

UKRAINE'S CENTRIST CAMP IN DISARRAY AHEAD OF 2006 ELECTIONS

By Taras Kuzio

Although the main story in Ukrainian politics this fall has been the rift in the Orange Revolutionary camp, the centrists that once gathered around former president Leonid Kuchma are far more divided. Most of them will have a hard time winning seats in the 2006 parliament.

Two of Ukraine's three centrist parties, representing the largest of the three oligarchic parties, have decided not to create election blocs and instead contest the 2006 elections alone (Ukrayinska pravda, October 31, November 1). The Social Democratic Party--United (SDPUo) and Regions of Ukraine (RU) will both run independent campaigns in 2006.

The SDPUo ran independently in both the 1998 and 2002 elections, obtaining 4% and 6% respectively. With current ratings of only 1%, it is unlikely to win a seat in 2006.

Regions of Ukraine's first election was in 2002, when it ran as a member of the pro-Kuchma "For a United Ukraine" bloc. In June 2005 it floated the idea of creating a bloc named after its leader, Viktor Yanukovich, which became saddled with the unfortunate slang abbreviation "Blya" (Blok Yanukovich).

Two new parties could have joined "Blya": New Democracy, led by former Kharkiv governor Yevhen Kushnariov, and Derzhava, led by former prosecutor Hennadiy Vasyliiev. A third possible member of "Blya" would have been the Progressive Socialists.

The third centrist party, Labor Ukraine (TU), is no longer a political force. Its dismal 1% rating is now divided between two quarrelling wings of TU led by Valeriy Konovaliuk and Volodymyr Sivkovych (Ukrayinska pravda, October 8, 11). TU split over how to relate to the Orange Revolution. Konovaliuk sought to modernize TU by permitting some cooperation with the administration of President Viktor Yushchenko, while Sivkovych lobbied for the TU to join the hard-line anti-Yushchenko opposition.

Why have the centrists turned on each other?

All along, the centrists were united only by their allegiance to Kuchma, not by any common ideological bonds. This tenuous connection mirrors the lack of real unity in the Orange Revolutionary camp, which united nationalists, anarchists, liberals, businessmen, and Socialists against Kuchma and Yanukovych. After Yushchenko won, there was no common enemy to bind the coalition together.

According to SDPUo leader Viktor Medvedchuk, one of the main differences between his party and Regions of Ukraine is that the RU faction signed the parliamentary agreement with President Yushchenko, a step the SDPUo refused to undertake (Den, October 7).

Medvedchuk also complained that, because the SDPUo had backed Yanukovych's candidacy in the 2004 elections, voters continue to confuse the SDPUo and RU as "one team."

Medvedchuk's argued unconvincingly that the SDPUo, "upholds a contemporary social-democratic ideology," while Regions of Ukraine uses the slogan, "Strong regions – strong state." In reality, both parties are ideologically amorphous and the Socialist International even rejected the SDPUo's membership on the grounds that it was not a real social-democratic party.

Ironically, Regions of Ukraine is no longer a pro-Kuchma party. Defeated presidential candidate Yanukovych is now hostile to Kuchma, believing he betrayed and embarrassed him in the second round of the 2004 elections. Yanukovych lobbied throughout the first week of the Orange Revolution for Kuchma to launch a violent crackdown to confirm the official result of himself elected as president. But, Kuchma refused, instead calling for fresh elections without Yushchenko or Yanukovych where he could have stood as a candidate. RU's initial distrust of Kuchma and Medvedchuk, it believes, was proven correct.

During his decade in office, Kuchma granted the ruling elites in Donetsk, the RU's base, de facto autonomy. They were only reluctantly brought into Kyiv politics by Kuchma in 2002 when Yanukovych was made prime minister and, two years later, heir apparent. They invested sizeable financial resources in the 2004 elections. The RU and the SDPUo are therefore also divided over the Kuchma era, with Medvedchuk giving it a positive spin while Yanukovych is now critical.

Ukrainian polls continue to point to only six parties and blocs being elected to the 2006 parliament. These six will compete in three groups for voters (Ukrayinska pravda, October 31).

The Yulia Tymoshenko bloc will compete with Yushchenko's People's Union-Our Ukraine for the mantle of the Orange Revolution. RU will compete with the Communists for uneducated voters and pensioners in eastern Ukraine.

The Socialist Party and parliamentary speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn's bloc will compete for the rural vote in central and southern Ukraine.

The Orange Revolutionary camp is likely to re-unite after the 2006 elections to create a pro-Yushchenko majority that may include the Lytvyn bloc and the Socialists (Ukrayinska pravda, October 8, 10, 25, 27, November 1). Centrists, on the other hand, will only be represented by Regions of Ukraine, as other formerly influential pro-Kuchma parties will fail to enter parliament.