

American cash plays political role in Ukraine; U.S. officials deny the \$65 million has interfered with the country's electoral process

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Abstract (summary)

WASHINGTON (AP) - The Bush administration has spent more than \$65 million in the past two years to aid political organizations in Ukraine, paying to bring opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko to meet U.S. leaders and helping to underwrite exit polls indicating he won last month's disputed runoff election.

Yushchenko is friendlier toward Europe and the United States than his opponent, who has [Vladimir Putin]'s support as well as backing from the current Ukrainian government of President Leonid Kuchma. Putin lauded [Viktor Yanukovich] during state visits to Ukraine within a week of both the Oct. 31 election and the Nov. 21 runoff.

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Full Text

WASHINGTON (AP) - The Bush administration has spent more than \$65 million in the past two years to aid political organizations in Ukraine, paying to bring opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko to meet U.S. leaders and helping to underwrite exit polls indicating he won last month's disputed runoff election.

U.S. officials say the activities don't amount to interference in Ukraine's election, as Russian President Vladimir Putin alleges, but are part of the \$1 billion the State Department spends each year trying to build democracy worldwide.

No U.S. money was sent directly to Ukrainian political parties, the officials say. In most cases, it was funneled through organizations like the Eurasia Foundation or through groups aligned with Republicans and Democrats that organized election training, with human rights forums or with independent news outlets.

But officials acknowledge some of the money helped train groups and individuals opposed to the Russian-backed government candidate - people who now call themselves part of the Orange revolution.

For example, one group that got grants through U.S.-funded foundations is the Center for Political and Legal Reforms, whose Web site has a link to Yushchenko's home page under the heading "partners." Another project funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development brought a Center for Political and Legal Reforms official to Washington last year for a three-week training session on political advocacy.

"There's this myth that the Americans go into a country and, presto, you get a revolution," said Lorne Craner, a former State Department official who heads the International Republican Institute, which received \$25.9 million last year to encourage democracy in Ukraine and more than 50 other countries.

"It's not the case that Americans can get 2 million people to turn out on the streets. The people themselves decide to do that," Craner said.

White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan said, "There's accountability in place. We make sure that money is being used for the purposes for which it's assigned or designated."

Since the Ukrainian Supreme Court invalidated the results of the Nov. 21 presidential runoff, Russia and the United States have traded charges of interference. A new election is scheduled for Dec. 26.

Opposition leaders, international monitors and Bush's election envoy to Ukraine have said major fraud marred the runoff between Yushchenko and current Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych, who was declared the winner.

Yushchenko is friendlier toward Europe and the United States than his opponent, who has Putin's support as well as backing from the current Ukrainian government of President Leonid Kuchma. Putin lauded Yanukovych during state visits to Ukraine within a week of both the Oct. 31 election and the Nov. 21 runoff.

Yushchenko's backers say Russian support for Yanukovych goes beyond Putin's praise and includes millions of dollars in campaign funding and other assistance. Putin has said Russia has acted "absolutely correctly" with regard to Ukraine.

Documents and interviews provide a glimpse into how U.S. money was spent inside Ukraine.

"Our money doesn't go to candidates; it goes to the process, the institutions that it takes to run a free and fair election," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

The exit poll, funded by the embassies of the United States and seven other nations as well as four international foundations, said Yushchenko won the Nov. 21 vote by 54 percent to 43 percent. Yanukovych and his supporters say the exit poll was skewed.

The Ukrainian groups that did the poll of more than 28,000 voters have not said how much the project cost. Neither has the U.S.

The four foundations involved included three funded by the U.S. government: The National Endowment for Democracy, which gets its money directly from Congress; the Eurasia Foundation, which gets money from the State Department, and the Renaissance Foundation, part of a network of charities funded by billionaire George Soros that gets money from the State Department. Other countries involved included Great Britain, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Canada, Norway, Sweden and Denmark.

Grants from groups funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development also went to the International Center for Policy Studies, a think tank that includes Yushchenko on its supervisory board. The board also includes several current or former advisers to Kuchma, however.

IRI, Craner's Republican-backed group, used U.S. money to help Yushchenko arrange meetings with Vice President Dick Cheney, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Armitage and GOP leaders in Congress in February 2003.

The State Department gave the National Democratic Institute, a group of Democratic foreign policy experts, nearly \$48 million for worldwide democracy-building programs in 2003. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright chairs NDI's board of directors.

The NDI says representatives of parties in all the blocs that participated in Ukraine's 2002 parliamentary elections have attended its seminars to learn skills such as writing party platforms, organizing bases of voter support and developing party structures. NDI also has been a main financial and administrative backer of the Committee of Voters of Ukraine, an election watchdog group that said the presidential vote was not conducted fairly.

NDI also organized a 35-member team of election observers headed by former federal appeals court Judge Abner Mikva for the Nov. 21 runoff vote. IRI sent its own team of observers.

The U.S. Agency for International Development also funds the Center for Ukrainian Reform Education, which produces radio and television programs aiming to educate Ukrainian citizens about reforming their nation's government and economy. The center also sponsors press clubs and education for journalists.

On the Net:

U.S. State Department: <http://www.state.gov>

Center for Political and Legal Reforms: <http://www.pravo.org.ua/>

International Center for Policy Studies: <http://www.icps.kiev.ua/eng/>

International Republican Institute: <http://www.iri.org>

National Democratic Institute: <http://www.ndi.org>

National Endowment for Democracy: <http://www.ned.org>

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