

EURASIA DAILY MONITOR
Volume 1 Issue 54 (Jul 19, 2004)

**FORMER PARTY-OF-POWER DIVIDED OVER SUPPORTING
YANUKOVYCH**

By Taras Kuzio

Two leading Ukrainian political parties convened national congresses in early July to select which candidate to support in Ukraine's October 31 presidential elections. Surprisingly, both parties swung away from President Leonid Kuchma's designed successor, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, and put forward rival candidates. Should Yanukovich win, the two parties could find themselves sidelined in parliament.

The People's Democratic Party (NDP) was independent Ukraine's first party-of-power. Its leader, Valeriy Pustovoitenko, was prime minister between 1997 and 1999. Pustovoitenko succeeded Pavlo Lazarenko, who was convicted of corruption charges by a U.S. court in May 2004. Yushchenko followed Pustovoitenko.

Like Russia's former party-of-power, Our Home is Russia, the NDP never fully coalesced behind President Kuchma. In the 1998 elections it barely limped across the 4% threshold, winning only 5.01% (compared to Rukh's 9.4%). In the 2002 elections the NDP was a junior partner in the For a United Ukraine Bloc. In parliament the NDP has the minimum number of deputies needed to create a faction -- 14.

Over the last year, NDP members have strongly pressured Pustovoitenko to stand as their presidential candidate. Yet during the July 10 NDP congress, Pustovoitenko caved into pressure from Kuchma's allies and instead agreed to back Yanukovich. "We have no other choice but to go along with the authorities," Pustovoitenko told the NDP congress (Ukrayinska pravda, July 13).

NDP rank-and-file members, however, were not so willing to follow orders. After support for Yanukovich was forced through the NDP congress, the membership split, with one faction creating a "Democratic Platform." When a reporter asked one member of the Democratic Platform, Oleh Zarubynsky, how the party's 300,000 members would vote in October, he replied, "How these 300,000 minus 400 [delegates] will vote is absolutely clear." Most, he said, will vote freely in the election booth. His coded language was clear: most NDP members will vote for the challenger, Yushchenko (kandydat.com.ua, July 15).

Thus the NDP endorsement of Prime Minister Yanukovich will apparently be a hollow victory (Ukrayina moloda, July 12). Yanukovich's election campaign

cannot rely on NDP local branches as a reliable foundation, as most of those members incline towards supporting Yushchenko. In the run up to the NDP congress, only 20% of rayon and 8% of oblast NDP branches wanted to endorse Prime Minister Yanukovych as the NDP candidate. The overwhelming majority of NDP branches backed either Pustovoitenko or Yushchenko.

Leading NDP members have long been critical of corruption and the oligarchs. This view undoubtedly influenced their refusal to be railroaded into backing Yanukovych. Zarubynsky complained, "Using stolen money, the oligarchs are rushing to buy up enterprises," a clear reference to the fraudulently conducted privatization of Kryvorizhstal by oligarchs Viktor Pinchuk and Renat Akhmetov in June (Ukrayinska pravda, July 13). Zarubynsky called upon the NDP to help stop the "oligarchization" of Ukraine. This conviction cannot be undertaken by supporting the head of Ukraine's biggest oligarch clan -- Yanukovych -- in this year's elections.

The NDP has a long history of splits and divisions. In 1990-91 the Democratic Platform of the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) was the first mutation. The KPU's Democratic Platform later evolved into the Party of the Democratic Revival of Ukraine (PDVU), which, after merging with the Labor Congress, became the NDP. The PDVU's New Ukraine Bloc was a main supporter of Kuchma's election bid in 1994.

The current upheaval over which candidate to support in the presidential elections replays the divisions within the NDP during the 1999 presidential elections. In 1999 leading NDP members resigned and joined the opposition in protest of the NDP's support for Kuchma's candidacy. Taras Stetskiv, Oleksandr Yemets, and Volodymyr Filenko joined parties that later came to back Our Ukraine while Anatoliy Matvienko's Republican Party "Sobor" became a key member of Yulia Tymoshenko's bloc.

The NDP's current internal convulsions stretch back to 2003. First, the NDP lost the minister for the environment and natural resources post, when Vasyl Shevchuk was unceremoniously dropped from the Cabinet after he granted licenses to Petro Poroshenko, an Our Ukraine businessman. Then former parliamentary speaker Ivan Pliushch resigned from the NDP and defected to Our Ukraine.

In April and May 2004 the NDP backed opposition votes in parliament condemning the blatant fraud in the Mukachiv election. One such vote, backed by the NDP, demanded the resignation of Viktor Medvedchuk as head of the Presidential Administration.

Another Kuchma ally that also backed his election bid in 1994 is the Inter-Regional Bloc of Reforms (MRBR), which merged with the NDP in 2001. MRBR members are also in the front ranks of those displeased with the NDP's official backing of Yanukovych.

A third 1994 ally (after the NDP and MRBR) to desert Kuchma is the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (SPPU), which Kuchma headed in 1993-94. The SPPU and the party of the same name (PPPU) have also refused to back Yanukovich's candidacy and instead put forward the leader of the SPPU and PPPU, Anatoliy Kinakh, as their candidate.

At the SPPU's congress on July 12, all of the delegates -- except Donbas delegates -- backed Kinakh as their presidential candidate. In a prime example of the blatant bias on Medvedchuk-controlled media, 1+1 and Inter TV channels reported that most PPPU delegates had backed Yanukovich.

Kinakh, who was briefly a caretaker prime minister between Yushchenko in 2001 and Yanukovich in 2002, took the step that Pustovoitenko had threatened but backed away from, namely heeding the demands of party members and standing as a presidential candidate. Kinakh's candidacy will undoubtedly eat away at Yanukovich's support, as their constituencies are similar.

The PPPU, NDP and People's Agrarians represent the moderate wing of pro-Kuchma centrists who have agreed to be the nucleus of a future parliamentary majority (Ukrayinska Pravda, July 2). Should Yushchenko win the presidency this year, all three are likely to support the creation of a new parliamentary majority grouped around the largest faction in parliament, Our Ukraine.

This scenario was thwarted after the 2002 elections, because Medvedchuk had created a parliamentary majority excluding Our Ukraine, even though it had won the elections. Any new parliamentary majority after a Yushchenko victory would now seek to exclude Medvedchuk's Social Democratic United Party who would then seek allies on the left.

Thus Kuchma and his candidate, Prime Minister Yanukovich, have lost two key constituencies that helped Kuchma secure his second term. How many more erstwhile allies leave the fold before October remains to be seen.