

A Survey of Developments in Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine by the
Regional Specialists of RFE/RL's Newslines Team

OUR UKRAINE AS TRANSFORMATION OF RUKH.

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The Ukrainian Movement for

Perestroika (commonly referred to as Rukh) was established in 1988-89 as a popular front comprising former prisoners of conscience from the Ukrainian Helsinki Group and members of the cultural intelligentsia. Rukh became a catalyst for other opposition parties and civic groups that came onto the scene during the last few years of Soviet rule.

During the 1990s, however, Rukh became progressively marginalized within Ukraine's evolving multiparty political system. In 1992, the movement divided into two wings, one led by Vyacheslav Chornovil who stood in "constructive opposition" to President Leonid Kravchuk, and another that supported Kravchuk and created the Congress of National Democratic Forces (KNDS).

In the second half of the 1990s, Chornovil's Rukh had better relations with President Kuchma because of Kuchma's support for reform in 1994-96 and his pro-Western orientation between 1995-99. By 1998-99, though, relations were beginning to sour as Rukh became disillusioned with the type of regime emerging in Ukraine, the rampant corruption, and the widening gap between rhetoric and policies. After the death of Chornovil in a suspicious car accident in March 1999, Rukh again split into two wings. One wing, led by former Foreign Minister Hennadiy Udovenko, maintained good relations with the government, while the other, led by Yuriy Kostenko, leaned toward the opposition and kept close ties with Yuliya Tymoshenko's Fatherland party.

Former Prime Minister Yushchenko has transformed the splintered Rukh into Rukh-2 (Our Ukraine) for the current elections. That transformation has been so thorough that the only similarity left between the old Rukh-1 and Our Ukraine is that pop singer Taras Petrenenko continues to close all of Our Ukraine's rallies with Rukh's unofficial anthem "Ukraine, Ukraine!"

Our Ukraine is more popular than Rukh-1 for a number of reasons. Unlike Rukh-1, Our Ukraine has a socioeconomic program, and about two-thirds of Yushchenko's typical campaign stump speech is devoted to laying out this program. The Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) and the oligarchs voted no confidence in Yushchenko's government in April 2001, despite his record as prime minister in 1999-2001, when he paid back wages and pensions and presided over

Ukraine's first period of economic growth in a decade. This track record seems to be working in Our Ukraine's favor.

In Yushchenko, Our Ukraine has a charismatic leader who is able to bridge the gap between citizens and rulers, a gap that was already large during the Soviet era and which grew wider in the 1990s. Our Ukraine has managed to reunite the two wings of Rukh and the successor to the KNDS, the Christian Republican Party. Our Ukraine now consists of 25 political parties, including liberal, patriotic, and Christian-democratic factions, as well as the Federation of Trade Unions. It has also broadened Rukh-1's old social base by incorporating pragmatic bankers and others from the financial sector, as well as representatives of business and state officials. Roman Bezsmertnyy, political coordinator of Our Ukraine, is still the president's representative in parliament and is a former member of the Republican Party and of the People's Democrats (NDP). Bezsmertnyy resigned from the NDP after he joined Our Ukraine, while the NDP aligned with For a United Ukraine (ZYU).

Pragmatists have been attracted to Our Ukraine because it defines itself as an alternative -- rather than an opposition -- in a country where optimism for a better future has all but evaporated. If Rukh-1 could be described as romantic, Rukh-2/Our Ukraine is purely pragmatic -- Ukraine's first real alternative to either a sort of return to the past, as envisioned by the KPU, or continued muddling along with no clear strategy, as favored by the oligarchs.

It was always a mistake for Western and Russian commentators to categorize post-1992 Rukh-1 as "nationalist," a holdover from the Soviet era, when a "Ukrainian nationalist" was by definition from western Ukraine, spoke Ukrainian, and supported center-right parties. It is also a mistake to define Our Ukraine as "nationalist." Our Ukraine supports the Jewish former mayor of Odesa, Eduard Hurvits, who is now running on the Our Ukraine party list. In mid-March, Our Ukraine condemned anti-Semitic leaflets that were circulated against Hurvits. Our Ukraine's party list also includes Crimean Tatars and ethnic Russians. Volodymyr Hrynyov, a Kharkiv-based former head of the Russophile Social-Liberal alliance during the 1998 elections, is now supporting Our Ukraine. The hard-line national-democratic and nationalist parties have joined Tymoshenko's bloc, not Our Ukraine.

A comparison of public opinion polls conducted by several organizations in mid-March by the Internet publication "Ukrayinska pravda" gave Our Ukraine a popularity rating of between 24 and 33 percent, far higher than pro-presidential blocs or the KPU, and an increase from 18.8 percent a month earlier. The Center of Economic and Political Studies predicts that this could reach as high as 29.3 percent, due primarily to Yushchenko's personal popularity. Unlike Rukh-1, Our Ukraine's more pragmatic program has generated support in eastern and southern Ukraine, albeit far less than in western Ukraine where polls give it 50 percent support.

Yushchenko has refrained from criticizing the government, and his only criticism is directed at oligarchic groups such as the Social Democratic Party Ukraine (United) (SDPU-O) and former Prime Minister Valeriy Pustovoytenko's NDP, which is one of five parties that make up ZYU. "The SDPU-O is as likely to evolve into

social democrats as sea lions into lions," Yushchenko tells his supporters at rallies. Yushchenko has also ridiculed the claim that the 1997-99 Pustovoytenko government laid the foundation for Ukraine's economic revival, claiming that Ukraine was on the verge of bankruptcy when Yushchenko himself became prime minister in December 1999.

It is also wrong to consider Our Ukraine "nationalist" because its support for radical economic and political reforms and for Ukraine's integration into European and trans-Atlantic structures are hardly traditionally nationalist positions. Our Ukraine simply seeks to take back from the oligarchs the control of a country that was propelled to independence by Rukh-1 in 1989-1991. That is what Yushchenko means when he tells supporters at rallies, "This is your Ukraine! This is your Ukraine!"

Our Ukraine argues that the national revolution successfully launched by Rukh-1 needs to be completed now by a democratic revolution led by Rukh-2. One of the priorities for Ukraine is to overcome its "crisis of power" and change its "momentocracy" for a medium- to long-term plan. "Over the last 10 years, no system has been created that would guarantee Ukrainian democracy," Yushchenko wrote in the weekly "Zerkalo nedeli/Dzerkalo tyzhnya."

Our Ukraine has entered Ukraine's political arena during a generational change similar to that experienced by Russia in the late 1990s. Our Ukraine is a young bloc, with an average age of 40 among its candidates. The generation represented by former President Boris Yeltsin in Russia and Kravchuk and Kuchma in Ukraine will go into retirement in two years' time. The generation following them, represented by Vladimir Putin in Russia and Yushchenko in Ukraine, are now taking their places. If Our Ukraine does well in the elections, it could serve as a powerful launch pad should Yushchenko decide to run for the presidency in 2004.

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