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Star U.S. Lawyer to Defend Kuchma

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KIEV — Lawyer Alan Dershowitz, who has helped win acquittals for some of the most famous criminal suspects in the United States, intends to use his evidence-busting skills to defend the former Ukrainian president accused in the murder of an investigative journalist more than 10 years ago.

Dershowitz said Monday that he was drawn to the case by a recording that prosecutors say incriminates former President Leonid Kuchma. A voice on the tape that sounds like Kuchma's is heard complaining about journalist Heorhiy Gongadze and suggesting that someone "deal" with the problem.

Gongadze was kidnapped in September 2000, and his headless body was later discovered outside Kiev. Kuchma has denied any involvement.

"A main point is that he is a victim of a manufactured tape, that nobody can be confident that the recording is authentic," Dershowitz said in an interview. "And there is nothing worse than being a victim of false evidence."

Dershowitz, 72, said he himself was subject to the use of a false recording while working

on the celebrated case of Claus von Bulow, who was accused of trying to kill his wife, an American heiress, in 1980.

"Someone tape recorded me, and he had a tape recorder in his sock, and he took the scissors and cut the tape and made me sound like I said what I did not say," the lawyer said. "I became very interested and sympathetic to the fight of somebody who was exposed to a false tape."

Von Bulow was found guilty in his first trial, but after hiring Dershowitz to handle his appeal he had the conviction overturned and was acquitted in a second trial. Dershowitz wrote a book about the case, "Reversal of Fortune: Inside the von Bulow Case," which was made into a movie in 1990.

He also was a member of the defense team that won a controversial acquittal for O.J. Simpson, the U.S. football star accused of murdering his ex-wife and her friend in 1994.

Dershowitz, a professor at Harvard Law School, said he was working closely with Kuchma's Ukrainian lawyers.

"My job is to look hard at the science, to conduct our own investigations using world-renowned experts," he said.

He questioned the decision by Ukraine's Prosecutor General's Office to reverse its long-standing position and accept as evidence the recording that was supposedly made in Kuchma's office. Dershowitz called for the case to be closed "to not further reinforce the impression that the actions of the legal system may be politically motivated."

The criminal proceedings against Kuchma, 72, were initiated unexpectedly in March. Kuchma, who served as president from 1994 to 2005, had been questioned in the case in the past, but not as a suspect.

Prosecutors now say that he is suspected of abusing his powers by giving orders to Interior Ministry officials that eventually led to the journalist's killing.

Three former police officers were convicted of involvement in Gongadze's killing and sentenced to lengthy prison terms in 2008. Another key suspect, arrested after years in hiding, is awaiting trial. Prosecutors have concluded the murder was ordered by former Interior Minister Yury Kravchenko, who was shot dead in 2005 in what authorities ruled to be a suicide.

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