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PARTY OF REGIONS SPLITS OVER GEORGIA AND NATO

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The Party of Regions expelled National Security and Defense Council (NRBO) Secretary Raisa Bohatyryova from the party's senior decision-making body, the Political Council, and from the party itself on September 1. Until being appointed NRBO secretary in December 2007, Bohatyryova had been the leader of the Regions parliamentary faction.

The surprise decision quickly followed Bohatyryova's support for Georgian territorial integrity and NATO membership during a luncheon held three days before at Washington's Metropolitan Club by the U.S.-Ukraine Business Council (USUBC). Bohatyryova was on an official visit to the United States from August 24 to 30.

Bohatyryova's remarks were in response to two questions posed by Jamestown and by Arieh Cohen of the Heritage Foundation. Asked whether she supported President Viktor Yushchenko's support for Georgia's territorial integrity or that of Regions leader Viktor Yanukovich in support of South Ossetian and Abkhaz independence, she answered that Yanukovich's position did not reflect the party's position and gave her strong support to Yushchenko.

Bohatyryova praised Yushchenko for attempting to unite politicians and Ukraine and criticized other political leaders for putting their personal interests above national ones. She added, "they frequently use foreign challenges for their party and electoral plans despite the risks of a threat to national security," an oblique reference to Yanukovich and his stance on NATO (Ukrainian News Agency, August 31).

Bohatyryova ridiculed Regions' official view on NATO as one that was in favor of NATO membership when the party was in power and against it when it was in

opposition. She never raised the question of a referendum on NATO, a persistent Regions demand.

Citing the Kosovo precedent, Yanukovych has supported the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Two days after Bohatyryova's remarks the Crimean branch of Regions appealed to the parliamentary faction to do the same (www.partyofregions.org.ua, August 26; www.prava.com.ua, August 28). The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MZS) described Yanukovych's call as "harming the national interests of Ukraine," "provocative," "irresponsible," and "unpleasant" (www.mfa.gov.ua, August 29).

In a statement issued by the Regions faction, it did not support Yanukovych and the Crimean branch's call for Ukraine to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Instead, the statement blamed the authorities for not staying neutral and dragging Ukraine into the conflict by supporting Georgia and unleashing a "massive anti-Russian propaganda campaign" (www.rada.kiev.ua, August 26).

The Regions faction demanded a return to good relations with Russia, constitutional changes that would transform Ukraine into a non-bloc (neutral) country, and a referendum on NATO membership. Regions' call for the creation of a temporary parliamentary commission to investigate the delivery of weapons to Georgia and the participation of Ukrainians on the Georgian side echoed claims made by Russia about Ukraine's alleged involvement in the conflict.

Ukrainian politicians and the media have pointed out that arms deliveries to Georgia began under Presidents Leonid Kuchma and Eduard Shevardnadze, not under Yushchenko and Mikheil Saakashvili. Ukraine also supplied arms to Georgia during Yanukovych's government from 2002 to 2004.

Bohatyryova's expulsion from Regions was propelled by Yanukovych's anger that she had belittled his position as leader. Bohatyryova cited senior Regions leaders who condemned Russia's occupation of Georgian territory and said that Yanukovych's call for recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was a "personal viewpoint" that did not reflect the collective leadership of the party.

Deputy Regions faction leader Oleksandr Yefremov disagreed, claiming that Yanukovych's position was the outcome of a "consolidated point of view of the

Political Council of Regions. It was not the viewpoint of one person” (www.pravda.com.ua, September 1).

Asked during the USUBC luncheon whether she would be advising her U.S. contacts of Ukraine’s support for a NATO MAP, she said, “There is a need to state loudly not only [its] importance but a rise of a threatening situation if a Membership Action Plan is not given to Ukraine” (www.pravda.com.ua, September 1). Bohatyryova’s backing for Yushchenko’s strong support for a NATO MAP is at odds with Yanukovich’s opposition to a MAP.

Since the crisis Ukrainian polls have shown a reversal of the downward trend in support for NATO membership that arose following the invasion of Iraq and anti-NATO media campaigns during Yanukovich’s 2002-2004 government and the 2004 elections (www.pravda.com.ua, September 1). Support for NATO membership has risen back to a pre-Iraqi invasion level of one third, while opposition to it has declined.

Bohatyryova stated unequivocally that the Black Sea Fleet would have to withdraw by 2017 and that the constitution forbade foreign bases, whether Russian or otherwise (a pointed reference to NATO or American bases). Supporting Russia’s stance, Regions has raised the question of extending the lease beyond 2017, even though this flatly contradicts Regions’ support for Ukraine’s neutrality, a status that rules out foreign bases.

Regions has split over the Georgian crisis and indirectly over NATO. Crimean Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) leader Leonid Grach, an ally of the pro-Yanukovich faction in the Crimean parliament, has criticized Regions for its lack of a consolidated position on Georgia (Ukrainian News Agency, September 1).

Yanukovich’s support for the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is unpopular as support for the country’s territorial integrity is as high in eastern as it is in western Ukraine. With many Ukrainians and Western observers looking to the Crimea as Russia’s possible next target, the pro-independence stance of Yanukovich and Regions will be unpopular and will be used, as it already has been by the MZS, to question their patriotism (see EDM, August 12).

The Georgian conflict has exposed long simmering divisions in Regions between its virulent anti-orange ideological wing headed by Yanukovich, to which many former KPU voters defected, and a pragmatic wing dominated by big business with which Bohatryova is aligned. The split may significantly harm Yanukovich's chances ahead of the January 2010 presidential elections and open up eastern Ukraine to further advances by the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc in the 2007 pre-term elections. Bohatryova's expulsion from Regions could be followed by Regions defectors to the president's newly created United Center party (see EDM, July 28).