

## MEDIA BIAS DECREASES IN UKRAINE, BUT THROUGH DUBIOUS MEANS

By **Taras Kuzio**

Six months into the Viktor Yushchenko presidency, the media and information situation in Ukraine remains mixed. The good news is that oligarch control over electronic media is on the decline. The bad news is that the tactics of the newly elected authorities are not always different from those used under former president Leonid Kuchma.

Ukraine's media played a negative role in the 2004 presidential election. According to the OSCE's Election Observation Mission's final report, "Most media outlets failed to provide impartial and fair coverage... and few TV stations provided the opposition with airtime" ([osce.org/odihr/](http://osce.org/odihr/)).

The main oligarch clan to lose in the presidential election is linked to the Social Democratic Party-United (SDPUo). During Kuchma's second term in office, the SDPUo controlled two television channels: the U.S.-Ukrainian joint venture "1+1" and the Russian-Ukrainian joint venture "Inter." State Channel 1 also came under the executive control. Inter and 1+1 have the largest number of viewers in Ukraine, and they are regionally concentrated in the west and center (1+1) and east and south (Inter). Most Ukrainians receive their information from television.

In the first week of the Orange Revolution, censorship disintegrated. The director and journalists at 1+1 Channel rebelled and refused to follow guidelines sent by the authorities. Although the SDPUo had never controlled 1+1, its directors had been warned that if they did not follow the guidelines, the channel would be shut down.

Following Yushchenko's election, State Channel 1 automatically transferred to his control. Taras Stetskiv, a long-time Yushchenko ally and organizer in the Orange Revolution, became the channel's president.

With two of the SDPUo's three TV channels taken away, only Inter remained under their control. Information was recently leaked to the investigative news site Telekritika claiming that the SDPUo has now lost Inter channel ([telekritika.kiev.ua](http://telekritika.kiev.ua), June 6). National Security and Defense Council secretary Petro Poroshenko, who has business interests in Russia, is acting as an intermediary for a Russian businessman who wants to purchase Inter channel. The Russian is reportedly "loyal to the Orange Revolution."

The president of Inter channel is Ihor Pluzhnykov, deputy head of the SDPUo, who controls 79% of its shares. Russia's Channel 1 controls the other 21%.

When Pluzhnykov initially refused to sell, he was subjected to a well-known tactic to persuade him to change his mind. As reported by Telekritika, "certain delicate factors forced him to begin negotiations...in a way, he was forced to choose between liberty and the TV station" ([telekritika.kiev.ua](http://telekritika.kiev.ua),

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Yale University scholar Keith Darden dubbed this proven method of persuasion the "blackmail state." Beginning under Kuchma, officials and businessmen were permitted to indulge in corruption in return for political loyalty. To ensure this loyalty, the government collected files documenting their illegal activities.

The files collected by the "blackmail state" are now being turned against former Kuchma supporters. Inter channel President Pluzhnykov is the second known target; the first was Crimean Prime Minister Serhiy Kunitsyn (EDM, April 22). Kunitsyn, head of the Crimean branch of the pro-Kuchma People's Party of Ukraine (NDP), was forced to resign or face criminal charges. His replacement, Anatoliy Matvienko, is head of the Sobor Party, which is part of Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko's bloc.

The SDPUo's loss of control over three television stations and the loss of its power base in Trans-Carpathia give little optimism for its future (EDM, May 18). A new Razumkov Center poll gave the SDPUo only 1% support, down from 6% in the 2002 and 4% in the 1998 parliamentary elections (Natsionalna Bezpeka i Oborona, no. 3, 2005). Ukrainian experts do not expect the SDPUo to scrape past the 3% threshold in the March 2006 election.

Ukraine's other oligarchs continue to control their television channels, at least for the time being. Dnipropetrovsk oligarch and Kuchma son-in-law Viktor Pinchuk controls ICTV, STB, and Novyi Kanal, while Donetsk oligarch Renat Akhmetov controls TRK Ukrayina, which mainly broadcasts in the Donbas oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Pinchuk and Akhmetov are battling the authorities over the sale of Kryvorizhstal, Ukraine's largest metallurgical plant, which they bought in June 2004 at the under-valued price of \$800 million. The current authorities, with court backing, are seeking to transfer the plant back to state property to likely be re-sold in an open tender for \$3-4 billion.

Inter channel's shift to political forces loyal to Yushchenko dramatically changes the media situation in eastern and southern Ukraine ahead of the 2006 election. Former pro-Kuchma centrists are in disarray after the defeat of their presidential candidate, Viktor Yanukovich. This crisis is also tantamount to a crisis of the pro-Russia idea in Ukraine as centrists, particularly the SDPUo, were the driving force behind Ukraine's re-orientation toward Russia in Kuchma's second term.

The pro-Russian Communist Party is also in crisis with 4.8% support (down from 20% in the 2002 election). This would give the Communists only 36 deputies in the 2006 parliament, down from its current 55 and 120 at its peak in the 1998-2002 parliament (Natsionalna Bezpeka i Oborona, no.3, 2005).

With access to Inter channel, the Yushchenko camp can now freely spread its message in eastern Ukraine. It can also deny a platform to pro-Russian forces in the 2006 election and thereby reduce the opposition's ability to block Ukraine's new Euro-Atlantic drive.