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Carthage 2.0: Anti-corruption agencies crack down on organised crime in Ukraine

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On 7 November, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced plans for personnel changes and legislative measures to increase the transparency of asset declarations submitted by Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) personnel. These steps follow the arrest of senior SBU and National Police of Ukraine (NPU) officers by the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) three days earlier. So far, authorities have formally accused five individuals of involvement in an organised criminal group, while at least 12 people are believed to have been involved. Major General Serhiy Duka, a former first deputy head of the SBU's Department for the Protection of National Statehood, and two police officers allegedly established a protection racket (known locally as *krysha*) for criminal organisations involved in fraud, currency counterfeiting and the production of and trade in narcotics and tobacco products. In return, they allegedly received payments worth millions, primarily in cryptocurrencies.

The organisation was allegedly headed by Russian national Yegor Burkin, also known as Levchenko, who was not detained by NABU and whose whereabouts are reportedly unknown. He has also held Ukrainian citizenship since 2014 and has been subject to Ukrainian sanctions since 2023. His interests in Ukraine were allegedly overseen by Andriy Osipov, who has been in custody since 31 July in connection with a separate investigation. During an operation carried out by NABU and the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO), the authorities searched approximately 70 properties across Ukraine, including those belonging to General Anton Kravchuk, head of the SBU's Main Directorate of Internal Security. He has not been charged to date.

The arrests and searches are a continuation of Operation Carthage, launched in September, which led to the detention of several individuals, including senior prosecutors. The findings of NABU and SAPO suggest that Ukrainian security agencies are among the country's main centres of corruption, while organised crime is gaining strength by exploiting factors such as the ongoing armed conflict. This represents another blow to President Zelensky's standing. For the past year, he has faced allegations of corruption at the highest levels of government and the security services, as well as within his inner circle.

Commentary

- **Organised crime is a growing problem in Ukraine.** The war has created additional opportunities for criminal groups to expand their support networks, partly because state

institutions are overstretched by their efforts to counter Russian aggression. Another contributing factor is the decline in illicit income that some officials derive from corrupt ties with businesses, prompting them to seek alternative sources of income by providing protection to criminal operations. The most visible example of this trend is the proliferation of fraudulent call centres targeting people across Europe.

- **Criminal groups are also involved in the illicit production of tobacco products and alcohol, as well as the forgery of documents and counterfeiting of means of payment.** This is corroborated by reports including the Global Organized Crime Index, which ranks Ukraine second in Europe in terms of organised crime levels. A report published this year by Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada also points to a 25% year-on-year increase in the number of criminal organisations detected and a 129% rise in drug-related offences committed by these groups.
- **The scandals uncovered by NABU are weakening Zelensky's position as the linchpin of Ukraine's power structure, yet he has done little to tackle corruption.** The scale of corruption at the highest levels of government is becoming an increasingly serious challenge in Ukraine's relations with the West. The EU is likely to intensify its pressure for comprehensive reform of the SBU, which has been delayed for years. Operation Carthage is also strengthening Ukraine's anti-corruption institutions while further exacerbating *tensions between them and other state security agencies*, particularly the SBU and the prosecution service.