

A Survey of Developments in Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine by the  
Regional Specialists of RFE/RL's Newslines Team

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HEADLINES

UKRAINE

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'ANTINATIONALIST' CAMPAIGN TO DISCREDIT OUR UKRAINE.

By Taras Kuzio

The

"party of power," represented by the election bloc For a United Ukraine (ZYU), recognized that it had little opportunity of winning votes in Ukrainophone western and central Ukraine in the 31 March parliamentary ballot. Therefore, in the same manner as in the 1994 presidential elections, President Leonid Kuchma sought to make a last stand in the more Sovietized and Russophone Donbas and other eastern Ukrainian oblasts. In Kuchma's 1994 campaign, Russian speakers were warned of the dangers of "Ukrainianization" if the incumbent, President Leonid Kravchuk, was returned to power.

In 2002, the authorities returned to traditional methods of mobilizing eastern Ukrainians by denouncing their opponents as "nationalists." Not surprisingly, the main target of this "anti-nationalist" campaign was Our Ukraine. On 28 February, fake Our Ukraine posters were placed in Kharkiv with headlines reading "Glory to Ukraine! Glory to Its Heroes!" The posters depicted Our Ukraine leader Viktor Yushchenko in a long line of nationalist leaders from Hetman Ivan Mazepa, who led a revolt against Russia in 1709, through to Symon Petlyura and Stepan Bandera, nationalist leaders in the 1910s and 1940s, respectively, to the former dissident and head of Rukh, Vyacheslav Chornovil.

ZYU's attempt to blacken Our Ukraine as a "nationalist" formation was assisted by Russian newspapers and television, which are still widely read and viewed in eastern Ukraine. Russian officials and Ambassador to Ukraine Viktor Chernomyrdin openly interfered in the elections by indirectly calling upon Ukrainians not to vote for Our Ukraine because it was "anti-Russian," i.e., "nationalist" in traditional Soviet parlance. The Ukrainian newspaper "Zerkalo nedeli/Dzerkalo tyzhnya" concluded that the executive, Kuchma's entourage, and Russian elites worked together "to produce an allergic reaction in people in Russian-speaking regions to

Yushchenko and his supporters."

In early March, Ukrainian and Russian news agencies reported that the Ivano-Frankivsk city council had voted to recognize members of the Waffen SS Galicia Division as "freedom fighters" and thereby grant them pension rights. The Russian media played a major role in disseminating this false information, which was later reported by the Western media and condemned by Jewish organizations.

The issue became further clouded because the Social Democratic Party Ukraine-united (SDPU-o), fearing that it was going to lose votes in western Ukraine to the Our Ukraine bloc, tried to gain votes by playing the nationalist card. The SDPU-o argued that its leader, Viktor Medvedchuk, was the son of a repressed member of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), and claimed that it had prepared a draft law to rehabilitate the OUN and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). The SDPU-o's populism was evident during Medvedchuk's election campaign visit to Crimea on 15 March where he categorically rejected suggestions that the SDPU-o sought to rehabilitate the OUN and UPA.

The most vociferous condemnations of the discussions on the rehabilitation of the OUN and UPA and the alleged Ivano-Frankivsk city decree were by Russian media outlets, which quoted outraged Russian officials from the State Duma and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Russian media and officials portrayed these moves as the program of "national radicals" who dominated Our Ukraine. In reality, as Ivano-Frankivsk Mayor Zinoviy Shkutyak said, the council had only debated the issue, not adopted any decision. In his view, the reaction proved that this was "an attempt by certain political forces to influence the election process in Ukraine." This view was backed by "Zerkalo nedeli/Dzerkalo tyzhnya," which concluded that the Russian media portrayal of the entire affair was "largely inaccurate and designed to falsely portray the front-running Our Ukraine as Nazi supporters."

Suspicious were also aroused that this was an attempt to sully Our Ukraine when the Ivano-Frankivsk city councilor who proposed the motion to rehabilitate the Galicia Division was found to be a member of the SDPU-o. Our Ukraine distanced itself from the controversy surrounding the Galicia Division by referring to Yushchenko's father's service in World War II in the Soviet Army. Nevertheless, the damage may have already been done to Our Ukraine among eastern Ukrainian voters.

The assassination of Mykola Shkriblyak, Ivano-Frankivsk's deputy governor and head of the oblast organization of the SDPU-o, just two days before election day again raised suspicions. Shkriblyak was a candidate in election district No. 90 where Our Ukraine candidate Roman Zvarych was his main opponent. District No. 90 is the former constituency of Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists (KUN) leader Slava Stetsko (KUN is a member of the Our Ukraine election bloc). ZYU openly linked the assassination of Shkriblyak to the atmosphere created by the alleged campaign to rehabilitate the Galicia Division.

The assassination had all the hallmarks of the "attempted assassination" of Progressive Socialist Party leader Nataliya Vitrenko in the 1999 presidential elections in Krivyy Rih in an

attempt to discredit Kuchma's main threat, Socialist Party leader Oleksandr Moroz. In the 2002 elections, the main threat to the authorities had changed to Our Ukraine.

Zvarych took up Ukrainian citizenship after renouncing his U.S. citizenship in the mid-1990s and was elected to the outgoing parliament as a member of Rukh. On 6 March, the ICTV channel controlled by Labor Ukraine, a member of ZYU, had already labeled Zvarych as a "national radical" who planned reprisals if Our Ukraine won the elections.

Targeting Shkriblyak, therefore, had two purposes: it further blackened Our Ukraine as a "nationalist" formation while contributing to the officially inspired anti-American campaign by pointing to Zvarych, like Yushchenko, as having American connections. The SDPU-o-controlled 1+1 and Inter television channels implicated Zvarych and the U.S. Embassy in the assassination attempt by citing reports from the SDPU-o newspaper "Kievskie vedomosti." The SDPU-o-controlled media also alleged that the U.S. Embassy had pressured Shkriblyak to withdraw his candidacy earlier in March.

The claim by SDPU-o leader Medvedchuk that the assassination was meant to remove the probable victor in constituency No. 90 is unlikely, as the SDPU-o obtained merely 2.5 percent of the vote in the region compared to Our Ukraine's 72 percent. Zvarych won the seat with 61 percent of the vote. Although it can never be ruled out that Shkriblyak's murder was business-related, there will remain suspicions that he was simply a patsy to discredit Our Ukraine. Ukrainians have a saying: "Beat your own so that foreigners are afraid."

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