

END NOTE

RUSSIA GIVES UKRAINE A HELPING HAND IN ITS ELECTIONS

By Taras Kuzio

Preparations for the Ukrainian parliamentary elections on 31 March are being keenly followed not only in the West but also in Moscow. Russia is keen to capitalize upon its success over the past two years in reorientating Ukraine's multivector foreign policy eastward. The main threat to the consolidation of this eastward orientation and Russia's increasing influence in Ukraine is Viktor Yushchenko and his Our Ukraine bloc.

In Ukraine, as in other postcommunist states, support for the pursuit of reform, reviving national identity, and an orientation toward "Europe" are closely tied together. The West is seeking to support this package of policies by encouraging reform and free elections, as exemplified by U.S. training of 25,000 local election commissions and \$200,000 in support for the regional media in Ukraine. In contrast, Russia's primary concern is to reassert its influence within Ukraine, regardless of who is in power in that country (as in Belarus).

During the last two years, Russophile oligarch clans and their media outlets in Ukraine have increasingly given credence to a "Brzezinski plan" conspiracy that was first aired by Russian sources close to President Vladimir Putin. The "Brzezinski plan" is supposedly an elaborate plan concocted by a group of U.S. policymakers to overthrow President Kuchma and replace him

with Yushchenko in a "bloodless revolution." An analogy is drawn with the overthrow of Slobodan Milosovic in Serbia in October 2000. Yushchenko's alleged allies in this plot are the two wings of the radical anti-Kuchma opposition, Yuliya Tymoshenko, his former deputy prime minister, and Socialist leader Oleksandr Moroz.

The "Brzezinski plan" was allegedly behind the "Kuchmagate" scandal that broke in November 2000, when incriminating tapes illicitly made in Kuchma's office were released, leading to Ukraine's largest opposition demonstrations. The "Brzezinski plan" therefore played a classic disinformation role in seeking to deflect attention from possible Russian involvement in the scandal (in cahoots with a Ukrainian oligarch group) by laying blame on the West. After Kuchma survived calls for his ouster in 2000-2001, the conspiracy was quietly forgotten, but it was again revived in November of last year by "Kievskiye Vedomosti," a newspaper owned by the Social Democratic Party (United) (SDPU-O).

Controversial Kremlin strategist and Putin imagemakers Gleb Pavlovskii and Merat Gelman, who are joint owners of the Fund for Effective Politics (FEP), have given the maximum publicity to the "Brzezinski plan" conspiracy. The FEP is seeking to continue other shadowy PR activities in the Ukrainian elections together with the SDPU-O. Its main target is, unsurprisingly, Yushchenko, who is the archenemy of SDPU-O leader Medvedchuk.

In a recent survey of attitudes to foreign policy by political parties undertaken by the Analytical Centers of Ukraine Network (<http://www.intellect.org.ua>), only the SDPU-O, apart from the Communists, supported Ukraine's membership of the Russia-Belarus Union. The SDPU-O also recently raised the question of changing the 1989 Law On Languages by adding Russian as a second "official language." This Russophile populism did not prevent the SDPU-O from including the "nationalist" and pro-NATO former President Leonid Kravchuk among its top five candidates for the elections.

The SDPU-O is also the main backer of the extreme nationalist, anti-Western, and pro-Kuchma Rukh for Unity (NRU-ye) splinter group led by Bohdan Boyko, which was suspiciously created only three days before the Kuchmagate scandal began. The NRU-ye and the Progressive Socialists play the role of "radical opposition" parties on the left and right controlled by the executive, in a similar manner to Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia. The NRU-ye controls the Ternopil-based "Tryzub" paramilitaries led by Colonel Yevhen Fil who orchestrated the violence at the March 9, 2001 demonstration in order to discredit the anti-Kuchma opposition.

The SDPU-o has also duplicated some of the shadowy PR activities that the FEP earlier successfully used in Russia. This includes attempting to blacken Yushchenko's character, which unlike that of the majority of other politicians, remains beyond repute. The FEP has an agreement with the SDPU-O to provide "campaign advice," and 10 of its associates are working on this campaign. This has included creating a fake Yushchenko website (<http://www.yuschenko.com>), an action that the FEP also undertook in the 1999 Russian parliamentary elections against Moscow Mayor Yurii Luzhkov and then-Foreign Minister Yevgenii Primakov.

The FEP and its SDPU-O allies were very probably behind Ukraine's second taping scandal, that of Yushchenko and Kyiv Mayor Oleksandr Omelchenko in early January 2002. As Serhiy Sobolev, deputy head of the Reform and Order pro-Yushchenko party said, this latest scandal "is a fresh pointer to those who organized the tape scandal" in Kuchma's office. This is apparently because of the similarity in advanced technology used in both cases. Sobolev had in mind the suspicion -- first voiced by "RFE/RL Newslines" in December -- that the SDPU-O (with Russia) was behind the taping of Kuchma's office.

The latest tape was released by the newly organized civic group "For Trustworthiness in Politics," which is closely linked to the SDPU-O and the NRU-ye. It aimed to discredit Yushchenko by

creating the impression that he conspired with Omelchenko to remove Medvedchuk as deputy speaker. The latest taping was condemned by the majority of political parties and Omelchenko has taken the matter to court. Omelchenko, whose son is a member of the Yushchenko bloc and is himself a strong opponent of the SDPU-O, also accused Pavlovskii and the FEP of underhand practice by "humiliating Ukrainian national dignity."

The Ukrainian elections are the scene of a fierce geopolitical competition over the future direction of Ukraine, and yet the choices open to Ukraine are only twofold. Either it can continue to muddle along and "rejoin Europe together with Russia," the preferred option of Kuchma and the oligarchs, which postpones integrating into Europe indefinitely and ties Ukraine's fate to Russia's. Or it can revitalize its reform and nation-building policies and integrate into Europe regardless of Russia, the option promoted by Yushchenko and his allies.

Taras Kuzio is a research associate at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Toronto.