Protests shake Zelensky government after dismissal of Ukrainian defense minister

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The Ukrainian ruling class and military are in an immense crisis following the firing of Defense Minister Mykhailo Fedorov and the reshuffling of President Volodymyr Zelensky's cabinet last week.

On Saturday, around 10,000 protesters gathered in Kiev near the Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theatre demanding the dismissal of current Commander-in-Chief Oleksandr Syrskyi and the reinstatement of Fedorov. Smaller protests were also held in Odessa, Lviv, Lutsk, Dnipro, Cherkasy, Zhytomyr, Vinnytsia, Chernivtsi, Rivne, and Ivano-Frankivsk, and elsewhere.

The protests have shaken the Zelensky government, which has been embroiled in a number of corruption scandals, involving several of Zelensky's closest allies. However, these protests cannot be characterized as "anti-war." Rather, they have been dominated by frustrated pro-war veterans and upper middle class elements from Ukraine's so-called "civil society," who support the war in principle but are critical of Zelensky's conduct of it. Protesters in Kiev were photographed carrying placards with Fedorov's name, explicitly backing the continuation of the disastrous war with Russia that has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers and youth, both Ukrainian and Russian.

Fedorov's firing has also drawn criticism from influential Ukrainian politicians, the Western media and, behind closed doors, NATO politicians. Kiev's mayor Vitaly Klitschko, who played a prominent role in the 2014 Western backed coup and maintains close ties to German imperialism in particular, openly criticized Fedorov's firing as a "big mistake." The British *Guardian* described the move as "shocking," writing that it "startled senior European officials."

On Saturday, well-aware of the precarious situation of his government, Zelensky hinted that he may be reconsidering his decision.

"There were many consultations yesterday and today. Of course, I hear what people are saying," Zelensky said, noting that he had spoken with both Commander-in-Chief Syrskyi and Fedorov. "Decisions regarding the army will be developed," Zelensky said.

Following his dismissal Fedorov revealed that he had recommended to Zelensky that both Syrskyi and Chief of the General Staff Andrii Hnatov be replaced due to their opposition to Fedorov's reform initiatives. But Zelensky ultimately rejected this recommendation and sided with Syrskyi.

"When the president said he did not plan to replace Syrskyi, I... said I would learn to work with him," Fedorov stated at his own press conference. But "all the initiatives we proposed were blocked," he added. Fedorov also accused Syrskyi of enabling corruption.

Tensions between Fedorov and Syrskyi have come to the fore as Ukraine, with the backing of both the EU and the US, has significantly expanded and intensified long-range drone strikes deep into Russian territory. Fedorov, just 35 years old, was appointed to the post of Defense Minister only six months ago and has been primarily associated with this intensification of long-range drone warfare and the "gamification" of targets hit by Ukrainian forces. Ukrainian forces have also ramped up their efforts to carry out drone strikes on Crimea, which Fedorov has vowed to "cut off" from Russia entirely.

Both the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times* described the conflict between Fedorov and Syrskyi as one between a young and tech-savvy reformer, and a representative of the "old guard" within the Ukrainian military. *The New York Times* praised Fedorov as "Ukraine's Drone Warfare Mastermind" and reported

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that his firing came after he had blocked purchases of artillery ammunition in favor of drones.

Praised by the Western media as a high-tech reformer, Fedorov has also cultivated ties with the country's notorious far-right groups and counts neo-Nazi blogger Sergio Sternenko as a personal advisor. As a former board member and head of the Odessa section of the neo-Nazi Right Sector group, Sternenko played a prominent role in the 2014 Odessa Massacre of 48 left-wing activists at the Trades Union building.

Sternenko has described Fedorov as "the best minister of defense in our entire history" and criticized the "bureaucratic obstacles and artificial delays" which, according to Sternenko, had delayed bigger reforms of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

In the days following Fedorov's dismissal, Ukrainian forces have dramatically ramped up long-range drone and maritime attacks, successfully hitting Russian oil depots, shadow fleet tankers in the Black Sea, and major logistics centers deep inside Russian territory, including facilities near Moscow. Such strikes are part of a strategy specifically championed by Fedorov.

The expanding drone strikes of the past weeks and months have created a serious fuel crisis in Russia, one of the largest oil producers in the world. They are also claiming a growing death toll. On Sunday, a Ukrainian strike on a warehouse of the Russian online retailer Wildberries in Kotovsk, in the Tambov region, killed at least seven workers, injuring 25 more. The town is located approximately 360 kilometers (220 miles) from the Ukrainian border.

A second Wildberries warehouse was also hit outside of Moscow. One worker who was injured during the strikes later died from his injuries, according to Russian officials. Russia retaliated with a large wave of strikes on Ukraine's capital Kiev.

While Western media have celebrated these strikes as a sign that Ukraine could "win" the war, the increased reliance on drones is not least of all a response to the massive desertion crisis facing the Ukrainian army. According to an April report from public broadcasting (PBS) in the US, an estimated 150,000 service members were missing from their units as the war entered its fifth year.

Soldiers interviewed in the report stated that they they now viewed the NATO-backed proxy war as a sham in which countless soldiers were being needlessly slaughtered. "I thought people would be valued. I thought there would be some kind of support there. Well, I got there, and I realized that the commanders were sending people to their deaths. It was crazy," Andriy told PBS.

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