

## EURASIA DAILY MONITOR

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### TENSION BUILDS AS UKRAINIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION ENTERS HOMESTRETCH

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On the eve of the October 31 Ukrainian presidential elections, the political situation in the country may be spiraling out of control. President Leonid Kuchma cancelled a one-day visit to Poland last weekend, blaming the "complicated internal situation in Ukraine." On October 25 he again attacked the opposition for their campaign activities, while staying conspicuously silent about massive election violations (Ukrayinska pravda, October 25).

The authorities believed that by September the election momentum would have shifted in their favor. Instead, challenger Viktor Yushchenko's lead over Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich has continued to grow, causing panic in the Kuchma camp.

The government doubled pensions to \$53 per month (285 hryvnia), at a cost of an additional 1.1 billion hryvnia (\$206 million). The move drove inflation up from 6.3% to 9%, created gasoline shortages, and triggered a rush on the hryvnia. Ukraine's National Bank, headed by Yanukovich's campaign manager Serhiy Tyhipko, had to tap its foreign currency reserves to keep the hryvnia stable. Interest rates are also set to go up. Still, Yanukovich has persisted in trying to induce voters, offering interest-free loans for property purchases and free cars for pensioners.

Doubling pensions and two new policy initiatives (making Russian an official language and allowing dual citizenship) brought Yanukovich an additional 10-15% in the ratings, primarily from Communist supporters. However, Communist voters did not stay with Yanukovich long. A Razumkov Center poll found that 62% of respondents in eastern Ukraine and 74-76% in other regions believe that the pension increase was a pre-election ploy to raise Yanukovich's popularity (Ukrayinska pravda, October 26).

Communist Party candidate Petro Symonenko continues to lead in two oblasts where Yanukovich must win to enter round two of the elections. Worse still for Yanukovich, in Luhansk oblast, which together with Donetsk makes up his Donbas power base, coal miners are on strike demanding the payment of wage arrears.

Public rallies are becoming more tenuous as the campaign winds up. Although President Kuchma had admitted that "provocations" would take place, he called upon law enforcement to "not react to provocations" (Ukrayinska pravda, October 25). In reality, law enforcement have been directly involved in "provocations" throughout the campaign.

On October 23 a rally in support of Yushchenko that ended outside the Central Election Commission (CEC) attracted 100,000 people, despite numerous obstacles used to block his supporters from traveling to Kyiv. That evening 200 demonstrators remained outside the CEC to support the opposition members inside, who were attempting to prevent the creation of further election stations in Russia, which they fear will be fraudulently used by Russia on behalf of Yanukovich's candidacy.

One hundred plain clothes "demonstrators" attacked the remaining opposition protestors that night. They were brought to the CEC by a spetsnaz unit (Tytan) within the Interior Ministry. Two of the "demonstrators" were later detained by the opposition, after they were discovered to have identity cards showing them to be Interior Ministry captains, suggesting the collusion of law enforcement with Yanukovich's campaign (Financial Times, October 25).

Despite widespread arrests and intimidation of opposition and youth NGOs, these groups are

fighting back. A student rally on October 16 in Kyiv attracted 25,000 in support of Yushchenko. In Lviv, 2,000 picketed the Interior Ministry and State Administration to protest repression of youth groups and 10,000 attended a Lviv rally on October 26 in protest at the arrest of youth activists. Whenever police have attempted to enter student facilities without warrants, they have been refused entry, such as at Kyiv Mohyla Academy.

The authorities have begun to reveal their growing panic in four ways.

First, local authorities have attempted to block Yushchenko's campaign tour of southern and eastern Ukraine. In Kirovohrad a temporary zoo was even installed on the square where he was meant to speak. Other cities have refused to let his plane land in their jurisdictions.

Second, the authorities are beginning to realize that only Yushchenko can bring out large crowds. A pro-Yanukovych rally in Kyiv providing free alcohol still only attracted 500 people.

Yushchenko and Socialist leader Oleksandr Moroz have called upon their supporters to picket the CEC and regional election commissions on election night to prevent fraud. After Saturday's rally the authorities began building a fence around the CEC. In response, the Socialist Party issued a statement that said, "The authorities are scaring us with a 'Georgian scenario' when they themselves are developing a 'Belarusian scenario' " (Ukrayinska pravda, October 25).

Third, members of the pro-presidential camp who are neutral between Yushchenko and Yanukovych have fallen under suspicion. Both parliamentary speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn and former presidential adviser Oleksandr Volkov have recently complained that the Security Service is following their movements. Both Lytvyn and Volkov have warned of dire consequences if they or their families, who are also under surveillance, are harmed. Former Interior Minister Yuriy Krawchenko, who was dismissed in February 2001 because of his involvement in the murder of opposition journalist Heorhiy Gongadze, has fled with his family to Russia because of fears he might become a scapegoat to deflect blame from Kuchma.

Fourth, remaining independent media outlets have come under assault. Both Channel 5, linked to Our Ukraine businessman Petro Poroshenko, and Era TV, linked to Dnipropetrovsk oligarch Andrei Derkach, have been threatened with closure. The reason is their objective coverage of the elections: the authorities fear that they will provide uncensored news on election day. Reporters Without Frontiers ranked Ukraine 138th in its just-released Press Freedom Index, the lowest in Europe apart from Russia which is 140th ([www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org)).

It is little surprise that tension is running very high. On October 14, the head of Yushchenko's election campaign, Oleksandr Zinchenko, sent an open letter to the National Security and Defense Council outlining how the authorities, through their election violations, are threatening national security ([www.razom.org.ua](http://www.razom.org.ua)). Our Ukraine also issued a statement outlining its fears of the violent measures that the authorities were planning on election day to forestall an opposition victory (Ukrayinska pravda, October 22).