

# Ukrainian interior minister with close ties to the far right resigns

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Ukraine's Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, who is notorious for his ties to neo-Nazis, has resigned from his position in the government of President Volodymyr Zelensky. No reasons for his surprise resignation were revealed.

Avakov was the country's longest-serving minister. He spent seven years in his position starting in 2014 under former President Petro Poroshenko, who came to power after a US- and EU-backed far-right coup in Kiev. He continued on after Zelensky defeated Poroshenko to claim the presidency in 2019. In addition to serving under two different presidents, Avakov also maintained his position through four different prime ministers.

As Interior Minister, Avakov oversaw the country's domestic security forces including both local and national police, and Ukraine's newly reformed National Guard, which is composed of members of the country's various fascist militias such as the Azov Battalion. Thanks in no small measure to Avakov—who maintains a personal friendship with the leader of the Azov Battalion, Andriy Biletsky—open fascists were essentially granted the full backing of the Ukrainian state.

Under his watch, fascist thugs were given free rein to terrorize and attack journalists, assault ethnic minorities, and carry out targeted killings, up to and including the killing of a three-year old boy in a botched political assassination attempt.

In almost every case the culprits were never caught, received light sentences, or any actual prosecution was limited to the low-level assailants without any attempt to cover those higher up giving the orders to carry out right-wing political violence.

Demonstrating the close ties between Avakov and his far-right thugs and Washington, Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch hailed Avakov in the 2019 impeachment hearings against US President Donald Trump.

In Ukraine, Avakov is viewed simultaneously as one of

the country's most powerful and most hated political figures. A full 80 percent of the Ukrainian population held a negative view of Avakov's time in office in a 2020 opinion poll.

In 2017, Avakov's son Oleksander was implicated in an embezzling scandal involving the purchase of military weapons at inflated prices with government funds. Despite the blatant corruption by a family member, Avakov continued as interior minister and the charges against his son were quickly dropped.

In June of 2020 hundreds of protesters from various political backgrounds gathered in Kiev to call for Avakov's resignation after reports of an alleged rape and torture of a woman by police not far from Kiev.

Despite the protests, Zelensky threw his support behind Avakov and stated among ministers "there were none better" than Avakov and called him "a powerful minister."

Avakov would go on to spend another full-year in office building up his public political profile. Amid a military crisis over Crimea and East Ukraine between Ukraine and Russia in the spring, Avakov took a leading role in fueling tensions by visiting the front and inciting Ukrainian nationalists to war.

Using his Facebook page rather than official government media, Avakov called on "patriots," using fascist language, to prepare for war and protect the "Motherland." He also suggested that Ukraine would fare better than it did in 2014 due to the over \$2 billion in military aid and equipment it has since received from the US.

Throughout the seven-year-long conflict that has claimed the lives of over 14,000 people and displaced millions, Avakov has maintained the most right-wing and militaristic positions regarding a potential peace settlement with the breakaway separatist-controlled areas in Eastern Ukraine. Avakov and his far-right allies have

vehemently opposed any deal that would grant sovereignty or special status to the separatist-controlled territories in East Ukraine, and deny Kiev full control over the region.

While the reasons behind Avakov's resignation have not been revealed, reports have surfaced on the Ukrainian news site Strana that Avakov was ordered to resign while meeting with the US deputy assistant secretary of state, George Kent. This may well be due to Avakov and his far-right ties presenting a public image problem for the United States as the Biden administration is seeking to posture as the protector of "democracy" against Russia.

Other reports have suggested that Zelensky ordered Avakov to resign after growing frustrated with Avakov's own political prominence. Notably, in the past year Avakov refused to support sanctions pushed by Zelensky against former President Petro Poroshenko, with Avakov stating that Poroshenko "was not an enemy of Ukraine."

Despite his resignation, it is telling that Avakov was able to quietly walk away from a position he held under two different US-backed administrations, with none of the murders, assaults and scandals he oversaw negatively affecting his political career and power.

On the contrary, reports from Russia's *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* suggest that Avakov will now become a leading opposition figure and could become "the most dangerous opponent of the current government."

Furthermore, Avakov's announced replacement, Denys Monastyrskiy, formerly worked for Avakov associate and current deputy interior minister, Anton Herashchenko. Monastyrskiy is also a member of Zelensky's own Servant of the People party, suggesting that Monastyrskiy was placed in the position as a compromise between Avakov and Zelensky.

Avakov's resignation comes amid a profound domestic and foreign policy crisis. According to the news site Strana, Ukrainian political experts are expecting mass protests this fall due to rising gas and utility prices as well as an increase in consumer prices. The apparent attempts of Washington to ease tensions with Russia, including the recent summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden, have further fueled conflicts within the Ukrainian oligarchy and the Zelensky government.

Whatever the details behind Avakov's resignation, it is clear that he will continue to hold substantial political power within Ukraine due to his influence over the far right, which plays an oversized role within Ukraine as it is essential in carrying out the war in eastern Ukraine and

crushing working class opposition to Kiev's domestic policies.

Following his resignation, Ukraine's parliamentary members lauded Avakov for having "saved Ukraine from the Russian world" and offered only mild criticisms of his time in office.

Avakov himself embodies the right-wing trajectory of the former Stalinist bureaucracy-turned-oligarchy and expresses it in its most rabid, nationalist form.

A former engineer, Avakov quickly transitioned into a capitalist following the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991. He made millions while creating a business network that included banks, natural gas fields, supermarket chains and factories.

In 2002, Avakov entered politics as an official in Kharkov's City Council. He was later appointed governor of the province of Kharkov by President Viktor Yushchenko in 2005 after Avakov had supported the US-backed "Orange Revolution" in 2004.

Avakov used his position to enrich himself and his own Bazis Bank by purchasing government assets in Kharkov through the bank. He was later forced to flee to Italy in 2011 after accusations of corruption arose following the election of Avakov's political enemy, Viktor Yanukovich, as president of Ukraine.

Avakov eventually returned to Ukraine following the US-backed coup against Yanukovich in February 2014 and was appointed Interior Minister in the newly created government.

Through it all, like the rest of Ukraine's ruling oligarchy, Avakov has maintained his own personal wealth which is reportedly in the hundreds of millions. While Ukraine is Europe's poorest country, Avakov is known for his love of luxury. In 2018, Avakov purchased a 26-room villa on the Mediterranean Sea coast of Italy worth more than \$900,000.



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