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THE MYTH OF UKRAINE'S "THIRD FORCE" IN PARLIAMENT

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Parliamentary speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn has made another trip to Moscow on August 1 to seek political support for the March 2006 parliamentary election (Ukrayinska pravda, August 1). But the choice is limited and it is not clear with whom Lytvyn's People's Party of Ukraine (NPU) would cooperate in Russia.

Russian President Vladimir's Putin's Unified Russia party has already signed a cooperation agreement with defeated presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovich's Regions of Ukraine party. Russia's Rodina party has agreed to cooperate with the Socialist Party of Ukraine, while Russia's and Ukraine's Communists are eternal allies.

Since Yushchenko's election in late 2004, the pro-Leonid Kuchma centrist camp has disintegrated into a hard-line anti-Yushchenko core of 71 deputies and a larger group of 86 "third force" MPs willing to cooperate with Yushchenko. The hard-line, anti-Yushchenko parliamentary opposition includes Regions of Ukraine (51), the Social Democratic Party-United (SDPUo [20]), and the Communist Party (56).

The former Kuchma camp has, in effect, divided into two groups. The hard-core opposition draws on two of Ukraine's three oligarchic clans: Kyiv (SDPUo) and Donetsk (Regions of Ukraine).

The third clan, based in Dnipropetrovsk, has disintegrated into two warring factions. Viktor Pinchuk's Interpipe group supported Yanukovich's candidacy, while the Pryvat group indirectly backed Viktor Yushchenko. Since Yushchenko's victory, Pryvat has aligned with Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, herself a dissident oligarch from Dnipropetrovsk.

Another key group to emerge from the Kuchma camp consists of centrist third-force parties that are not fronts for large regional clans. These "third-force centrists have tended to seek accommodation with Yushchenko, rather than join the hard-line opposition.

Since Yushchenko became president, the main parliamentary group to gain strength is comprised of former members of the Kuchma camp. Lytvyn's NPU faction has grown from 14 deputies to 46, making it the fourth-largest faction in parliament. United Ukraine (20) and Democratic Ukraine (19) are also composed of third-force members from the Kuchma camp. Democratic Ukraine is allied to Lytvyn, giving him indirect control over 66 of the 86 third-force deputies.

Other moderate pro-Kuchma factions have disappeared after their faction sizes declined below the minimum 14 deputies. These include former Prime Minister Valeriy Pustovoitenko's People's Democratic Party (NDP), the Kharkiv group's Democratic Initiatives led by Stepan Havrysh (Yanukovich's representative in the Central Election Commission), and the former Dnipropetrovsk oligarchic clan's Labor Ukraine (TU).

This group now holds the balance of power in parliament, but their influence will likely end after

First, their public support outside parliament is very low. A third force election bloc composed of the NDP, TU, and NPU may not cross the low 3% threshold to enter parliament. Some third-force parliamentary factions have no political parties outside parliament (i.e. Democratic Initiatives, Democratic Ukraine, United Ukraine). None of these parties has a strong regional base and without links to oligarchs or the ruling regime they also have fewer financial resources.

Second, the term "third force" is in reality a misnomer. The only difference between them and the hard-line centrist opposition Regions of Ukraine and SDPUo is that the latter two have unequivocally stated their opposition. Instead, the third-force parties are trying to be both in opposition and on good terms with the authorities, a difficult position to maintain.

Prime Minister Tymoshenko advised these parties to get off the fence. "If you are part of the authorities, then there is no need to shoot us in the back," Tymoshenko said, referring to their unwillingness to back much-needed WTO legislation this spring (Zerkalo Nedeli/Tyzhnia, July 16).

Third, many leading members of the third-force parties played prominent roles in the Kuchma administration. Their link to the Kuchma era has led Tymoshenko and many in Our Ukraine to oppose aligning with them in the 2006 election.

The NDP, for example, was Kuchma's first party of power in 1998, and NDP leader Pustovoitenko was coordinator for the political parties that backed Yanukovich in the 2004 election.

Criminal charges have been launched against high-ranking NDP member Anatoliy Tolstoukhov and Dmytro Tabachnyk (Labor), deputy prime minister and secretary to the Yanukovich government, for abuse of office. On November 25, 2004, in defiance of a Supreme Court ruling the day before, the two men ordered two official newspapers to publish the official election tally showing that Yanukovich had been elected president (Ukrayinska pravda, August 3).

Labor Ukraine's (TU) former leader Tyhipko was the head of Yanukovich's election campaign. Ihor Sharov, head of the Democratic Ukraine parliamentary faction, was Tyhipko's deputy in the Yanukovich campaign.

TU's new deputy leader, Volodymyr Sivkovych, is remembered by the Yushchenko camp as the head of the parliamentary committee to investigate Yushchenko's near fatal poisoning in September 2004. Sivkovych discredited himself by continually rejecting the conclusion that Yushchenko had been poisoned, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Tymoshenko's demand that Yushchenko exclude Lytvyn from the 2006 election alliance (EDM, August 3) will marginalize this third-force grouping. Lytvyn's marginalization from the Yushchenko camp will leave him exposed to criminal charges as head of the presidential administration during the worst period of Kuchma's rule in 1996-2002. Lytvyn is particularly vulnerable to further incriminating details related to the murder of opposition journalist Heorhiy Gongadze in fall 2000. Myroslava Gongadze and Mykola Melnychenko, the presidential guard who illicitly taped Kuchma's office, are both convinced that Lytvyn lobbied Kuchma to order then Interior Minister Yuriy Kravchenko to deal harshly with Gongadze.

Prosecutor Sviatyslav Piskun has announced that the Gongadze case will go to trial in August-

the murder, will face prosecution at this time.

The next stage of the investigation will target the plotters. If Lytvyn is implicated as one of the organizers, the "third force" will become a finished force.