

END NOTE

ELECTION CAMPAIGN STARTS IN UKRAINE

By Taras Kuzio

On 31 March 2002, Ukraine will elect a new parliament. The outcome of that ballot will determine the country's domestic and foreign orientation for the first decade of the 21st century. How the elections are conducted will determine if Ukraine's international image will improve following the death in the fall of 2000 of journalist Hryhoriy Gongadze and the ensuing "Kuchmagate" scandal. The 1994 and 1998 parliamentary elections were deemed free and fair by the OSCE and the Council of Europe.

Ukraine's revised parliamentary election law came into force on 30 October 2001, and the 90-day election campaign officially begins on 1 January 2002. Ukrainian voters have a six-cornered choice between two pro-presidential blocs (For a United Ukraine and the Social Democratic Party of Ukraine united [SDPUo]); two antipresidential blocs (Socialists and Yulia Tymoshenko); one that bridges these two hostile camps and is antioligarch but is not hostile to President Leonid Kuchma (Our Ukraine); and one that rejects just about every aspect of the present political system and Ukraine's independence (Communists).

The hard-line Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) will more than likely again garner its steady 15-20 percent of the vote, mostly from pensioners, according to two December polls by Sotsis and Democratic Initiatives. That party's main support base is in the industrialized Russified and sovietised regions of Eastern Ukraine and the Crimea.

The Socialist Party of Ukraine (SPU), once an ally of the KPU, took part in the 1998 elections with the now defunct Peasant Party. Peasant Party leader Oleksandr Tkachenko, who served briefly as Rada Chairman in 1998-1999 until Ukraine's "velvet revolution" in early 2000 that removed the Rada's left-wing leadership, has now returned to the KPU. Throughout the 1990s, the SPU moved cautiously to the right to position itself on the left of the Social Democrats and toward a pro-statehood position. This move was reinforced by the key role played by SPU leader Oleksandr Moroz during the Kuchmagate affair that erupted in November 2000. The SPU's allies will be four small parties representing rural interests, dissident Greens, the former Soviet-era Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine, and Social Democrats. The SPU's main base of support is in the Ukrainophone regions of Western and Central Ukraine outside of Galicia. Mykola Melnychenko, the former Security Service officer at the heart of Kuchmagate who is now in exile in the United States may run on the SPU list.

Moroz's SPU is tactically allied with the former Forum for National Salvation (FNS) created in February 2001 at the height of Kuchmagate because both blocs support moves to radically reform Ukraine's political system, including abolishing the presidency and

impeaching President Kuchma. The FNS has been renamed the "Yulia Tymoshenko" bloc to capitalize on the former deputy premier's popularity as a female politician and most voters' preference for personalities rather than blocs or parties. The Tymoshenko bloc includes her own Fatherland, two center-left parties (Social Democrats and the Patriotic Party), and four national democratic ones (Sobor, Republicans, Conservative Republicans, and Christian Democrats).

The SDPUo, which is headed by former first deputy parliament speaker Viktor Medvedchuk, has long considered former Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko as its main protagonist, and he has felt the same about the SDPUo. Both the SDPUo and Yushchenko's Our Ukraine have their main base of support in western-central Ukraine and Medvedchuk orchestrated the 26 April no-confidence vote in Yushchenko's government. In the 1998 elections, the SDPUo only managed to gain seats in the Rada because the party's result was "topped" up by votes from the Agrarians to push it over the threshold to the suspiciously close 4.01 percent. While Medvedchuk has attempted to use the language card to obtain eastern Ukrainian votes, he has also sought to increase his profile among western Ukrainians by openly talking of the arrest in 1944 on charges of being a member of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) of his father, who was then deported to Siberia, where Medvedchuk was born.

The loss of support from the executive for the SDPUo, as reflected in Medvedchuk's ouster on 13 December from the post of deputy chairman of the Rada, means that the party will not have access to "administrative resources" during the campaign. It is also not coincidental that the National Council for Television and Radio Broadcasting, headed by former Rukh Chairman Ivan Drach, withdrew the license from Inter television — which is controlled by the SDPUo and is highly popular in Eastern Ukraine where the rival pro-Kuchma For a United Ukraine has its main support base — on the same day that Medvedchuk was removed as Rada deputy chairman. The SDPUo leadership must be wondering if they will suffer the same fate as former Prime Minister Pavlo Lazarenko's Hromada, which was destroyed in 1998–1999 after he quarreled with the executive. SDPUo votes may be needed by For a United Ukraine to counter Yushchenko's popularity.

Successive opinion polls conducted since summer 2001 show Yushchenko's popularity rating at 30 percent, a figure far higher than any other politician in Ukraine, and that of Our Ukraine at 15–20 percent, according to the same two polls. The popularity of his bloc is only low in southern-eastern Ukraine (2–5 percent) and the Crimea (1 percent). This means that for the first time in Ukraine's history, the KPU is not the most popular party. The "Yushchenko phenomenon" makes it likely that the KPU will only attract hard-core supporters, while those who formerly voted for the Communists as a sign of protest against the status quo will this time vote for Our Ukraine, Tymoshenko, or the SPU. Yushchenko's bloc includes his longtime national democratic allies from the two main wings of Rukh; Reform and Order, led by old-time colleague Viktor Pynzenyk; the Liberals (the former Donbas Party of Power); the "mini oligarch" Solidarity party, whose leader Petro Poroshenko heads the bloc's headquarters; and other smaller Christian and national democratic parties.

Yushchenko has attempted to bridge the pro- and anti-Kuchma camps

by making clear his opposition to the oligarchs but not to Kuchma personally. This has, however, not prevented Kuchma from openly accusing Yushchenko earlier this month of being behind "Kuchmagate." Yushchenko is the godfather to Poroshenko's daughters and has been criticized by Tymoshenko for including both him and Roman Besmertnyi, until recently Kuchma's representative in the Rada and a former member of the pro-Kuchma Peoples Democratic Party of Ukraine (NDPU), as his election campaign manager. Kuchma is also utilizing the recently formed anti-Yushchenko Rukh for Unity led by Bohdan Boyko to draw away some Rukh supporters from Our Ukraine.

For a United Ukraine is Kuchma's open favorite and the nucleus of Ukraine's future presidential party. At a meeting with the regional media on 18 December, Kuchma openly admitted having instructed all levels of the state, from the heads of village councils to the prime minister, to vote for that bloc. During his two-hour meeting he never once mentioned Medvedchuk or the SDPUo. The five parties belonging to the bloc (NDPU, Agrarians, Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, Party of Regions, Labor Ukraine) seemed earlier this fall in danger of falling apart, a factor that led Kuchma to delegate Volodymyr Lytvyn, head of the presidential administration, to lead the bloc. Prime Minister Anatoliiy Kinakh is second on the list of top names of For a United Ukraine. Lytvyn sees the main supporters of his bloc as voters tied to the authorities and pro-presidential supporters.

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