

Ukrainian politics

Volodymyr Zelensky hires oligarch's lawyer as chief of staff

Ukraine's president brushes aside concern over links to Igor Kolomoisky



Andriy Bogdan after a meeting at the presidential administration on Tuesday

Roman Olearchyk in Kiev MAY 22 2019

Volodymyr Zelensky, the former comedian who took over as Ukraine's president on Monday after a [landslide election victory](#), has brushed aside concern over his links to Igor Kolomoisky by hiring the oligarch's lawyer as his chief of staff.

Mr Zelensky late on Tuesday appointed Andriy Bogdan as head of his presidential administration. The Kolomoisky-linked lawyer was selected on Mr Zelensky's second day in the job over other top advisers who have been better received by Ukraine's western backers, including former finance minister Oleksandr Danylyuk.

The appointment of Mr Bogdan was followed by others that showed the president putting trusted associates into senior roles in the administration.

Serhiy Shefir, co-founder of the president's multi-million-dollar comedy and television production business, became first assistant within Mr Zelensky's office, while Ivan Bakanov, who headed their business until recently, was appointed deputy head of state security services.

Vadym Prystaiko, formerly envoy to Nato, was chosen as deputy presidential administration chief — a move welcomed by diplomats.

An aide to Mr Zelensky said Mr Danylyuk was said to be appointed national security chief.

The clutch of appointments came after Mr Zelensky, a political novice, moved to try to consolidate power in the war-scarred country by calling snap parliamentary elections just after taking the oath of office.

Mr Zelensky's appointment of Mr Bogdan is expected to deepen concerns among western backers over his connections to Mr Kolomoisky, whose television channel provided strong election campaign coverage.

"That is not the way it was supposed to be . . . Zelensky has been telling everybody that he is his own man whenever he has been asked about his Kolomoisky ties," said a foreigner in Kiev with ties to western diplomatic circles.

In an effort to dispel concern about his own appointment, Mr Bogdan said he had ceased all legal work for Mr Kolomoisky and other clients.

One concern is how Mr Zelensky will weigh in on Mr Kolomoisky's legal battles against Ukraine's government over the 2016 nationalisation of PrivatBank. Mr Kolomoisky and partners lost control of the top commercial lender after officials uncovered a \$5.5bn balance sheet hole. Mr Kolomoisky claims the bank takeover was politically motivated and unjustified.

But the nationalisation under Petro Poroshenko, the former president, was strongly supported by the US, EU and IMF as part of an exhaustive bank sector clean-up. Their multibillion-dollar financial lifelines have propped up Kiev and supported reforms since Moscow annexed Crimea in 2014 and fomented a separatist war in eastern regions.

Mr Bogdan took on his duties as an IMF mission arrived in Kiev for discussions about reforms and disbursements from a \$3.9bn standby loan programme which is crucial to helping Ukraine service a peak in foreign debt payments this and next year.

"The optics of this appointment are very bad," said Adrian Karatnycky, a fellow at the Atlantic Council.

"Mr Bogdan's role as a lawyer and close intimate of oligarch Igor Kolomoisky is bound to raise questions in the international community and among Ukraine's voters who saw in Zelensky a clean break with Ukraine's unclean past."

Despite his Kolomoisky connections being raised prominently in the election campaign, Mr Zelensky surfed a rising wave of anti-establishment support to crush Mr Poroshenko in last month's run-off, with 73 per cent of the vote.

