

YANUKOVYCH TRIES TO CLEAN UP HIS IMAGE

By **Taras Kuzio**

Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich was nominated on April 14 as the candidate of the pro-presidential camp for the October 31 presidential election in Ukraine. The nomination came six days after a parliamentary vote on constitutional changes failed. Opinion polls show Yanukovich to have overtaken Communist Party leader Petro Symonenko as the second-most popular candidate. Therefore, he is likely to go to the second round, where he will face Viktor Yushchenko, leader of the Our Ukraine bloc. Yanukovich has two drawbacks as a candidate: his own criminal background and his association with the Donbas region. Yanukovich heads the Party of Regions, the Donbas "party of power." From 1997 to 2002, Yanukovich was Donetsk governor and has close links to Renat Akhmetov, one of Ukraine's wealthiest oligarchs, who is chief executive of Donetsk-based Systems Capital Management. Until Yanukovich was nominated as prime minister in November 2002, he never included information concerning his two prison terms in any of his biographies. The two prison terms are still ignored in many Yanukovich biographies (www.yanukovich.openua.net).

Yanukovich was sentenced to three years imprisonment, from 1967 to 1970, for theft. But he was released early. He was again imprisoned from 1970 to 1972 for violence. In 1978, the Donetsk oblast court annulled both convictions. Hanna Herman, Yanukovich's new press spokeswoman, complained that, "Someone is very eager to discredit the leading aspirant to the top post in our state" (Ukrayinska Pravda, May 13). President Kuchma added that it is, "a bit laughable when this factor is used" (Ukrayinska Pravda, April 28). A Cabinet of Ministers press release, dated May 13, also linked the public airing of Yanukovich's prison terms to the election campaign.

The issue will not go away. Even within the pro-presidential camp not everybody is convinced that it was a right choice to put forward a candidate with two criminal convictions. Members of the Lviv branch of the pro-presidential Labor Party refused to back Yanukovich because he had been twice imprisoned and they believe he would, "transform Ukraine into a Donetsk gubernia" (Ukrayinska Pravda, May 25).

Not surprisingly, the opposition has raised the issue. Our Ukraine Deputy Mykola Tomenko posed a question in Parliament to Interior Minister Mykola Bilokin, in which he asked for details relating to both convictions. Answering the question has proven difficult for Bilokin, as the original documents in Donetsk oblast courts pertaining to Yanukovich between 1960 and 1970 have disappeared. A

similar cleansing of official documents pertaining to the past of Viktor Medvedchuk, head of the presidential administration, took place after the publication in 2001 of an unflattering biography entitled *Narcissist by Our Ukraine* Deputy Dmytro Chobit.

Oleksandr Kondratyev, chairman of the Donetsk appeals court, attempted to clear up Yanukovich's criminal background at a news conference during which he outlined the convictions. Kondratyev explained how former cosmonaut and USSR Supreme Soviet Deputy Georgiy Beregoviy interceded on Yanukovich's behalf to help overturn both convictions (Interfax-Ukraine, May 26). After the press conference, Donetsk media publicised a claim that the 1978 overturning of the two convictions was legitimate as Yanukovich had been charged on "false testimony" (Ukrayina TV, May 26). It was offered as further proof of his innocence that Yanukovich was permitted to join the Communist Party in 1970.

In 1973, Medvedchuk was also sentenced to two years imprisonment for violence. But he, like Yanukovich, did not serve his full sentence. Quashing of Medvedchuk's conviction may have been based on an illicitly taped conversation by presidential guard Mykola Melnychenko. On the recording, Kuchma is told by then-Chairman of the Security Service Leonid Derkach that Medvedchuk and his long-time oligarch ally, Grygoriy Surkis, had been KGB agents (New York Times, December 19, 2003).

Yanukovich's image has also been damaged by his association with the Donbas, a Ukrainian region well-known as politically akin to Belarus -- and one of Ukraine's most corrupt regions. Donbas is considered domestically and abroad as a region with very close ties joining local political and business interests with organised crime elites. Yanukovich and his allies do not seem to understand those links. But in February, the Industrial Union of the Donbas (ISD) failed to win a tender in the privatisation of the Polish steelworks Huta Czestochowa. The ISD tender was turned down on the advice of the Polish Internal Security Agency (ABW), which alleged that the ISD possessed an "unfathomable source of capital, unknown business structure, and was possibly involved in money laundering" (Rzeczpospolita, March 4).

Yanukovich is hampered in improving his image by his ties to the pro-presidential camp. His ratings have declined because of his refusal to condemn election malpractice in the April Mukachevo mayoral elections. His support for media freedom sits uneasily with his history of affiliation with pro-Kuchma allies and his own record as governor in the Donbas, which developed as the Ukrainian region with the worst record on media freedom. Yanukovich has attempted to improve this image

by hiring Herman, head of Ukraine's Radio Liberty office. Yanukovich claims that she would assist him, if he won the election, in developing media freedom in Ukraine (Ukrayinska Pravda, May 6).

Yanukovich is also saddled with the inability of Ukraine's authorities to resolve the fall 2000 murder of opposition journalist Heorhiy Gongadze, editor of the Internet Ukrayinska Pravda newspaper. During Yanukovich's visit to Brussels to attend a meeting with the EU, the International Union of Journalists (IUJ) gave him a letter which was critical of the way the Gongadze case was handled. Yanukovich told the IUJ that he would make "strengthening media freedom one of the priorities of his election campaign" (Ukrayinska Pravda, May 19).

Ukraine's oligarchs have long sought scholarly links and academic doctorates as a means to improve their status. In May, Yanukovich was elected to the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences. Finally, Yanukovich was quick to appoint as his adviser Ruslana Lyzhychko, the Ukrainian entrant who won the 49th Eurovision contest held last month in Istanbul. As a result of the Ukrainian win, next year's contest will be hosted in Kyiv by the victor in this year's presidential election.