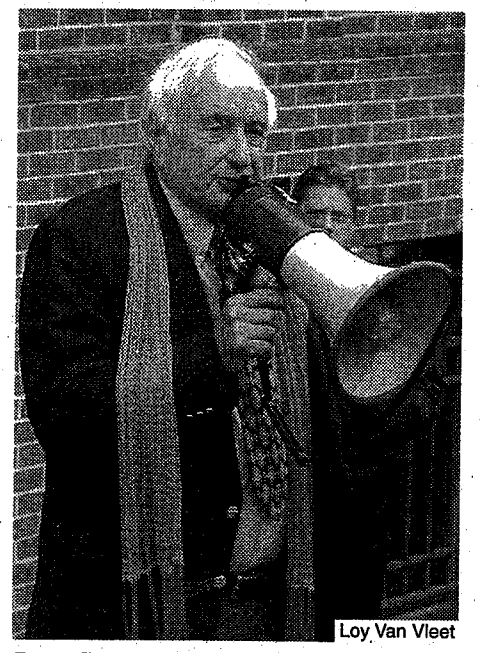
1,500 Ukrainian Americans demonstrate in D.C. for democracy in Ukraine

by Yaro Bihun

Special to The Ukrainian Weekly

WASHINGTON – An estimated 1,500 Ukrainian Americans demonstrated in front of the Embassy of Ukraine here November 24, protesting the fraud perpetrated in the recent presidential elections in Ukraine and showing their solidarity with the opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko and his backers demonstrating in Kyiv's Independence Square.



Loy Van Vleet

Rep. Sander M. Levin, who co-chairs the Congressional Ukrainian Caucus, was among the speakers at the protest demonstration in front of the Ukrainian Embassy in Washington.

Chanting "Yushchenko" and various slogans, the crowd blocked off the street in front of the Embassy's main entrance and part of Francis Scott Key Park next to it. The demonstration also forced the police to stop traffic on part of M Street, a major artery bringing bridge traffic across the Potomac River into the capital from Virginia.

While many of the demonstrators were from the Greater Washington area, most came from out of town. There were seven busloads from Chicago, six from the New York area, and two each from Detroit and Philadelphia. Others came by car from Baltimore, Cleveland, Boston and other cities in the Northeast.

The protest program, moderated by Ukrainian Congress Committee of America President Michael Sawkiw Jr., included speeches by U.S. Repr. Sander M. Levin (D-Mich.); Mykola Melnychenko, the former major in Ukraine's security service who secretly recorded President Leonid Kuchma's compromising conversations; and representatives of the communities participating in the protest. Local Catholic and Orthodox priests led the gathering in prayer.

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The 1,500 demonstrators in front of the Ukrainian Embassy building in Washington came by bus and auto from as far away as Chicago. Some, it seems, took a day off from school to do so.

The highlight of the event was the appearance by four Ukrainian diplomats who a day earlier signed a statement expressing their solidarity with their countrymen demonstrating in Ukraine and protesting the conduct of the presidential election. The four – Counselors Oleksandr Potiekhin, Volodymyr Chumak and Olexandr Scherba, and Second Secretary Yurii Parkhomenko – came out of the Embassy to the cheers of the crowd and shared their feelings about the election.

Toward the end of the two-hour demonstration Ukrainian Ambassador Mykhailo Reznik invited a delegation into the Embassy for what Mr. Sawkiw

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1,500 Ukrainian...

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later described as "a very amicable, meaningful dialogue."

Asked if there was a freeze descending on relations between the Ukrainian American community and the Ukrainian Embassy, Mr. Sawkiw said that as yet it was not evident. "It depends on what happens," he added. "That's the reason we went into the Embassy as a delegation, to show that we are in solidarity with the Ukrainian people."

However, at least one scheduled joint event has been put on hold. The Washington Group, the country's largest Ukrainian American professionals organization, "postponed indefinitely" an evening featuring the president of the Ukrainian Institute of America, Walter Nazarewicz, which was to have been held at the Embassy.

From the Ukrainian Embassy, the demonstrators went to the Embassy of Russia to show their displeasure with its government's meddling in the election process in Ukraine. Afterwards, a smaller group went on to the State Department, where a delegation had a meeting with an official responsible for Ukrainian affairs.

The Ukrainian Embassy was the scene of smaller protest marches earlier in the week, and on November 29 there was a small demonstration near the White House.