of attempting to maintain good relations with Kuchma by not joining the opposition camp.

In mid-December, Medvedchuk was removed by a vote of no confidence from his position as first deputy Rada speaker. Having named his former head of the presidential administration, Volodymyr Lytvyn, to be the Rada speaker, Kuchma has now handed Lytvyn's old position over to Medvedchuk.

Medvedchuk has never hidden his presidential ambitions — unlike Lytvyn, who has never mentioned such a role for himself and feels uncomfortable in the limelight. In the summer of 2000, just after Kuchma was re-elected to his second and final term, Medvedchuk proposed to Kuchma that, in gratitude for the SDPU-o's assistance in securing Kuchma's re-election in 1999, the president should openly opt for the "Boris Yeltsin-Vladimir Putin" transfer-of-power mode. Kuchma refused, having at that time no inkling of the immunity he would soon desperately need when the "Kuchmagate" scandal erupted four months later.

The "Yeltsin-Putin" model is no longer completely out of the question following Medvedchuk's appointment. As no other personality from the oligarchic and pro-presidential factions can rival Medvedchuk, Kuchma may see him as his only chance to thwart a presidential election victory by Ukraine's most popular political figure, Our Ukraine's Yushchenko.

Kuchma still faces an uphill struggle, but not an impossible one. An opinion poll by the Ukrainian Center for Economic and Political Studies in May that asked respondents if they supported certain politicians gave Yushchenko 27.6 percent support and Medvedchuk 11.2 percent. Although Yushchenko's lead is substantial, Medvedchuk is already in a threatening position, especially considering his new access to the president's "administrative resources." For comparison, it should be recalled that Kuchma himself had less public support at the beginning of the 1999 presidential elections than Medvedchuk has now.

Certainly, Russia would not complain about Kuchma's choice of Medvedchuk. Gleb Pavlovskii's Effective Policy Foundation, which has close ties to Putin, worked for the SDPU-o during the March elections. Pavlovskii and other Russian leaders have applauded Medvedchuk's promotion. Russia's leaders tend to see Ukraine's political groups in black and white terms -- "pro-Russian" (United Ukraine, SDPU-o, and the Communists) and "anti-Russian" (Our Ukraine, Tymoshenko bloc, and even the Socialists). This division into "pro-" and "anti-" Russian forces is also the same fault line dividing the "pro-" and "anti-" presidential forces, with the exception of the Communists.

Although Medvedchuk has a reputation for aloofness, Prime Minister Anatoliy Kinakh and Lytvyn are little better. Indeed, this aloofness from the average Ukrainian is typical of the former high-ranking Soviet Ukrainian elite, something that might work against them in the 2004 presidential elections. By contrast, one of Yushchenko's biggest assets is his ability to connect with the Ukrainian public.

The final move in Kuchma's endgame will be to allow United Ukraine to divide into five or more factions and to give each one separate access to resources, such as staff, vehicles, and offices. This division will not necessarily harm their cohesiveness. During times of crisis, they can be pulled back together.

After blocking Yushchenko's moves to replace Kinakh as prime minister and then placing Lytvyn and Medvedchuk into checkmate positions, Kuchma was in a position to demonstrate his magnanimity in the division of Rada committees among factions. That division was consummated on 11 June by a vote in the Rada of 348 in favor.

Our Ukraine came away with the largest number of committees (10). Of these 10, the three most significant are Budget, Law Enforcement, and Freedom of Speech and Information. Our Ukraine also heads the Industrial Policies and Entrepreneurship, Combating Crime and Corruption, and Law Enforcement committees. National Democrats control two of their favorites -- Culture, Spirituality, and Human Rights and Ethnic Minorities and Interethnic Relations.

The number of deputies on each committee is a reflection of how deputies calculate their usefulness to themselves and, in some cases, to their vision of Ukraine. The most popular committees are also, not surprisingly, the most lucrative -- Budget (39), Finances and Banking Activity (34), Fuel and Energy Complex (32), and Transport and Communications (23). Of these four, the last three are controlled by the pro-Kuchma and oligarchic United Ukraine. Three of the smallest are Science and Education (11); Health, Motherhood, and Childhood (8); and Social Policies and Labor (8), in which United Ukraine has no interest.

Former Foreign Minister and Our Ukraine member Borys Tarasiuk failed to obtain the Foreign Affairs Committee after Kuchma adamantly opposed his candidature. It was handed instead to a former head of the presidential administration, Dmytro Tabachnyk, who has long coveted the post of foreign minister. His committee has 21 members, compared to just 11 on the committee on European Integration that was created especially as a sop for Tarasiuk. The Communists continue to control Defense and National Security.

This division of committee heads does not bode well for an integrated policy toward future NATO membership, something the Communists oppose and that they could easily block in the military sphere. More importantly, the Rada will have two committees with competing ideologies on European integration. Tarasiuk's committee will support integration in word and deed, dealing with Brussels directly. Tabachnyk's, on the other hand, will continue to pay lip service to the need for integration into Europe, but will proceed via Moscow while continuing to support domestic policies that hinder integration. Tabachnyk was a leading member of the "To Europe with Russia!" deputies group that existed in the 1998-2002 Rada.

Ihor Zhdanov, an expert at the Ukrainian Center for Economic and Political Studies, believes that all these moves by Kuchma signal the beginning of the 2004 presidential election campaign. Nevertheless, the positions of Rada speaker or head of the presidential administration are poor launching pads for the presidency. As in Russia, the most useful launching pad is generally believed to be the post of prime minister, especially during a period economic growth and declining wage and pension arrears.

If Medvedchuk is to be anointed as Kuchma's replacement, he needs to become prime minister at least a year prior to the election. Replacing Kinakh with Medvedchuk would not be difficult, as Kinakh's Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs is close to the SDPU-o. But such a move might displease rival oligarchic clans who would oppose such SDPU-o favoritism.

Kuchma will not be able to launch a nationalist campaign to elect his successor, as did Putin, and Kuchma is far more discredited than Yeltsin ever was. These negative factors could be overcome if Kuchma uses another trump card he mastered in the 1994 elections and which Pavlovskii's foundation worked on in the March elections: the promotion of the "pro-Russian" Medvedchuk to counter the "nationalist" Yushchenko. The more densely populated eastern Ukraine might not like Kuchma or Medvedchuk; but they might prefer him to Yushchenko, for whom they did not vote in large numbers in March.

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