

Ukrainian government accuses pro-Russian oligarch and opposition leader of “high treason”

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The right-wing Ukrainian government of President Volodymyr Zelensky has indicted the country’s main opposition party leader, the oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, on charges of high treason and embezzlement.

Specifically, state authorities are accusing both Medvedchuk and his business partner, Taras Kozak, of transferring oil and gas production licenses located in the Sea of Azov to Russia following Crimea’s annexation by Russia in 2014, which at the time was overwhelmingly supported by the peninsula’s population.

In addition, Medvedchuk has been accused of disclosing classified information on Ukrainian troop movements.

According to Ukraine’s Prosecutor-General Irina Venediktova, the charges against Medvedchuk carry sentences of up to fifteen years in prison.

“Medvedchuk, as the organizer of illegal activities, and having strong ties with the top leadership of the Russian Federation, began subversive activities against Ukraine, including in the economic sphere,” Venediktova said while outlining the charges against Medvedchuk in a briefing.

While the Ukrainian media initially speculated that Medvedchuk would flee to Russia upon hearing of the charges, Medvedchuk appeared at the Prosecutor General’s office later that day in Kiev. He denounced the charges as “fabricated” and a case of clear political repression.

Ukrainian prosecutors had requested a jail sentence and recommended that bail be set at \$10.8 million. The presiding judge denied the government’s request and instead placed Medvedchuk on house arrest and

confiscated his passport.

Upon leaving the Prosecutor General’s office Medvedchuk was accosted by right-wing nationalists who accused him of being a lackey of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The indictment of Medvedchuk is the latest step in a carefully staged political crackdown against the pro-Kremlin Opposition Platform-For Life party which Medvedchuk leads. The party is currently the second largest in the Ukrainian parliament holding 44 of 450 seats behind Zelensky’s own Servant of the People party.

As Zelensky’s approval ratings have fallen over the past year due to his inability to solve the over seven-year long civil war in eastern Ukraine and the medical and economic crisis caused by COVID-19, support for Medvedchuk’s party has risen. Several polls have even shown the Opposition Platform-For Life party winning a hypothetical parliamentary election, raising the prospect of the return of a Moscow-friendly government to Kiev.

Such a scenario would be anathema to both the United States and the EU which backed the far-right coup that toppled elected President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014. They have sent billions in aid to Kiev since, and are playing a central role in the development of Ukraine’s military which is engaged in an ongoing civil war with Russian-backed separatists in East Ukraine. The civil war has claimed the lives of over 14,000 people and displaced millions.

With the support of the new Biden administration in the United States, Zelensky has moved quickly to head off the threat from a Russia-friendly political opposition within Ukraine.

In February, Zelensky undemocratically shut down three popular predominantly Russian-speaking television stations—ZiK, 112 Ukraine and NewsOne—all of which are owned by Medvedchuk and his business partner Taras Kozak. Medvedchuk's financial assets were also frozen for three years and both he and Kozak were sanctioned by the Ukrainian government.

Following the crackdown, several other journalists were accused of “treason” including the popular pro-Russian blogger Anatoly Shariy who, like Medvedchuk, leads a political opposition party that favors a negotiated settlement to the war in the eastern Donbass region.

Later in April, Zelensky moved even further to shut down opposition media and limit free speech by asking YouTube to ban all Medvedchuk-affiliated channels within Ukraine's borders.

The California-based company dutifully fulfilled the request and was later thanked by Ukraine's embassy in Washington.

In addition to leading the main opposition party and a constant figure in post-Soviet Ukrainian politics, Medvedchuk is also an extremely wealthy oligarch, worth an estimated \$1 billion. In 2015, amidst the ongoing civil war in Donbass, he purchased a yacht worth \$214 million.

A former Stalinist bureaucrat and lawyer, Medvedchuk quickly transitioned into a full-fledged capitalist following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, making millions off the purchase and sale of the Donbass region's prodigious industrial concerns and energy resources.

In 2014, following the United States-backed right-wing nationalist coup and the Russian annexation of Crimea, Medvedchuk was sanctioned by the US Department of Treasury for violating the “security, stability, sovereignty, or territorial integrity of Ukraine.”

Despite his opposition to the US-backed coup, Medvedchuk has continued to play a significant role in Ukrainian bourgeois politics due to his immense wealth and influence over the Donbass region. As a result of both business and personal ties with the Russian oligarchy, Medvedchuk has been the most prominent go-between with Moscow and Kiev over the course of the civil war in eastern Ukraine. He has helped in drafting the Minsk peace accords and securing the

release of captured Ukrainian soldiers by Russian-backed separatists.

It now appears that the increasingly right-wing, militaristic and undemocratic Zelensky government is moving to excise Medvedchuk from Ukrainian ruling-class politics altogether, threatening a complete breakdown of ties with Russia and any remaining possibility of a negotiated settlement between Moscow and Kiev over the Donbass region. The crackdown on Medvedchuk and his party also comes amidst ongoing tensions with Russia over East Ukraine and Crimea, which were escalated by Kiev's adoption of a strategy to “recover Crimea.”

Zelensky's crackdown on the pro-Russian oligarchic opposition has been encouraged by the United States since 2014. Washington has constantly urged both former President Petro Poroshenko and now Zelensky to prosecute the Russian-affiliated section of the Ukrainian oligarchy in the name of an “anti-corruption” campaign.

Last week, while visiting Kiev amidst growing tensions between Ukraine and Russia, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken obliquely called upon Zelensky to move more aggressively against this section of the oligarchy. He stated, “Ukraine is facing two challenges: aggression from outside, coming from Russia, and in effect aggression from within, coming from corruption, oligarchs and others who are putting their interests ahead of those of the Ukrainian people.”

The indictment and prosecution of Medvedchuk will undoubtedly further worsen relations between Kiev and Moscow.



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