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By Taras Kuzio

In February, Oleksandr Turchynov, a close ally of Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, replaced Ihor Smeshko as chief of the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU). Smeshko recently provided new details about violence during Ukraine's 2004 presidential elections in a long interview published in the May 27 issue of the newspaper Fakty. Smeshko's comments bring to light more details about the violence planned, and sometimes attempted, against presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko. This new information also helps explain why the Orange Revolution that carried Yushchenko to victory was non-violent.

The Yushchenko camp anticipated and prepared for violence. Yushchenko's personal security detail was led by Yevhen Chervonenko, now minister of transportation, and included 55 former SBU, spetsnaz, and Interior Ministry experts. Chervonenko claims that they had an "elaborate system of reconnaissance, intelligence, and physical protection" (Times, April 1).

Chervonenko also built up a team of hundreds of "battle-ready" individuals, including many athletes. "All were armed. Many of them legally held various weapons, including hunting weapons" (Ukrayinska pravda, March 29). These paramilitaries were backed by 4,000 volunteers who, according to Orange Revolution organizer Taras Stetskiv, were "ready for everything and only waited for a signal" to storm the presidential administration (Zerkalo Nedeli/Tyzhnia, December 11-17, 2004).

According to Chervonenko, "We would not have allowed troops into the center of Kyiv without a fight" (Ukrayinska pravda, March 29). That fight never came. When Interior Ministry (MVS) troops were dispatched to Kyiv on November 28 they failed to reach their destination because taxis had blocked the main roads into Kyiv.

Aside from possible assaults on his supporters, new details suggest that there were three separate plots to eliminate Yushchenko.

Plan one is the best known, namely Yushchenko's near-fatal poisoning. However, Smeshko claims that Yushchenko was not poisoned with anthrax on September 5 during dinner with SBU deputy chief Volodymyr Satsiuk. He says that the SBU had investigated a possible link between the poisoning and the two Russian bombers arrested two months later. If proven, this scenario would point to a Russian connection in at least two of three assassination attempts on Yushchenko.

Plan two involved bombing Yushchenko's election headquarters during the November 21 runoff. Two men arrested in connection with this plot had false Russian passports and were in a car with Russian license plates. The two arrested claimed that the 3 kilos of plastic explosives in their car were part of an attempt to fake a terrorist attack and increase Yushchenko's ratings. Smeshko discounted this explanation because a small portion of the plastic explosive had been tested, common procedure before a bomb is planted. If the bomb had gone off as planned, the entire three-story headquarters would have been destroyed.

For plan three, a sniper squad was trained to assassinate Yushchenko while he addressed the Orange Revolution crowds from the Maidan stage in central Kyiv. Chervonenko said this was the second of two assassination attempts that he had foiled (Times, April 1). Whether the sniper squad was arrested or fled abroad has not been disclosed.

Rumors of a Russian spetsnaz unit in Kyiv during the Orange Revolution have proven to be false. SBU Chief Turchynov and MVS Minister Yuriy Lutsenko have now revealed these were in fact a MVS "BARS" spetsnaz unit brought from the Crimea to be the last line of defense outside the presidential administration (Zerkalo Nedeli/Tyzhnia, December 11-17, 2004, Ukrayinska pravda, April 12). The first lines of "Berkut" spetsnaz were from Kyiv; photos show that demonstrators had placed flowers in their shields.

The Crimean "BARS" spetsnaz had orders to shoot if the demonstrators broke through the unarmed "Berkut" forces and attempted to storm the presidential administration. Tymoshenko led crowds to the building on November 23 where they stood all night.

Smeshko credits the SBU with preventing violence during the Orange Revolution. This was not easy as, "A part of those who still were in power

demonstrated a readiness to go for a violent option, even as far as bloodshed, to hold onto power" (Fakty, May 27).

Smeshko says then-President Leonid Kuchma advocated non-violence. Kuchma's son-in-law, oligarch Viktor Pinchuk, claims that one reason Kuchma refused to use violence was he did not want to leave office with Ukraine "drowned in blood" (Ukrayinska pravda, February 12), nor did he want to be executed like Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989 (Ukrayinska pravda, January 26).

Besides Kuchma, only Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych and presidential administration head Viktor Medvedchuk had the authority to order MVS Minister Mykola Bilokin to send Internal Troops against the crowds. In fact, Yanukovych told former Polish President Lech Walesa, "An order had already been given to the security forces" (Observer, May 1). Indeed, throughout the first week of the Orange Revolution Yanukovych complained that Kuchma had not fulfilled his "constitutional duties" by transferring power to the declared president-elect -- Yanukovych -- and imposing a state of emergency.

Besides taxis blocking main roads into Kyiv, another factor worked against the order for MVS troops to attack the protestors. According to Turchynov, during the 18 months prior to the election a "special contact unit" had worked with Kyiv's military units (Guardian, May 27). This effort, together with a decade of cooperation in NATO's Partnership for Peace, created Orange sympathizers in the armed forces who were ready to obey orders from Yushchenko's Committee for National Salvation. Thus, MVS Internal Troops halted their advance on Kyiv. "The leadership of the infantry of the armed forces of Ukraine warned that they were ready to stand between the people and the ranks of Internal Troops moving on Kyiv" (Ukrayinska pravda, April 12).

Aside from Yushchenko's poisoning, other forms of violence were narrowly averted during Ukraine's 2004 presidential election, and the Orange Revolution will be remembered for its non-violent nature.