

SECURITY FORCES BEGIN TO DEFECT TO VIKTOR YUSHCHENKO

By [Taras Kuzio](#)

During yesterday's parliamentary hearings on Ukraine's post-election crisis, speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn promised not to use force against demonstrators. Similarly, during Sunday's meeting of the National Security and Defense Council, Security Service (SBU) chairman Ihor Smeshko argued against using force, as it would lead to greater unrest and constitute a threat to national security.

Do these statements reflect concern for democratic rights or an indirect admission that the security forces would not back the authorities? Most likely the latter. The Yushchenko camp was buoyed by secret negotiations with the Interior Ministry (MVS) and military, elements of whom stated their willingness to defend protestors in Kyiv if the authorities launched repression. An MVS statement guaranteeing to put down "threats to the constitutional order" was therefore largely hollow (Reuters, November 22).

On election night (November 21) MVS officers appeared on Channel 5 stating their unwillingness to act against the narod (people). Kyiv Berkut (riot police) Maj. Hennadiy Abramchuk, who appeared in one of these appeals, was removed one day later. Since November 25-26, when the political situation in Kyiv began tipping in challenger Viktor Yushchenko's favor, the reality has been that the SBU, armed forces, and MVS did not have the stomach to repress hundreds of thousands of protestors.

Their reluctance is based on the widespread public doubt that Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich won the presidential runoff. During the first three days after the November 21 vote, a breakdown in command and control left most MVS officers confused as to who was in charge. When asked this question, a Berkut officer guarding the presidential administration replied, "I don't know whether Kuchma or Yushchenko is now president" (Kyiv Post, November 25).

On November 26-27, MVS cadets and officers were seen arguing with Berkut policemen guarding the presidential administration. Six hundred cadets from the MVS Academy were telling Berkut officers that the elections had been completely fraudulent and encouraging them to join the opposition (Zerkalo nedeli, November 20-26).

President Leonid Kuchma's distrust of Kyiv's elite special forces was handled in two ways. First, his office flew in Crimean detachments, which were thought to be personally hostile to the "nationalist Yushchenko." Second, Russian "Vityaz" special forces from Bryansk flew into Irpin, near Kyiv, on November 23 to provide safe passage for Kuchma, his allies, and incriminating documents, should the situation deteriorate.

On BBC World News (November 28) leading Kyiv MVS officers admitted that the majority of Kyiv's MVS officers were pro-Yushchenko. Different rayon departments of Kyiv's MVS, such as Sviatoshyn, have begun to defect in domino fashion to Yushchenko (razom.org.ua, November 27). The Kyiv Prosecutor's office has also declared its support for Yushchenko.

The seriousness with which these MVS defections were taken could be seen in Interior Minister Mykola Bilokin's demand that his officers obey the law and

not declare their support for either candidate (Ukrayinska pravda, November 26). This is rich coming from Bilokin, who had bragged that the MVS would "get drunk for three days" after Yanukovych won the elections. Bilokin dragged the MVS into supporting Yanukovych during the elections through KGB-style surveillance of the opposition and providing escorts for busloads of absentee-ballot voters for Yanukovych. A decree by Yushchenko's Committee for National Salvation is set to divide the MVS further by replacing the discredited Bilokin with a more neutral individual.

Although the Berkut may be standing firm, this is not the case with other MVS special force units. In western Ukraine large numbers of officers and lower ranks from the directorate to combat organized crime (UBOZ) have defected to Yushchenko's Committee for National Salvation. MVS personnel in other units in Trans-Carpathia also defected to the Committee (maidan.org.ua, November 26). By the second day after round two, Lviv's MVS officers were wearing Yushchenko-orange armbands.

The SBU had largely stayed out of politics during the election campaign, but since round two the SBU's sympathies lie with Yushchenko. Large numbers of audio files made in Yanukovych's election headquarters, which reveal plans for blatant election fraud, were leaked by the SBU to the Yushchenko camp.

General Oleksandr Skybynetsky, an adviser to SBU chairman Smeshko, and four other senior SBU officers issued an appeal to the security forces to not use force against the opposition and to not obey "illegal" orders. "The Ukrainian people refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the presidential elections," the statement read (Ukrayinska pravda, November 25). Skybynetsky and SBU General-Lieutenant Oleksandr Skypalsky had already issued a statement on the eve of round two calling upon their fellow SBU officers to not be dragged into the elections.

The military has also been showing support for Yushchenko. Defense Minister Oleksandr Kuzmuk reassured demonstrators that they should, "Have no doubts that the army will always defend the interests of the people" (Financial Times, November 25). Kuzmuk's concern could be seen when he warned the opposition against attempts at winning over the military. He complained about deputies visiting military garrisons and agitating officers to not obey any "criminal orders" issued against the Yushchenko camp (Inter TV, November 26).

General Mykhailo Kutsyn, commander of Ukraine's Western Operational Command, stated his unwillingness to use his military units against the narod. Since the runoff, there have been daily reports of Western Operational Command units declaring their loyalty for Yushchenko. They were backed up by appeals from Yushchenko on November 24 and by an appeal from a special congress of local government deputies who support Yushchenko to soldiers and officers in the security forces a day later.

On November 25 Kuzmuk's predecessor, General Yevhen Marchuk (a former SBU chairman and secretary of the National Security and Defense Council) made a stunning statement to Channel 5, calling upon the SBU, MVS, and military to not obey "orders given by word of mouth" that would presumably be directed against demonstrators. General Vitaliy Radetsky, defense minister in the 1990s, told opposition crowds, the "Slogan for today is the Army is with the people!" (razom.org.ua, November 29).

Both Marchuk and Radetsky have called upon President Kuchma to admit widespread vote rigging. The independent Armed Forces trade union issued an appeal calling upon their fellow military officers to demand the removal of the Yanukovych government and the appointment of a new Defense Minister.

Not to ignore other branches of the security forces, Yushchenko issued a statement addressed to Customs Service and Border Troops and calling upon them to stop "oligarchs" fleeing Ukraine with various ill-gotten goods and funds (yuschenko.com.ua, November 26). In western Ukraine the State Tax Administration, which has its own militia units, defected quite early on to Yushchenko. Military units of the Ministry of Emergency Situations have also declared their support for Yushchenko as president.