

# Corruption Scandal: Did Zelensky Fire His Minister of Defense?

Ukraine's Latest Corruption Scandal Threatens to Erode National Unity

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Global Research, February 10, 2023

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*By Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky having to vehemently deny that Oleksii Reznikov has been replaced as Ukraine Minister of Defence in the wake of a corruption scandal, it demonstrates that national unity is eroding and distrust in the government is growing. This is a nightmare situation for Ukraine since Zelensky initially came to power on the back of an anti-corruption platform and the latest scandal comes as Russia is reportedly preparing for a major offensive.*

In the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament), Zelensky called for an end to "rumours or any other pseudo-information" relating to Reznikov being dismissed. Although the Ukrainian president evidently hoped that this would alleviate the corruption allegations, the first major scandal of his administration since the war began in February 2022, speculation ran rife.

He pointed out that only the president can dismiss a minister, stressing in a Telegram post that: "We are taking personnel and institutional steps at various levels in the defence and security sector that can strengthen Ukraine's position."

David Arakhamia, an ally of Zelensky and a senior member of parliament, was quoted on February 5 as saying that Reznikov would be reshuffled from the defence ministry and given another portfolio. This was allegedly in response to a corruption scandal at the defence ministry. A day later he said that there would be no cabinet changes "this week."

For most of 2022, in the lead up to the US Congress election, the Republican candidates highlighted the corruption in the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence and questioned the misuse of funds that Washington continuously sends to Kiev.

As it appears though, Reznikov has not been reshuffled. It is recalled that he has gained a lot of influence lately, visiting the American-controlled Ramstein Airbase in Germany and

being described as a “good friend” by Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin. So long as Reznikov continues to serve US interests, it is unlikely that Washington will order Kiev to remove him. However, the moment Reznikov is no longer of use, the US will not hesitate to get rid of him.

It cannot be overlooked that the first article about corruption in the Ukraine Ministry of Defence appeared in the weekly newspaper Zerkalo Nedeli, which has connections with the American Embassy and receives grants from abroad to survive. The dire situation that the Ukrainian Armed Forces find themselves in could be a motivating factor for, what Zelensky says, are “rumours” and “pseudo-information” about the reshuffling of Reznikov as the US might want a stronger figure leading the defence ministry.

Reznikov is not a good defence minister. He is a lawyer and has little understanding of his position, meaning that he is effectively the civilian face of the ruling junta. In fact, Reznikov admitted to making a “pact” with Ukrainian Chief of Command Valeriy Zaluzhny.

“We agreed that I wouldn’t lecture him on how to fight. I’m not an artillery man. I’m an attorney, a lawyer working as defense minister,” he said.

A corruption scandal began on January 21 when Zerkalo Nedeli exposed in an article a procurement scheme in which the Defense Ministry paid double and triple the market prices for certain army provisions. Rather than acknowledge the obvious corruption, Reznikov instead accused the journalists of “manipulating” the facts just before the Ramstein meeting. In fact, it was Reznikov being manipulative as he attempted to shift focus away from the corruption scandal and onto the Ramstein meeting. The defence minister admitted that this was a “communicative failure”, but the damage was already done.

It is recalled that on January 24, Deputy Defence Minister for Supply, Vyacheslav Shapovalov, resigned from his post. This was followed by the USB arresting two people involved in the corrupt procurement scheme. Bohdan Khmelnytsky, who was also responsible for procurement, is suspected of embezzling nearly \$3 million through the purchase of substandard bulletproof vests for soldiers. Volodymyr Tereshchenko, the deputy foreign trade coordinator, is accused of misappropriating \$1.3 million in budgetary funds in a similar manner to Khmelnytsky.

Reznikov has not been accused of direct involvement, but he accepts responsibility for his subordinates and says he will stepdown immediately if Zelensky orders it. Corruption scandals in the Defense Ministry cost Petro Poroshenko his presidency and allowed Zelensky to come to power on the back of an anti-corruption platform. For this reason, even though Zelensky denies it for now, we could see the removal of Reznikov in the near future or the Ukrainian president could face major political and civilian backlash and risk upsetting the already fragile unity of the nation.

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