

FAKE LETTER FROM YUSHCHENKO'S DOCTOR QUESTIONS POISONING CLAIM

By **Taras Kuzio**

The attempted poisoning of opposition presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko last month has taken a new turn that suggests a return to Soviet-era KGB methods. A fake letter from the Austrian clinic that treated Yushchenko was sent to Reuters news agency and then widely disseminated abroad and by pro-presidential media in Ukraine.

Yesterday [October 5], Reuters issued a statement that denied the authenticity of the information it had distributed on September 28, which had been based on the fake statement purportedly drawn up by the clinic. Also on October 5, pro-presidential parliamentary factions issued a joint statement that drew on the fake clinic statement and subsequent news reports to call upon Yushchenko to withdraw his candidacy because he had misled everybody about his poisoning. They also called for adjourning the parliamentary commission established to investigate the poisoning (*Ukrayinska pravda*, October 5).

Yushchenko became extremely ill on September 6, with symptoms that resembled acute food poisoning (see, EDM September 20). His symptoms grew so severe that Yushchenko traveled to a clinic in Vienna, which stated that the mortality risk, had he arrived at the clinic 24-72 hours later, would have been 80%. After he returned from Vienna, Yushchenko spoke to the Ukrainian parliament where he accused the "authorities" of organizing an attempt on his life.

The Ukrainian authorities launched a two-step plan to deal with the attention Yushchenko received after surviving the assassination attempt. First, the authorities organized a fake "assassination" attempt on their own candidate, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich. This attack was planned to occur during Yanukovich's September 24 visit to Ivano-Frankivsk, during which he wore a bulletproof jacket under his coat. But before a hard object could be thrown at him, a student hurled an egg at the Prime Minister. Thinking it was the planned projectile, Yanukovich collapsed on the ground. The resulting farce backfired on Yanukovich (see, EDM September 30).

Second, authorities tried to undermine Yushchenko's poisoning story by issuing a fake statement by the Vienna clinic. On September 18 Mikhail Pogrebynsky, political consultant to Yanukovich ally Viktor Medvedchuk, prepared the ground by stating that the whole incident "looked very much like a campaign trick" (*Zerkalo nedeli*, September 25-October 1).

The pro-presidential media began circulating stories alleging that Yushchenko had long been ill and was therefore physically unfit to be president. Medvedchuk's Inter television channel (October 1) claimed Yushchenko suffered from a complex of ailments that are "typical for many state servants because of their lifestyle." On October 3 ICTV, a channel controlled by oligarch Viktor Pinchuk, used its "Dokladno" analytical program to make public Yushchenko's medical records, which had been provided by the parliamentary committee investigating the poisoning. A September 29 temnyk (secret administration instruction sent to the media) advised media editors to describe the poisoning as "unsubstantiated" and to outline how Yushchenko had "misled the Ukrainian public" (Ukrayinska pravda, October 1).

The Rudolfinerhaus clinic in Vienna denied the authenticity of the fake statement on October 4. Dr. Michal Zimpfer said he had never seen, nor did he sign, the September 28 statement faxed to Reuters. The clinic's statement pointed out that doctors are still unable to determine whether Yushchenko had been poisoned or not. The clinic reiterated that Yushchenko's symptoms were not a product of food poisoning but from substances introduced artificially into his bloodstream. In contrast, the fake clinic statement had categorically stated, "The information disseminated about an alleged poisoning is absolutely unfounded in medical terms" (Reuters, September 28). The public relations company Trimedia (trimedia.at) then admitted to having faxed the fake statement, which had originated in Germany. They claimed that the text had been prepared by the Kyiv-based PR firm EuroRSCG.

New information has suggested how the poisoning may have occurred. Apparently Yushchenko began to feel acutely ill several hours after having dinner with the chairman of the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), Ihor Smeshko, and his deputy, Volodymyr Stasiuk. Yushchenko had called for a meeting with the two men to discuss the security services' involvement in the election campaign. The dinner took place at Stasiuk's home and was organized by two leading members of Yushchenko's team, Roman Besmertnyi and Davyd Zvannia. Stasiuk's involvement is significant, as he is seen as President Leonid Kuchma's man in the SBU (Zerkalo nedeli, October 2).

Yushchenko's election team has accused the SBU of being behind the fake letter faxed to Reuters. They must also remain suspicious that Yushchenko's acute illness began so soon after his dinner with two SBU chiefs. In late September Yushchenko's campaign headquarters publicly released information that the well-known organized crime figure Oleksandr Angert ("Angel") was in Kyiv on a mission to assassinate Yushchenko. Angert denied the accusation (Ukrayinska pravda, September 29). As the October 31 presidential election enters its final weeks, the degree of suspicion and

distrust that exists among the opposition, public, and the authorities is now so high that such information is widely believed.