

EURASIA DAILY MONITOR
Volume 1 Issue 104 (October 13, 2004)
UKRAINIAN AUTHORITIES TARGET STUDENT AND YOUTH
ELECTION-MONITORING GROUPS

By **Taras Kuzio**

As Ukraine's presidential election approach, the authorities are increasingly nervous about the increased visibility of youth NGOs monitoring the election. October has seen an especially large number of intimidation tactics and violence targeted against these groups.

On October 4, Tetiana and Oleksandr Batrak, Donetsk-based activists from Student Wave, a youth election-monitoring initiative linked to candidate Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine group, were kidnapped by skinheads, locked in a basement, and interrogated about their planned activities. The Batraks were whisked away in an automobile with no license plates. As leaders of Student Wave noted, "It is nonsense when cars without [license] numbers can travel throughout the city and take away people and not be halted by the DAI [State Automobile Inspectorate] posts" (razom.org.ua, October 6).

The skinheads demanded information that would suggest that Ukrainian youth groups might launch a Georgian-style popular revolution. They were particularly interested in how the students would react if the election results were falsified. When the kidnapped students replied that they would indeed organize students to protest fraud, the interrogators became "very agitated" (Ukrayinska pravda, October 6). They also openly admitted to the kidnapped students that they were "criminal bandits who are not afraid of anything" (razom.org.ua, October 5).

It was no surprise that these tactics were used in Donetsk. According to Ukrayina moloda (September 23), local businessmen, the state administration, and organized crime groups are planning to engineer widespread election fraud in Donetsk. Massive election fraud occurred in Donetsk during the 1999 and 2002 elections, when Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich was still governor of the region.

The skinhead enforcers are well prepared, suggesting they are working on behalf of the authorities. The Donetsk thugs sought specific details about Student Wave's finances, membership, leaders, and objectives. They had files on each of the Student Wave leaders containing personal data that had to have come from university administrators or the Security Service (SBU). Different youth groups have noted that the SBU has questioned their members regarding an alleged coup by the opposition.

Ukraine's youth election-monitoring groups have organized two coalitions. The "New Choice" group brings together many well-known youth and election

monitoring NGOs and is supported by the Europe XXI Foundation (europexxi.org.ua). New Choice grew out of the Civic Monitoring Committee active in the 2002 election, which saw the first large-scale youth mobilization. The "Freedom of Choice" coalition brings together 300 NGOs active in election monitoring (coalition.org.ua; hotline.net.ua).

Youth election-monitoring groups are involved in a wide range of activities in an attempt to counter violations and get out the youth vote. A traveling "Political Theater" has mocked Yanukovich over his presumed fear of eggs, after he collapsed last month when hit by one during his visit to Ivano-Frankivsk. In early October the radical youth group "PORA" (It's Time) even released chickens outside the Cabinet of Ministers building in Kyiv.

These NGOs also have more serious activities. Youth groups, such as the well-known Committee of Voters of Ukraine (cvu.org.ua), have a strong reputation for election monitoring. Their assistance is invaluable for OSCE long-term observers who spend two months in Ukraine's regions prior to elections.

Youth groups have launched legal cases against the common practice of state officials campaigning on the job for Yanukovich. In early October the Kherson oblast governor, Serhiy Dovhan, was forced to defend his efforts on behalf of Yanukovich. Dovhan was soon removed after the case became widely publicized and damaged Yanukovich's ratings. The youth election-monitoring group "Znayu!" (I Know!) is involved in providing positive information on the elections, educating elections monitors, and attempting to block election fraud (znayu.org.ua). This informational strategy compliments threats by more radical youth NGOs to publicize corruption by election officials who may be tempted to take bribes in return for falsifying the election results.

PORA has been especially targeted, because the authorities have labeled it an "extremist" group. Numerous PORA members have been detained or arrested throughout Ukraine for minor "crimes" such as putting up stickers (pora.org.ua/en/content/view/211/2/). PORA is perceived as radical because it was modeled on Serbia's OTPOR and Georgia's Khmara youth groups. Serbian OTPOR members, who were highly influential in the October 2000 democratic revolution in Serbia, have helped to train PORA. Ukrainian authorities remain fixated on the possibility that this election will trigger a repeat of the Serbian and Georgian revolutions in Ukraine, which they believe were instigated by the United States.

To counter PORA's success, the authorities have created a "Non-PORA." One of its first acts was an October 12 demonstration in front of the U.S. embassy in Kyiv, using placards saying, "No to American Imperialism!" (<http://maidan.org.ua/static/news/1097489198.html>) This anti-Americanism is part of the overall anti-American campaign unleashed by the authorities in

an attempt to portray Yushchenko as an American stooge (see EDM, October 8).

Yesterday (October 12) Alexander Marich, a founder of OTPOR, was detained at Kyiv's Borispol airport and deported today (October 13). Marich had a multi-entry visa and had spent most of the last two months in Ukraine, but official fear of OTPOR bringing the "Serbian/Georgian scenario" led to his deportation.

What most perturbs the authorities is that Yushchenko has overwhelming support among the younger generation. In contrast, Yanukovych's team had to pay students to attend a rally on his behalf in Kyiv on September 29. These students responded "Yes!" to a call from Yanukovych's campaign headquarters when asked if they desired "Free and Fair Elections." But when asked "And you will vote for Yanukovych?" they replied "No!" on live television. The organizers abruptly ended the rally.

Student Wave is organizing an October 16 student rally in Kyiv that plans to bring together 10,000 students from across Ukraine in support of Yushchenko. The rally will begin with a free concert in central Kyiv featuring Ukraine's two best known rock bands. The rally is intended to mobilize students behind demands for a free and fair election. In addition, it will provide concrete advice for students on how to resist pressure and intimidation from the authorities (Ukrayinska pravda, October 12). According to the organizers, "The authorities are not happy at the level of support of the people's candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, among students" (yuschenko.com.ua).