

PRO-KUCHMA PARTIES COMPETE FOR RURAL VOTE

By Taras Kuzio

The Peasant Party of Ukraine (SelPU) held its congress on July 16-17 and changed from an opposition party to one controlled by the pro-Leonid Kuchma camp. Its new leader, Tetiana Zasukha, is a close personal friend of Ukraine's first lady, Ludmilla Kuchma. Zasukha and her husband, Anatoliy, head of state administration for Kyiv, were select guests of Kuchma's during his medical treatment over the New Year in a private clinic in Baden-Baden, Germany (Ukrayinska pravda, July 16 and 17).

The SelPU was created in January 2002 by Soviet Ukraine's last Minister for Agriculture, Oleksandr Tkachenko, and its core membership consisted of the conservative chairmen of collective farms. In the 1990s, Tkachenko took a back seat to Serhiy Dovhan, the SelPU's leader until he recently was convinced to step down after being given a position as head of the Kherson state administration. SelPU took part in the 1998 parliamentary elections in alliance with the SPU and obtained 8.55% of the vote, coming in third after the KPU and Rukh.

A year later the SPU-SelPU alliance collapsed, and the SPU created its own parliamentary faction. Tkachenko was Parliamentary Speaker for a brief period in 1998-99. He registered as a presidential candidate in the 1999 elections but withdrew his candidacy before election day. In January 2000, Tkachenko was removed by a national-democratic-centrist "velvet revolution," and he joined the KPU.

The then SelPU went into terminal decline, and, after standing alone in the 2002 elections, it obtained a miserable 0.37% of the vote, coming in 19th out of the registered 33 parties. In contrast, the still-oppositional SPU came fifth with 6.87% of the vote.

At first glance, the 2002 election result seemed to suggest that the SelPU was not really such an important catch for the authorities. But, this view fails to appreciate how many of the centrist parties in the pro-Kuchma camp were once weak parties who were taken over because of their brand name, legal status, or pliable leadership.

Particularly during election season, the authorities seek to control political machines that can deliver votes in key economic sectors. In this regard, the SelPU compliments the current rural party of power, the People's Agrarian Party (NAP), which was originally established in the mid-1990s to compete with the SelPU. Instead of competing, the SelPU and NAP could now work jointly for the pro-Kuchma camp but with different regional responsibilities. The SelPU's main area of support is in southern and central Ukraine while the NAP is strongest in western and central Ukraine.

NAP leaders, a moderate member of the pro-Kuchma camp, began complaining in June that their ostensible allies were attempting to poach their members, and

they threatened to defect from the pro-Kuchma camp if this continued. NAP was in desperate need of high-level political protection, which it only obtained when Parliamentary Speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn was elected as its head in early July. Lytvyn openly admitted that the main pressure on NAP came from Viktor Medvedchuk's Social Democratic United Party (SDPUo) (Zerkalo Nedeli, June 26).

Lytvyn quickly sought to make the NAP into a more viable party. One of his first decisions was to give a two-week deadline for parliamentary deputies elected through the NAP in 2002 to join the Agrarian faction. Failure to do this would lead to expulsion from NAP. Indeed, Zasukha and Mykhailo Zubets were expelled after refusing to move from the Labor Ukraine to the Agrarian factions.

Lytvyn raised concerns that Zasukha, the new leader of the SelpU, would now try to poach NAP members in the same manner as the SDPUo had tried to do the month before (Ukrayinska pravda, July 14). In fact, the SDPUo could have orchestrated the SelpU takeover by expelled NAP members.

For Lytvyn, becoming NAP leader also means preparing for the 2006 parliamentary elections. The Agrarian Party first stood for elections in 1998 and failed to cross the 4% threshold, obtaining 3.68% and coming in ninth out of 30 registered blocs and parties. In the 2002 elections the Agrarians joined with other pro-Kuchma parties in the For a United Ukraine bloc.

Becoming NAP leader also gives Lytvyn party protection, as he likely will lose his Parliamentary Speaker position if the pro-Kuchma camp's candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, is elected. As president Yanukovich would want to replace the head of the Presidential Administration, Medvedchuk, who is known to covet the speaker position.

Lytvyn is hoping to build NAP into a party strong enough to make others refrain from poaching its members or taking over its local branches. "I want the People's Agrarian Party to be a real, and not just a nominal, political force. When this happens such problems will no longer take place," Lytvyn promised (Zerkalo nedeli, June 26). In turn, NAP obtains protection from Lytvyn; although he has no oligarch clan behind him, Lytvyn believes that his long and close links to President Kuchma protects his interests.

Lytvyn is trying to prepare for every possible outcome in this year's elections. In Washington he is lobbying U.S. government officials with the hope of improving his image. His election rhetoric has been strongly critical of the "oligarchization" of Ukraine and corruption.

One possibility that Lytvyn has to consider is a victory by opposition presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko. In such a scenario, moderates in the pro-Kuchma camp, such as NAP, would most likely support a new parliamentary majority built around Our Ukraine's 100 deputies. The majority could also include the new Center faction created by parliamentary defectors from the pro-Kuchma camp, who allegedly are allied to Lytvyn (Ukrayinska pravda, June 30). Such a new parliamentary majority would exclude the SDPUo, as Lytvyn is as antagonistic towards Medvedchuk and the SDPUo as is Yushchenko.