

Murder Charges for Kuchma

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KIEV — Ukraine's ex-president Leonid Kuchma was formally charged on Thursday over the 2000 murder of opposition journalist Heorhiy Gongadze and could face up to 12 years in jail if convicted.

The Ukraine Prosecutor General's Office on Tuesday opened a criminal case against Kuchma, president of independent Ukraine from 1994 to 2005, on suspicion of involvement in the beheading of Gongadze, one of his sharpest public critics.

The murder of the popular journalist, who was also well-known on TV talk shows, became emblematic of the sleaze and violence of post-Soviet Ukraine under Kuchma and led to street clashes in Kiev between protesters and riot police.

Emerging from questioning in the prosecutor's office, Kuchma, 72, told reporters: "I have been charged. On Monday we will meet here again and we'll see how things develop further."

The prosecutor general's spokesman, Yury Boichenko, confirmed that Kuchma had been charged with abuse of office, leading to the death of the journalist, which carries a jail sentence of between five and 12 years.

Kuchma on Wednesday denied any role in the grisly murder of the 31-year-old campaigning editor. It turned into post-Soviet Ukraine's most notorious crime case and was a turning point in Kuchma's 10-year rule.

He repeated his denial on Thursday. "I categorically disagree with every charge, except the part which says that I am Leonid Danilovich Kuchma. This is beyond question."

The opening of the case against Kuchma, once a patron of President Viktor Yanukovych who was his prime minister for two years, has surprised many observers.

Critics of Yanukovych and the opposition have consistently accused him of covering up misdeeds of his political and business associates since he came to power in February 2010, while at the same time persecuting opposition rivals.

But former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, Yanukovych's fiercest rival, has said she sees the whole affair as "bluff and window-dressing" aimed at projecting the impression that the Yanukovych leadership is abiding by the rule of law. She said Kuchma's prosecution would come to nothing.

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