

END NOTE

THE ORGANIZED CRIME/SECURITY FORCES NEXUS IN YUGOSLAVIA AND UKRAINE

By Taras Kuzio

The 12 March assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic was blamed by the International Crisis Group on an "interlocking nexus" of organized crime, war criminals, and police and army officers hiding behind "nationalist-patriotic" slogans and organizations." Similar accusations were made by 14 Serbian civic groups and other Serbian commentators.

But the link between organized crime, the executive, and domestic-security forces that still exists in Serbia is not unique to that country -- it is also characteristic of Bosnia and to a lesser degree of Croatia, and in the 1990s became the norm in Ukraine and Russia.

Although military budgets were starved throughout the 1990s, the domestic security forces in Yugoslavia, Ukraine, and Russia grew in size. In Yugoslavia, former President Slobodan Milosevic distrusted the armed forces and relied upon the Interior Ministry and the security service as his personal Praetorian Guard.

The Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) is the successor to the republican KGB but, unlike in Russia, it was never divided into separate internal and external branches. The Directorate for State Defense -- successor to the republican KGB's 9th Directorate, which guards top officials and is analogous to the U.S. Secret Service -- was separated from the SBU, but was reabsorbed in 1996.

Mykola Melnychenko, who illicitly bugged President Leonid Kuchma's office in 1999-2000, worked in this directorate as a counterintelligence officer.

In Yugoslavia under Milosevic, and also in Ukraine and Russia, the main bodies to have gained from the transfer of financial resources from the military are their interior ministries. The interior ministries in Russia and Ukraine inherited the internal troops and OMON troops that were created in the Gorbachev era. The OMON retain their name in Russia, and have the worst human rights record of any Russian security-force unit in Chechnya. In Ukraine,

the Soviet-era OMON became the Berkut (Golden Eagles) and have been used to attack opposition demonstrators.

Political surveillance and state-orchestrated violence in these countries is usually the work of specialist units of the interior ministry. The assassination of Djindjic is widely believed to be the work of Milorad Ulemek-Lukovic "Legija," a former commander of the Serbian Interior Ministry's elite police Special Operations Unit (JSO), or Red Berets, which covertly supported paramilitary operations and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Croatia in the 1990s. Lukovic switched allegiances to the opposition in the fall of 2000 and helped arrest Milosevic for the international war crimes tribunal. In gratitude, the authorities under Djindjic reportedly turned a blind eye to Lukovic's connections to organized crime.

In Ukraine, the murder of opposition journalist Heorhiy Gongadze in the fall of 2000 has thrown the spotlight on the activities of special police units in Ukraine's Interior Ministry. Prosecutor-General Svyatoslav Piskun and other senior officials in the Prosecutor-General's Office have recently claimed that one of the best leads they are pursuing in Gongadze's murder is the involvement of the Interior Ministry's Falcons (Orly), special-forces troops attached to the Directorate for Combating Organized Crime (UBOZ) within the ministry. Information about the Falcons first appeared on the Melnychenko tape released in November 2000 that sparked the Kuchmagate crisis. This evidence has since been backed up by leaked letters from anonymous Interior Ministry officers.

As with the JSO and paramilitary groups in Yugoslavia under Milosevic, and similar units in Croatia and Bosnia, the special purpose Falcons units were involved in organized crime. Since the fall of 2002, some senior and lower-ranking members of the UBOZ's Falcons have been arrested and charged with jointly organizing "death squads" together with organized-crime figures.

In addition to shedding light on Gongadze's death, the leaked Interior Ministry letters have provided information that corroborates and complements a 1999 video interview with ministry officers leaked to then-presidential candidate Yevhen Marchuk, who admitted that they organized the "car accident" that led to the death of Rukh leader Vyacheslav Chornovil in March 1999. A KamAZ truck hit the car in which Chornovil was traveling, killing him and the driver. Chornovil's son Taras, and Hennadiy Udovenko, who is Chornovil's successor as head of Rukh, both accuse the authorities of being behind the "accident." Although Rukh was already dividing into two feuding groups just prior to Chornovil's death, his demise rendered the split irreversible and thus removed a potential threat to Kuchma in the presidential elections later that year.

A similar episode took place in Yugoslavia in October 1999. A car in which Vuk Draskovic -- the head of Serbia's largest opposition

party, the Serbian Renewal Movement -- was traveling was also hit by a large truck. Draskovic survived, but his three bodyguards died, one of whom was Draskovic's brother-in-law. After cooperating with Milosevic in government, Draskovic had begun making overtures to join the opposition Alliance for Change.

The truck drivers in both Chornovil's and Draskovic's "car accidents" were never prosecuted. Djindjic had, however, allowed a sensitive trial to begin of policemen involved in the Draskovic crash. Djindjic himself was the target of a similar "accident" last month when a large truck, driven by a man allegedly working for Legija attempted to hit his car in what was widely believed to be an assassination attempt.

The nexus between organized crime and internal security forces might be cleaned up in Serbia following Djindjic's assassination. A former assistant chief of a JSO unit was arrested on 25 March on suspicion of participating in Djindjic's assassination. But, in CIS states, such as Ukraine, this prospect still seems far off. The latest leaked Interior Ministry letter in Ukraine claims that the front-runner in next year's presidential elections, Viktor Yushchenko, is being trailed by the very same Falcons that Prosecutor-General Piskun is investigating for their possible role in Gongadze's murder.

Dr. Taras Kuzio is a resident fellow in the Centre for Russian and Eastern European Studies, University of Toronto.