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PRO-KUCHMA CAMP CONTINUES TO DISINTEGRATE

--*Taras Kuzio*

In the aftermath of the scandalous second round of the Ukrainian presidential election on November 21, the pro-Kuchma parliamentary majority, established originally to back up Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich's "coalition government," is continuing to unravel. The disintegration is part and parcel of the gradual defection of state institutions from Kuchma to either a neutral position or challenger Viktor Yushchenko's camp.

The pro-presidential majority has been in crisis since September, when the Agrarian Party faction, led by parliamentary speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn, announced that it was "suspending" its membership. This step effectively eliminated the pro-presidential camp's claim to be a "majority," as it brought their number to below 225 deputies. New defections have reduced the pro-Kuchma camp by another one-third.

On the eve of round one, opposition ally Yulia Tymoshenko claimed that a new parliamentary majority of 233 deputies was ready to be dispatched in the event of a Yushchenko victory (*Ukrayinska pravda*, October 31). After round two Yuriy Kostenko, another close ally of Yushchenko, claimed that this embryonic pro-Yushchenko majority had increased to 270 deputies (razom.org.ua, December 3).

This increase, Kostenko argued, was due to three factors. First, Kuchma's "administrative pressure" on deputies to stay in line is no longer effective. Second, deputies are re-aligning their loyalties to a new president-in-waiting: Yushchenko. Third, some deputies are angry at the actions of Labor Party head and faction leader Serhiy Tyhipko, who resigned as head of the Yanukovich campaign and chairman of the National Bank without consulting either his party or his parliamentary faction.

Labor Ukraine, controlled by the Dnipropetrovsk oligarchic clan, suffered the greatest disintegration from Tyhipko's resignations. Ten deputies quit the faction, reducing it to only 16 deputies. The defectors include the head of the Labor Ukraine faction, Ihor Sharov, as well as Defense Minister Oleksandr Kuzmuk. This latter defection shows the degree to which the military has deserted Kuchma. Two former defense ministers (Yevhen Marchuk and Valeriy Radetsky) have also defected to Yushchenko.

The defections from Labor Ukraine were caused by the party's loss of authority ahead of the March 2006 parliamentary elections. As head of the Yanukovich camp, Tyhipko and Labor Ukraine were viewed by the public as linked to election fraud in the presidential runoff, which was severely denounced by parliament in a resolution on November 27 and in a Supreme Court ruling six days later.

Most of the deputies who have quit Labor Ukraine remain unaffiliated. But they likely will either create a pro-Yushchenko faction or even join Our Ukraine under a

Yushchenko presidency. Serhiy Buriak, the founder of Brokbiznesbank, is, for example, Yushchenko's father-in-law.

Many unaffiliated deputies have long cooperated with Yushchenko by maintaining a neutral position under the "protection" of parliamentary speaker Lytvyn. Oleksandr Volkov, once Kuchma's adviser and an important strategist in the 1999 presidential elections and 2000 referendum on changing the constitution, has long cooperated with Yushchenko. In the re-run of round two, set for December 26, Volkov predicts that Yanukovych's chances are "nil" (*Ukrayinska pravda*, December 1).

Other unaffiliated deputies provided concrete assistance to Yushchenko during the elections. Former Dnipropetrovsk oligarch Andrei Derkach, now an unaffiliated deputy, permitted Yushchenko to be prominently shown on ERA TV and ERA radio, two media outlets that he owns. Besides Channel 5, owned by Our Ukraine businessman Petro Poroshenko, ERA TV was the only other television channel where Yushchenko received positive media coverage.

As with Lytvyn's Agrarians (20), three other factions are now neutral, meaning that after Kuchma departs from office they will move into the Yushchenko camp. These include the People's Democratic Party-Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (16), United Ukraine (17), and the Center (16) factions, a total of 69 deputies.

Besides the end of the Kuchma era and the discredited second round of the elections, another factor promoting a re-shaping of centrist factions is their lack of an ideological profile. This separates them from the ideologically oriented national democrats (Our Ukraine, Tymoshenko bloc) and left (Socialists, Communists). Oleksandr Yedin, a defector from Labor Ukraine, complained that it was unclear what they stood for, "orientating in western Ukraine upon one political force and in the east on another" (*Ukrayinska pravda*, December 3).

Viktor Medvedchuk's Social Democratic United faction (SDPUo) is also in decline, losing seven deputies. Yuriy Liakh, a close ally of Medvedchuk and chairman of Ukrkreditbank, committed suicide on December 3 in Kyiv. The SDPUo, unlike Labor Ukraine in Dnipropetrovsk or especially Yanukovych's Regions of Ukraine in Donetsk, has little support in its home base of Kyiv, where Yushchenko dominates.

Of all of the centrist parties and factions, the SDPUo has the most to lose from a Yushchenko victory. It will prove impossible for Medvedchuk to remain in Ukraine under a Yushchenko presidency. Parliamentary votes earlier in the year called upon the Ministry of Justice to ban the SDPUo as a "fascist" party and for Kuchma to remove Medvedchuk as head of the presidential administration.

After the Supreme Court ruling, the Security Service launched a criminal investigation into alleged hacking into the Central Election Commission (CEC) server, using evidence provided by the computer consultants who designed the CEC system. Medvedchuk and Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Kluyev have been implicated in this scheme.

Other centrists concerned about their future include Transport Minister Heorhiy Kirpa. Deputy Transportation Minister Ivan Saliy provided mounds of evidence to the Supreme Court about the massive abuse of "administrative resources" by state transportation companies in support of Yanukovych, which was undertaken on the orders of Kirpa and Kluyev. Kirpa organized the Vidrozhennia Party in the summer to force transportation workers to back Yanukovych.

If a nascent parliamentary caucus of 270 deputies has indeed already been formed, a pro-Yushchenko parliamentary majority would be only 30 short of the 300 votes needed to consider changes to the constitution.