

Stasiuk Program

for the Study of Contemporary Ukraine

450 Athabasca Hall, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB Canada T6G 2E8

May 23, 2003

Kuchma Prepares for the Future

By David Marples

Ukraine's Leonid Kuchma, once considered a "lame duck" president in the light of his international isolation, and with only some 16 months left of his administration, has recently taken some major steps to strengthen the office at the expense of the parliament. His opponents fear that he will attempt to extend his presidency beyond the maximum two terms as defined in the Ukrainian Constitution.

The "resurrection" of Kuchma is a remarkable event. Over the past year he has survived scandals that would have destroyed most national leaders—from an alleged supply of anti-radar equipment to Iraq to virtual segregation at the NATO summit (the language was switched to French so that the American president did not have to sit next to him, according to the English alphabetical listing), to a unified parliamentary opposition that had as its mission the removal of the president prior to the expiration of his mandate.

How has he managed to recover? He has used the full arsenal of his authority. First, the administration has been carefully managed by oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, the head of the presidential administration. An equally powerful figure is that of new Prime Minister, Viktor Yanukovich, the former governor of Donetsk, a giant of a man who has been imprisoned at least twice for embezzlement and is a known associate of one of the city's richest oligarchs, Rinat Akhmedovich, owner of the local soccer club, Shyaktar Donetsk.

Yanukovich arouses memories of one of Kuchma's earlier Prime Ministers, Pavlo Lazarenko, now a fugitive in the United States, awaiting trial for corruption. In a recent interview with the BBC, Kuchma dropped several hints that he would not be averse to the elevation of Yanukovich as the next president of Ukraine. It is not a thought likely to give comfort to most Ukrainian residents.

Kuchma also accepted an appointment as the new Chairman of the CIS, an organization that Ukraine has declined to join in the past, explaining this apparent contradiction as expedient for the development of a free-trade zone in the CIS area. In truth, the CIS chairmanship provided Kuchma with some much-needed credibility. Meanwhile his government continues to petition the EU for future membership.

Having ensured his immediate survival, the Ukrainian president has turned on the parliament, in which the main opposition stems from three sources: the Communists led by Petro Symonenko, the Socialists under Oleksander Moroz, and the Yuliya Tymoshenko Bloc, led by the politician of the same name. In the background remains Ukraine's most popular politician, Viktor Yushchenko, who at one time seemed the likely president elect, but whose prospects today are dimming.

Kuchma has proposed a new constitutional reform that would see the formation of a powerful new upper house, entitled the Chamber of the Regions, cutting down the number of deputies in the regular parliament from 450 to 300. It is unclear how this upper chamber would be elected, but likely its deputies would owe their allegiance to the president, and would delay or halt unpopular measures emanating from the lower house.

A barrage of propaganda has been issued about the wisdom of the presidential initiative, led by Medvedchuk and Yanukovich, through control of the official media and newly created information centres across Ukraine. Kuchma has declared that the decision will be made in a national referendum, arousing fears that given state control over the process and a compliant Constitutional Court, Ukraine will experience the sort of enhancement of presidential power that destroyed democracy in Belarus in late 1996. Not only would the president have authority to dissolve parliament, but a new upper chamber might also agree to amendments to the Constitution that, in theory, could extend Kuchma's period in office.

Opposition leaders point out that Kuchma has extended his term in office once before through the issue of a new Constitution. The sort of changes being recommended could lead to a stipulation that the president be given a new mandate. At best, the changes seem engineered to ensure a succession of a candidate, such as Yanukovych, favoured by Kuchma.

Faced with these new threats, the opposition has embarked on a more limited campaign: to ensure that both the presidency and parliament continue to the end of the current terms, after which new elections must be held, and to prevent the president's proposed constitutional reforms.

Like his neighbours, Putin and Lukashenka, however, Kuchma has learned a most valuable lesson: that no matter how corrupt and tyrannical his regime may be, he has retained the means to expand presidential power and oversee the evolution of Ukraine into a virtual dictatorship, backed by the Donetsk "clan" and in spite of a distinct lack of popular support.