

Personnel revolution in the Ukrainian armed forces

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On 9–11 February, President Volodymyr Zelensky, defence minister Rustem Umerov and the new Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, General Oleksandr Syrskyi, made changes to over a dozen senior positions in the armed forces. Some of the dismissals and appointments have been published in presidential decrees, although information about other decisions has not been made public yet. Those who have been removed include the closest aides of General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, who was dismissed on 8 February (see [‘Zelensky dismisses General Zaluzhnyi’](#)), including both of his deputies, General Mykhailo Zabrotskyi and General Yevhen Moysiuk, as well as General Serhiy Shaptala (who was Chief of the General Staff) and General Serhiy Nayeiv, Commander of the Joint Forces of the Ukrainian Armed Forces; he had been in effective command of the group responsible for defending the country’s northern border.

Colonel Vadym Sukharevsky, who will be responsible for the development of drones in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and Colonel Andriy Lebedenko, a specialist in communications and radio-electronic warfare, have been appointed Syrskyi’s deputies. General Anatoly Barhylevych will be the new Chief of the General Staff, while General Oleksandr Pavluk, formerly a deputy defence minister, will take over as the commander of the Ground Forces (for selected profiles, see Appendix). Changes have also been made to the positions of deputy chiefs of the General Staff and commanders of the Air Assault Forces, the Marines and the Territorial Defence Forces.

However, there have been no decisions on who will become the new commanders of the operational-strategic groups, primarily Khortytsia and Taurida, or regarding any reshuffles in the command of the operational groups, which are a key element of the Ukrainian Armed Forces’ battlefield command system.

Commentary

- The personnel changes have mainly affected administrative, organisational and planning positions. The military has largely welcomed them, especially the promotions of several junior officers who have earned great respect and a special place in the history of the war against Russia. They demonstrated their valour as company or battalion commanders in 2014–15, and then rose through the command ranks to become commanders of brigades or operational groups in 2022–24. They also have experience in overseas missions and international exercises; some of them have completed military studies or training courses in the militaries of NATO states. The most prominent figure in this group is Colonel Vadym Sukharevsky, who ordered his troops to open fire on separatists near

Sloviansk in April 2014, becoming the first to defy the orders that were in place at the time.

- Some of the appointees are officers who have previously been close to General Syrskyi; assessments of their abilities are more mixed. The most controversial figure is General Ihor Plakhuta, who was previously Syrskyi's deputy when the latter commanded the Khortytsia group, and who has now been put in charge of the Territorial Defence Forces. Plakhuta served in the Internal Troops in early 2014, and was present at Kyiv's Maidan during the Revolution of Dignity as a member of the forces that were cracking down on the protests. However, he has not been accused of involvement in the beatings and murders of the demonstrators; those who participated in those events recall him as an officer who tried to talk to the protesters to avoid bloodshed.
- In recent days General Zaluzhnyi's most loyal aides have been dismissed as part of the personnel changes in the armed forces. However, we can assume that there will be no personnel or doctrinal revolution in the leadership of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and that the reforms initiated by the previous commander-in-chief will move forward. However, it remains unclear who will be appointed to the frontline command posts, as commanders of the operational-strategic groups and operational groups.
- The appointment of capable and highly respected officers to senior positions should be seen as a skilful move on Zelensky's part to alleviate the discontent in the military and the general public caused by the dismissal of General Zaluzhnyi and his replacement with the unpopular General Syrskyi. A similar effect is expected from the announcement that the military will form a new type of force responsible for the use and training of unmanned systems (airborne, land-based and naval), which Colonel Sukharevsky will lead. This decision has met the expectations of many soldiers, volunteers and entrepreneurs who have been involved in projects to design and manufacture drones for the armed forces. However, it should be stressed that these promising personnel changes will not translate into real reforms in terms of training quality and technological advances or an eventual increase in the combat capabilities of the Ukrainian Armed Forces unless a new wave of mobilisation is enforced (see '[U progu trzeciego roku wojny. Kryzys mobilizacyjny na Ukrainie](#)') and the domestic industry ramps up the mass production of drones. However, the implementation of these plans depends on the Ukrainian government, particularly President Zelensky, rather than the leadership of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Appendix. Profiles of selected Ukrainian commanders

Colonel Vadym Sukharevsky

Born in 1984 in Berehove (Zakarpattia oblast). In 2004 he took part in the Ukrainian mission to Iraq. He graduated from the Ground Forces Academy in Lviv in 2009 and then served in the airborne assault forces. On 13 April 2014, while commanding a company of the 80th Airborne Regiment near Sloviansk, he defied the orders that were in place at the time and ordered his troops to open fire on saboteurs from the unit led by Igor Girkin. In August 2014 he was wounded during the fighting near Luhansk. He was the organiser and first commander of the 503rd Marine Battalion, which is considered to be one of the most

capable Ukrainian infantry units; the battalion is unofficially known as the 'Badgers', in reference to Sukharevsky's nickname. In March 2022, he was appointed commander of the 59th Motorised Brigade, which the Russian forces had crushed in the region of Kherson in the first days of the war. Sukharevsky quickly reconstituted the brigade, which went on to become one of the best in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and headed it until he was appointed Syrskyi's deputy. During the war, he has consistently sought to ensure the rational use of drones at every organisational level; thanks to his support, in 2022 the 59th Brigade created the 'Magyar's Birds' unit, which has recently evolved into an independent battalion that operates as part of a Marine infantry group.

General Anatoly Barhylevych

Born in 1969 in Zhytomyr oblast. He began his military service in the Soviet Armed Forces. After graduating from the military academy in Tashkent, he joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces. During the 2014–15 war in eastern Ukraine, he held a number of staff positions and later served as deputy commander of the Ground Forces in charge of the formation and development of the territorial defence forces. In 2022, he became chief of staff of the Khortytsia group; in November 2023, he was appointed commander of the Territorial Defence Forces. The new Chief of the General Staff is a close associate of General Syrskyi, so his appointment comes as no surprise.

General Oleksandr Pavlyuk

Born in 1970 in Zviahel (Zhytomyr oblast). He graduated from the military academy in Kharkiv in 1991, and then served for several months in the Soviet Army's units in Germany while they were being disbanded. Since 1993, he has worked his way up through the command ranks in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. In 2014, he commanded the 24th Mechanised Brigade during the fighting in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. After that he held various staff positions before being appointed commander of the Joint Force Operation in July 2021. He was serving in this position when the full-scale war broke out. In its early days, he commanded the defence of the Donbas; from March to May 2022 he headed the Kyiv Regional Military Administration. In February 2023, he was appointed deputy defence minister and served in this position for another year until his appointment as commander of the Ground Forces. General Pavlyuk is regarded as an experienced, reliable commander and enjoys considerable respect in the military.