

UPDATE: Publication of Manafort payments violated law, interfered in US election, Kyiv court rules

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Editor's Note: This story has been updated to include a statement by MP Serhiy Leshchenko.

Two Ukrainian officials violated the law by revealing information about

millions of dollars of alleged illegal cash payments to lobbyist and former chair of U.S. President Donald Trump's election campaign Paul Manafort, a Kyiv district court said on Dec. 12.

In reviewing an administrative case filed by lawmaker Boryslav Rozenblat, the court concluded that Artem Sytnyk, director of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine, and parliamentarian Serhiy Leshchenko acted illegally when they revealed that Manafort's surname and signature were found in the so-called "black ledger" of ousted President Viktor Yanukovich's Party of Regions.

The "black ledger" is alleged to be a secret accounting book showing suspicious payments by the party to a range of individuals and officials. It became a key document implicating Manafort in corruption in Ukraine, and helped to end his tenure as Trump's campaign chair.

In a [statement on its website](#), the court also appeared to describe the two men's actions as constituting interference in the 2016 United States presidential election.

The release of information about the "black ledger," which was part of a pre-trial investigation, "led to interference in the electoral processes of the United States in 2016 and harmed the interests of Ukraine as a state," the court's press service wrote.

The court also declared that Leshchenko acted illegally and termed his actions "interference in the external politics of Ukraine by spreading the above-mentioned information about Paul Manafort."

In October 2017, the court launched judicial proceedings in Rozenblat's suit against Sytnyk and Leshchenko. In the suit, the lawmaker called on the court to recognize the two men's actions as illegal.

In its Dec. 11 ruling, the court partially satisfied the demands of the plaintiff because Sytnyk and Leshchenko, as “subjects of state authority,” could not prove that they spread the information about Manafort without violating the law, the court’s press-service wrote.

In response to the ruling, Leshchenko [published a post on Facebook](#) suggesting that the decision was aimed at helping President Petro Poroshenko remove Sytnyk from office. By finding the National Anti-Corruption Bureau chief in violation of the law, the government will attempt to deflect criticism from among Western diplomats in Kyiv if he is removed, Leshchenko claimed.

“In response to criticisms about how (firing Sytnyk) is unacceptable, the scammers in the president’s circle will say: we’re firing him for illegally influencing the elections in the U.S.,” Leshchenko wrote.

In 2005, Manafort went to work for the Party of Regions in Ukraine after mass protests prevented its leader, then Prime Minister Yanukovich, from assuming the presidency after the falsified 2004 election. That event, known as the Orange Revolution, became the impetus for a large and extremely expensive campaign to burnish Yanukovich’s reputation in Western capitals.

Manafort’s consulting would eventually help Yanukovich win the presidency in 2011. After a tenure marred by excessive corruption, Yanukovich would subsequently be forced from power by the EuroMaidan Revolution in 2014 and flee to Russia.

In May 2016, Leshchenko published information from the Party of Region’s “black ledger” showing that the party spent large sums of money on paid advertising and the services of top state officials.

In August 2016, the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine published a report indicating that Manafort's name was found in the ledger alongside a list of payments. It [concluded](#) that Manafort could have received more than \$12 million from the Party of Regions since 2007.

That revelation helped force Manafort to abandon his role as Trump campaign chair. However, it also proved controversial in Ukraine.

After Trump's November 2016 election, Nazar Kholodnytsky, head of the Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's office, said his agency could not prove the authenticity of Manafort's supposed signature in the ledger. It also saw no grounds to press charges against Manafort.

In January 2017, the news site Politico published an article suggesting that Ukrainian government officials attempted to use the "black ledger" to interfere in the U.S. presidential election in favor of Trump's rival for the presidency, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

In June 2017, Yaroslav Hordiyevych, spokesperson for the Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's office, [told the Kyiv Post](#) that his agency did not support Leshchenko and the National Anti-Corruption Bureau's decision to release the information.

Claims that Ukraine attempted to interfere in the U.S. presidential election have even reached Trump himself. In July 2017, the U.S. president [wrote in a tweet](#): "Ukrainian efforts to sabotage Trump campaign – 'quietly working to boost Clinton.'"

In his Facebook post, Leshchenko suggested this was another reason for the court ruling.

"With this decision, Poroshenko will try to earn additional loyalty from the

Trump Administration, so it will close its eyes to any violations during the (March 2019 Ukrainian presidential) elections and the use of administrative resources, so that the ruling corrupt officials remain in power," he wrote.