

UKRAINE'S INTERIOR MINISTRY SHADOWING PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

By Taras Kuzio

A new scandal is unfolding in Ukraine that is likely to add to the growing realization that this year's Ukrainian presidential elections cannot be described as free and fair. On August 3 the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (www.ihf-hr.org) appealed to Ukrainian authorities "to observe international standards for free and fair elections, as reliable evidence suggests that governmental officials in several sectors are illegally abusing public institutions to manipulate the outcome of the 31 October 2004 presidential election."

The latest scandal has provided proof about how Interior Ministry (MVS) personnel have illegally placed leading opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko under surveillance (*Ukrayinska pravda*, August 10). Confiscated MVS video footage also shows that other candidates are also under surveillance, as one tape is of opposition Progressive Socialist leader Natalia Vitrenko.

On August 10, Yushchenko undertook his "Let's Clean Ukraine of Dirt" campaign tour to the Crimea. His official bodyguards from the Directorate of State Protection (part of the KGB during the Soviet era was and the service from which Mykola Melnychenko bugged President Leonid Kuchma's office in 1999-2000) noticed individuals tailing Yushchenko. Members of the Directorate arrested three unidentified individuals.

Yushchenko's bodyguards and Our Ukraine aides found the car used by the unidentified individuals. In it they found espionage equipment, 12 automobile license plates, radio communications, and both still and video cameras. The people following Yushchenko had in their possession special documents allowing them to travel anywhere in the Crimea without being asked for identity documents.

The video camera contained footage of Yushchenko's entire Crimean visit, including his private visit to Sevastopol where he met his family. The car held numerous documents that outlined details of Yushchenko's itinerary. His Crimean schedule, the people he had visited, and who had met him, details of all of his private visits, and the political aims of his election campaign in the Crimea were all recorded.

Yushchenko and his aides immediately called on the MVS to explain what had taken place. They informed the MVS that their official bodyguards had never asked for additional security measures.

The MVS was slow to respond. Eventually, the Crimean department of the MVS claimed that the three arrested officers were in fact protecting him from "provocateurs" (*Ukrayinska pravda*, August 11). The MVS statement claimed that the agency provided such protection to all presidential candidates, and it even cited the relevant legislation.

Not surprisingly, opposition candidates did not believe the MVS explanation. This incident followed a pattern of increasing MVS involvement in KGB-style activities against the opposition. Such activities first became public in November 2000 when opposition journalist Heorhiy Gongadze was murdered after he had reported surveillance by the MVS in July 2000.

Our Ukraine parliamentary deputy Mykola Tomenko directly accused Prime Minister and presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovych of ordering the surveillance. Our Ukraine also showed journalists the video footage of Yushchenko that had been confiscated from the MVS (Ukrayinska pravda, August 12). On the tape the journalists could hear the voices of the MVS officers who were discussing what to video, rather than whom to guard.

Tomenko argued that the order given to the MVS to follow opposition candidates was illegal. He linked the surveillance to the more general problem of wide-scale abuse of state-administrative resources by presidential candidate Yanukovych. "Today, the entire state machine works for one candidate," Tomenko complained (Ukrayinska pravda, August 12).

Yushchenko led the attack on the surveillance operation by directly blaming the head of the government: Yanukovych. "This is the work of this government--the Yanukovych government that has direct jurisdiction over the MVS and Interior Minister Mykola Bilokin" (Ukrayinska pravda, August 12). Yushchenko advised the MVS that he had no need for their "bodyguard" services, as he was already protected by the Directorate of State Protection as well as a private, officially registered security firm.

Yushchenko accused the MVS of not only following him but also of interfering in his private life by filming him with his wife and kids. He explained that he had ruled out any request to the MVS for protection, as the MVS seems to be working on behalf of Yanukovych's candidacy. "I do not believe these people and I cannot entrust my life and those of my family to them," Yushchenko declared (Ukrayinska pravda, August 12).

This latest episode in the election season makes a mockery of President Kuchma's "guarantee" to hold free and fair elections. As London's *The Independent* newspaper pointed out (August 12), this latest embarrassment comes from "a regime that blends sinister authoritarianism with banana republic-style bungling."