

Loyalty above all. Ukraine's speaker of parliament is dismissed

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On 7 October, the *Verkhovna Rada* (the lower house of parliament) of Ukraine voted to dismiss Dmytro Razumkov as its speaker. 215 deputies from the ruling Servant of the People party voted in favour of the resignation, as did 20 from *Batkivshchyna*, 19 from For the Future, 18 from Trust, 6 from Voice and 6 non-party deputies. Ruslan Stefanchuk, the former deputy speaker, was appointed the next day in his place. Razumkov was one of President Volodymyr Zelensky's closest associates at the beginning of his political career. He was responsible *inter alia* for the Servant of the People party's election strategy and image ; he also headed the party's list of candidates during the 2019 parliamentary elections.

Commentary

- Razumkov's dismissal came as a consequence of the growing conflict between him and the president. The reason was his public criticism of the head of state's activities and political initiatives, which in the perception of the President's Office contributed to lowering Zelensky's popularity and destabilising party unity. Over the past year, Razumkov questioned the possibility of the president dismissing members of the Constitutional Court and the National Security & Defence Council's imposition of sanctions against deputies of the pro-Russian Opposition Platform – For Life, including their media holdings. Zelensky finally lost confidence in Razumkov when the latter criticised the so-called law on oligarchs, which has been an important element of the president's image policy. The speaker cast doubt on whether the bill was in accordance with the constitution, and requested a legal opinion from the Venice Committee, which was seen as an act of deliberate obstruction.
- Razumkov's attitude, presented as evidence of his disloyalty to the president and his party, was what convinced most of its deputies to support his dismissal. The decision to sack him is a demonstration of Zelensky's strength; the intent is to discipline and unite the party, and also to enable the president to control the work of the parliament more effectively. This will be made easier by the appointment of 8 October of Ruslan Stefanchuk as the new chairman; he is perceived as loyal to Zelensky, and not harbouring greater political ambitions himself.
- Razumkov had also become more distant from the actions of the president and the Servant of the People party because of his desire to play an independent role in politics; he may also intend to run in the next presidential elections. He has not yet officially

confirmed this, but nor has he denied that he is considering such a run. According to recent public opinion polls, Razumkov ranks second among the politicians with the greatest public confidence (32%), right behind the current president (33%). He is thus becoming a potentially serious rival to Zelensky, who is most likely to seek re-election, so depriving Razumkov of his prominent position is also a step towards limiting his influence and his chances of building a political base, and to reducing his presence in the media.