

Trump impeachment

Cleaning up Ukraine in the shadow of Trump

The country's anti-graft prosecutor Ruslan Ryaboshapka says 'there are no untouchables'



© Konstantin Chernichkin/FT

Roman Olearchyk in Kyiv NOVEMBER 27 2019

Ruslan Ryaboshapka, a lawyer and anti-fraud whistleblower appointed general prosecutor of Ukraine in August, faces more than the task of cracking widespread corruption at home.

As the new face leading the effort, he also has to convince US president Donald Trump that his country is changing under the administration of [Volodymyr Zelensky](#), a former comedian who was elected president in the spring on promises to root out corruption and end a smouldering undeclared war with Russia that has claimed nearly 14,000 lives.

It will be difficult, to judge from [recent Congressional testimony](#) in Washington given by former US special envoy Kurt Volker, who cited Mr Trump describing Ukraine as “a terrible place” of “terrible people” who are “all corrupt”.

In an interview, the 43-year-old prosecutor said he was “bothered” by daily depictions of a lawless Ukraine in the US impeachment inquiry. “This is not fair,” he told the Financial Times. “Ukraine is not as corrupt as is being presented there . . . We have made significant progress as of late.”

Mr Ryaboshapka first served as deputy head of Mr Zelensky's office and was appointed prosecutor weeks after the Ukrainian leader's infamous July phone call in which Mr Trump pressed him to launch probes into past Ukraine dealings of former vice-president Joe Biden and [his son Hunter](#). In a non-verbatim transcript of that call, Mr Zelensky, in an apparent bid to appease his US

counterpart, refers to the forthcoming appointment of a prosecutor who will be “100 per cent my person”.

There is also a good chance to reboot the entire prosecution and judiciary. Ruslan [Ryaboshapka] was moving all these reforms when he worked in the presidential office, now he is focused on implementing prosecution reform

Daria Kaleniuk, anti-corruption watchdog Antac

deputy head of Ukraine’s National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption in protest at cover-ups in probes of asset declarations made by public servants.

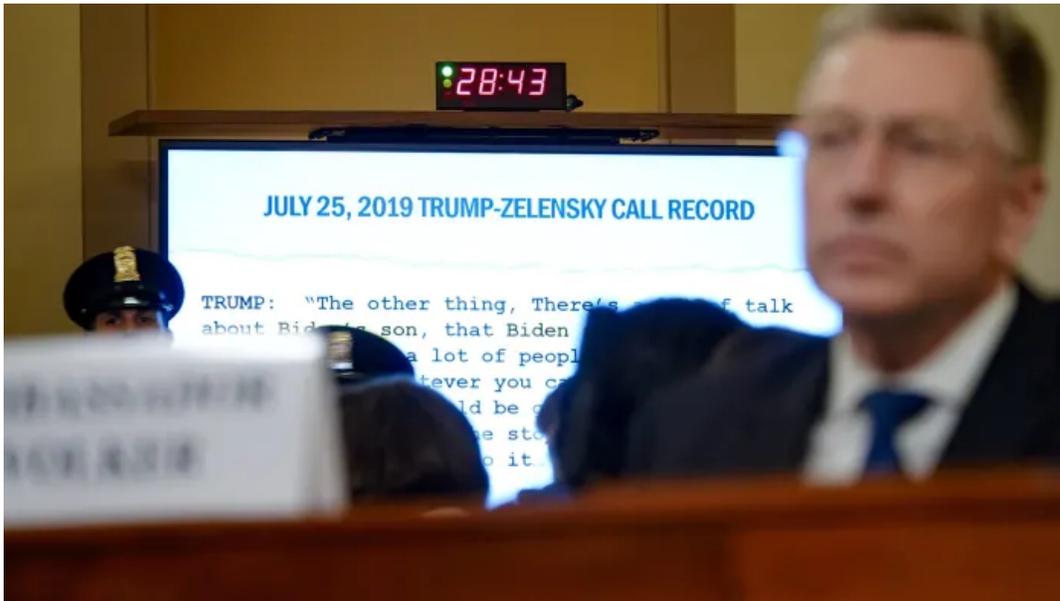
Daria Kaleniuk, director of anti-corruption watchdog Antac, said Mr Ryaboshapka has been “instrumental” in preparing a set of anti-corruption laws under Mr Zelensky which are “already adopted and are being implemented”, including some which were “stalled” under Petro Poroshenko, the previous Ukraine president.

“There is also a good chance to reboot the entire prosecution and judiciary,” Ms Kaleniuk said. “Ruslan was moving all these reforms when he worked in the presidential office, now he is focused on implementing prosecution reform.”

Mr Ryaboshapka insisted other candidates were being considered at the time. “I am 100 per cent my own person . . . The general prosecutor, not of Zelensky, but of the country,” he said.

Asked about a potential probe focusing on the Bidens and their connection with [Ukrainian energy company Burisma](#), Mr Ryaboshapka said Mr Trump’s attorney-general William Barr had made no contact to formally request a joint investigation. A broader audit into past and current cases, including those involving Burisma, were under way, he said.

Having years earlier worked at the Ukraine office of Transparency International, Mr Ryaboshapka won the respect of activists in 2017 when he resigned as



© The Washington Post via Getty Im

Ukraine, which received financial backing from the IMF, the US and EU after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, is "not in bad shape with regards to anti-corruption infrastructure" formed in recent years, including the creation of a new anti-corruption court, Mr Ryaboshapka said.

Mr Zelensky's parliamentary majority has [reintroduced criminal responsibility](#) for illicit enrichment by public servants, established protection for whistleblowers and will soon reshuffle leadership of the anti-corruption agency Mr Ryaboshapka quit years earlier. Mr Ryaboshapka's office has handed investigative powers to anti-corruption bureaus set up as part of the IMF and western support packages.

The prosecutor described reform of a dysfunctional court system as a challenge that will take years and pointed to near-term plans to streamline the country's Supreme Court, slashing its number of judges in half from 200.

He hinted at the likely replacement of Roman Truba, head of the recently formed State Bureau of Investigations, whose independence was questioned by leaked audio recordings suggesting he received orders from Mr Zelensky's chief of staff Andriy Bogdan. Mr Truba has described the recordings as "fakes."

Mr Ryaboshapka said he would also downsize 11,000 nationwide prosecutors by a third by vetting out dishonest and qualified personnel.

"This is the largest number of prosecutors per capita worldwide with the exception of the Russian Federation," he said. Those staying will get a 50 per cent salary increase to reduce temptation of fraud.

Mr Ryaboshapka spoke before an IMF delegation ended its second visit to Kyiv without approving a new multi-billion-dollar programme, in part owing to concerns over [PrivatBank](#).

The largest commercial lender was nationalised in 2016 after a massive balance sheet hole was identified. Former owners led by oligarch Igor Kolomoisky, who backed Mr Zelensky's presidential bid, [seek through litigation](#) to reclaim control over the bank and rebuff government attempts to recover losses from them.

They have not been among a handful of politicians and businessmen arrested or charged in a flurry of probes that also targeted allies of Mr Poroshenko.

Describing the PrivatBank case as “one of the highest priorities,” Mr Ryaboshapka said probes linked to Mr Kolomoisky were in the hands of an independent anti-corruption bureau.

“The PrivatBank case is truly being investigated . . . There are no untouchables,” he said.

Turning back to Washington, where the US House of Representatives is moving to impeach Mr Trump, he said: “It's critically important for the west not to pull us into some conflicts between their ruling elites, but to continue to support so that we can cross the point of no return.

“We have a historical moment in Ukraine now where cardinal change is possible . . . where we can go from an oligarch system of governance to a European and democratic one.”