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TWO DOWN, ONE TO GO? UKRAINIAN OFFICIALS TARGET ANOTHER OLIGARCHIC CLAN

By Taras Kuzio

The May 13 arrest of the former governor of Trans-Carpathia, Ivan Rizak, follows the capture of the head of the Donetsk oblast council, Borys Kolesnykov, one month earlier. The widespread arrests of lower-ranking officials for election fraud and corruption have now moved up to medium-level officials.

Rizak is formally accused of driving the dean of the University of Uzhorod to commit suicide in May 2004. Volodymyr Slyvka was found dead with his veins slashed and a knife in his heart. The charge could lead to 7-12 years imprisonment.

Rizak also stands accused of massive corruption in Trans-Carpathia, including extorting protection money from local businesses for the Social Democratic Party-United (SDPUo). Transport Minister Yevhen Chervonenko also revealed that during the April 2004 mayoral elections in the Trans-Carpathian town of Mukachevo, Rizak ordered Interior Ministry spetsnaz to beat up Our Ukraine deputies and organized massive election fraud (Ukrayinska pravda, May 15).

The next arrests will undoubtedly be senior figures in Rizak's SDPUo and Borys Kolesnykov's Regions of Ukraine (RU). The arrest of Rizak hits the SDPUo particularly hard, because the SDPUo was the only one of Ukraine's three clans to not be popular in its home base. Instead of Kyiv, the SDPUo put down roots in Trans-Carpathia, where it still faced challenges from more liberal groups.

Since the 2004 presidential election, regional officials in Trans-Carpathia have been replaced by those loyal to President Viktor Yushchenko, whose Our Ukraine is the most popular political force in the region. In the 2002 elections, Our Ukraine and the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc together won 41% of the Trans-Carpathian vote, and Yushchenko also won the 2004 presidential race in Trans-Carpathia. In contrast, Our Ukraine has made few inroads into Donetsk oblast, where the Donetsk clan and RU can remain secure.

Stripped of its home base, the SDPUo is likely to follow the demise of the Dnipropetrovsk clan's Labor Ukraine (TU). Labor Ukraine de facto disintegrated after the Orange Revolution as its leader, Serhiy Tyhipko, was discredited for being the head of the Viktor Yanukovych campaign. Tyhipko went to Austria on a "skiing holiday" in late November and only returned four months later. To distance itself from Tyhipko, TU elected a new young leader, Valeriy Konovaliuk, a defector from RU.

Ukraine's centrist parties are tainted with election fraud and massive corruption, making it impossible for the Yushchenko team to treat them as if they were a real opposition force. The RU and the SDPUo's efforts to portray the arrests of Kolesnykov and Rizak as "political repression" have fallen on deaf ears.

Parliamentary speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn does not regard either the RU or the SDPUo as "opposition." According to him, "In Ukraine, aside from the Communist Party, there is no opposition. Those that declare themselves to be in opposition are simply demoralized and ...they do not possess a clear position" (Ukrayinska pravda, May 17). Former SDPUo adviser Mikhail Pogrebysky also believes that the SDPUo "has no strategic plan of how to be in opposition" (Ukrayinska pravda, March 24).

Besides these factors, the SDPUo also suffers from four other problems that will contribute to its ultimate demise.

First, SDPUo leader Viktor Medvedchuk is a liability, but his leadership is fundamental to the party's existence.

Second, Medvedchuk admitted to the SDPUo congress that his experience heading the presidential administration from 2002 to 2004 damaged the party's popularity (sdpuo.org.ua, April 2). The SDPUo obtained 6% of the vote in 2002, while today its popularity hovers around 2%. The party may not cross the 3% threshold for the 2006 parliamentary elections.

Third, the investigation into Yushchenko's poisoning is homing in on the SDPUo. Medvedchuk and Volodymyr Satsiuk, deputy chairman of the Security Service in 2004, likely will be implicated in this criminal case. Yushchenko fell ill following a dinner at Satsiuk's house.

Fourth, details are slowly emerging about a conspiracy to cover up the murder of opposition journalist Heorhiy Gongadze in fall 2000. Prosecutor-General Sviatyslav Piskun has revealed that, after Gongadze was murdered, he was disinterred and re-buried by a second group (Ukrayina moloda, May 5).

This second team placed Gongadze in a shallow grave, leaving items on him that could identify him. They also re-buried him in Socialist Party leader Oleksandr Moroz's constituency north of Kyiv. The aim, Piskun believes, was to undermine the government, which at that time was led by Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko. The Yushchenko government's crackdown on graft in the energy sector had particularly affected the SDPUo, which therefore wanted to see his government go.

A detailed investigation in Ukrayina moloda (April 14) adds to this theory, claiming that the SDPUo moved Gongadze in order to discredit President Leonid Kuchma and force early elections. This scenario suggests that the SDPUo knew that about the incriminating audiotapes made in Kuchma's office by presidential guard Mykola Melnychenko.

According to Melnychenko, in the event of early elections, either Medvedchuk or Yevhen Marchuk, then secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, would have succeeded Kuchma. Melnychenko told former Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky, whose Civil Liberties Foundation financially assisted him in exile that he had worked for Marchuk.