

SOCIAL DEMOCRAT-UNITED LEADER MEDVEDCHUK AWAITS HIS FATE

By **Taras Kuzio**

In an interview long promised but only given yesterday (June 16) to *Ukrayinska pravda*, Social Democratic Party of Ukraine-United (SDPUo) leader Viktor Medvedchuk was asked if he was ready to flee abroad, like many of his pro-Leonid Kuchma allies. He replied, "No, under no circumstances. I made my choice -- I remain party leader." And if he were threatened with arrest? "I am ready for everything."

It is difficult to understand Medvedchuk's calm optimism, except on three grounds. First, as an experienced lawyer and head of the Union of Ukrainian Lawyers, he expects to mount a good defense. Second, he may have been extra careful, unlike his allies, to not leave behind incriminating evidence of his participation in corruption or election fraud. Third, he may be confident that no high-ranking SDPUo members will incriminate him by agreeing a plea bargain deal to reduce their own sentence.

The Yushchenko administration is actively seeking such plea bargains from former Trans-Carpathian governor and SDPUo leader Ivan Rizak, who was arrested last month (see EDM, May 18). Rizak has been promised leniency from charges of extortion, links to organized crime, election fraud, and corruption in return for providing evidence against Medvedchuk. This issue is being personally "decided and controlled not so much by [President Viktor] Yushchenko as by [National Security and Defense Council Secretary] Petro Poroshenko" (*Ukrayinska pravda*, June 14).

Although Medvedchuk has decided to stay in Ukraine and defend himself, two SDPUo deputy leaders fled abroad for "health treatment." Poroshenko is also personally involved with a second high-ranking SDPUo official, Ihor Pluzhnykov, president of Inter television channel. Pluzhnykov is recuperating in the Czech Republic after facing intense pressure to sell Inter channel to businessmen loyal to Yushchenko (see EDM, June 10).

A second deputy SDPUo leader, Volodymyr Satsiuk, has fled abroad to an unknown destination. Satsiuk was deputy chairman of the Security Service (SBU), and his name became well known after Yushchenko became extremely ill after eating dinner at Satsiuk's house on September 5, 2004. Poroshenko also controls the investigation into Yushchenko's poisoning (*rep.in.ua*, June 15).

Satsiuk claims that his house was broken into on May 27. The thieves ignored valuables and only stole files, diaries, computer discs, and a cell phone. One week later, Prosecutor-General Sviatoslav Piskun announced that Satsiuk was being sought for three "heavy crimes" (*Ukrayinska pravda*, June 7). Piskun insisted that Satsiuk was not being sought over Yushchenko's poisoning but on charges relating to, among other things, his illegal sale of SBU property. Nevertheless, SBU chairman Oleksandr Turchynov added, "I will not hide the fact that we have questions for him about Yushchenko's poisoning" (*Ukrayinska pravda*, June 15).

Turchynov described the charges as "abuse of his position that led to serious losses for the state" (*Ukrayinska pravda*, June 15). An additional charge

included forging documents to become a colonel, and then using this rank to be made deputy SBU chairman.

Former SBU chairman Ihor Smeshko, also present during the fateful September 5 dinner, has come forward to defend Satsiuk. Smeshko claimed that the SBU had investigated the poisoning but found no evidence of SBU involvement. Smeshko believes that Piskun is trying to pin the poisoning on Satsiuk and himself (Segodnya, June 14). The SBU have had difficulty proving their lack of involvement. The September 5 dinner was the only occasion when Yushchenko's bodyguards did not test his food.

Interviewed by Komsomolskaya pravda v Ukrainie (June 14) Satsiuk adamantly denied any involvement in Yushchenko's poisoning: "I have never undertaken any crimes." Further still, "I do not regard myself as guilty and do not see any reason to flee." The Prosecutor-General's office still issued an international warrant to Interpol for his arrest.

Ultimately, the best way to marginalize Medvedchuk and the SDPUo will come if they do not cross the 3% threshold in the 2006 parliamentary election. This would seriously erode the credibility of the hard-line, anti-Yushchenko opposition by removing one of its three component parties. Regions of Ukraine and the Communists are certain to cross the 3% threshold.

Medvedchuk is himself a major cause of the SDPUo's demise. In a poll that asked if leaders were trusted, three hard-line opposition party leaders received negative ratings. Medvedchuk obtained the highest with -32%. Medvedchuk has suggested that his replacement as SDPUo leader could be Nestor Shufrych, who "represents the essence of the party's face" (Ukrayinska pravda, June 16). "He is a leader," Medvedchuk added.

This comment shows how far former Kuchma loyalists such as Medvedchuk are out of touch with public opinion and reality. In a March poll, the Razumkov Center asked respondents whom they would never vote for: 53.1% replied "Shufrych," only slightly less than the highly unpopular Communist leader Petro Symonenko who polled 55.3% against (uceps.com.ua). Shufrych is also under investigation for corruption and bribing voters in his election to parliament in 2002. At this rate, Medvedchuk will be the last senior SDPUo leader standing.