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Ukraine: corruption scandal over fake disability certificates

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On 4 October, Ukraine's secret services detained Tetiana Krupa, the head of the Medical-Social Expert Commission (MSEK, a body responsible, among other tasks, for issuing disability certificates) in the Khmelnytskyi Oblast and a deputy to the oblast's council representing the Servant of the People party. Cash in various currencies amounting to approximately $6 million was discovered in her home.

On 16 October, journalist Yuri Butusov published the results of his own investigation, revealing that 51 public prosecutors in Khmelnytskyi Oblast had obtained disability certificates from the MSEK, which enabled them to receive a disability pension. Among those implicated was the head of the regional public prosecutor's office, who resigned the following day. Journalists have also uncovered that similar practices were in operation in other oblasts. An investigation initiated by the General Prosecutor's Office in the Khmelnytskyi and Cherkasy oblasts revealed that almost 30% of the local prosecutors had also obtained such certificates, while in other oblasts the proportion was between 5% and 10%. Heads of public prosecutors' offices in five regions have since resigned from their posts.

On 22 October, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) announced that it had foiled the activities of eight organised crime rings involving MSEK members in several regions. On the SBU's initiative, 4,106 disability certificates have been annulled, having been issued on the basis of falsified documents, and an investigation has been opened to review a further 2,400 certificates. The National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, convened by Volodymyr Zelensky on that day, ordered a review of asset declarations submitted by MSEK members and disability certificates issued to civil servants, as well as an inspection of their disability pensions. The Prosecutor General, Andriy Kostin, handed in his resignation letter to the president. A week later, the Verkhovna Rada dismissed him and enacted laws which represent the first step towards a system reform to digitise the procedure for issuing disability certificates. Plans have been made to dissolve the MSEK by the end of the year.

The scale of illicit enrichment among civil servants from the falsification of medical certificates has revealed a high level of corruption at several state institutions, whose employees and prosecutors paid bribes to obtain a disability pension. The illegal practice was exacerbated by the fact that many Ukrainians were interested in obtaining a fake disability certificate to avoid military conscription. By responding to this situation in a swift and decisive manner, the authorities aimed to avert a serious reputational crisis and public outrage. Although the countermeasures were assessed positively, they were delayed, especially considering that the Ukrainian leadership had tolerated corruption at the MSEK

for several years.

Commentary

- **Corruption is widespread at the MSEK, and the authorities have overlooked this fact for many years.** The aforementioned practice was widely applied before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Krupa served as the principal physician at the MSEK branch in the Khmelnytskyi Oblast since 2008, and many prosecutors obtained their disability certificates prior to 2022. The new law reforming the MSEK, which was adopted on 29 October, was prepared as early as May 2024, and the recent scandal expedited its enactment. The bill's rationale stated that the operation of this institution relies on Soviet-era procedures, describing the system as outdated, corrupt, and affected by excessive bureaucracy. This indicates that the bill's authors were aware of the problems associated with the MSEK's activity.
- **The recent scandal represents another manifestation of the widespread practice of evading military service and bribing officials involved in the draft system.** Aside from the MSEK, the practice was also exposed among the employees of military medical boards. The territorial draft centres (TCK) are also prone to bribery. The media repeatedly reported instances of TCK officials providing documents to conscripts, exempting them from military service in exchange for a bribe. This hampers the draft effort in the context of an increasingly difficult situation on the front. Thus, dissolving the MSEK would be a positive step. However, it would require further reforms of military draft boards and the TCK.
- **The authorities decided to act quickly to prevent the opposition from highlighting the problem; however, they succeeded only in part.** Both the media and politicians commented extensively on the issue. Simultaneously, Krupa's detention, the prosecutors' dismissals, the investigation initiated by the SBU, and the announced digitisation of the process for issuing disability certificates have been assessed positively by the public as well as commentators. By dismissing the Prosecutor General, the authorities treated him as a scapegoat and defused the scandal at a relatively low political cost. Kostin's dismissal had been planned for several months, because he was considered a candidate for Ukraine's ambassadorship to a European country. It seems that, despite this, the scandal will undermine the reputation of Zelensky and his team, especially if the personnel reshuffle and purges are not followed by institutional changes to reduce the risk of corruption. The situation may improve to some extent as a result of the digitisation of the process for issuing disability certificates.