

Zelensky confirms planned purge of Ukrainian military leadership

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky confirmed on Sunday that he was planning a wholesale purge of the top Ukrainian military leadership in an interview with Italy's RAI TV. Zelensky conducted the interview only a few days after a meeting at which General Valery Zaluzhny reportedly refused to step down as commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian army and accept a minor position.

Reports of Zaluzhny's firing first emerged early last week, and then were quickly backtracked by Zelensky government officials following an outcry on right-wing Ukrainian social media, which views Zaluzhny as the "savior" of the nation. When questioned about the ongoing reports of Zaluzhny's imminent firing by RAI TV, Zelensky responded that "a new beginning is necessary" and that the Ukrainian people want "a reset."

Zelensky went on to substantiate reports that Zaluzhny's firing would be part of a larger purge by Zelensky of both the top military leaders as well as within the Ukrainian government.

"I have something serious in mind, which does not concern a single person but the direction of the country's leadership," Zelensky said. He added that this "reset" involved "replacement of a series of state leaders, not just in a single sector like the military."

In the interview, Zelensky also belatedly admitted that the war was now at a "stalemate" after previously criticizing Zaluzhny for characterizing the war as such in the *Economist* earlier in November. "As far as the war on the ground is concerned, there is a stalemate, that's a fact", he said. As is typical of the Ukrainian ruling class, Zelensky then blamed the setbacks in the war on insufficient Western military support, stating, "there have been delays with equipment, and delays mean mistakes."

The interview with RAI TV was preceded by a report in the *Washington Post* on Friday indicating that Zelensky had informed the Biden administration of his plans to dismiss Zaluzhny ahead of the meeting on Monday.

Unnamed officials "familiar with the discussion" claimed that the Biden administration "did not support or object to the high-stakes decision." However, with over \$75 billion in US military aid sent to Ukraine since the beginning of the war in February 2022, such feigned disinterest cannot be taken at face value. A report by BBC Ukraine last week claimed that there had been direct intervention by Western officials to prevent Zaluzhny's dismissal.

As the *Washington Post* itself reported in October 2023, Zaluzhny maintains very close ties with retired General Mark Milley, the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in first the Trump and then the Biden administration from 2019 to September 2023, who spoke with Zaluzhny for hours in regular calls following the outbreak of the war. Zaluzhny is also known to cultivate close relations with the country's far-right and is an avowed admirer of Nazi-era Ukrainian fascist leader Stepan Bandera.

Shortly after his attempted ouster by Zelensky, Zaluzhny published an op-ed on CNN, in which he wrote that Ukraine has "to contend with a reduction in military support from key allies". He advocated a new "strategic vision" for the war, which had to include "high-tech assets" for the army and means to "reduce the economic capabilities of the enemy, or to isolate, or wear him down."

The struggle and purge within the top military leadership already extends beyond Zaluzhny.

Last Monday, Ukrainian news outlet *Ukrainska Pravda* reported that in addition to firing Zaluzhny, Zelensky also planned to dismiss Chief of the General Staff Sergey Shaptala. Amidst the reports, Zaluzhny posted a photo of himself in Facebook with Shaptala wishing him a happy birthday. "We still have a very difficult path ahead, but we can be sure that we will never be ashamed," Zaluzhny cryptically wrote. On the same day, Yuliia Laputina, Ukraine's Minister for Veterans' Affairs offered her resignation to Zelensky.

The exact reasons for the bitter conflict between Zaluzhny and Zelensky are unclear and reports about their differences have been contradictory. Veteran investigative reporter Seymour Hersh reported on Friday that Zelensky planned to fire Zaluzhny due to his participation in secret talks with American and other Western officials over negotiating a ceasefire with Russia. Hersh cited one official as saying, “Of course, Zelensky knew that Zaluzhny was dealing with the West. But Zelensky will be a dead man walking with the army, which is in favor of the general. He’s going to have a mutiny on his hands.”

By contrast, the *Washington Post* reported that Zaluzhny had been the one pressuring Zelensky to draft another half a million men into the army. In fact, this is what Zelensky claimed when he announced the new round of mobilization, but Zaluzhny publicly denied this claim. According to the *Post*, “In a tense Monday meeting, Zaluzhny argued that new recruits were needed to make gains on the battlefield in the face of Russia’s superior firepower and troop strength, said people familiar with the conversation. Ukraine also needed to prepare for personnel losses, which are expected to be comparable to last year’s, he said.”

The conflict between the top army leadership and the Zelensky administration in Ukraine is unfolding under conditions of a serious military, political and economic crisis. Over the past two years of war, Ukraine has lost at least 400,000 men on the battlefield, the equivalent of about 1 percent of its pre-war population. Many more were wounded, with many of them disabled. Meanwhile, the territorial gains especially of the 2023 NATO-backed counter-offensive, which cost billions of dollars and at least 125,000 lives, have been minimal. In addition to the staggering loss of human lives, Ukrainian workers are battered by inflation. Since October, families and friends of soldiers have staged protests demanding their return from the front, an initial but significant sign of growing anti-war sentiments in the population.

Now, the Ukrainian government is drafting another half a million men into the army while the military and military intelligence have launched strikes deep into Russian territory. Meanwhile, there are no indications that the situation on the battlefield is changing in favor of Ukraine and its NATO-armed military.

On Sunday, reports emerged from Ukrainian journalists that Russian forces are continuing to gain the upper hand in the city of Avdiivka, which is strategically significant. Control by Kiev grants Ukrainian forces the ability to hit the heavily populated Donetsk with artillery and

potentially attempt to “retake” the city, which has been under Russian-backed separatist control following the NATO-backed coup of elected President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014.

However, according to the embedded Ukrainian war journalist Yuroy Butusov, who maintains ties to far-right armed groups, ammunition shortages continue to plague Ukrainian forces in the battle for the town. “Avdiivka needs fresh reserves and rotation of units of the heroic 110th Brigade, which maintains control despite absolute exhaustion after almost two years of continuous fighting in the town,” he wrote on Telegram on Sunday. “We also need ammunition as supplies are also extremely low, and the enemy has a great superiority in munitions.”

On the same day that these reports were emerging from Avdiivka, Zelensky visited Ukraine’s 65th Mechanized Brigade near the front-line town of Robotyne in Zaporizhzhia Oblast in a very public appearance to drum up support among Ukrainian soldiers.

Robotyne was one of the few towns of any significance taken by Ukraine last August during its failed spring-summer counteroffensive that cost the lives of some 125,000 in just a few months time. There, Zelensky awarded troops with Crosses of Military Merit, a presidential award recognizing soldiers for personal bravery and courage during combat missions.

Signaling that he intends for Ukrainian soldiers to continue fighting in the NATO proxy war, Zelensky attempted to motivate his forces with an inspirational speech. “I am greatly honored to be here today. To support you and present awards. Such a difficult, decisive mission rests on your shoulders — to push back the enemy and win this war. I wish you this victory. I wish to do everything to make this victory faster,” Zelensky said.



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