

UNRESOLVED GONGADZE MURDER MAY BE ISSUE IN UKRAINIAN ELECTIONS

By [Taras Kuzio](#)

Tension has again re-surfaced surrounding the autumn 2000 murder and beheading of Ukrainian opposition journalist Heorhiy Gongadze. On June 17, Hryhoriy Omelchenko, head of the parliamentary committee investigating the murder, announced that his commission had reached a unanimous verdict. The commission concluded that Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma ordered violence against Gongadze, while then Minister of Interior (MVS) Yuri Krawchenko and then Security Service (SBU) Chairman Leonid Derkach implemented the order. Volodymyr Lytvyn, then head of the Presidential Administration, was present during discussions concerning Gongadze where Kuchma gave the order. Not surprisingly, Lytvyn, now parliamentary speaker, has blocked discussion of the parliamentary commission report in which senior officials would have been called to give evidence. Lytvyn became speaker in May 2002. Since September 2000, Omelchenko has attempted to have preliminary findings of the commission discussed in Parliament. But such discussions have not taken place. When Omelchenko appealed to Lytvyn on June 14 to be given time to outline conclusions of the report, he was rebuked as Lytvyn "knows what is in there" (Ukrayinska Pravda, June 16).

The commission has again recommended that the prosecutor's office launch impeachment proceedings against Kuchma as the "main organizer of the illegal criminal order relating to Gongadze" (Ukrayinska Pravda, June 17). Impeachment is unlikely to occur because of the requirement that two-thirds of parliamentary deputies support the motion. Tension deepened when secret documents on the Gongadze case were leaked to British newspaper the Independent (June 19). Commenting on the reports, Omelchenko said they led to the same conclusions as those of the parliamentary commission. The documents, which included interviews with four police officers, indicated a high level cover up blocking investigation into the Gongadze murder. In October 2003, Hennadiy Vasilyev, who is hindering progress of the investigation into the murder, replaced former Prosecutor-General Svyatoslav Piskun, who was close to bringing charges in the case. The Independent confirmed that an MVS Special Forces unit, which had Gongadze under surveillance, collaborated with organized crime groups. One of these, a well-known Kyiv mafia group led by "Kysil," was given the task of eliminating Gongadze.

The Independent (June 19) pointed to leaked documents that showed that Igor Honcharov, a police officer arrested in 2003 for links to organized crime, was murdered by a lethal injection of thiopental on August 1, 2003. Honcharov had passed documents on the Gongadze case to a Kyiv NGO. Honcharov feared being murdered and that his death would be faked as suicide. Honcharov's death certificate listed his death as stemming from "natural causes". Evidence of the thiopental injection came from a secret unofficial autopsy carried out before his cremation. Only a month after he was appointed, Prosecutor Vasilyev released from imprisonment Oleksiy Pukach, head of the MVS investigative department. Pukach was arrested on Prosecutor Piskun's orders because he had headed the MVS group of 25 officers who had kept Gongadze under surveillance. Vasilyev replaced Piskun as prosecutor only six days after Pukach was arrested. After Gongadze's abduction on September 16, 2000, Piskun illegally ordered the MVS documents on Gongadze to be destroyed.

The Independent published names of four MVS officers who testified to having been ordered to follow Gongadze. In light of Honcharov's death, those officers, some of whom provided these documents to the Independent, remain concerned for their security. Prosecutor Vasilyev rejected charges laid out in the report of the Gongadze Commission and in the Independent. Vasilyev described the four MVS officers as "mythical employees of law enforcement organs" (Ukrayinska Pravda, June 21). Vasilyev also denied that there was a high-level cover up, claiming that a man, identified only as "K," had been arrested. Vasilyev said that K had previously been prosecuted for murder and the beheading of corpses. K confessed to murdering the journalist. This is not the first time authorities have attempted blame criminals for the Gongadze murder; criminals were first charged in December 2000.

With no progress in the Gongadze case, lack of trust and confidence in the prosecutor's office is not

(Ukrayinska Pravda, June 22). If indeed K is the murderer, he would know where Gongadze's head is to be found, she added. The Socialist Party (SPU) described Vasilyev's reaction to the Independent article as another attempt at a cover up, backed by Kuchma, his parliamentary allies and Speaker Lytvyn. The SPU, and other opposition groups, have demanded that the Gongadze Commission report be discussed in Parliament and that Prosecutor Vasilyev provide Parliament with a report on the Gongadze investigation. The slow pace of the prosecutor's office investigation into the Gongadze murder contrasts starkly with the rapid submission to Parliament on June 10 for Julia