

EURASIA DAILY MONITOR
Volume 1 Issue 81 (September 09, 2004)

STRATFOR REPORT SUGGESTS DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION POSSIBLE IN UKRAINE

By **Taras Kuzio**

Is a Georgian-style democratic revolution possible in Ukraine? While clearly refuting any similarities between Georgians and Ukrainians, the authorities are also increasingly nervous. A U.S. STRATFOR intelligence commentary that predicted Ukraine was approaching a Georgian-style revolution was widely discussed in the pro-presidential Ukrainian media. The Social Democratic United Party newspaper (*Nasha gazeta*, August 27) predicted that if such a revolution were attempted, it would not have widespread support. Vasyl Baziv, deputy head of the presidential administration, railed against the opposition for threatening to call for mass protests against election fraud (*Ukrayinska pravda*, September 3).

The authorities appear to have everything stacked in their favor: large finances, "state-administrative resources," the security forces, and organized crime skinheads. At the same time, semi-authoritarian regimes, such as Ukraine, are very vulnerable during elections. The clearest examples of this were in Serbia (October 2000) and Georgia (November 2003) when protests over election fraud led to regime change. Ukraine's ruling oligarchs are also very aware that they have no legitimacy in the eyes of Ukrainians and the *vlada* (ruling regime) is widely discredited.

President Leonid Kuchma has himself ridiculed the idea of the "Georgian scenario" taking place in Ukraine. In the last 2-3 years, he said, he had been threatened with protests of 300-400,000 (when the real figure was 20-50,000). "Therefore, I do not take such threats in a very serious way" (*Den*, July 20).

This is, though, only the official face of the regime. In reality, the authorities fear the October 31 presidential election might actually remove them from power in independent Ukraine. Viktor Yushchenko, the presidential candidate leading in the polls, believes that the authorities "have started panicking" (*Interfax*, August 23). Serhiy Tyhipko, the head of Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich's election campaign, told ICTV (August 10) the widely believed view that, if Yanukovich wins, it would mean that the elections had been rigged. "Then, the next steps will follow -- a Georgian variant, a revolution," Tyhipko warned.

The regime is showing signs of insecurity. This explains why a relatively small-scale student protest in the northeastern city of Sumy against the politically motivated merger of three universities led to panic in Kyiv. About 100 students marched on Kyiv but were beaten and arrested along the way, leading to further protests in Kyiv and Sumy. The Interior Ministry issued a statement claiming that the student march on Kyiv was being promoted by "well known political forces [i.e. the opposition] with the aim of including, through their actions, extremist-directed individuals" (*Ukrayinska pravda*, August 8). The on August 10, President Kuchma reversed his April 21 decree combining the Sumy universities. The decision was made, "to remove premises for political speculation and confrontation." It is difficult to imagine 100 students forcing a Western President or Prime Minister to backtrack in such a way.

The same is true of Kuchma's decision to suspend further privatization ahead of the elections. The June privatization of Kryvorizhstal by oligarchs Viktor Pinchuk and Renat Akhmetov was widely condemned inside and outside Ukraine as heavily fixed in their favor. Kuchma halted further privatizations because the opposition had stated that these sales would be reversed if they came to power.

On August 22, the Interior Ministry (MVS), Security Service (SBU), and Prosecutor's Office issued a joint statement that warned they were taking "preventive measures." According to these agencies, "We have evidence indicating that the opposition political forces are currently preparing various and dangerous acts aimed at destabilizing the country." The statement further claimed that protests planned in the event of election fraud, "are dangerous for society and domestic stability and will be dealt with according to Ukrainian law." The bulletin alleged that the opposition was calling upon Ukrainians to "express protest in the most extreme forms -- a revolt" (*Ukrayinska pravda*, August 22).

Opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko, a Yushchenko ally, has indeed warned that she would "organize and lead acts of civil disobedience" if the authorities used the same tactics they unveiled in the April Mukachiv elections (Zerkalo nedeli, August 21). In that race, the opposition won the popular vote, but the authorities declared their candidate to be victor.

But how many Ukrainians would go on to the streets to marshal a "Georgian scenario"? A national poll by the respected Kyiv-based Razumkov think tank found that 84% of those polled agreed that they had a right to protest on the streets in the event of election fraud (Ukrayinska pravda, August 5). Only 6% disagreed.

The Razumkov experts cautioned that not all favorable respondents would automatically hit the streets to protest. At the same time, they warned, "It would be naive to hope that the authorities can without limits discredit themselves in the eyes of their own population without an outcome that could turn out to be fatal to themselves" (Ukrayinska pravda, August 5).

Another poll conducted by the Democratic Initiatives Fund and Sotsis found that 18.1% of Ukrainians were ready to take part in protests against election fraud, as opposed to believing they had a right, as in the Razumkov poll (UNIAN, July 23). Some 10.6% would strongly protest if their candidate did not win the elections.

An estimated 53.3% of Ukrainians would prefer to trust the planned exit polls, which will be the biggest of any Ukrainian elections, rather than the official result if the two differ (UNIAN, July 23). Ukraine's largest planned exit polls, coupled with plans by the opposition to block attempts at election fraud, concern authorities that are not confident of winning the elections. Stepan Havrysh, Viktor Yanukovich's official representative in the Central Election Committee, and Yanukovich himself, have therefore attempted to downplay the significance of these planned exit polls (Ukrayinska pravda, August 27).

The irony is that the provocations that have taken place have been by the authorities, not the opposition.