

END NOTE

'PARTY OF POWER' IN CRISIS IN UKRAINE

By Taras Kuzio

Ukraine's current "party of power," the Social Democratic Party-United (SDPU-o), is suffering the "gravest crisis in its history," a commentary in "Zerkalo nedeli/Dzerkalo tyzhnya" on 15 March concluded. The SDPU-o, led by presidential administration head Viktor Medvedchuk, is being increasingly challenged by a reformist wing led by deputy parliamentary speaker Oleksandr Zinchenko.

The SDPU-o was a small party until it was taken over by the Kyiv oligarchic clan in the mid-1990s and its leader, former Justice Minister Vasyl Onopenko, was pushed out. Onopenko went on to create the Ukrainian Social-Democratic Party, which was a member of the liberal Yuliya Tymoshenko Bloc during the 2002 elections.

The takeover of the SDPU-o occurred at the same time that Ukraine's former "sovereign communists" began transforming their political influence into economic wealth after President Leonid Kuchma launched his economic reforms in 1994. These new centrist oligarchs sought political cover from established political parties to legitimize their newfound wealth.

In 1998, centrist parties made their first appearance in parliament, accounting for four of the eight parties that crossed the

4 percent threshold in the proportional half of the elections. In addition to the SDPU-o, they included the Green Party and the all-Ukrainian "party of power," the Popular Democratic Party (NDP), headed by Prime Minister Valeriy Pustovoytenko.

The SDPU-o came in last of those that crossed the 4 percent threshold in both the 1998 and 2002 elections. In the 2002 elections, the party garnered 6.27 percent of the vote, a marginal improvement over the 4.01 percent it polled in 1998, which gave it 19 seats. Another 12 SDPU-o members were elected in single-mandate districts and seven as independents, making the SDPU-o the third-largest centrist faction.

Loyal Dnipropetrovsk oligarchs took over the small Labor Ukraine party, while the Donbas oligarchs created the Party of Regions. The first "party of power" in Donetsk, the Liberals, went into decline after Yevhen Shcherban -- the local governor, a parliamentary deputy, and a high-ranking Liberal Party member -- was assassinated in November 1996.

"Parties of power" that are no longer on good terms with the executive have been forced to ally themselves with the center-right opposition. Tymoshenko's Fatherland Party merged into a single party with longtime nationalist and former dissident Stepan Khmara's Conservative Republican Party. The Liberals, meanwhile, joined former Premier Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine.

The SDPU-o entered the 2002 elections separately from the For a United Ukraine (ZYU) bloc, which united regional "parties of power," because it is the only centrist party to have invested resources in building a party structure. The SDPU-o claims 350,000 members -- a figure that should be taken skeptically -- organized into 780 district and city branches. The largest branches are in Transcarpathia, Zaporizhzhya, and Kharkiv. The SDPU-o has its own publishing house and issues 12 newspapers, including Kyiv's weekly

"Nasha Hazeta Plyus" with a circulation of about 500,000.

A major problem for the SDPU-o -- or any "party of power" -- is Ukraine's inherited ethno-cultural and regional cleavages. Eastern Ukraine is dominated by oligarchic centrists and the Communists. The only oblast where ZYU came first in the proportional half of the 2002 elections was Donetsk, where Our Ukraine failed to cross the 4 percent threshold.

In western and central Ukraine, on the other hand, oligarchic parties with roots in those areas -- SDPU-o and the Agrarians -- are unpopular. The former disgraced head of Naftohaz, Ihor Bakay, who is allied to SDPU-o sympathizer Oleksandr Volkov, ran in western Ukraine in the 2002 elections but was defeated.

The then-head of the Kyiv branch of the SDPU-o, Hryhorii Surkis, was roundly defeated in the May 1999 mayoral elections by current popular Mayor and Yushchenko ally Oleksandr Omelchenko. It is not coincidental that Kyiv city's SDPU-o branch, which was until last month headed by Surkis, experienced the worst decline in membership of any SDPU-o branch in 2001-02. The Kyiv clan's SDPU-o barely scraped past the 4 percent threshold in the city of Kyiv in the 2002 elections when it obtained 4.85 percent, compared to the 8.48 percent it obtained in the 1998 elections. In local elections to the Kyiv City Council held at the same time as parliamentary elections last year, the SDPU-o fared even worse.

Although it finished last in the proportional half of the 2002 elections, the SDPU-o nevertheless succeeded in placing its members in many senior leadership posts. "Ukrayinska pravda" on 28 February claimed that the SDPU-o controls one-third of Ukraine. The head of the presidential administration and two of his deputies are SDPU-o members, as are two ministers, the head of a state committee, and three governors. In addition, the party has 10,000 elected representatives at all levels, including the deputy parliamentary

speaker and the secretary of the National Security and Defense Council.

Why then is there a crisis in Ukraine's newest "party of power?" Six factors account for the SDPU-o's crisis.

First, the ruling elite is close to panic as the Kuchma era draws to a close. Immunity from prosecution for Kuchma will not necessarily help the oligarchs escape prosecution for corruption unless they ensure that a Kuchma loyalist is elected to succeed him in next year's presidential elections.

Second, when he became head of the presidential administration in May 2002, Medvedchuk closely linked the SDPU-o's fortunes to a highly unpopular president. As "Zerkalo nedeli/Dzerkalo tyzhnya" pointed out, "Everyone realizes that the party's close links with the authorities are harmful to its image and ratings." Zinchenko's argument that making the SDPU-o the "party of power" "gives credit and adds prestige to the organization," is simply not convincing.

Third, interviewed in "Nasha Hazeta Plyus" on 14 February, sociologist Yevhen Holovakha advised the SDPU-o that democratization in Ukraine is regressing and under threat. Ironically therefore, by supporting this regression in its role as the "party of power," the SDPU-o is undermining its own party prospects within Ukraine's electoral democracy.

The fourth contributing factor is the creation of a new information policy directorate under Medvedchuk that is headed by SDPU-o sympathizer Serhiy Vasylyev. Vasylyev is responsible for the introduction of censorship through "temnyky," or instructions to television stations. News programs on the 1+1 and Inter television channels -- two of Ukraine's largest broadcasters, both of which are controlled by the SDPU-o -- have the least degree of public trust, according to a Ukrainian Democratic Circle poll conducted in

February. The same is true of the daily newspaper "Kievskiye vedomosti," which is also controlled by the SDPU-o and half of whose copies are regularly returned unsold. Vasylyev has also reverted to Soviet-style rhetoric in denouncing and ridiculing complaints by international organizations and NGOs about media harassment.

Fifth, the "quality" of party cadres is mediocre. Many people join the SDPU-o in the same way as they joined the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the Brezhnev era -- not for ideological, but for careerist reasons. This problem exists among all centrist, ideologically amorphous parties, but the SDPU-o thought -- mistakenly -- it had overcome this by investing in an ideological profile (social democracy).

Finally, Medvedchuk is at odds with practically every other political group in parliament as a result of his aggressive attempts at forging a pro-presidential majority, "black" operations aimed at discrediting Yushchenko (e.g., fake Our Ukraine leaflets), and his demand for the Prosecutor-General's Office to reopen criminal charges against Tymoshenko.

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