Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 4.09.2023 www.osw.waw.pl

Ukraine: the dismissal of the defence minister

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On 3 September, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced the dismissal of Ukraine's defence minister, Oleksii Reznikov. He will be replaced by Rustem Umierov, who has so far served as director of the State Property Fund. These changes are yet to be approved by the Ukrainian parliament in the coming days. Zelensky did not give a direct reason for Reznikov's dismissal; he only noted that the Ministry of Defence needed to take a new approach and revise its model of cooperation with both the army and the public.

Commentary

- Reznikov's dismissal did not come as a surprise; the Ukrainian media have been speculating about it for several weeks, and Umierov (see bio in the Appendix) had been mentioned as his potential successor for several days. It is believed that Reznikov was dismissed due to numerous scandals which had come to light in recent months over the purchase of equipment & supplies for the army by the Ministry of Defence, and the way mobilisation had been conducted. It seems that the final straw was the scandal over the procurement last year of winter uniforms for the army (they proved to be of low quality and were overpriced, and the purchases were linked to customs & tax frauds), which journalists exposed in August. The contract worth $30 million was concluded with a company registered in Turkey co-owned by 26-year-old Oleksandr Kasay. He is a cousin of Hennadiy Kasay, a Ukrainian parliamentary deputy from Zaporizhzhia representing the Servant of the People party, who was linked with the Motor Sich plant and its former director Vyacheslav Bohuslayev; this man was charged with high treason and has been detained since last October. Regardless of what the investigation uncovers, Reznikov was still unable to respond to the journalists' accusations, thus contributing to the escalation of chaos and suspicions around the Ministry of Defence.
- Reznikov's position has been weakening since the beginning of 2023, when the scandal involving the purchase of food for the army at inflated prices broke out (for more see '*Ukraine: a wave of dismissals against a background of corruption*'). According to unofficial information, he was close to being dismissed at that time, but this did not happen mainly due to the lack of a suitable candidate to replace him, and also because the negotiations with Western partners regarding the supply of ammunition and armaments were at an advanced stage. Nevertheless, in the following months, the scandals in Reznikov's ministry started causing more and more reputational damage to the government, especially due to the minister's repeated unprofessional reactions to allegations made by journalists and volunteers.

- The unsuccessful attempts to find Reznikov's successor in February and discussions about his possible dismissal, which continued throughout August, are proof of the personnel shortages within the government camp. At the same time, managing the Ministry of Defence is considered extremely difficult and politically risky, given the accumulation of organisational problems and accusations of corruption. The nomination of Umierov proves that Zelensky has, at least temporarily, managed to overcome the staffing problems, and that the ruling camp has retained a certain ability to cooperate with people who are not members of the inner political circle.
- The nomination of Umierov in place of Reznikov has been well received in Ukraine. He has a reputation as a person who has highly developed organisational and communication skills, a great deal of energy, and extensive contacts abroad (especially in the US and Turkey). Even the opposition circles recognise these advantages, but at the same time they have noted his close ties with Andriy Yermak, the influential Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine. However, Umierov has hardly any experience as far as military and defence issues are concerned. Therefore, regardless of his managerial skills and good will, it will take him some time to get a fuller picture of how the ministry really functions.
- Reznikov's dismissal is part of the ongoing personnel reshuffle in the Ukrainian defence sector. On 28 August, Arsen Zhumadilov was appointed head of the Resource Supply Agency of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Like Umierov, he is an ethnic Tatar from Crimea, was educated abroad and has gained managerial experience in public administration. The nominations of Umierov and Zhumadilov are examples of the active participation of Crimean Tatars in Ukraine's public life. They also have a symbolic meaning in the context of the Russian invasion, particularly the idea that Ukraine could withdraw from Crimea in exchange for peace with Russia that are currently being considered in the West. Such moves seem to confirm that Kyiv treats the peninsula as an inseparable part of Ukrainian territory and does not intend to 'sell' it, and that the Ukrainian government views the Crimean Tatars as part of the multinational Ukrainian society.

APPENDIX

Rustem Umierov was born in 1982 in Soviet Uzbekistan to a Muslim family of Crimean Tatars who had been deported in 1944 and returned to Ukraine in the early 1990s. Umierov graduated from the National Academy of Management (with a bachelor's degree in economics) and the National Technical University of Ukraine, the Kyiv Polytechnic Institute (with a master's degree in computer science and information technology). He was active in business: in 2004–2010 he held managerial positions at the Lifecell mobile operator, and later at ICG Investments and iCapital investment funds. In 2013, he headed his own investment fund, Astem (he resigned after being elected a parliamentary deputy). He started his political career in Crimea: from 2007 he was a delegate to the National Congress of Crimean Tatars. In 2011–13, he was active in the Crimean Development Foundation tasked with organising the international activity of Mustafa Dzhemilev, the leader of the Crimean Tatars. In 2019, Umierov was elected MP from the list of the pro-European Holos party. He stipulated that he would retain the status of a non-party/cross-bench parliamentarian dealing with national security issues. In 2020, he joined the group for developing a state

strategy for the liberation of Crimea and Sevastopol at the National Security and Defence Council. In February 2022, he became a member of the Ukrainian delegation which conducted talks with the Russian Federation in Belarus, and later joined the group that was devising an agreement to enable the export of Ukrainian food through the Black Sea. He actively participated in the talks with the Turkish intermediary as a result of which the Russians released the command staff of the Azov Regiment. In July 2022, he became the chairman of the parliamentary interim committee of inquiry for monitoring the receipt and use of foreign aid during martial law. In September 2022, he became president of the State Property Fund tasked with the privatisation of state enterprises and real estate among other issues. Between January and July 2023, a record sum of about 2.1 billion hryvnia (over $56 million) was transferred to the budget as a result of privatisation of state property. Umierov has never been suspected of fraud throughout his business and political career.