



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on February 10, 2024

Zelensky Fires Commander-in-chief of Ukrainian Army

The head of the Ukrainian armed forces throughout the conflict with Russia, General Valeriy Zaluzhny, was fired from his post on Thursday. The move comes days after Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky hinted at the dismissal in an interview, giving rise to a public backlash.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov announced the firing on Facebook, crediting Zaluzhny for having assumed “one of the most difficult tasks” by leading the military against Russia.

“But the war doesn’t remain the same. War is changing and demands change. Combat in 2022, 2023 and 2024 are three different realities; 2024 will bring new changes that we must be prepared for. New approaches, new strategies are needed,” Umerov wrote.

“Today, the decision on the necessity of changing the leadership of the Armed Forces of Ukraine was adopted,” he added.

Rumors of Zaluzhny’s pending removal began to spread in late January, coming from both military and political sources in Kyiv, only to be officially denied.

Last Friday, February 2, the *Washington Post* reported that Zelensky had informed the White House of his decision to fire Zaluzhny, which the administration officials accepted. On Saturday, February 3, Zelensky spoke with Italy’s RAI TG1 news channel and said he was planning to replace “a series of state leaders” — not just in the military.

The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) advised Zelensky that such a move could lead to riots in the capital, the newspaper *Ukrainska Pravda* reported on Wednesday, citing agency sources. The SBU told its staff to be prepared for riots in Kyiv if the general, who remains popular with both the public and soldiers, was purged.

The SBU also contacted some of the military commanders, asking them to monitor their troops and make sure none of them leave their positions, they added.

Reports of tensions between Zelensky and Zaluzhny had been circulating for months, with the failure of the Ukrainian counteroffensive last year believed to have worsened relations.

In mid-January, Bloomberg reported that the falling out between the pair happened after Zelensky was angered by the general describing the situation on the battlefield with Russia as “a stalemate.” Zaluzhny later retracted his comments, but “stresses have remained despite official assertions that the leadership is unified,” the newspaper reported.



AP Images
Valeriy Zaluzhny



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Zaluzhny was in charge of Ukraine's 2023 summer offensive, which failed to achieve any considerable military gains and cost Kyiv hundreds of irreplaceable Western-supplied armored vehicles and more than 100,000 men. The battlefield situation has continued to worsen for the Ukrainian military ever since.

Former president Petro Poroshenko gave a speech in the Ukrainian parliament on February 7, telling Zelensky to leave Zaluzhny alone and start with his own cabinet if he felt the need for a purge.

On February 9, Politico EU reported that Zaluzhny was dismissed as the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian armed forces partly because he had disagreed with the Pentagon about how to conduct the counteroffensive against Russia last summer.

The unnamed adviser told Politico that the Ukrainians "just weren't interested in US advice, and they generally concluded that we have nothing to offer them advice-wise," underscoring that many of the Pentagon's suggestions ended up being seen as "tone-deaf" as the Americans had no experience in this type of warfare.

Although Zaluzhny received most of the blame for this, the United States "kept yelling at the wrong person," Politico's source claimed, because he was "hamstrung by Zelensky" and the latter had the final say on military matters.

Officially, the United States has neither supported nor opposed Zaluzhny's removal, with National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan telling the media last weekend that "we're just not going to get embroiled in that particular decision."

Unofficially, Zaluzhny was blamed for the Ukrainian disagreements with the Pentagon during the 2023 counteroffensive, a source who has "advised the White House on military matters" told Politico.

British and American generals helped plan Ukraine's big offensive push to the Azov Sea, but Zaluzhny "tossed aside" the plan after just four days of brutal fighting and chose tactics the Ukrainians were more familiar with, as per a *Washington Post* postmortem published in December.

General Oleksandr Syrsky has since been announced as Zaluzhny's replacement. Syrsky, who is widely unpopular in the military, is reportedly seen as politically safe as he is an ethnic Russian with no political ambitions.

On February 8, Politico reported that Syrsky is unpopular among the rank and file of the Ukrainian military, who regard him as a "butcher" willing to sacrifice waves of troops.

Syrsky is a contentious choice, best known for "leading forces into a meat grinder in Bakhmut [called Artyomovsk in Russia], sending wave after wave of troops to face opposition fire," Politico said.

The unsuccessful defense of Artyomovsk/Bakhmut last year cost Ukraine dearly, and earned Syrsky the nickname "butcher," an anonymous source within the Ukrainian military told the news site.

A captain told the outlet that Syrsky's appointment is a "very bad decision," adding that soldiers refer to him as "General200," a nickname that Politico said refers to 200 of his men dying, but could also refer to "Cargo 200," a Soviet and Russian military code used to characterize corpses being removed from the battlefield.

"General Syrsky's leadership is bankrupt, his presence or orders coming from his name are demoralizing, and he undermines trust in the command in general," an anonymous Ukrainian military officer and frontline intelligence analyst posted on X. "His relentless pursuit of tactical gains constantly



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depletes our valuable human resources, resulting in tactical advances such as capturing tree lines or small villages, with no operational goals in mind.”

“This approach creates a never-ending cycle of fruitless assaults that drain personnel,” the officer said.

Syrsky takes over the command of a faltering military, with Kyiv having lost nearly 500,000 men since the hostilities started in February 2022, based on figures from the Russian Defense Ministry. Before his dismissal, Zaluzhny warned Zelensky that a rapid improvement in Ukraine’s position on the battlefield was unlikely, regardless of who took his place, the *Washington Post* reported last week.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday that Russia’s campaign against Ukraine will not be influenced by Syrsky’s appointment, and that Moscow will continue until its goals are achieved.



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