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Ukraine: the agriculture minister faces charges of corruption and running a criminal group

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On 25 April, the head of Ukraine's Ministry of Agrarian Policy and Food, Mykola Solskyi, tendered his resignation; the next day, the High Anti-Corruption Court decided to place him under temporary detention with the possibility of release on bail of 75 million hryvnias (c. $1.9m). This decision stemmed from the charges of misappropriation of property and leading a criminal group that the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office had brought against him.

An investigation by the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) has revealed that between 2017 and 2018, Solskyi headed a network that misappropriated 1250 plots of land with a total value of 291 million hryvnias (c. $7.3m) and attempted to seize land worth more than 190 million hryvnias (c. $4.8m). The group allegedly also included the current deputy minister of agrarian policy and food, Markiyan Dmytrasevych, as well as officials of the State Service of Ukraine for Geodesy, Cartography and Cadastre, the body which is in charge of land registration.

Solskyi entered politics in 2019 through Andriy Bohdan, a former chief of the President's Office who was at loggerheads with his successor Andriy Yermak. Solskyi was appointed minister in March 2022; he was presumably promoted in recognition of his success in pushing through an important law on free trade in land (see '*The act on the land market – a key step towards the development of Ukrainian agriculture*'). Since 2019 he has been an MP of the presidential party Servant of the People, and has served as head of the Ukrainian parliament's committee on agrarian policy. Prior to that, he had been an entrepreneur.

Commentary

- Solskyi's detention marks the first time that corruption charges have been brought against a sitting Ukrainian minister. This move is meant to demonstrate that the country's anti-corruption authorities are operating effectively and that the flow of information within the NABU has been tightened; according to media reports, Solskyi was not informed that he was under investigation or that he was about to be charged. From the point of view of those in power, his arrest proves that the government, which has been accused both at home and abroad of tolerating corruption, is determined to combat criminality including within its own ranks.
- Solskyi's detention coincides with the personnel and structural changes in the government that President Volodymyr Zelensky has been promising since February.

There has been speculation that the ministry of agrarian policy would be merged with the ministry of economy, but at its plenary session on 23–24 April the Ukrainian parliament did not make any decisions to this effect, postponing the personnel changes until May. Formally, parliament must decide whether to accept Solskyi's resignation, but this is all but certain following his arrest. Failure to do so could cause significant harm to the ruling elite's image as the affair has already resonated in the Western media, exposing the negative, corrupt face of the current government.