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UKRAINIAN LEADERS CRACK DOWN ON YOUTH GROUPS AHEAD OF ELECTION

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On October 15 Ukrainian Prime Minister and presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovich told foreign diplomats in Kyiv that the government is taking all measures to ensure a free and fair election on October 31 (Ukrayinska pravda, October 15). Officials will ensure observance of the rule of law, democratic principles, and equal access to the media, he assured.

Now in its fourth month, the Ukrainian election campaign has been dominated by widespread abuses and violations, as the U.S. State Department warned on the same day as Yanukovich's speech to diplomats. Yanukovich's claims of being in favor of a free and fair election are not plausible, as the authorities have launched a nation-wide effort to repress opposition forces. To ensure that Yanukovich is not confronted by opposition demonstrations during his campaign appearances, members of youth groups are arrested before he arrives (<http://maidan.org.ua>).

Members of the PORA (It's Time!) youth movement, modeled on Serbia's OTPOR and Georgia's Khmara, were arrested in western, southern, and eastern Ukraine (see pora.org.ua and kuchmizm.com). During a search of PORA's Kyiv office, witnessed by opposition parliamentary deputies, the police found nothing incriminating except anti-Yanukovich leaflets. But during a second search, with only the police present, a bomb was allegedly found. The Prosecutor General then launched a criminal case accusing PORA leaders of "terrorism" and "destabilization of the situation in the country." PORA was accused of being an illegal "military formation -- a terrorist group" (Ukrayinska pravda, October 16). The Prosecutor General's office has attempted to link the alleged bomb to the August terrorist act in a Kyiv market, which it had originally blamed on political parties allied with Our Ukraine.

A widespread media campaign has linked PORA to Our Ukraine, and thus its presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko, whom the authorities have been desperate to portray as an "extremist" (temnik.com.ua, October 18 and 19). PORA members issued a statement describing themselves as the "vanguard of peaceful opposition." They called upon all of their activists and Ukrainian citizens to "legally, peacefully, and in a non-violent manner defend constitutional rights and freedoms in Ukraine" (pora.org.ua, October 18).

Over the same weekend, armed members of two pro-presidential parties, Yanukovich's Party of Regions and Viktor Medvedchuk's Social Democratic Party United, tried to break into the opposition newspaper, Vecherni Vesti, which is linked to Yulia Tymoshenko, a key Yushchenko ally. A spetsnaz unit

of the Interior Ministry also attempted to break into the prestigious Kyiv Mohyla Academy University to locate PORA supporters, but officials refused to allow them in without a search warrant.

These pre-emptive actions against the opposition were part of a failed attempt to disrupt last weekend's student rally in Kyiv. Some 20,000 students from throughout Ukraine rallied in support of Yushchenko's candidacy (razom.org.ua/album/152/).

In a related action, Ukrainian Border Troops prevented Aleksandar Maric, a founding member of OTPOR, from entering the country. The Security Service and Foreign Ministry have refused to provide an explanation, especially as Maric had a one-year multi-entry visa.

OTPOR has been training PORA members under the auspices of the Citizen Participation in Elections in Ukraine (CPEU) program run by Freedom House, the National Democratic Institute, and the International Republican Institute and funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development. OTPOR had also been cooperating with the Znyayu (I Know!) civic education and election youth group (znyayu.org.ua).

Presidential spokesman Vasyl Baziv has argued that the action taken against OTPOR is both legal and in the interest of Ukrainian national security (Interfax-Ukraine, October 15). But, as Freedom House pointed out, the CPEU program is legally registered with the Ministry of Justice and "operates in full compliance with Ukrainian laws" (freedomhouse.org). Such "learning across borders" is an "integral and accepted part of programs" used to encourage democratization throughout the world, according to a Freedom House press release.

This is certainly how the opposition understands U.S. assistance programs. But Ukrainian authorities are visibly paranoid about the threat of a Serbian or Georgian-style popular revolution occurring in Ukraine to protest election fraud. One week before the arrests and deportations, the pro-presidential camp had clamored for the National Security and Defense Council to take tough action against opposition plans to undertake mass civil disobedience (Ukrayinska pravda, October 7).

Valeriy Pustovoitenko, head of the group coordinating political parties that support Yanukovych, warned that regional organizations of his own People's Democratic Party throughout Ukraine were reporting that "certain forces are preparing for disturbances on election night in all of Ukraine's regions" (Ukrayinska pravda, October 13).

Our Ukraine deputy Taras Stetskiv retorted that opposition and civic groups are merely attempting to ensure as few violations as possible on election day, given the laxity of law enforcement bodies and election officials. Yushchenko's campaign also issued a statement claiming that the authorities

were losing control of the situation and were not confident of Yanukovich's victory (razom.org.ua). This was admitted by presidential adviser Mikhail Pogrebynsky, who said, "We have a situation whereby the bigger part of the authorities' team does not believe in their success." He added that there was a widespread "feeling that the authorities will lose" (glavred.com, October 6).

Emphasizing their concerns, Oleksandr Milenin, Deputy Minister of Interior and head of Kyiv's police, leaked to the Financial Times (October 19) the existence of a new "ninja" police unit "trained in special measures." He also claimed that "new means" had "been approved by the health ministry" and were available to suppress protests. These developments have made Milenin confident that "There won't be any revolution here" in Ukraine.