

## UKRAINE OPPOSITION LEADER VICTIM OF POISONING

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*Supporters of Ukrainian political opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko are digesting news that the once dashing and now disfigured presidential candidate may have been poisoned by his political foes.*

Doctors at an Austrian clinic where Yushchenko had been getting tests since he fell mysteriously ill after a dinner with a political rival in September, found evidence of dioxin poisoning in his blood stream.

Dioxins are highly toxic chemicals that often are byproducts of factories that use chlorine in cleaning and manufacturing. In humans, dioxins in large doses can cause cancer and liver damage and have been linked to reproductive damage and an increased likeliness of diabetes and heart disease. Yushchenko had 1,000 times the normal amount of dioxin in his blood.

The tests leave "no doubt" Yushchenko's illness "has been caused by a case of poisoning by dioxin," Dr. Michael Zimpfer, the head of the Rudolfinerhaus hospital, told reporters at a news conference in Vienna on Saturday.

A criminal investigation has been opened into the apparent poisoning.

### **Yushchenko's symptoms**

Yushchenko, who opposed Ukrainian Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich in an election last month to replace the outgoing president, had been campaigning despite a range of painful symptoms caused by the poison -- most notably, a swollen, grayish and pockmarked face.

One of many symptoms of dioxin poisoning is Chloracne, a skin condition that manifests itself in bumps and painful facial blisters. In photographs, the once handsome father of three looked like he had aged 20 years. The disfiguring acne, while not harmful to his health, may persist for decades, experts say.

Yushchenko also reportedly suffers great pain and had a catheter inserted into his spinal column, through which painkillers were administered during the presidential campaign.

"It is my growing conviction that what happened to me was an act of political reprisal against a politician in opposition," Yushchenko said according to news reports. "The aim, naturally, was to kill me."

## **Political reprisal**

Yushchenko and his supporters believe that former members of the KGB, the notorious Soviet intelligence agency infamous for its secret plots to wipe out political enemies, may be responsible for the attempt on his life.

Russian Pres. Vladimir Putin supported Yushchenko's opponent during the election and Putin critics claim poisoning, a common practice during the Soviet era, has returned since the ex-KGB officer took office.

"The list is rather long, and since Putin assumed power in Russia, poisoning has been one of the preferred political tools used by the Kremlin," Pavel Felgenhauer, a Russian military analyst, told the Associated Press.

The Kremlin has had no reaction to Yushchenko's illness, the AP reported.

In 2003, Yuri Shchekochikhin, a liberal lawmaker and journalist who often criticized government corruption, died from what appeared to be a severe allergic reaction. Shchekochikhin's colleagues at the Novaya Gazeta newspaper where he worked assert that he was poisoned, though no evidence was found, according to the AP.

A second Novaya Gazeta reporter Anna Politkovskaya, also known for her criticism of the Kremlin, fell seriously ill after drinking tea on a flight from Moscow to southern Russia during coverage of a hostage crisis. Politkovskaya survived despite symptoms of severe food poisoning.

In one of the most notorious cases of alleged KGB poisoning, BBC journalist Georgi Markov, who defected from the former communist country of Bulgaria, was killed when a Ricin-filled pellet was injected into his leg by a jab from a rigged umbrella.

Russian authorities have also been criticized for using toxic gas as a sleep-inducing agent during a 2002 hostage crisis in which Chechen rebels held more than 600 Russian theatergoers. A majority of the deaths that resulted from the hostage crisis were attributed to the gas.

"These substances were mostly developed during Soviet times," Felgenhauer told the AP. "And the specialists who designed these kinds of poisons and ways of applying them were trained during Soviet times."

## **Yushchenko's fate**

Yushchenko was released from the hospital after treatment and doctors expect his damaged liver to return to normal. But, because chemical toxins like dioxins remain in the body for long periods, the effects of the poison could show up later.

For now, Yushchenko is campaigning for a second election, scheduled for Dec. 26. The Ukraine's Supreme Court threw out the results of the first election in November after accusations the election was rigged and widespread protests shut down the capital city of Kiev.

*--Compiled by Kristina Nwazota for NewsHour Extra*