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Ukraine: a wave of dismissals against a background of corruption

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In the last ten days of January 2023, several corruption scandals were exposed in Ukraine, resulting in a series of top officials being fired from the state administration. On 21 January 2023, the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) detained Vasyl Lozynsky, deputy minister for the development of communities, territories and infrastructure, and accused him of accepting a $400,000 bribe in connection with his ministry's procurement of heating equipment. On the same day, irregularities in the supply of food to the military came to light. It was revealed that the Ministry of Defence had awarded its foodstuffs procurement contract to a company with small share capital, no business experience and no premises, and that the prices contracted were severely inflated. Although the Defence Ministry's first reaction was to deny the allegations, public outrage was so strong that the deputy minister in charge of procurement, Vyacheslav Shapovalov, resigned. NABU has launched an investigation into the matter.

23 January 2023 saw the resignation of the deputy head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, Kyrylo Tymoshenko, who had been responsible for supervising the regional administration and for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. In recent weeks he had come under criticism from the media for his conflict of interests. On the same day, the deputy Prosecutor General of Ukraine Oleksiy Symonenko announced his resignation over his New Year's trip to Spain, during which he used a car belonging to Hryhoriy Kozlovsky, an influential businessman from the tobacco industry. On 26 January 2023, Mykola Tyshchenko was expelled from the Servant of the People parliamentary group in connection with his trip to Bangkok, the official reason for which was to "meet the Ukrainian diaspora".

On 23 and 24 January the Cabinet of Ministers and President Volodymyr Zelensky accepted the resignations handed in by Tymoshenko, four deputy ministers (aside from Shapovalov, Ivan Lukeria & Vyacheslav Nehoda from the ministry for the development of communities, territories and infrastructure , and Vitaly Muzychenko from the ministry of social policy were dismissed) and two regional governors who had become entangled in corruption scandals.

Commentary

- The scandals at the top tiers of government have demonstrated that after almost a year of war the level of discipline among Ukrainian state officials is falling. The series of resignations should be viewed as an attempt by Zelensky to overcome a serious crisis in his government's public image. It was triggered by the numerous instances of corruption

and conflict of interest which came to light in recent days, combined with the revelations of the lifestyle lived by some state officials, which is highly inappropriate during wartime. These scandals have undermined the reputation of the ruling camp in the eyes of the public and the military, as well as Ukraine's foreign partners. Zelensky is aware that tolerance for such behaviour, especially in his close circle, may translate into a drop in his approval rating and risk his country's Western partners reducing their financial and military aid to Ukraine. The West was already closely monitoring the conduct of Ukrainian officials, as evidenced by the US's appointment in mid-January 2023 of a task force to investigate potential irregularities in the distribution of US equipment and financial aid in Ukraine.

- The Defence Ministry's failed attempts to hush up the scandal have accelerated a shift in the Ukrainian public debate. As a consequence, the media and NGOs have decided to abandon the self-censorship which they had applied to reporting on negative developments in the ruling camp, in an attempt not to undermine the authority of the government and its solidarity with the public in wartime. In the early days of the Russian aggression, the media avoided talking about the abuses and mistakes the authorities had made when preparing the country for war. They saw it as necessary to hush up internal conflicts, as these could have undermined the state's resilience. From the summer of 2022, however, they changed this approach when the view that the war was an opportunity to combat corruption became widespread, and that this was more important than the potential risk of Russian propaganda using the scandals in its information war. Therefore, it seems that society's tolerance of the government, which was particularly evident in the early days of the war, is now over, and that the media will now report on corruption scandals whenever these occur.