

The dismissal of Valery Zaluzhny is a crucial new phase in the war

Unfortunately, President Zelensky risks getting it wrong



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News is hardly the best word to describe an announcement that has been rumoured for weeks but never quite come about. Even so, when Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, at last replaced Valery Zaluzhny with Oleksandr Syrsky as the commander of his armed forces, as part of a broader reorganisation on February 8th, it was as if something momentous had just happened.

This is partly because of General Zaluzhny's crucial role in the country's valiant, against-the-odds repulse of Russian forces in the early days of the invasion, and his popularity among his troops and Ukraine's civilians. But the general's dismissal is arresting for another, more important reason. It marks a new and crucial phase in the war—one that Mr Zelensky is in danger of getting wrong.

The differences between the actor-turned-politician and his battle-hardened commander were partly about culture and personality. After Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24th 2022, these differences were unimportant—indeed, they may even have been a strength. In an

inspiring example of Ukraine's "networked" culture, each component of the country's resistance focused on its own task. Rather than exert central control, Mr Zelensky got on with being patriot-in-chief, giving voice to his nation's defiant refusal to yield in the face of Russia's aggression. General Zaluzhny, who had in effect already been at war with Russia for years, focused on the fighting. Only as the Russian and Ukrainian armies dug themselves in, and the front lines stagnated, did these frictions start to cause harm.

It is no secret that, as their relationship worsened, the two men also came to differ about what to do on the battlefield. Mr Zelensky and his administration held General Zaluzhny responsible for last year's failed counter-offensive. They wanted the Ukrainian army to prepare for further attacks and had been pressing him to draw up battle plans and to take on the unpopular burden of mobilising more troops.

The general rejected their arguments. He observed that his caution after the failure of the initial assault ended up sparing vital troops and equipment. He argued that he could not plan for the next counter-offensive unless he knew what resources he had. He said that it is politicians' responsibility to mobilise society—and he was right.

It is not unusual in war for politicians and soldiers to hold a low opinion of each other. What really doomed the relationship between Mr Zelensky and General Zaluzhny was the president's shifting view about how the war would determine the sort of country Ukraine should become.

When *The Economist* first interviewed Mr Zelensky in Kyiv, just weeks after the invasion, he spoke eloquently about how his country was fighting for its destiny as a Europe-leaning democracy. Ukraine, he said, put greater value on life than territory. More recently, however, Mr Zelensky's presidency has come to be defined by the objective of recapturing all Ukraine's occupied territory. As it became clearer that this war aim could not be achieved, Mr Zelensky's impatience with his general mounted. He and his officials felt threatened by General Zaluzhny's popularity. That was one reason he sought to centralise power in the presidential compound in Kyiv.

It was probably inevitable that the cut and thrust of normal politics would begin to exert themselves as the war dragged on. Unfortunately, politics in Ukraine is not like politics in

Washington or Paris. It is a naked contest for resources and power, funded by oligarchs and factions—and, these days, by foreign donors. In the West ideas often come second; in Ukraine they are usually absent altogether.

Under these circumstances, it was right for the general to go. In a democracy the armed forces must be subordinate to the politicians. General Zaluzhny's authority as commander-in-chief had already been fatally harmed by the rumours of his dismissal. The longer Mr Zelensky appeared to be too weak to fire him, the more his own authority suffered, too. The question is where that leaves the president and Ukraine's new top soldier, General Syrsky, who has been promoted from commander of the country's ground forces.

One risk for Mr Zelensky will be the grumbling provoked in the army by the sacking of a much-loved commander. General Syrsky has a reputation for being willing to engage the enemy, even if the cost in men and machines is high. He is a divisive figure who provokes strong reactions from serving officers. Some praise his professionalism, others say he terrifies his subordinates and rules by fear. He is less likely to question the priorities of his president. As he takes on the top job, he will have to soften his style of command and learn to speak truth to power.

The reorganisation will also cause disruption as officers shift to new positions in the chain of command. It is important that these changes do not degrade Ukraine's capacity to fight. Before long, the country will need a new mobilisation even if General Syrsky uses his troops mostly for defence—as, for now, he should.

Because General Zaluzhny was a hero in Ukraine, his sacking will have political fallout, too. Mr Zelensky's statement announcing his departure was vague about what he will do next. Those who know the general do not see him as a natural politician, but he would not be the first old soldier to have his head turned by the promise of power. In a country like Ukraine, one oligarch or another will doubtless see him as a vehicle for their own ambitions. He should keep a sense of humility. For his part, Mr Zelensky needs to be enlightened enough to understand that, if he and his administration attempt to bottle up discontent, they will harm the political culture they are trying to save.

The most important question is whether Mr Zelensky can profit from General Zaluzhny's dismissal to refocus his vision for the war. Today he is still publicly clinging to his promise that Ukraine will take back every inch of soil occupied by Russian forces, even if he privately knows that this will not happen soon, if at all. If Ukrainian forces could expel the Russian invaders it would be a wonderful thing. However, unless something completely unexpected changes, a war defined by territory is a war Ukraine cannot win.

Mr Zelensky therefore needs to see this reorganisation as a chance to reframe his vision of the war. To sustain itself in the long fight ahead, Ukraine needs to increase its resilience. In military terms, that means better air-defence and artillery, and an ability to make running repairs. Given the refusal of Republicans in Congress to agree on a big package of arms and money, Ukraine needs an even greater home-grown ability to produce weapons—especially drones. In economic terms, Ukraine needs to attract investment as well as aid, and to add more value to what it exports. In political terms it means that Mr Zelensky should publicly rededicate himself to a war of values.

Ukraine will emerge as the victor from this bloody conflict so long as it is a prospering, democratic Westward-leaning country. His government needs a laser-like focus on making that happen. About that, there should be no difference between the president and his commanders.

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