

The death of Georgy Gongadze—Ukrainian state implicated in journalist's murder

Andy Niklaus**25 January 2001**

On September 16 last year the 31-year-old journalist Georgy Gongadze, publisher of the Internet journal *Ukrainska Prawda* [pravda.com.ua], left his office to go home. His wife and two young children waited for him in vain. He never came home.

Gongadze had been active among various wealthy oligarchs and political parties before setting up the *Ukrainska Prawda* (Ukrainian Truth) in April last year. The journal concentrated on the exposure of cases of corruption within the highest levels of the ruling elite. Compromising documents about President Leonid Kuchma, among others, were published on the Internet so as to evade censorship.

The muzzling of the press in the Ukraine is notorious. The government utilises the tax offices or imposes high fines for "slander" or "spreading false information", in order to drive critical media operations into bankruptcy. Some have become dependent on rich sponsors, which further limits their freedom. According to the journalists' trade union, in the nine years since the Ukraine became independent, 38 journalists have died violently. Some were the victims of mysterious accidents, and others were simply shot in broad daylight. Neither the culprits nor those giving the orders have ever been caught.

Georgy Gongadze seems to have suffered the same fate. However, there is evidence suggesting that he may have been kidnapped by the secret service (SBU) or the even more powerful Interior Ministry.

In mid-November, a headless male corpse was found near the capital Kiev. Acid had been poured over the remains of the body. On the basis of certain pieces of jewellery, friends recognised the body as that of Gongadze. But before his relatives could identify him, the corpse was brought to Kiev and remains under lock and key. Gongadze's mother offered to help pay for a DNA test to see if this was the body of her son, but the authorities keep finding new excuses to block any identification.

At the end of last year, Olexandr Moroz of the opposition Socialist Party (SPU) presented a forensic report that had been obtained in Germany, which proved that the disfigured corpse discovered in October was that of the disappeared journalist Georgy Gongadze.

The case attracted great attention in the Ukraine and there were several demonstrations in Kiev and other cities. Several thousand journalists demonstrated in Kiev against restrictions on press freedom. President Kuchma and other officials have repeatedly obstructed efforts by journalists to uncover the truth. When the journalists' federation planned a live broadcast from the European Union parliament in Strasbourg to report on the case, a bomb threat was issued, causing the programme to be cancelled.

Statements by Moroz have seriously implicated the government, which is a centre-right coalition of eight parties. At the end of

November, Moroz produced tape recordings of 11 telephone calls in which three men speak about what should happen to Gongadze. Among other things, they suggest taking Gongadze back to his native Georgia and dumping him there without any clothes, or to selling him "to the Chechens". Moroz claims the voices on the tape belonged to President Kuchma, Interior Minister Yuri Kravtshenko as well as the director of the presidential administration, Volodymyr Litvin. Moroz is said to have received the tapes from a member of the secret service.

The tapes were checked by the Justice Ministry in the Netherlands, which acknowledged their authenticity. Whether one of the voices belonged to President Kuchma could not be established. There is a 70 percent probability that it is Kuchma, according to the Kiev newspaper *Serkalo nedeli*, which cites the Dutch investigation.

On December 7, three members of the parliamentary committee of inquiry into the Gongadze case, Sergey Golovaty, Olexandr Shir and Viktor Shishkin, travelled to an unnamed European country to interview a former SBU member. The three have close connections with the SBU secret service, since they were previously active as justice minister, prosecutor general and a secret service colonel. They filmed the SBU member for 24 minutes. On the video, he is said to acknowledge the president's participation in the discussion and give information on how the incriminating tape recordings were made.

When the three parliamentary deputies arrived back at Kiev airport, the video was seized and was damaged before being returned. Nevertheless, the damaged video was shown in parliament in mid-December. Afterwards fights broke out between deputies, with government supporters fighting with members of the opposition.

The SBU officer at the centre of the case is 34-year-old Mykola Melnychenko, who had been one of Kuchma's bodyguards for three years, reaching the rank of major. According to the opposition SPU press office, Melnychenko continuously travels abroad and is under the constant protection of "patriotic forces".

In the video, Melnychenko explains that he hid digital recording equipment under the sofa in Kuchma's office and recorded his discussions over a long period. He claims his aim was to stop the criminal activities of the regime, in order to cleanse the Ukrainian people of dirt and lies. He also heard on tapes that Kuchma wanted to silence certain media, had parliamentary delegates shadowed and put obstacles in the way of banks and foundations that caused unease. At the beginning of November Melnychenko quit his service with the SBU.

President Kuchma denied the accusations directed against him and claimed on Ukrainian television that the case was "a consciously provoked and carefully planned political campaign" aimed at destabilising the Ukraine, to make it look like "an uncivilised

country" and stop the course of the reforms. Some newspapers have dubbed the Gongadze case "Kuchmagate", in reference to the Watergate crisis in the US.

In mid-December calls for Kuchma's resignation became even louder. The *Verkhovna Rada*, the Ukrainian parliament, decided by a narrow majority that Kuchma should sack Interior Minister Kravtshenko, Prosecutor General Mykhailo Potebenko, as well as the head of the Ukrainian security agency, Derkatsch. However, the resolution was only advisory and did not oblige the head of state to do anything. Kuchma explained he wanted to wait for all the investigations to be completed before taking action.

On December 19, several thousand demonstrated before the parliament in Kiev and called for Kuchma's resignation. There were also counter-demonstrations supporting Kuchma. International protests were also launched and the organisation "Reporters without borders" presented a protest note to Kuchma. A delegation of the Council of Europe also travelled to Kiev to examine the situation facing the Ukrainian press. By the middle of January, Kuchma had to admit that there had been high-level discussions about Gongadze.

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Ukraine in 1991, constant power struggles between various wings of the former Stalinist elite have characterised the "democratic" parliament. The two groups in the 445-seat parliament presently confronting each other both emerged from the old state apparatus.

Since the beginning of last year, Kuchma's majority has relied on an alliance of 11 groups—from liberals to Greens and ultra-nationalists. Moroz's opposition SPU came out of a split-off from the Ukrainian Communist Party (KPU), the former state party. It is using the Gongadze case as a welcome means to eliminate the oligarchs around Kuchma and to continue the "reforms" themselves.

The conflict also has foreign policy implications. According to Ukrainian commentators, pro-Western and particularly pro-American forces escalated the Gongadze murder scandal against President Kuchma. Behind it is the fear of an increasing rapprochement between Kuchma and Moscow. In particular, his gestures toward the Kremlin on the question of gas debts are viewed with increasing disquiet. These forces would prefer to replace Leonid Kuchma with government chief Viktor Yushchenko, who maintains very close relations with the West and international financial organisations, and whose wife is an American citizen.

In this context another potential legal scandal has emerged. A few days ago, the Ukrainian public prosecutor made accusations against Deputy Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko, who is a trusted friend of Yushchenko. According to the press agency *Interfax*, Timoshenko, who is responsible for the energy sector, has been accused of tax evasion and stealing Russian natural gas. Her husband has been in jail since last July awaiting trial on the same charges.

Yulia Timoshenko was a board member of the energy company UES, which was said to have resold Russian natural gas to a British company. The directors then divided the profits among themselves.

The backdrop of this crude power struggle is the worsening economic position of the Ukraine, and the shocking decline in social conditions faced by the masses. Unlike Russia, the Ukraine was unable to profit from higher world oil prices last year. Attempts at a speedy integration of the Ukraine into Europe have failed.

In 1994, the International Monetary Fund demanded the lifting of state control over the exchange rate, resulting in the collapse of the old currency. The price of bread rose overnight by 300 percent, the cost of public transport by 900 percent, and electricity by 600 percent.

Over the past decade, industrial production has fallen by 70 percent. Foreign investors have concentrated on prime acquisitions of the coal, steel and iron industries. According to a study by the prime minister, with production continuing to shrink, industrial output now makes up only 10.4 percent of the Gross National Product.

The extensive fertile valleys of the Ukraine were considered the breadbasket of Europe for centuries. But agricultural production has halved since 1990. Experts fear a famine if the IMF's agrarian reforms announced for 2001 are actually carried out. As for workers' wages, they have declined by 70 percent over the past 10 years. According to *Den* newspaper, while average monthly wages in 1999 were US\$47, in the first quarter of 2000 they amounted to only \$39 (the legal minimum wage is \$24). Pensions in 1999 were just \$16 a month, and even this miserable income is eaten up by burgeoning inflation rates.

At a press conference on World AIDS Day in early December, Health Minister Vitali Moskalenko said, "The Ukraine faces an HIV/AIDS epidemic. The rise of those suffering with AIDS is dramatically high." There are some 350,000 estimated AIDS cases in the Ukraine, almost 1 percent of the population. According to a UN report, in 2010, 6 percent of the population will be infected with AIDS. "Poverty and unemployment, as well as access to cheap drugs, have brought about this dramatic development," the report concludes, which also cites that the Ukraine has had the fastest increase of the epidemic in Europe.

The Ukraine's foreign debts presently amount to \$13 billion. Last May the country faced bankruptcy, with \$2.6 billion in outstanding loans being called in. Only by carrying out debt conversion under the direction of several prominent European banks was the threatened financial collapse averted.

Fearing a social explosion, shortly after the demonstrations against President Kuchma the IMF released the first instalment—\$246 million—of a \$2.6 billion credit. It was delivered, however, with punishing stipulations that will further undermine the economy and living conditions of the masses.

It is within this devastating economic and social context that the struggle in Kiev continues to intensify. Both the murder of Georgy Gongadze, as well as the accusations against Yulia Timoshenko, are being used by various forces behind the scenes to carry through a rearrangement of political power.



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