

# Ukrainian government sanctions pro-Russian oligarch and opposition leader

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The government of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Friday announced sanctions targeting the oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, the head of Ukraine's leading opposition party.

Medvedchuk, who has an estimated net worth of \$1 billion, has played a major role in Ukrainian politics ever since the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991. In contrast to the anti-Russian NATO-backed right-wing government of Zelensky, Medvedchuk has maintained close business and political contacts with the Russian oligarchy and is a personal friend of Russian President Vladimir Putin. In 2014, he was sanctioned by the US. Both he and his Opposition Platform–For Life party favor reestablishing close ties with Moscow and ending the nearly seven-year-long war in eastern Ukraine.

At a briefing last Friday, Oleksiy Danilov, Ukraine's secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, announced that Medvedchuk's assets were also frozen and that Ukraine's state security service (SBU) would be carrying out an investigation of Medvedchuk's ownership of coal mines that are located in separatist-controlled eastern Ukraine. Danilov also accused Medvedchuk of "financing terrorism."

In an indication of the deep geopolitical conflicts within the Ukrainian oligarchy, the government also announced that it would be taking over the PrykarpattZakhidtrans oil pipeline. The pipeline carries Russian oil to Europe and is reportedly owned by Medvedchuk through foreign intermediaries.

The sanctions against Medvedchuk are part of an ongoing crackdown by the Zelensky government against all political opposition as the country continues to suffer both medically and economically from the coronavirus pandemic.

On February 2, Zelensky took the unprecedented step

of closing down three popular opposition-affiliated TV channels—112, Newsone and ZIK—on the grounds of "national security." While the channels are officially owned by Taras Kozak, a member of the Ukrainian parliament and the Opposition Platform–For Life party, the channels are reportedly financially owned by Medvedchuk. Both Kozak and Medvedchuk also had their personal planes banned from operating in Ukrainian airspace.

While Zelensky was elected in 2019 with an overwhelming 73 percent of the vote—a vote that above all represented a repudiation of the 2014 US and German-backed coup—just 19.8 percent of Ukrainians are willing to vote for him now, according to a January 26 poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS).

The same KIIS poll suggested that in a hypothetical parliamentary election the Medvedchuk-led Opposition Platform–For Life party would win with 20.7 percent of the vote. Zelensky's own Servant of the People party, which came into power in July 2019, would garner just 11.2 percent, rendering it a fourth-place party with little chance to govern unless aligned with another party.

The Opposition Platform–For Life party has been the largest but not the only political target of the Ukrainian government. On February 16, Ukraine's SBU charged pro-Russian blogger and politician Anatoly Shariy with "high treason" and "incitement of ethnic or racial hatred" by spreading "Russian propaganda" in the media.

Shariy, who currently lives in Spain, is an extremely popular blogger in Ukraine. He has made a number of important investigative posts in recent years, uncovering far-right nationalism and anti-Semitism within the Ukrainian state as well as ongoing corruption. Shariy's party also supports a negotiated

settlement to end the war in eastern Ukraine, making his party a target of the far right. Several of its leading members have been attacked by right-wing thugs.

Seven years have now passed since the US- and EU-backed coup in 2014 that heavily relied on fascist forces and installed an aggressively pro-NATO section of the Ukrainian ruling class in Kiev. Like his predecessor, Petro Poroshenko, the Zelensky government now appears headed towards collapse, endangering US foreign policy interests in the region.

In Washington, the possible return of a Moscow-friendly government to power in Kiev is viewed as militarily unacceptable, and the US has fully endorsed the sanctions against Medvedchuk. The US Embassy's page noted on Saturday, "The US supports efforts yesterday to counter Russia's malign influence, in line with law, in defense of its sovereignty and territorial integrity."

By contrast, the Kremlin has made clear that Zelensky's crackdown against the pro-Russian political opposition has severely undermined the chance for a resolution of the war in Donbas, increasing the chance for an outbreak of full-out war between Ukraine and Russia.

The crisis of the Zelensky government and the embittered infighting within the country's ruling class are fueled by the coronavirus pandemic, which has devastated both the country's impoverished health system and economy.

More than 26,000 Ukrainians have officially died due to COVID-19. The country's dilapidated hospitals and underfunded medical workers have been overwhelmed, often reusing essential PPE and medical supplies, including such basics as syringes.

The horrific conditions in Ukrainian hospitals and the enormous impact of the crisis on an already deeply impoverished population are a direct outcome of the restoration of capitalism, following the Stalinist dissolution of the USSR in 1991. Three decades later, Ukraine is the poorest country in Europe and the standing ground for dangerous military provocations and war preparations by the imperialist powers against Russia. Meanwhile, the EU and US have refused any meaningful help in getting the vaccine.

While the country's wealthier EU allies have already had access to a vaccine, Ukraine is just this week receiving its first 500,000 doses of the AstraZeneca

vaccine, despite begging both the United States and EU for access to the vaccine for months. Under these conditions, the vaccine distribution has become a focal point of conflicts over foreign policy within the ruling oligarchy.

Last fall, Medvedchuk met with Putin and obtained permission from the Russian president for Ukraine to receive Russia's Sputnik V vaccine. More recently, he obtained a license for Biolik, a pharmaceutical company based in eastern Ukraine, to manufacture the vaccine in Ukraine.

While the Russian government undoubtedly views the distribution of Sputnik V within Ukraine as a chance to regain lost political influence in the region, the vaccine itself has proven effective. On February 2, the *Lancet* medical journal published third-stage results of Sputnik V's clinical trials showing that it is one of the most effective and safest vaccines in the world. Despite the growing medical evidence of its efficacy, on February 10 the Zelensky government officially banned its use on Ukrainian territory, claiming that Sputnik V was part of a Russian "information war" targeting Ukraine.

The working class can only put an end to the social and economic catastrophe and the danger of war by intervening in the crisis on the basis of its own class interests, independent from all factions of the ruling oligarchy. This requires that the political lessons be drawn from the struggle of the Trotskyist movement for an internationalist socialist perspective in opposition to the nationalist betrayal of the October revolution of 1917 by Stalinism.



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