

KYIV LAUNCHES FAR-REACHING REFORM OF INTERIOR MINISTRY

By Taras Kuzio

It was inevitable that radical, democratizing reforms would be launched within the Ukrainian Interior Ministry (MVS) after the appointment of Yuriy Lutsenko as interior minister. Already, the new atmosphere inside the MVS has contributed to progress in the Gongadze murder investigation (see EDM, March 2). Lutsenko is a young activist from the Socialist Party (SPU) who was highly involved in the Ukraine Without Kuchma movement (2000-2003) and then in the Orange Revolution protests.

Lutsenko is being assisted by MVS officers who also want to cleanse their agency of corruption and human rights violations (Zerkalo nedeli, February 5). The Ukrainian media now regularly publish highly critical open letters from MVS officers and addressed to Lutsenko (maidan.org.ua, February 22, 25, 28, March 1; kuchmizm.info, February 27).

Lutsenko has made tackling corruption an urgent priority. "Without this step it will be impossible to revive trust towards the MVS," he declared, adding "And only after this can one hope of struggling against criminality inside Ukraine" (Ukrayinska pravda, February 4). MVS officers who are likely to be charged with human rights and corruption violations include former MVS Minister Mykola Bilokin and the former head of the Kyiv city MVS, Oleksandr Milenin. Under former president Leonid Kuchma, the MVS was widely regarded as the most corrupted power ministry.

The degree of corruption inside the MVS could be seen from the size of bribes required to land one of its high-ranking positions, such as the heads of oblast departments. The highest bribe known is \$1 million for the post of chief of the Donetsk oblast MVS. Other oblasts reportedly cost between \$50,000 and \$250,000 (maidan.org.ua, February 28).

Lutsenko is in favoring of bringing in younger people and of raising the status of the MVS as steps towards introducing democratic reforms. During his first month in office, Lutsenko has introduced six key reforms at the Ministry.

First, all MVS officers were to be evaluated by March 1. Citizens with grievances against any MVS officer were asked to come forward and provide evidence. This process was intended as a way to measure the trustworthiness of MVS officers and the level of corruption inside the MVS.

Second, Oleksandr Kikhtenko replaced Serhiy Popkov as head of MVS Internal Troops. Popkov had been ready to use force against the Orange Revolution crowds. MVS Internal Troops will be renamed the Republican Guard.

MVS Internal Troops were downsized after Ukraine became an independent state and some of its functions were assigned to the newly formed National Guard.

Although the National Guard became the most professional and patriotic combat unit of the security forces, Kuchma never trusted them because they were the only unit under joint parliamentary-executive control (Ukraine did not have a president when the Guard was established in late 1991). Kuchma disbanded the National Guard in 1999 and transferred their functions back to the MVS Internal Troops. Lutsenko was surprised to find that the Internal Troops had tanks and artillery, equipment that will not go to the Republican Guard.

The plan to re-name the Internal Troops as a Republican Guard is a throwback to the 1990s, when the National Guard was modeled on West European paramilitary formations, such as the Italian Carabinieri, French CRS, and Spanish Republican Guard. The national democratic parties that back President Viktor Yushchenko will welcome the change, due to the negative image of MVS Internal Troops as the descendants of the NKVD troops who fought Ukrainian nationalist partisans during and after World War II.

Third, the most criminalized wing of the MVS, the Directorate to Combat Organized Crime (UBOZ), will undergo reform. UBOZ stands accused of colluding with organized crime -- not combating it -- under Kuchma. A large group of UBOZ officers and organized crime members were recently detained and charged with murdering wealthy individuals in order to steal their property.

UBOZ officers are also believed to be behind the murder of Gongadze. The secret audiotapes made in Kuchma's office include mention of "Eagles" by then-MVS Minister Yuriy Kravchenko. The comment is believed to be a reference to a UBOZ spetsnaz unit (Sokil). UBOZ officers are also believed to have organized the "car accident" that led to Rukh leader Vyacheslav Chornovil's death in 1999.

Fourth, Ukraine's new leaders intend to turn many MVS functions over to civilian services. Lutsenko is himself a civilian. The ministry's militarized nature is a holdover from the USSR. Again, this is an attempt to bring the MVS closer to the Western norm. Along with renaming the MVS Internal Troops, the divisions that currently guard prisons (as they did in the USSR) will be transformed into Western-style prison guards. The passport, medical, and press service departments of the MVS are to be civilianized as well.

Fifth, the State Automobile Inspectorate (DAI), the most disliked arm of the MVS, is to be disbanded, a step copied from Georgia. Former DAI officers will conduct joint patrols with regular MVS officers to oversee road safety and traffic issues and will no longer hand out automatic fines, a DAI activity that bred massive corruption.

Sixth, Lutsenko dispatched Internal Troops to the two most criminalized regions of Ukraine, Trans-Carpathia and Donetsk, to assist in rooting out organized crime and high-level corruption. The mayor of Donetsk, Oleksandr Lukyanchenko, complained that this move fed the widely believed stereotype that Donetsk is a highly "criminalized region," a perception that "should be proven with facts" (Interfax-Ukraine, March 1).

Internal Troops are also bound for the Crimea. That these three regions are controlled by former local parties of power under Kuchma -- the Social Democratic Party-United in Trans-Carpathia and defeated candidate Viktor Yanukovich's Regions of Ukraine in Donetsk and Crimea -- is likely no coincidence.