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PEOPLE'S UNION-OUR UKRAINE MAKES SURPRISING CHOICE TO LEAD KYIV BRANCH

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On June 18, President Viktor Yushchenko's new "party of power," People's Union-Our Ukraine (NS-NU), finally held its inaugural congress. Speculation had been rife that Kyiv Mayor Oleksandr Omelchenko would become head of the Kyiv branch of NS-NU, but that did not happen. The Kyiv branch chief will be in the best position to be elected Kyiv's mayor in the March 2006 election, which coincides with the parliamentary election.

Instead of Omelchenko, Our Ukraine parliamentary faction leader Mykola Martynenko was elected head of Kyiv's NS-NU. The head of Kyiv's branch of Our Ukraine, Volodymyr Bondarenko, was elected to lead Kyiv's NS-NU Executive Council. This shift represents a second Orange Revolution, this time against Mayor Omelchenko, who has fallen out of favor with the Yushchenko coalition. Martynenko will inevitably become the Yushchenko coalition's candidate for mayor of Kyiv in 2006, and Omelchenko will not be able to rally enough votes to defeat him.

Conflict between Omelchenko, who heads the marginal Unity (Yednist) party, and Our Ukraine flared up in March in a by-election near Kyiv. Our Ukraine's candidate won, but Omelchenko's allies have contested the results in court. Conflict also continues to smolder in various rayon districts of Kyiv and Kyiv oblast over Our Ukraine's demands to remove corrupt heads of rayon state administrations loyal to Omelchenko.

Another dispute rests over prime land near Kyiv that was given away to government officials in the last two years of Leonid Kuchma's presidency. Omelchenko was implicated in the land transfer scam in upscale suburbs such as Pusha Vodytsia. Land was sold at bargain prices and then registered in the names of relatives or businesses, making it difficult to trace the real owner (*Washington Times*, June 19).

Omelchenko has always had an alliance of convenience with Yushchenko. He had maintained good relations with President Kuchma, who permitted him to combine the mayor's position with that of head of Kyiv's state administration, a local governor appointed by the executive. This cozy arrangement led to accusations by Our Ukraine supporters that Omelchenko adopted a "wait and see" approach to the Orange Revolution, hoping to come out on top regardless of who won the 2004 presidential election. Unity was divided over whether to support Yushchenko as their presidential candidate in 2004 or, as an alternative to Viktor Yanukovych, Mayor Omelchenko (see EDM, August 6, 2004).

This "wait and see" trait is common to the former high-ranking Communist *nomenklatura*. As parliamentary speaker, Leonid Kravchuk also sat on the fence

during the August 1991 hard-line Moscow putsch and, only after the coup was defeated, supported Ukraine's declaration of independence and the banning of the Communist Party.

Our Ukraine supporters in Kyiv have pointed out that Omelchenko never once visited the Maidan (Independence Square) during the Orange Revolution. Instead he waited until New Year's Eve -- five days after Yushchenko won the December 26 repeat runoff. At the time, Our Ukraine's Kyiv leader said, "We, unfortunately, did not feel any support from Oleksandr Omelchenko in Kyiv." Bondarenko continued, "We were on the side of Yushchenko, but Omelchenko was on the side of Kuchma" (*Ukrayinska pravda*, June 19).

Bondarenko revealed that Omelchenko had actually tried to move the central stage of the Orange Revolution from the Maidan to another area of Kyiv. Although Orange supporters partially took over Kyiv's Town Hall, which also doubles as the residence of the city's state administration, they did not have Omelchenko's permission.

When 46 Kyiv city deputies declared Yushchenko the winner after round two, Omelchenko pressured 12 of them to withdraw their signatures.

At the same time, Omelchenko's alliance-of-convenience was important in blocking a takeover of Kyiv by Viktor Medvedchuk's Social Democratic Party-United (SDPUo). Negative public opinion also helped Omelchenko in blocking the SDPUo from taking over Kyiv. Omelchenko trounced SDPUo leading personality Hryhoriy Surkis in the May 1999 Kyiv mayoral election by 76.4% to 16.5%. Surkis' "trusted person," a requirement in Ukrainian electoral legislation, was none other than former President Kravchuk, who is now head of the SDPUo parliamentary faction.

Omelchenko and Yushchenko collaborated in removing Medvedchuk as First Deputy Parliamentary Speaker in December 2001. Yushchenko saw this as revenge after Medvedchuk had orchestrated a parliamentary vote of no confidence in his government in April of that year.

The impact of the Kuchmagate crisis, which began in November 2000 and led to anti-Kuchma protests in Kyiv, also played a role. A second factor was the rise of Unity, Omelchenko's mini "party of power, which polled 11.62% in Kyiv, its highest vote in Ukraine, but still less than Our Ukraine's 28.05% in Kyiv. Throughout Ukraine, Unity only obtained 1.09%, compared to Our Ukraine's 23.57%.

Last weekend's inaugural NS-NU congress relegated Omelchenko to the ranks of the older generation, which the Orange Revolution has forced aside to make way for the middle and younger generation (EDM, February 9).