

YUSHCHENKO FINALLY ACTS TO CLEAN UP HIS GOVERNMENT

By Taras Kuzio

Yesterday, September 8, Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko fired his government and removed top officials accused of corruption. Oleksandr Zinchenko, the former head of the presidential secretariat, had leveled the startling corruption charges four days earlier after resigning on September 2 (see EDM, September 8).

The crisis that engulfed Yushchenko's team after Zinchenko's accusations was no ordinary political crisis. Indeed, Socialist Party leader Oleksandr Moroz described it as a "crisis of the system" (Ukrayinska pravda, September 8).

Suddenly Ukraine's Orange Revolution received its first negative headlines from the international media. The Daily Telegraph's September 7 headline was typical: "Ukraine's Orange Revolution loses its luster."

Worse still, Ukraine's leaders failed to quietly forewarn the United States, the European Union, and Russia of Yushchenko's imminent housecleaning. Not surprisingly, many observers remained concerned about possible "destabilization" while scrambling to find out more than what they had read on the morning wires.

Russia's President Vladimir Putin appeared overjoyed at the crisis (The Guardian, September 6). He repeated Zinchenko's accusations of corruption, gloating, "We said this before and no one wanted to listen to us."

Ultimately, the main fallout was in the domestic arena, as the crisis called into question Yushchenko's personal leadership style. Few wanted to say publicly what everybody was saying privately; namely, does Yushchenko have the political will to enforce his presidential decisions?

Since his inauguration in January, Yushchenko has often preferred traveling on the international stage than actually running the country. Although constitutional reforms transferring some power from the executive to parliament and government are not set to take place until January 2006, Yushchenko was already acting as a symbolic president.

In the last eight months, Yushchenko has only intervened when the domestic situation reached a crisis point. He failed to halt the notorious public squabbling between Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and National Security and Defense Council Secretary Petro Poroshenko. He finally intervened in May, warning Tymoshenko about her statist economic policies (see EDM, May 11, 27), and in June-July, when it looked as though parliament might not adopt the legislation necessary for joining the WTO (EDM, June 15). In September Yushchenko warned Tymoshenko about supporting one oligarch group (Pryvat) over another (Interpipe) in a re-privatization dispute.

When Zinchenko aired the coalition's dirty laundry ahead of Yushchenko's scheduled visit to the United States this week, the president had to respond. A failure to act decisively might have spelled the end of the Yushchenko presidency. The opposition would capitalize on public anxieties and the image of a lame duck president ahead of the March 2006 elections.

Social Democratic Party-United parliamentary faction leader Leonid Kravchuk warned Yushchenko that he could face early elections if the political crisis continued. The former president obviously spoke from experience, having been forced to call early elections in 1994.

A growing number of Ukrainians had already begun to question whether Yushchenko was all that different from his predecessor, Leonid Kuchma. A Razmukov Center poll found that the number of Ukrainians who believed that Yushchenko was better than Kuchma had declined from 52% in April to 37% in August (Zerkalo Tyzhnia/Nedeli, August 27-September 2).

Worse still, in August the number of Ukrainians who believed that Ukraine was moving in the "wrong direction" (43%) for the first time was higher than those who thought Ukraine was moving in the right direction (32%). In February 51% of Ukrainians believed Ukraine was moving in the "right direction" compared to only 24% who disagreed. Trust in Yushchenko and Tymoshenko had declined during the same period by 16-17% (Zerkalo Tyzhnia/Nedeli, August 27-September 2).

Parliamentary speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn said that, although the new leaders claimed to be doing everything in a different way, "it increasingly resembled how it was done under Kuchma" (Ukrayinska pravda, September 6). He certainly would know, as he was head of the presidential administration from 1996-2002.

Yushchenko was also damaged by accusations recently made by Lesia Gongadze, mother of murdered opposition journalist Heorhiy Gongadze. Although killed in fall 2000, he has yet to be buried. Lesia Gongadze lost a court case in which she had complained about the inactivity of the prosecutor's office regarding her son's case. Afterwards, she said, "So what, Yushchenko or Kuchma – nothing has changed. I will not go to Yushchenko

and give him my hand, as we have nothing in common" (Ukrayinska pravda, September 7).

There have long been whispers that the official investigation into who ordered the Gongadze murder has been blocked at high levels (see EDM, July 20). First Deputy Prime Minister Mykola Tomenko said that the same people Zinchenko had accused of corruption were the same people who were blocking the Gongadze investigation (Ukrayinska pravda, September 8). Tomenko also claimed that Lytvyn had blocked parliamentary discussion of the report by the parliamentary investigation commission.

By acting decisively to remove officials accused of corruption, Yushchenko has shown that his presidency differs from that of Kuchma, who condoned corruption in exchange for political loyalty.

Zinchenko has already taken evidence to the prosecutor's office related to Poroshenko's allegedly corrupt activities. Accusations against him may be personally difficult for Yushchenko, as Poroshenko is the godfather of one of Yushchenko's five children.

Yushchenko's decisive actions have resolved the crisis for now. But there remains much to be done and his allies are deserting him. Yushchenko's Our Ukraine parliamentary faction has progressively disintegrated throughout this week. People's Union-Our Ukraine now has only 45 deputies, down from 100 at the beginning of 2005. Yushchenko's faction now has only one more deputy than Lytvyn's People's Party (44) and only four more than Tymoshenko's (41).

After Zinchenko's accusations, the Our Ukraine faction splintered into a People's Union-Our Ukraine bloc (45), using the name of Yushchenko's stalled new party of power, and Rukh factions (14). Two further factions soon appeared -- Reforms and Order (15) and Forward Ukraine (19). The Ukrainian People's Party (22) withdrew from Our Ukraine earlier.

Given the apparent crisis, perhaps Yushchenko should not be traveling abroad at this time.