

Ukraine in Brief

Volume VI, Issue 11

March 23, 2011

Former President Kuchma suspect in murder investigation

Ukraine's President from 1994-2005, Leonid Kuchma, is formally being investigated as a suspect in the 2000 murder of journalist Georgiy Gongadze.



Former President Leonid Kuchma (left) and independent journalist, Georgiy Gongadze (Photo: Kyiv Post)

The murder of the journalist was national news because of Gongadze's notoriously independent means of reporting. He frequently criticized actions of Kuchma he believed to be wrong, as well as the actions of other top officials and businessmen.

In a press conference on March 22, the First Deputy Prosecutor General, Renat Kuzmin officially announced that the state will be looking into Kuchma's involvement in the murder. In a statement at the press conference, Kuzmin said "Today, Kuchma is suspected of exceeding authority, in giving illegal orders to Interior Ministry officials, that led, as a result, to the murder of a journalist."

Kuchma has not released any statements on the subject of being a suspect in the investigation, though he has consistently denied any wrongdoing in the murder.

Some officials are weary that Kuchma will ever be indicted for this crime, or even seriously investigated. Yulia Tymoshenko spoke out and questioned the prosecutor's intentions of actually seeking justice.

U.S. NGO leaves Ukrainian election law working group

The National Democratic Institute (NDI), a nongovernmental organization based in the United States, has withdrawn its membership in the Ukrainian working group dedicated to creating a new form of election law. NDI cites the undemocratic nature of the group as the reason for departure.

A statement by the institute's Eurasia regional director said "NDI has decided it must suspend its participation in the group unless steps are taken to make the entire election law drafting process more inclusive and transparent." The institute hopes that Ukraine will make the necessary changes because if not they will backslide further from democracy as opposed to working toward it.

NDI further reiterated how important it is for a country to have election results that the public can be confident in.

When the group withdrew from the committee, they sent a letter to Justice Minister Oleksandr Lavrynovych urging him to ensure the process of drafting new laws remains democratic. In a response to the accusations, Lavrynovych disagreed with NDI and said the group is open to many different opinions.



Ukrainian Justice Minister Lavrynovych (Photo: Kyiv Post)

Ukraine has been working to develop new election laws after international statements that the October elections 2010 did not meet fairness standards and thus were undemocratic.

U.S. Ambassador in Ukraine Reflects on US-Ukraine Relationship

John Tefft, the U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine recently gave an interview *The Day* newspaper in Kyiv, Ukraine. In the interview he discusses the relations between the two countries in regards to business, as well as other areas of life.

In terms of American business investment in Ukraine, the ambassador said he understood the concerns businesses have about investing. Ambassador Tefft acknowledged the "cronyism" that is a part of the Ukrainian business sector and went on to state that U.S. businesses, "see enormous risks, they don't see a fair and transparent system." Improving the investment climate for U.S. businesses will also help to improve Ukraine's economy.

The ambassador also spoke about the importance of the US-Ukraine Strategic Partnership, as a forum for discussing ideas related to democracy, as well as other topics. Specifically about the most recent meeting, in February of this year, he stated "I was actually encouraged because the government of Ukraine took this very seriously." In accordance to the ambassador, the more weight given to these meetings, the more successful they will be in the future.

In regards to President Yanukovych's first year in office, the ambassador declined to comment directly, but did state that between the Partnership Commission and phone calls between the two countries, they have reflected on the highs and lows of the past year and continue to move forward. Ambassador Tefft said reforms in a variety of areas, from economic to criminal procedure, to election rules, to judicial independence need to be dealt with, and he wants "To see reform proceed and to proceed fast."