

HALF OF KYIV'S LEADING PARTIES REJECT YANUKOVYCH

By Taras Kuzio

At its party congress at the end of July, Unity (Yednist) refused to back Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich for the upcoming presidential elections (Ukrayinska pravda, July 24). Unity is headed by Oleksandr Omelchenko, the popular mayor of Kyiv and head of the Kyiv state administration.

Kyiv is dominated by two political parties, Unity and Viktor Medvedchuk's Social Democratic Party-United (SDPUo). The latter party did vote to back Yanukovich. Omelchenko and Medvedchuk have remained bitter foes since Omelchenko defeated the head the Kyiv SDPUo branch, Hryhoriy Surkis, in the 1999 mayoral elections. Their rivalry has sparked numerous charges and counter-charges (Ukrayinska pravda, July 25).

In December 2001 Medvedchuk was voted down as first deputy speaker of parliament. The defeat was seen as revenge, as the SDPUo had organized the vote of no confidence against the Yushchenko government in April 2001. Illicitly taped conversations that were later publicized showed how Yushchenko had coordinated the parliamentary vote with Omelchenko.

Omelchenko blamed the SDPUo for arranging the hunger strikes outside Kyiv city hall last year and for circulating rumors about imminent increases in food price (razom.org.ua, September 1, 2003). Earlier this year, the SDPUo launched a populist campaign against Omelchenko over price hikes on transportation. Brotherhood, a nationalist party controlled and funded by the SDPUo, organized these actions.

Omelchenko's critical views of the SDPUo pre-date the Unity congress. In September 2003 he admitted that a high level-conflict had existed for many years. Omelchenko accused the SDPUo of being disinterested in the welfare of Kyiv's residents and of only being interested in acquiring real estate and land through privatization (Ukrayinska pravda, February 17). Because of the SDPUo's access to "administrative resources," it can and does abuse the law and use its television monopoly to portray Kyiv in a poor light. This situation would continue, Omelchenko believed, as long as the, "apparatus of state administration is formed solely on the basis of one political force" (Ukrayinska pravda, September 3, 2003).

In late 2002 the Presidential Administration and its parliamentary allies attempted to revise the law regarding the capital city. The changes would allow the president to appoint a head of Kyiv's State Administration who opposed the elected mayor; Omelchenko has held both positions since 1999. Again, Omelchenko and the opposition saw Medvedchuk, in his new position as head of the Presidential Administration, as being behind the proposals (Zerkalo nedeli, August 17-24, 2002).

The attempt to change the law failed when it was blocked by Kyivites and opposition forces. As Omelchenko argued, "If this law is passed in parliament

then the Kyiv city mayor, which is not foreseen in this document, would have symbolic meaning. The mandate that I obtained from 73% of Kyivites would be annulled" (Zerkalo nedeli, August 10-17, 2002).

Although Unity and the SDPUo are technically both Kyiv parties-of-power, only Unity has a base in the city. In the 2002 parliamentary elections the SDPUo barely scraped through the 4% threshold in Kyiv. Thus, of Ukraine's three large oligarch clans, only the SDPUo does not have a secure home base. In the 2002 elections, Kyivites largely voted for the opposition Our Ukraine party and the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc.

Of the 272 delegates at the Unity congress, 173 voted for Omelchenko as their presidential candidate. The other candidates who obtained large numbers of votes were Kuchma, Yanukovych, and reformer Viktor Yushchenko.

In reality, Omelchenko was the compromise candidate. Most delegates at the Unity congress wanted to back Yushchenko, who has long had close relations with Omelchenko. The Lviv branch of Unity appealed to Yushchenko and Omelchenko to join forces because, "A defeat in the elections of national-patriotic forces will lead to the final usurping of power by anti-Ukrainian clans" (Ukrayinski novyny, July 26). Regardless of the outcome of the appeal, the Lviv branch of Unity said they would be agitating for Yushchenko.

Omelchenko pulled few punches during his Unity congress speech. "Negative processes that have taken hold in all spheres of society, the chaotic approach to adopting reforms, and disgruntlement among large sections of society all threaten unforeseen consequences for the political independence of the state," Omelchenko warned (Ukrayinska pravda, July 25). He described privatization as having been conducted in a worse fashion than Stalinist industrialization. Omelchenko also condemned corruption, the dependency of the courts on the authorities, their control over mass media, "total censorship," and political stagnation.

Although the Unity congress voted to back Omelchenko, rather than Yushchenko, Omelchenko's congress speech made it perfectly clear where he stood politically. Volodymyr Rybak, a leading figure in Yanukovych's Party of Regions and former Donetsk mayor, attended the Unity congress. He was visibly shaken by what he had heard at the congress and advised Unity that Yanukovych would be no longer seeking their support. "We do not need this! We are not seeking to offend anybody and do not want anybody to offend us! I have attended many congresses but have never heard such things!" Rybak shuddered (Ukrayinska pravda, July 25).

Omelchenko's attempt to straddle the line between the opposition and the authorities is over. He has been forced by the upcoming elections into choosing in which camp (authorities or the opposition) he lies. Like so many derzhhavnyky (statists) in the national democratic camp, Yushchenko had also attempted to be a "loyal opposition." Both Omelchenko and Yushchenko finally -- but grudgingly -- have been forced into joining the opposition.