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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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All the risks of replacing General Zaluzhnyi

The change at the top of the Ukrainian army, carried out by President Volodymyr Zelensky after numerous hints, might be one of those events that would determine the further course of the war and even its final result.

The trouble for Ukraine is that no one could predict whether replacing the leading defence commander would lead to triumph or collapse.

The president of Ukraine took a risk by choosing to replace General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, and that risk is just as significant as the final victory or defeat.

Ukraine could be pleased that the change, which took place last Thursday, was executed as in any developed democracy.

After 2 years of defending the nation's existence, the highest military commander was replaced following the decision of the civil authorities, legally and legitimately.

In countries with weak democracies, like Ukraine, this is expected - forced "disappearance" of leading generals as victims of clan conflicts, assassinations, or expulsions.

Since the start of the aggression against Ukraine, Russia has lost at least 6 high-ranking generals, while Kyiv has been talking about twice the number of leading officers killed.

Similar things have happened not only at the front. People from the top of the security sector died in mysterious situations all over Russia, including the spectacular assassination of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Wagner paramilitary structure, last August.

By changing the leading general of its army, Ukraine has confirmed that it was far from Russia, even regarding the understanding of democracy. The civilian dismissed the first soldier because he was his superior, and the latter complied with that decision. This sequence of events is impossible in Russia, not without severe consequences.

A hero instead of a hero

The risk of President Zelensky is not personal, and the fact that he managed to avoid it speaks highly of the thoughtfulness of his decision.

Instead of one hero of the nation stepping down from the post of commander-in-chief, another hero has arrived. General Oleksandr Syrskyi, previously the commander of ground forces, became the new chief of Ukrainian military.

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He has been well-liked as the chief of Kyiv's defence during the crucial first days of Russian aggression and as the commander who pushed back Russian troops from Kharkiv, recapturing some occupied parts of eastern Ukraine.

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In his strategy of amortising the possible consequences of a crucial change, Volodymyr Zelensky will rely on the fact that an officer of the highest reputation and trust among the troops will remain the chief of the army.

Why are things bad at the front?

However, he has a bigger concern - to convince the nation and the army that the change was necessary. At this moment in particular.

In the case of such war "disruptions", the first conclusion is that things have not been going well on the front and could not improve without significant cuts. The removal of General Zaluzhnyi represents the recognition of the Ukrainian state that it has been doing poorly on the front, or at least not well.

This is where Ukraine will face a significant risk regarding further resistance to Russian

aggression. It needs to answer the question - who is responsible for the lack of results in war?

Replacing the first general is the response of the civil authorities (President Zelensky), showing that the responsibility lies with the one who has been replaced.

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But will that answer satisfy the citizens, particularly the soldiers, the 2-year comrades-in-arms of General Zaluzhnyi, for whom they have great sympathy and unquestionable belief in his military leadership since day one?

The arrival of the equally popular General Syrskyi will only partially dispel these doubts, so President Zelensky will have to make a lot of effort to defend the image of the first patriot he has acquired during the 2 war years.

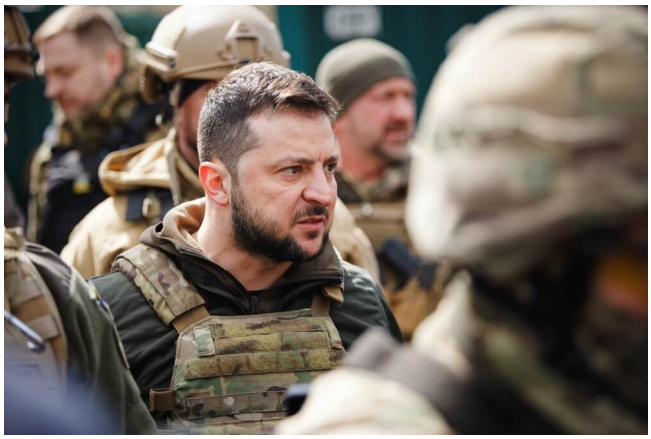
One of the first, perhaps the most difficult, questions that he will have to answer persistently is whether General Zaluzhnyi is to blame for the lack of success on the front (popular belief is that he is not) or whether the civilian government is responsible because it did not provide the general and the army with enough personnel and weapons, to make them more efficient.

Risks before Zelensky

Zelensky changed the head of the army at the moment of the most severe crisis in the supply of weapons, when by far the most significant source of that aid, the US, has been stuck in a political blockade regarding the further shipment of military material.

The change at the top of the Ukrainian army came when the Ukrainian cause had been moving down on the list of priorities of Europeans, focused on their own problems and pre-election calculations.

President Zelensky probably hopes that by removing the first officer, he will send a strong enough signal to his allies that he is ready to make the most complex cuts to the country's defence structure, for which, in return, he deserves full credit from his partners.



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Zelensky, however, cannot know how convincing and efficient his move will be if it turns out that the motive for removing General Zaluzhnyi was to remove a potentially dangerous political competitor.

In 2 years, the deposed general won the sympathy of tens of thousands of his soldiers. However, those soldiers are also voters, politically interested citizens, regardless of whether or not Zaluzhnyi has ambitions to engage in politics.

It would not be the first time in recent history that great generals wanted to transform the loyalty they gained from soldiers in battle into political support. However, most often, they were attacked by their civilian bosses. Why should Ukraine be an exception?

The decision to remove General Zaluzhnyi leaves Ukrainian President Zelensky facing a big and risky battle of great dissuasion. First, he needs to persuade his own nation that there is no conflict at the heart of the defence command about the principal goal and the manner of achieving it.

He needs to remove doubts of his Western partners of political conflicts escalating in Kyiv that have put the war effort aside. And, in the end, to dissuade Russia regarding the changes at the top of the army, suggesting the collapse of the Ukrainian defence.