

Zelenskyy replaces Zaluzhnyi as Commander-in-Chief



President Zelenskyy presenting the Order of the Golden Star and title of Hero of Ukraine to Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi today.

For the last several weeks, there has been considerable speculation about whether President Zelenskyy would replace Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Zaluzhnyi famously told *The Economist* last fall that “Just like in the first world war we have reached the level of technology that puts us into a stalemate,” a characterization President Zelenskyy disputed. And this winter he proposed lowering the age for the draft from 27 to 25 to get an additional 500,000 soldiers, a proposal Zelenskyy opposes. Ever since, there had been speculation about whether, and if so when and with whom, Zelenskyy would replace Zaluzhnyi as Commander-in-Chief. Last week, Zaluzhnyi revealed that Zelenskyy had asked for his resignation but he had refused to resign, and in an interview last weekend Zelenskyy confirmed he was thinking about replacing Zaluzhnyi in order to ensure that the military is led by someone who “is convinced of victory.” “A reset, a new beginning, is necessary,” Zelenskyy said. “It is not about a single person but about the direction of the country’s leadership. I’m thinking about this replacement, but you can’t say here we replaced a single person. When we talk about this, I mean a replacement of a series of state leaders, not just in a single sector like the military. If we want to win, we must all push in the same direction, convinced of victory.”

Yesterday, the speculation about Zaluzhnyi’s imminent departure became a reality. Zelenskyy replaced him as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine with Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi. Syrskyi has been the commander of Ukraine’s ground forces since 2019 and was appointed to his current rank in 2020. He is perhaps best known for having organized and led the defense of Kyiv after President Putin launched Russia’s “special military operation” in February 2022. But he is also known for having organized and directed Ukraine’s recapture of northeastern Ukraine, including almost all of Kharkiv region, which is adjacent to Luhansk and Donetsk, the two regions in eastern

Ukraine that comprise the Donbas. And importantly for Ukraine – especially in light of the fact that Putin has made it clear that the Russia’s primary objective at this point in the war is to take the Donbas – Syrskyi has extensive experience in, and knows well, that region. He served, beginning in 2014, as the deputy commander and then, from 2017, the commander of the Ukrainian military force, the Anti-Terrorist Organization (ATO), in the Donbas after pro-Russian separatists, with Russian military support, created the Luhansk and Donetsk “People’s Republics” in 2014 and attacked Ukrainian forces. As the commander of Ukraine’s ground forces since 2017, he directed those forces in the prolonged battle from late 2022 through last May for the city of Bakhmut in Donetsk region. And he is of course currently directing the Ukrainian effort to repel the continuing Russian attacks toward Kupiansk, Lyman, the Bakhmut area, Avdiivka, Marinka, the area south of Orikhiv in southeastern Ukraine, and the area east of the Dnipro River in southern Ukraine.

Yesterday, in announcing the change and looking toward the start of the third year of the war on Feb. 24, Zelenskyy said, “The experience of two years of this war has convinced us that it is only Russia’s defeats that bring peace closer. Each year of this war has its own nature. We withstood the first year. We started to reclaim our ground. We proved to the world that Russia can lose. In the second year of this war, we won the Black Sea. We won the winter. We proved that we can regain control of the Ukrainian sky. But, unfortunately, we failed to achieve the goals of our state on land. We have to be honest – the feeling of stagnation specifically in the southern directions and the difficulties in the battles in the Donetsk region have affected the public mood. Ukrainians are speaking of victory less often. However, the Ukrainian spirit has not lost faith in victory. Ukraine retains its historic chance. It is our duty to realize it. This year should be the time of Ukraine – the time when every Ukrainian warrior will know, as before, that the Ukrainian state and the Ukrainian army are capable of winning.”

Continuing, Zelenskyy said, “I am grateful to General Zaluzhnyi for two years of defense. I am grateful for every victory we have achieved together and thanks to all Ukrainian warriors who heroically bear the brunt of this war. Today we had a frank discussion about the changes needed in the army. Urgent changes. I offered General Zaluzhnyi to continue to be part of the Ukrainian state team. I would be grateful for his consent. Today I have decided to renew the leadership of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. This is not about surnames. And certainly not about politics. This is about the system of our army, about management in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and about attracting the experience of battlefield commanders of this war. Every soldier, every sergeant, and every officer who sees the frontline understands what decisions are needed. The army’s actions must become much more technologically advanced. The generalship must be reset. Headquarters at all levels must know and feel the frontline just like soldiers at the forefront. ...The Ukrainian Defense Forces are now almost a million people who were called up to defend our country. As of today, the majority of them have not felt the frontline in the same way as the minority who are actually at the forefront, actually fighting. This means that we need a different approach to rotations in particular. A

different approach to frontline management. A different approach to mobilization and recruitment. All this will give more respect to the soldier. And restore clarity to actions in the war.”

After announcing that he had appointed Syrskyi as the commander in Chief, Zelenskyy called for a number of changes in the Armed Forces, specifically, the preparation of a “realistic, detailed action plan for the Armed Forces of Ukraine for 2024” that takes into account “the real situation on the battlefield now and the prospects.” Each combat brigade on the first line must receive, he said, “effective Western weapons” and there must be “a fair redistribution of such weapons in favor of the first line.” “The logistics problems must be resolved.... Every general must know the front....The excessive and unjustified number of personnel in the headquarters must be adjusted. An effective rotation system must be established in the army....There is an obvious need to improve the quality of training for the warriors.”

Also yesterday, Zaluzhnyi thanked everyone who worked with him in the General Staff and the Ministry of Defense as well as President Zelenskyy and said: “I am proud of everyone in the Armed Forces of Ukraine who is protecting the future of our children. All soldiers, sergeants and officers. I bow my head to those who gave their lives for Ukraine and freedom. We remember and we will avenge them all. Ukrainians will definitely win. Glory to Ukraine!” Today, “for outstanding personal merits in the protection of state sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and selfless service to the Ukrainian people,” Zelenskyy presented Zaluzhnyi with the Order of the Golden Star, Ukraine’s highest military honor, and bestowed on him the title of Hero of Ukraine. The honor was well-deserved.

David R. Cameron
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