

# Internal Political Conflicts in Ukraine During the Threat of Russian Military Escalation

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Ukraine has been subjected to Russian military aggression since 2014. Some 14,000 people have died in the separatist war – instigated and perpetuated by Russia – in the country's easternmost part, the Donbas. Since the end of 2021, more than 100,000 Russian troops have been massed along the Russia-Ukraine border, as well as in Crimea, which was annexed by Russia in 2014, and in Belarus, potentially to be used by the Kremlin in a further military escalation against Ukraine.

## Ex-President on trial

In such a precarious situation, it might be assumed that the Ukrainian political elite would attempt to stand united and put internal political conflicts aside. On 20 December 2021, however, the State Investigation Bureau filed criminal charges of high treason against ex-President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko (2014–2019). The former president is accused of supporting terrorist organisations and conspiracy to commit criminal acts. The case began in the summer of 2021 but has only now come to the fore. The charges include conspiracy with representatives of the separatists in Donbas, the so-called Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic, which Kyiv consider terrorist organisations, to supply coal from mines located in those Russian-controlled territories. Another allegation is related to the cancellation of purchase orders for anthracite from South Africa, which had been arranged as an alternative to the coal from Donbas, thereby depriving Ukraine of the ability to diversify its coal imports away from the separatist areas. Poroshenko has denied all the charges.

According to the allegations, arrangements between Kyiv and the separatist authorities were facilitated by Viktor Medvedchuk, a Ukrainian politician and businessman with long-standing ties to Russia's President, Vladimir Putin. Medvedchuk, a former head of the presidential

administration under President Leonid Kuchma, has a long track record in protecting Russia's interests in Ukraine. In February 2021, Medvedchuk was made the subject of sanctions by Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council. He has been under house arrest since May 2021, accused by the Prosecutor General of Ukraine of high treason and supporting terrorists.

The treason case against Poroshenko has polarised Ukrainian society. On the one hand, some supporters of President Volodymyr Zelensky and his political party, Servant of the People, highlight the need for justice to be served and for political accountability. On the other hand, the political opposition, and supporters of Poroshenko's European Solidarity Party, claim that the accusations are politically motivated. To them, the charges are reminiscent of the jailing of former-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko in 2011 by the authoritarian administration of Viktor Yanukovich, the pro-Russian President of Ukraine ousted by the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014.

Although the Presidential Office has not commented on the criminal charges against Poroshenko, citing the independence of the legal system, the process nonetheless bears the hallmark of a political vendetta. The goal of the Zelensky team might be to revive the plummeting popularity of the president in the run-up to the 2024 presidential elections. The charges against Medvedchuk – who is one of the leaders of a pro-Russian party in the Ukrainian Parliament – had just that effect on Zelensky's ratings in 2021, but in a January 2022 poll Poroshenko's European Solidarity Party had taken a lead over Zelensky's Servant of the People. Although Zelensky continues to have a slight advantage over Poroshenko in their personal standings, the former president retains support in Western regions, which have traditionally wanted closer ties to Europe. Zelensky may hope to win nationalist votes by undermining his rival, who has previously criticised him for being too weak towards the Russian president.

Some see the charges against Poroshenko as part of anti-corruption efforts and a crusade against oligarchs. Poroshenko is one of the country's wealthiest businessmen. Since the end of his presidency, several of Poroshenko's top allies have been investigated or charged in corruption cases, leading many to infer that Poroshenko has also been corrupted. Given this, however, it seems appropriate to ask why the incumbent authorities have not prosecuted Poroshenko for corruption, in the light of the allegedly strong evidence, rather than decide to target him with a far more dubious treason case that is much harder to prove. The probable answer is that the authorities chose the treason charges because their aim is not to deliver justice, but to discredit Poroshenko politically by associating him with Medvedchuk and Russia.<sup>1</sup>

Some Ukrainian experts even claim that the critical situation with the potential Russian military escalation could serve as a useful distraction for the public. The authorities might calculate that, with Russian troops on the border, the Ukrainian people will not protest but support their political leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> *Kyiv Independent*, [Explainer: Is Poroshenko treason case justice or political persecution?](https://www.kyivindependent.com/explainer-is-poroshenko-treason-case-justice-or-political-persecution/) (kyivindependent.com)

## Confusion over British claims of Russian coup plans

Alongside the treason charges against Poroshenko, a fresh political scandal erupted on 22 January 2022 when the British government accused the Kremlin of seeking to install a pro-Russian leadership in Ukraine. According to a statement by the UK foreign secretary, Liz Truss, the Russian intelligence services are maintaining links with numerous former Ukrainian politicians:<sup>2</sup>

- ✦ Serhiy Arbuzov, First Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine in 2012–2014 and acting Prime Minister in 2014;
- ✦ Andriy Kluyev, First Deputy Prime Minister in 2010–2012 and Chief of Staff to Viktor Yanukovych;
- ✦ Volodymyr Sivkovych, former Deputy Secretary of the Ukrainian National Security and Defence Council, 2010–2013;
- ✦ Mykola Azarov, Prime Minister of Ukraine in 2010–2014; and
- ✦ Yevhen Murayev, Member of the Ukrainian Parliament in 2012–2019, member of Yanukovych's Party of the Regions and, after its dissolution, the Opposition bloc. Leader of the Nashi (Our) party.

The first four names on the list are all seasoned former politicians from the Yanukovych era. All have been put on the Western sanctions lists for their involvement in repression during that time, in disinformation or in Russian activities to destabilise Ukraine, although Arbuzov was removed from the EU sanctions list in 2021. Sivkovych was added to the US State Department's sanctions list for involvement in disinformation as recently as 20 January 2022.

Yevhen Murayev, who the UK report accuses of being the potential leader of the plot, is something of a different case. He never held any prominent position at the national level in the circle around Yanukovych. In contrast to the other four names, who all left Ukraine after Yanukovych fled the country and have spent most of their time since in Russia, Murayev has continued to live and work in Ukraine. Despite his pro-Russian activities, both in politics and as owner of a pro-Russia television channel, NASH, which regularly echoes the Kremlin's propaganda about Ukraine's "civil war" and the Euromaidan Revolution being a coup d'état, Murayev's has had problematic relations with Moscow. In 2018, the Kremlin even added him to its own sanctions list set up to "protect the interests of Russians and Russian companies".<sup>3</sup>

Murayev accused Medvedchuk of being behind the Russian sanctions imposed on him after he declined an invitation to join Medvedchuk's political party. The two were also competitors in the media. Murayev owned the NewsOne television channel, which was sold in 2019 to a close business partner of Medvedchuk. In 2020 NewsOne was sanctioned by the Ukrainian authorities together with other channels, 112 Ukraine and ZIK, which were also controlled by Medvedchuk.<sup>4</sup> This led to increased ratings for Murayev's NASH TV channel. Murayev was also early in airing the alleged connections between Medvedchuk and Poroshenko, which have again been highlighted in the current treason charges against Poroshenko.

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2 gov.uk, Kremlin plan to install pro-Russian leadership in Ukraine exposed - GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk))

3 *Kyiv Independent*, [Who is Murayev, the man UK exposes as potential leader of Kremlin's coup](http://www.kyivindependent.com) ([kyivindependent.com](http://kyivindependent.com))

4 Hedenskog, Jakob and Hjelm, Mattias (2020), "Propaganda by proxy: Ukrainian oligarchs, TV and Russia's influence", FOI Memo, No. 7312, [Report Summary - Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut - FOI](http://www.forskningsinstitutet.se)

Murayev has called the accusation that he is the leader of a Kremlin-backed plot to install a pro-Russian leadership in Ukraine “nonsense”. The British information is impossible to verify, and the alleged coup would also seem, at this stage, impossible to carry out. It would demand total control over Kyiv and substantial parts of Ukrainian territory by the Russian military forces. Even then, it would probably lead to protests and revolts on the part of the Ukrainian population.

Accusations of planned coups d'état are common in Ukraine. As recently as November 2021, audio recordings obtained by Ukrainian intelligence claimed to show Ukrainian and Russian representatives, with the alleged participation of Ukraine's richest oligarch, Rynat Akhmetov, planning a coup for 1–2 December. The Presidential Office called the oligarch in for a meeting, but the allegations were soon dropped, and the suspected coup obviously never materialised.

## Implications

Both the trial of Poroshenko, which bears the hallmarks of political interference by the team of the current president, and the alleged coup plans risk adding to the polarisation in Ukraine and dividing the focus from the real threats to the country. Political infighting and turbulence in Ukraine are in Russia's interests. Furthermore, they also risk introducing a degree of fatigue with Ukraine among its Western partners at a time when the country is more in need of support than ever. When meeting Zelensky in Kyiv on 21 January 2022, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken appealed to Ukraine's leaders to present a united front against Russia. The major importance of internal cohesion to Ukraine's resilience in times of crisis cannot be overemphasised.



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