

Volume 2 Issue 79 (April 22 , 2005)

YUSHCHENKO TURNS FOCUS TO SOUTHERN UKRAINE AND CRIMEA

By **Taras Kuzio**

Anatoliy Matvienko's confirmation as prime minister of Crimea on April 20 follows an April 4 Odessa court decision to overturn the 2002 mayoral elections and confirm Eduard Hurfits as mayor (Ukrayinska pravda, April 4, 20). Both cases represent a strategic breakthrough by President Viktor Yushchenko's team, as the predominantly Russophone Southern Ukraine and Crimean regions had voted for his opponent, Viktor Yanukovych in the 2004 presidential elections.

Hurfits, a member of Yushchenko's Our Ukraine bloc, won the 2002 Odessa mayoral election, but the courts awarded the job to his opponent, Ruslan Bodelan, who backed then-president Leonid Kuchma. Bodelan is the head of the Regions of Ukraine Odessa branch, thus his replacement represents a second blow to Yanukovych, the head of Regions of Ukraine. The head of the party's Donetsk oblast branch, Borys Kolesnykov, was arrested on April 6.

Crimean Prime Minister Serhiy Kunitsyn initially refused to resign, but was eventually enticed with the ceremonial position of presidential adviser. People's Democratic Party (NDP) leader Valeriy Pustovoitenko, who had backed Yanukovych, complained that NDP member Kunitsyn's resignation was a case of "political repression."

In reality, Kunitsyn was made an offer he could not refuse. As the Kyiv Weekly (April 15-22) wrote, Kunitsyn had complained, "Every week 100 inspectors arrive from Kyiv. They said to me, either you leave or we'll lock you up..." Files detailing Kunitsyn's corrupt background, records that are likely available for most members of Crimea's ruling elites, were used to force his hand.

Kunitsyn's replacement, Matvienko, is a surprising choice, as he heads the pro-democratic Sobor Party, which merged with the Republican Party in 2002. Sobor was a member of Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko's bloc in the 2002 elections.

Western scholars and policymakers usually lump Southern and Eastern Ukraine into one monolithic Russophone geographic unit, yet the reality is more complex. The Yushchenko team understands the different regional dynamics at work in Ukraine and is strategically targeting Southern Ukraine ahead of the March 2006 parliamentary elections.

Yushchenko's strategic move into Southern Ukraine comes after his successful election campaign in Central Ukraine, the region that often decides the outcome of Ukrainian elections. Controlling Southern Ukraine could increase Yushchenko's base from the 52% he obtained in the 2004 elections to two-thirds in the next parliament.

Southern Ukraine is less industrialized than Eastern Ukraine and therefore less russified, with the exception of the Crimea. A Ukrainian Barometer poll gave Yanukovych 30.8% support in Southern Ukraine and the Crimea, only slightly more than Yushchenko's 27.4% (Ukrayinska pravda, March 26).

In the largely agricultural Kherson oblast, Yushchenko and Yanukovych came neck-and-neck in all three rounds of last year's elections. In Odessa and Mykolaiv oblasts, which are more industrial, Yushchenko obtained approximately one-third to Yanukovych's two-thirds of the votes in all three rounds.

In the Crimean Autonomous Republic, Yushchenko's 12-16% votes were far lower than Yanukovych's 69-82%. Nevertheless, these were far better than Yushchenko's vote in Yanukovych's home base of Donetsk, where he obtained 5% or less in all three rounds (cvk.gov.ua).

This discrepancy between Donetsk and the Crimea was also reflected in the March 2002 parliamentary elections, which explains why the Yushchenko camp is targeting Southern Ukraine and the Crimea ahead of next year's parliamentary race.

As in Odessa, the political situation in the Crimea is now changing in Yushchenko's favor. Yushchenko's election led to the disintegration of the pro-Kuchma Stability faction in the Crimean parliament, which had numbered 85 out of 100 deputies. As Stability faction leader Borys Deych explained, "The Crimea cannot live as a separate part of the state. Everything that is happening in Ukraine spreads to the Crimea" (Zerkalo nedeli, March 19-25).

As in the Ukrainian parliament, many former pro-Kuchma centrists in the regions are also reluctant to oppose Yushchenko. Deych confided, "We are not in opposition to the new authorities" and we "declare our support for the president's course." The former pro-Kuchma People's Union "Stability" (38), coupled with the newly created pro-Yushchenko Power in Unity (15), gives Yushchenko a majority of 53 out of 100 Crimean deputies. Matvienko became prime minister with 61 votes. The Power in Unity faction is headed by Anatoly Burdyuhov, chief of a department at the National Bank of the Crimea (Kyiv Weekly, March 25-April 1).

Ukrainian observers attribute Matvienko's rise to the most-powerful position in the Crimea to two strategies. First, it gives Tymoshenko's Bloc (which includes her own Fatherland Party as well as Sobor) a strong position from which to compete against Yanukovych's party in 2006.

Of the two pro-Kuchma forces in the 2002 elections, only Regions of Ukraine remains a potentially significant force in Southern Ukraine and the Crimea. The Communists (KPU) and the Social Democrats (SDPUo) have both disintegrated as political forces throughout Ukraine, after coming in first and second in the 2002 elections in the Crimea in 2002.

The KPU is down from 20% in 2002 to only 5% today while the SDPUo's support has collapsed even more from 6% to only 1.2%, according to a new Razumkov Center poll (Ukrayinska pravda, April 20). The SDPUo is the only party that loses potential voters when the name of its leader, Viktor Medvedchuk, is mentioned.

Second, Matvienko's appointment will encourage the Tymoshenko bloc to cooperate with Yushchenko's new People's Union "Our Ukraine" party in the 2006 elections. Yuriy Kostenko's Ukrainian People's Party, which has refused to join People's Union, had hoped to go into the elections with Sobor.