Volodymyr Zelensky appoints new Commander-in-Chief amid intensifying drone warfare

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On Tuesday, after days of protests opposing the dismissal of Ukraine's Defense Minister Mykhailo Fedorov, President Volodymyr Zelensky dismissed Fedorov's main rival, Commander-in-Chief Oleksandr Syrskyi. He appointed Mykhailo Drapatyi, who is considered an ally of Fedorov, as the new Commander-in-Chief. Fedorov welcomed Drapatyi's appointment as a "breath of fresh air," bringing "new hope."

The appointment of Drapatyi marks Zelensky's second change of his Commander-in-Chief in a little over two years. In early 2024, Zelensky fired Valery Zaluzhnyi, an admirer of Ukrainian fascist Stepan Bandera, who was extremely well connected in the country's far right, as well as Washington, Berlin and London. Zaluzhnyi now serves as Ukrainian ambassador to the UK.

Zelensky dismissed Zaluzhnyi's replacement, Syrskyi, after days of protests in Kiev and other major Ukrainian cities, dominated by pro-war veterans and layers of the middle class. The removal of Syrskyi was one of the main demands of the protesters. It is also all but certain that leading NATO officials raised this demand behind closed doors. *The Guardian* reported that Zelensky's dismissal of Fedorov had "startled" European officials. It also drew criticism from influential Ukrainian politicians such as Vitaly Klitchko, who played a prominent role in the 2014 Western-backed coup in Kiev. According to the *Financial Times*, Zelensky has tried to convince Fedorov to rejoin his cabinet in another capacity. So far, however, Fedorov has rejected his proposals, insisting that he would only return as Defense Minister.

In the conflict between Fedorov and Syrskyi, the Western press clearly sided with Fedorov. Outlets such as *The Guardian* and the *Financial Times* depicted Syrskyi as a representative of the "old guard" within the Ukrainian military, with Soviet-era methods and conceptions of warfare. The 35-year-old Fedorov, by contrast, has been hailed as "Ukraine's Drone Warfare Mastermind" by the *New York Times*. The *New York Times* suggested that the conflict between Syrskyi and Fedorov escalated after the latter blocked purchases of artillery ammunition in favor of drones.

Drapatyi is widely seen to be in favor of Fedorov's approach to the war, centered on the growing use of long-range drones that hit infrastructure and civilian targets deep within Russian territory.

In recent months, such long-range drone strikes have increased dramatically to an average of 300-350 per day, according to Kiev. These strikes have been made possible by AI-assisted Hornet attack drones. At $5,000, Hornet drones are much less expensive than conventional missiles but can carry 5 kilograms (11 pounds) of explosives for some 200 kilometers (124 miles). The Hornet system was developed and is sold by the US defense tech company Swift Beat. Swift Beat is owned by Eric Schmidt, the former CEO of Google, who has long been highly connected with US intelligence, the Democratic Party and the military-industrial complex. A report in *Defense News* suggested that Schmidt was personally involved in the development of the Hornet system.

In an indication that the US was in favor of Drapatyi, Rob Lee, a senior fellow at the D.C.-based Foreign Policy Research Institute, endorsed Drapatyi ahead of his appointment, stating, "Given his experience, reputation, and emphasis on reforms, Drapatyi would

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be an excellent choice as commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces." The Instagram page of the Right Sector, one of Ukraine's most influential neo-Nazi organizations with a substantial presence in the military, endorsed Drapatyi's appointment as well.

Drapatyi's rise within the Ukrainian military has been entirely bound up with the NATO-backed war against Russia. His first major deployment came in 2014, after the coup in Kiev and the annexation of Crimea set off a civil war in East Ukraine. As part of the so-called "anti-terrorist operation," Drapatyi was sent to the Donbass to oversee the suppression of pro-Russian separatists. After completing his studies at the National Defense University of Ukraine in 2021, he was awarded the "Transitional Sword of the Queen of Great Britain" for the best graduate.

In the following years, Drapatyi continued to climb up the military ladder. He served as deputy to the General Staff and as commander of Ukraine's ground forces. In this capacity, Drapatyi played a central role in the Ukrainian invasion of Russia's Kursk region. The invasion ended in a military debacle, and Drapatyi was eventually forced to resign his post as Infantry Commander. This part of his biography has been conveniently omitted in the Western coverage of Drapatyi. Nevertheless, his involvement is indicative of his alignment with those sections of Ukraine's military and state apparatus that favor an aggressive development of military strikes, be it with drones or with ground troops, on civilian and energy infrastructure within the Russian Federation.

The strikes have targeted, in particular, oil refineries, triggering a severe fuel shortage in Russia, one of the world's largest oil producers. Earlier this week, the Russian government officially began importing oil to address the fuel shortages, which have forced thousands to wait in lines for fuel, for hours, sometimes even days. Fedorov was also a key figure in the recent targeting of Crimea's infrastructure, which has led to major blackouts and fuel shortages. Increasingly, these strikes also openly target civilian and general economic infrastructure.

Over the weekend, at least seven workers were killed and dozens injured in drone strikes on warehouses of Russia's online retail giant Wildberries. Many of the workers were trapped in the warehouse when it was hit by drones and set on fire. Wildberries, which functions much like Amazon, delivers household goods, clothing and other items to millions of households but also to Russian soldiers on the front lines.

In the two days since Drapatyi's appointment, Ukraine has continued its strikes on targets within Russia.

On Wednesday, a drone hit yet another Wildberries warehouse. The pro-Western Russian outlet Meduza reported that 10 percent of Wildberries' warehouse space, including the commodities stored there, have now been destroyed by Ukrainian drones. In a rare admission of the impact of Ukrainian drone strikes on Russia's economy, the Kremlin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov acknowledged, "The situation is indeed difficult because of the losses suffered ?both by the company [Wildberries] itself and ?by representatives of small- and medium-sized businesses" whose goods were destroyed.

The Kremlin has not released figures about the growing death toll of these strikes, but, based on Russian reports, it is likely that this year hundreds of civilians have been killed, if not more. In the night from July 22 to July 23 alone, 18 regions in Russia were hit by drone strikes. At least two people died in drone attacks on Crimea; a 3-year-old was killed in the Voronezh region; and one man was killed in the Belgorod region. Also on Wednesday, July 22, two people, including one young girl, died in a hospital in the Krasnodar region from injuries suffered during drone strikes.

In addition to the growing civilian death toll on the Russian side, Ukrainian drones are now also responsible for by far the largest share of Russian casualties on the battlefield. Russia has responded with an intensification of missile and drone strikes on Ukraine. On Thursday, Russia hit the port infrastructure and drone industry facilities in the city of Odessa. The U.N. Human Rights Office has recorded 1,396 civilian deaths in Ukraine for the first six months of 2026, a 37 percent increase compared to the first half of 2025.

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