

YUSHCHENKO SWITCHES SUPPORT FROM OUR UKRAINE TO UNITED CENTER

By Taras Kuzio

On July 12 Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko's fourth party of power United Center held its inaugural congress in pompous style at the Ukrayina Palace, broadcast live on state television Channel 1. Although presidential secretariat head Viktor Baloga was touted by the Ukrainian media as the most likely candidate, because of the use of administrative resources in the party's construction, Ihor Kryl was re-elected as leader (edc.org.ua).

United Center's inability to find a charismatic and well known leader is endemic to the party's crisis from its inception. The merger of United Center with the People's Democratic Party (NDP) failed to materialize prior to the congress (*Ukrayinska Pravda*, June 27). United Center was established on March 27 after five deputies resigned from Our Ukraine-People's Self Defense (NU-NS) but opted to remain in the orange coalition. At a maximum United Center may grow to number 15 out of the 72 NU-NS deputies, still far short of the necessary majority of 37 required to vote for NU-NS's withdrawal from the coalition.

United Center supports a grand coalition of NU-NS and the Party of Regions. United Center is a "constructive alternative," Baloga said, a codeword for pragmatists in Regions and NU-NS to unite. "We are of one mind with the president, our aims are the same" (*Ukrayinska Pravda*, July 8).

The new party of power is being established administratively through regional governors, with three joining (*Ukrayinska Pravda*, March 27). In Dnipropetrovsk a large proportion of the governor's office have joined.

United Center is being established "from above, using the advantages of administrative offices, reminiscent of Kuchma-era methods," *Zerkalo Nedeli* (June 28) bemoaned. Officials employed in regional governments refusing to join United Center have been released from employment (*Ukrayinska Pravda*, July 1). In half of Ukraine's 27 regions, United Center is headed by the governor or his deputies.

United Center has two major pitfalls. First, under constitutional reforms supported by parliament's two largest factions, Regions and the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc, governors would be placed under government control, leaving the president with few "administrative resources." The NDP halted unification talks with United Center after NP leader Ludmilla Suprun was not offered the post of Zaporizhzhia governor.

Second, United Center's choice of allies is marginal. The NDP, Democratic Party and the Republican Christian Party stood in the 2007 elections in the Ludmilla Suprun-Ukrainian Regional Active bloc that obtained 0.34 percent (10th place). Two other marginal allies are the Agrarians and the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (PPPE). An alliance with these five marginal parties would not boost United Center's popularity (*Ukrayinska Pravda*, April 24).

These five allies are former pro-Kuchma centrist parties, and four supported Viktor Yanukovich in

the 2004 elections. The PPPE supported Yushchenko in the second round of the 2004 elections but the defection of its members from Our Ukraine to the Anti-Crisis coalition in March 2007 spurred the president's April 2 decree to disband parliament.

Kyiv Mayor Leonid Chernovetsky—who was backed by Yushchenko in the May 26 pre-term Kyiv elections—is to join United Center. The Chernovetsky bloc came first in the Kyiv elections with 30 percent while NU-NS failed to reach the 3 percent threshold. Kyiv City Council Secretary Oles Dovhyi remains the link between Chernovetsky and United Center and could become the head of its Kyiv branch (Ukrayinska Pravda, March 18).

There is growing antagonism inside NU-NS at United Center for poaching its regional members, so pre-term elections would unravel the bloc. United Center could have potentially gained some support if it had successfully attracted the business wing of NU-NS, which has always been inclined toward a grand coalition and lukewarm toward Tymoshenko. United Center placed high hopes on attracting parliamentary speaker Arseniy Yatseniuk as its leader, a young and respected business leader loyal to Yushchenko, but he has repeatedly declined the offer.

Other businessmen in NU-NS told EDM that while they remained loyal to Yushchenko, they did not want to participate in a political project promoted by Baloga, who has poor relations with both the majority pro-Tymoshenko and minority pro-Yushchenko wings of NU-NS. NS is financed by Davyd Zhvannia, subject of an investigation to have his Ukrainian citizenship annulled. The investigation is being orchestrated—according to NS leader and Interior Minister Yuriy Lutsenko—by the presidential secretariat (see EDM, June 2; Ukrayinska Pravda, July 9).

It is unlikely that Ukraine will have a successful party of power for four reasons. First, Ukraine's regional diversity makes it impossible to have a single party that is pan-national. Second, a party of power requires an over-arching nationalism, as in Russia under Vladimir Putin. United Center's amorphous ideology of "patriotism, truth and pragmatism" has already failed in Kuchma-era centrist parties (Ukrayinska Pravda, June 9). Third, successful parties of power require a popular president who can lead them, as is the case in Russia. Fourth, parties of power succeed in autocratic—not democratic—systems where elites and businessmen can be cajoled into joining them.

Ukraine has attempted to build two parties of power under Kuchma and two under Yushchenko; all four have failed, or probably will.

The NDP was Kuchma's new party of power headed by Prime Minister Valeriy Pustovoitenko in the 1998 elections when, despite administrative resources, the NDP received only 5 percent of the vote. Following the replacement of Pustovoitenko by Yushchenko as prime minister in 1999, the NDP faction began to disintegrate. Suprun opposed "administrative methods" to establish new parties "because we have experienced this already and learnt our lessons" (Zerkalo Nedeli, June 28).

For a United Ukraine (ZYU) was established for the 2002 elections consisting of five pro-Kuchma centrist parties, but it obtained only 11 percent despite administrative resources. The ZYU disintegrated a month after the elections into constantly fluctuating factions.

In 2005 the People's Union-Our Ukraine was established as Yushchenko's first party of power but it failed to fulfill its main objective of merging disparate national democratic parties within Our Ukraine. Three years later United Center is the second attempt.

United Center will likely become Ukraine's fourth failed party of power and will therefore be

unable to win Yushchenko a second term.