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KUCHMA REGIME USING "SKINHEADS" AGAINST OPPOSITION

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Ukraine's prosecutor general is to report to parliament on May 12. He has already claimed that his office has undertaken 600 interviews during the course of its investigation into irregularities that occurred during the April 18 election in Mukachevo. Nevertheless, since the election, violent attacks have continued against the opposition by what are known as "skinheads." They have attacked Our Ukraine activists in Donetsk and vandalized the Kyiv offices of the Ukrainian National Party, a member of Our Ukraine.

In Ukraine, "skinheads" are grouped in "Brotherhoods" (Bratstvo) where they act as the enforcers of organized crime. They therefore have no ideological motivation.

The decision by President Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Medvedchuk, head of the Presidential Administration, to resort to the use of "skinheads" would seem to be a sign of their desperation as presidential elections loom in October. Despite some positive polling numbers for pro-Kuchma candidate Viktor Yanukovich, Kuchma and Medvedchuk both fear a victory by Our Ukraine leader Viktor Yushchenko. Personal animosity runs deep between Medvedchuk and Yushchenko.

The failure to adopt constitutional changes in the parliamentary vote of April 8 is one reason why Kuchma and Medvedchuk are becoming increasingly desperate and resorting to blatantly illegal activities. These include outright election fraud and the unleashing of organized crime "skinheads" against the opposition. These acts of desperation could result in unpredictable actions as the election date comes nearer.

To assume that Medvedchuk is undertaking these illegal activities without Kuchma's authorization is to misunderstand both Kuchma and Ukrainian politics. When domestic and international complaints compel presidential action to rectify problematic situations, as was the case after Mukachevo, Kuchma typically feigns ignorance and orders what amounts to a "virtual" investigation.

"Skinheads" first began to be used in the Fall of 2003 and targeted Viktor Yushchenko and his Our Ukraine bloc when they attempted to hold a regional congress in Donetsk. These plans were thwarted through the employment of thousands of paid (and often drunk) young people; they pretended to be in "opposition" to the "nationalist" Our Ukraine. The stewards organizing the anti-

Our Ukraine "opposition" were in fact "skinheads."

In March, during a by-election in Donetsk, paramilitary Cossacks and "big guys in black jackets" (that is, individuals with links to organized crime) claimed to be druzhnyky (People's Volunteer Militia). These Cossacks and "big guys" blocked access to vote counting by a non-governmental organization, the Committee for Voters, and other observers. The result was a landslide for the candidate backed by the authorities.

In the Crimea this past April, violence was organized by "skinheads" against Crimean Tatars who, in turn, over-reacted and attacked young Slavs in a coffee bar. The timing was meant to coincide with the arrival of financier George Soros in the Crimea, where he was to attend a Tatar conference. The purpose of the actions by the "skinheads" was to suggest that Soros encourages violence and instability (as he had allegedly done in Serbia and Georgia) in order to promote pro-U.S. regimes.

Subsequently, in Kyiv, Soros was attacked by activists from the nationalist "Bratstvo" organization (deliberately named so as to resemble the slang term for organized crime, Bratstvo's). The leader of the organization, Dmytro Korchytsky, is hostile to Our Ukraine and is an ally of Medvedchuk's Social Democratic United Party (SDPU-o).

The resort to the use of "skinheads" reveals the close ties that exist between the SDPU-o and organized crime. "Skinheads" were most active in the Mukachevo elections, where regional SDPU-o members were witnessed openly organizing and transporting them.

The close links between organized crime and the SDPU-o, coupled with shock at how far Medvedchuk has gone in his illegal activities, has led to calls by the opposition for the SDPU-o to be banned as a "fascist" party.

Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) personnel are unhappy over the escalation of violence by "skinheads" but are unable to halt it. Disgruntlement within the SBU has a long history going back to Kuchma's re-election in 1999. At that time Mykola Melnychenko, an officer in a service with duties resembling those of the U.S. Secret Service, began to make covert recordings of conversations in Kuchma's office. The tape recordings released after November 2000 revealed widespread illegal activities, including Kuchma's involvement in the abduction and murder of an opposition journalist, Heorhiy Gongadze.

A long time SBU officer, Valeriy Krawchenko, defected in Germany in February. He has condemned

what he says is the return in Ukraine to the use of KGB type tactics against the opposition.

The Ukrainian Interior Ministry (MVS) speaks in different tones. Indeed, the murder of Gongadze was undertaken by a special forces unit subordinate to the MVS directorate for combating Organized Crime (UBOZ), known as Sokil (Eagles). And these special forces MVS units are known to work together with "skinheads" - either to assist them directly, or turn a blind eye to their activities (Ukrayinska Pravda, April, 12-16, 19, 21-23; Zerkalo Nedeli, March 13-19, April 30-May 15; http://razom.org.ua/viewnews/top_news/13146).