

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1017259584745117640>

Ukraine's Elections Are Rife With Charges of Political Abuse

By Katya Cengel Special to The Wall Street Journal

Updated March 28, 2002 12:01 am ET

KIEV, Ukraine -- The capital continues to be abuzz with allegations of abuse of the political process days before Parliamentary elections Sunday.

Just last week alone, Oleksandr Yeliashkevych, head of Parliament's election monitoring committee, accused the state television network UT-1 of slanted coverage; opposition candidate Yulia Tymoshenko sent an open letter to the Council of Europe appealing for help in ensuring fair elections, while the state tax office accused her of using illegal funds to finance her campaign; and Mykhailo Hutsol, leader of the smaller Rainbow Election party, claimed he was being politically persecuted and requested asylum in the U.S. The week finished the night of March 23 with the destruction of the entire 107,000 print-run of the weekly opposition newspaper Svoboda (Freedom) by a group of assailants dressed as police officers.

The events come at the tail end of a two-month-long election campaign marred by opposition candidates complaining they are being blocked access to the media and allegations that government-supported politicians are using state funds to run their campaigns.

President Leonid Kuchma has defended the government's actions, saying that critics have exaggerated their claims of misuse of state funds. He also said observers fail to understand how the election process works in Ukraine.

In general, political analysts and election monitors say the onslaught of corruption charges in this Parliamentary campaign far outpace those seen in previous contests. The result has been an almost complete lack of voter confidence in the country's democratic system. A poll conducted by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation, an internationally funded election monitoring group, said that 75% of respondents believe the elections will involve fraud.

At the same time, the opposition continues to press Mr. Kuchma on the disappearance and murder of opposition journalist Georgy Gongadze. A group of parliamentary deputies in February called for Mr. Kuchma's impeachment following the authentication of tapes they say implicate the president in Mr. Gongadze's disappearance. Mr. Kuchma has denied any involvement. Mr. Kuchma, who has served two terms in office, has said he doesn't intend to run for a third.

Mr. Gongadze's disappearance in the autumn of 2000 sparked antigovernment protests and resulted in a government crackdown last winter. The government deployed scores of police forces to planned antipresidential rallies and made numerous arrests, including the detainment of 500 participants following a March 9, 2001, protest and the imprisonment of the leader of one of the main opposition parties.

The president isn't the only one under fire. A local monitoring group, International Secretary for the Committee of Voters of Ukraine, or CVU, cited in its Feb. 23-March 10 report that political corruption is rampant throughout the country, a claim backed by most other monitoring groups. The group said opposition candidates are routinely denied air time on national TV and radio, government employees have been fired for supporting the wrong party and regional broadcasts of Radio Liberty have been jammed.

While Ukraine is hardly viewed as a squeaky-clean democracy -- it rated one of the world's 10 most corrupt nations by Transparency International -- events surrounding the run-up to the March 31 election have alarmed political analysts. One monitoring group, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, said a 2002 referendum on whether to expand the president's powers was tainted by falsified signatures on ballots and unsanctioned early voting. The validity of Ukraine's election process has been under attack for several years, but observers say the degree to which government authorities tapped public funds for pro-presidential parties and manipulated the media is unprecedented.

Oleksiy Lychkovakh, a representative of CVU, the largest home-grown nongovernmental organization monitoring the elections, said that opposition parties, which have generally been denied access to the media, stand little chance of gaining the 4% vote they need to win a Parliament seat in this weekend's elections. Meanwhile, he said, pro-government parties make use of their positions in power to threaten, coerce and bribe voters, according to CVU.

"Right now analysts can predict the winner in local elections in 90% of the districts," Mr. Lychkovakh said.

Mr. Lychkovakh said Kiev bosses tell local leaders how to vote, who in turn instruct their subordinates. Those who don't follow suit are quickly fired, he said. Because many successful businesses owe their achievements to good

relations with those in power, they try to instruct workers how to vote. CVU said that this situation arose at the Luhanska coal mine in Eastern Ukraine, where workers were warned that they wouldn't be paid unless they voted for the pro-government party, Za Edu. Opposition candidates and CVU also noted that other regions have denied opposition parties access to meeting halls and threatened their supporters.

In its first years of independence in the early 1990s, Ukraine was credited with holding relatively free and fair elections. But in recent years increasing corruption and a crippled economy, which has created a less-than-transparent barter system in many sectors, have weighed on the system. The downward spiral began with 1998 parliamentary elections, during which the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe noted incidents of violence and abuse of public office. The trend continued during the 1999 presidential election, which the OSCE noted for "irregularities on election day."

A new election law passed on Oct. 30, 2001, was meant to correct these shortcomings by providing for multiparty representation on election commissions, equal opportunities for all electoral contestants and equal access to the media. But the U.S.-funded National Democratic Institute for International Affairs noted that confusion and lack of follow-through have hobbled the law's implementation.

"The situation in the country has gotten a lot worse since 1998 so you can't expect these elections to be better," said Peter Byrne, a political journalist with the English-language Kyiv Post.

TURMOIL IN UKRAINE

- **As Ukraine's Economy Revives, Its Problems Become Political**
07/24/01
- **Ukraine Approves New Prime Minister**
05/30/01
- **Authorities Concede Gongadze's Case Isn't Resolved**
05/25/01

Copyright © 2019 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.