

# Power struggle in Ukraine continues

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Conflicts continue between the opposing camps following the decision by the Ukraine Supreme Court to annul the disputed result of the presidential election of November 21 and order a revote on December 26.

Over the weekend, opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko called on his supporters to remain in the capital and continue their demonstrations, which have been taking place daily for the past two weeks, until the government of Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich is dismissed, a new electoral committee is appointed, and a new electoral law passed. One of Yushchenko's demands is that the casting of ballots be permitted only at the place of residence.

Yushchenko's supporters continue to blockade numerous government buildings. For his part, President Leonid Kuchma has so far refused to dismiss the government of Yanukovich, which lost a no-confidence vote in parliament last week. Yanukovich is the presidential candidate of the government camp.

Kuchma has thus far opposed the change to the electoral law demanded by the opposition. He is prepared to agree only if a constitutional amendment to curtail the powers of the future president is agreed to at the same time.

Intensive negotiations between both sides over a compromise settlement have taken place over the few past days under the mediation of European Union foreign policy head Javier Solana, Polish President Alexander Kwasniewski and his Lithuanian counterpart, Valdas Adamkus. The dismissal of the government, the passage of a new electoral law, and changes to the constitution are to be linked to form a package on which all sides can agree.

The negotiations, however, have to date produced no agreement. On Monday, the parties separated and Kuchma merely declared he was prepared to appoint a new electoral committee. A "reconciliation commission" has been assigned the job of seeking a compromise.

Despite the ongoing conflicts, the fronts are shifting. Negotiations, haggling and manoeuvres are taking place both in the open and behind the scenes. The process

underscores the fact that the power struggle in Ukraine has little to do with democracy or free elections, but rather expresses the conflict between different wings of the ruling elite and the great powers backing them.

Yushchenko has the full support of the US and the European Union, which, in the event of his victory, will be able to increase their economic and political influence over Ukraine and weaken the position of Russia—the latter being the particular aim of Washington. Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, continue to back Yanukovich.

Since the decision of the Supreme Court last Friday in favour of the opposition, Yanukovich has been forced increasingly onto the defensive. President Kuchma, whose base lies in the industrial city Dnepropetrovsk, has clearly distanced himself from his former favourite. In an interview with the *New York Times*, he even suggested that Yanukovich withdraw his candidacy, leaving Yushchenko to run unopposed, in order to discredit the new ballot.

The oligarch Viktor Pinchuk, who is married to Kuchma's daughter, is the leading figure in Kuchma's home town of Dnepropetrovsk. He rules over an empire comprising pipelines, steel and television interests, and, with an estimated fortune of \$3 billion, is reckoned to be the second richest man in Ukraine. Up to now, Pinchuk has supported Yanukovich, but at the same time he has sought to give backing to the opposing side.

According to a report in the news magazine *Der Spiegel*, Henry Kissinger, the elder George Bush, George Soros and Zbigniew Brzezinski all travelled to Ukraine prior to the November 21 election at Pinchuk's invitation for the purpose of "making their own estimation of the situation." Both Soros and Brzezinski intervened heavily in the election campaign in favour of Yushchenko. Soros partly financed the latter's campaign.

Pinchuk has allowed his television channels to report on the opposition, and has even visited opposition demonstrations. At the same time, his father-in-law Kuchma has been doing his best to curtail the powers of a future President Yushchenko.

Kuchma's current demand to limit the power of the

president and change over to a system in which the government is responsible to parliament and not the president was originally raised by the opposition, which was seeking to limit Kuchma's power. Prior to the decision by the Supreme Court, the opposition declared its readiness to change both the electoral law and the constitution. But now that Yushchenko stands on the threshold of the presidency, he is abandoning his former position. He fears he could be obstructed by a parliament in which he lacked a majority.

The issue has led to an open conflict with the leader of the Socialist Party, Alexander Moros. Moros had stood as a candidate for president in the first round of voting and ended up in third place behind Yushchenko and Yanukovich. In the run-off between the two top vote-getters, he had called on his supporters to vote for Yushchenko. According to election polls, Yushchenko benefited considerably from votes cast by Moros supporters, particularly in the east and south of the country.

Now Moros has accused Yushchenko of breaking his previous pledges. "This means that perhaps there will be no constitutional amendments and the monarchist form of rule in the Ukraine will continue," he said.

Kuchma, Pinchuk and Moros, whose party emerged out of the former Communist Party, represent those layers of the nouveau riche who traditionally sought to pursue a middle course between Russia and the West. Kuchma retained close relations with Russian president Putin, but at the same time strove to integrate Ukraine into NATO and sent Ukrainian troops to Iraq as part of the Polish contingent.

Yushchenko is backed by that wing of the new propertied classes in Ukraine who seek to orient the country towards Europe and the US. Yushchenko's biggest financier is Pyotr Poroschenko, head of the company Ukrprominvest, a conglomerate consisting of cafés, docks and engineering enterprises. An additional source of finances is David Schwania, who deals in nuclear power. Yulia Tymoshenko, who leads the opposition with Yushchenko, made her millions through trading in natural gas.

On the basis of massive support from the US, Yushchenko feels strong enough to up the ante and seek a monopoly of power. In doing so, he threatens to divide the country.

Yushchenko's policy has met with bitter opposition in the Donbass region, where 40 percent of the population is of Russian descent. Demonstrators in Donetsk have

carried banners declaring, "We Will Not Sell Our Souls to Bush."

Contrary to claims by Western media outlets, this stance is not just a product of propaganda on the part of those in power in the east of the country. The Donbass region is utterly dependent on its coal and steel industries, and Russia is the biggest market for such products. Many workers fear for their jobs should Yushchenko take power.

A referendum over autonomy for the region is planned for the start of January, and a "yes" vote could lead to a process of territorial disintegration such as that which took place in the former Yugoslavia.

At the same time, the oligarchs in the region are reluctant to develop too close relations with Russia. Their wealth resulted from the splitting off of the region from the former Soviet Union and their independence would be threatened by overly close links with Moscow. Rinat Achmetov, the richest man in the country and head of a coal and steel empire, is alleged to have reacted very angrily to the threat of autonomy launched by his protégé, Yanukovich.

The oligarchs want assurances, however, that their wealth will not be affected by a change of regime in Kiev. The same applies to the oligarchs of Dnepropetrovsk. It should not be too difficult for Yushchenko to agree to such terms. As *Der Spiegel* writes in its current edition: "An amnesty for Kuchma, a pact of non-aggression for the people around him, and a quiet guarantee securing their accumulated wealth is regarded as uncontroversial by the opposition."



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