

EURASIA DAILY MONITOR
Volume 1 Issue 25 (June 07, 2004)

UKRAINIAN OPPOSITION CANDIDATE TARGETED BY "SKINHEADS"

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On June 1, Ukrainian Parliament Deputy Speaker Oleksandr Zinchenko complained of collusion between "law enforcement structures and the criminal world" in the April 18 Mukachevo mayoral elections (www.rada.kiev.ua, June 1). Zinchenko specifically targeted "skinheads," who had been reportedly organized as paramilitary groups by the presidential administration and the Social Democratic United Party (SDPU-o), both of which are led by Viktor Medvedchuk. The "strategic, decisive decision" by the Trans-Carpathian governor, Interior Ministry and organized crime skinheads to undertake illegal activities "was not made in Trans-Carpathia but in Kyiv", Zinchenko stated (www.rada.kiev.ua, June 1). This was Zinchenko's second speech focusing on the elections. Speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn asserted in an earlier debate that, "what took place was simply a disgrace" (Ukrayinska Pravda, April 28).

Skinheads also have been conspicuous on a national level. Most of the disruption in presidential election campaigning has been felt by pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko, the most popular candidate, and emanated from outside Yushchenko's western and central Ukrainian strongholds. In those regions he faces little competition from either of his two main rivals - Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich or Communist Party leader Petro Symonenko. It will be primarily in the more Russian-speaking east and south where Yushchenko will have a tough election battle on his hands. This is clearly understood by rival candidates.

When Yushchenko's Our Ukraine party held its regional congress in Donetsk on October 31, skinheads acted as stewards, organizing students in opposition to the so-called "Nashists." The term Nashists is a play on the words Nasha Ukrayina (Our Ukraine). The opposition compared Our Ukraine party members to Nazis. Billboards plastered throughout Donetsk featured Yushchenko giving a Nazi salute. Yushchenko eventually won a libel suit but was awarded only 500 hryvni (\$US50) in compensation.

Paying students to demonstrate against the opposition or vote in favor of the authorities' candidates has become commonplace. At a recent demonstration in Kyiv, students holding anti-Yushchenko/Our Ukraine placards were embarrassed to be filmed because they admitted having been paid 10 hryvni (\$US2) to attend the demonstration (Ukrayina moloda, June 2).

Deputy Regional Governor Anton Kisse won the May 31 parliamentary seat election in Odesa. The low 24 percent voter turnout indicates that only 7.26 percent of voters in the constituency actually cast ballots in his favor. Our Ukraine-backed candidate Mykhailo Borodsky, head of the Yabloko party, came in third. Brodsky alleged that Kisse's victory was a consequence of students being, "ordered to support one of the candidates who was represented by administrative resources" (Ukrayinska Pravda, June 1). These student votes, combined with low voter turnout that worked against the opposition, gave Kisse his victory.

In the eastern Ukrainian cities of Kharkiv, Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia, Yushchenko has encountered opposition from regional governors. These officials are divided between orders to provide administrative resources for their candidate, Yanukovich, and responsibility for ensuring free and fair elections. Yanukovich's home base Donetsk, one of the most politically repressive regions in Ukraine, continues to prevent free and fair electioneering. Donetsk Mayor Oleksandr Lukianchenko was clearly irritated by Our Ukraine's electioneering in his city. This represented "unhealthy agitation", he said (Ukrayinska Pravda, April 27). A day after his complaints, skinheads attacked Our Ukraine activists holding an election campaign rally entitled "Yes to Good Living Standards! No to dictatorship!" (Ukrayinska Pravda, April 28).

In Kharkiv, Governor Yevhen Kushnariov ordered the release of two Our Ukraine activists from 10 and 15-day administrative arrests. Kushnariov was embarrassed by domestic and international criticism of his actions in ordering the incarcerations. Requests by Our Ukraine to hold demonstrations were turned down in Sevastopol and Kyiv. In Zaporizhzhia, security guards shot at Our Ukraine activists distributing leaflets outside the university after they refused to halt their

activities. University rectors, who are beholden for their positions to the presidential administration, sought to block opposition access to students. In Sumy, students were ordered to discard leaflets that they were given at the entrance to the university (Ukrayina moloda, June 2).

In Kyiv, Luhansk, Odesa and Zhitomir, offices of Our Ukraine have been entered illegally. The main aim of the culprits was to obtain lists of Our Ukraine members or sympathizers who could then be pressured into withholding support. In the Trans-Carpathian town of Mukachevo, teachers sympathetic to Our Ukraine were sacked. The parliamentary human rights ombudswoman protested the firings after receiving numerous appeals from sacked teachers. About 450 teachers from throughout Ukraine, who attempted to attend an opposition-backed education forum in Dnipropetrovsk, found that local authorities had closed the hall that they had rented. In Chernihiv, offices of Rukh, a party allied to Our Ukraine, was bombed. The attack was the third incident of this year. Opposition billboards, it would seem, are particularly offensive. In April and May, billboards supporting Yushchenko with the slogan "Yes! I Believe in Ukraine!" were legally paid for and erected throughout Ukraine. Within a short period, most had either been defaced or covered (www.razom.org.ua, May 20).

When Yanukovich and other officials visited the Crimean capitol city of Simferopol, as well as the cities of Melitopol and Chernivtsi, billboards were removed, either on orders from the presidential administration or on the initiative of over-zealous regional governors. Issuing bogus opposition leaflets is a long-standing practice. Such leaflets in 2003 precipitated Our Ukraine protests that led to parliament forbidding the post office from distributing political leaflets to homes. This has not halted the practice. A recent leaflet and poster that was widely-circulated by hand in Kyiv attempted to discredit Our Ukraine by offering to pay "a stable income until November" if an individual participated in opposition street protests (Ukrayinska Pravda, April 28). Anti-opposition media outlets quickly publicized this fake leaflet (<http://www.temnik.com.ua>, April 28).