

Jakub Olchowski

The case of Valerii Zaluzhnyi – a symptom of growing political tensions in Ukraine

The dismissal from the post of commander-in-chief of General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, very popular in Ukrainian society and the armed forces, caused a great stir, which was then intensified by the information that he was appointed ambassador to Great Britain. In Ukraine, it is widely believed that Zaluzhnyi's dismissal was the result of concerns of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his entourage related to the General's popularity and authority. Such actions by the authorities indicate an intensifying political struggle and, at the same time, may result in the deterioration of both the social mood and the morale of the army.

The "Iron General". Valerii Zaluzhnyi is currently the most popular public figure in Ukraine. In February 2024, 94% of respondents declared their trust in him – in all regions of Ukraine, which is an unprecedented situation, especially against the background of generally limited trust in the political elites. His charismatic personality, modesty, command style, competence, personal commitment, and attitude towards soldiers, fundamentally different from the characteristics and behaviour of generals with Soviet origins, made him extremely popular in the army and made him almost a pop culture icon in the public perception.

Zaluzhnyi was born in 1973 in Novohrad-Volynskiy (in 2022, the city's historical name Zviahel was restored) and received both a military education (land forces school, general staff academy) and a general academic education (international relations). He went through all the levels of the military during his career, in 2014-15 he participated in combat in the east of the country, and finally, in 2021, he took over the position of commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Under his command, the Ukrainian army began preparations to defend against the Russian invasion long before 24 February 2022, ignoring the calming voices of politicians, including President Zelenskyy, who were afraid of a possible panic and its consequences for the economy, e.g., the outflow of foreign investments (this attitude is currently widely criticized).

In the initial phase of the war, Zaluzhnyi became famous for, among other things, strong opposition to plans to blow up bridges on the Dnieper. These plans were intended to stop the Russian advance on Kyiv, but in fact, they reflected the panic that prevailed among Ukrainian elites in the first days of the invasion. During the war, Zaluzhnyi gained authority not only in the country and among Western military officials and analysts but also in the eyes of the Russians, who initially disregarded him.

Relations with President Zelenskyy and dismissal from office. Rumours of differences between the commander-in-chief and the president appeared already in 2022, and they intensified significantly during the battles for Bakhmut in 2023. Zelenskyy expected the army to achieve success on the front, which would make it easier to obtain Western help, whereas Zaluzhnyi took a balanced stance, being better aware of the actual military situation. He also expressed restraint on the issue of mobilization, questioning the possibility of calling up half a million soldiers but emphasising the need for urgent action to increase the size of the army and enable the rotation of front-line units.

The General also shared his opinions on the course and prospects of the war with influential Western media, including: "The Economist", "Politico", and CNN ("IEŚ Commentaries", No. 1006). As a result, this led to an escalation of tension in relations with Zelenskyy and his entourage, which as early as 2022 began to look for political motivation and ambition in Zaluzhnyi's actions as well as to criticize his media activity. The General's level of popularity also raised such concerns in the Office of the President. They were additionally fuelled by

both Zelenskyy's internal political opponents and Russian propaganda, trying to bring Zaluzhnyi into conflict with the president. Gradually, the media began to report more and more often about their tense relationship. On 5 March 2024, after the dismissal of General Zaluzhnyi from the position of commander-in-chief, the results of a poll were published according to which possible presidential elections would end with a decisive victory for Zaluzhnyi.

Taking into account the deepening differences between the president and the commander-in-chief, Zaluzhnyi's dismissal was expected at the end of 2023; there had already been numerous rumours, e.g., regarding Zelenskyy's alleged request for Zaluzhnyi to leave himself – which he allegedly refused. Ultimately, his dismissal took place on 8 February 2024, but it took place in a calm atmosphere, without unnecessary and emotional comments, and with mutual thanks. A day later, Zaluzhnyi was honoured with the title of Hero of Ukraine. This restrained behaviour on Zelenskyy's part was probably influenced by Zaluzhnyi's popularity in society – in December 2023, only 2% of Ukrainians were in favour of his release from duty, while 72% of respondents were of the opposite opinion. Less than a month later, on March 7, President Zelenskyy announced that Valerii Zaluzhnyi was to be Ukraine's new ambassador to the UK.

The command of the Ukrainian army was taken over by Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi, an experienced soldier who had been participating in hostilities since 2014. It is emphasised that he commanded the operations to defend Kyiv and liberate Kharkiv (along with Kyrylo Budanov, he was mentioned as Zaluzhnyi's successor). Syrskyi is a widely unknown figure. He was born in 1965 in the Russian Socialist Republic of the Soviet Union, where his father, a retired army colonel, still lives. In the 1980s, he received a military education in Moscow and served in the Soviet Army. Although the Ukrainian media is reluctant to write about it, soldiers unofficially call him "General 200"¹ or the "Bakhmut butcher", accusing him of a tendency not to take losses into account. The Russian media describe him contemptuously, suggesting that he intends to lead the surrender of the Ukrainian army, which would not have been allowed by Zaluzhnyi, who was dismissed at the behest of "Western sponsors", who were allegedly trying to reach an agreement with Russia.

Reactions to the dismissal of the commander-in-chief. General Zaluzhnyi did not officially comment on his removal. He was probably aware that any comments from him could be dangerous for the country at war: they would question the decisions and authority of the highest state authorities, and they would contribute to an increase in tensions and divisions in society and the army, further worsening the mood and morale, and finally – they would serve Russian propaganda. However, the public discourse is dominated by the belief that Zaluzhnyi has become a victim of his own popularity, which has turned the commander-in-chief of the armed forces into a political competitor from the point of view of the President's Office and Zelenskyy himself (even though the General has not personally expressed such ambitions). The differences of opinion between Zelenskyy and Zaluzhnyi are emphasised as well as the General's statements to Western media, which in the eyes of the presidential circle are intended to confirm his ambitions to play a greater role in the state. There are many opinions that after the failed Ukrainian counteroffensive, the authorities needed a "scapegoat". There are quite marginal opinions that a change in the position of commander-in-chief was necessary because the situation on the front has changed, which requires a new approach and concept of conducting the war.

Conclusions. The background, motives, and conditions for General Zaluzhnyi's dismissal from his position remain largely in the realm of conjecture and speculation. According to media reports, in early 2024, Zaluzhnyi was to be recognized by a medical commission as unfit for service under combat conditions. Then, after being released from his position, he placed himself at the disposal of the Minister of Defence and, having not received any assignment, asked to be released from service. This caused a wave of comments, including those accusing the presidential office of treating the General unbecomingly. According to various opinions, he also either rejected offers of diplomatic positions or, on the contrary, asked for them.

Regardless of any speculation, there is no doubt that the Office of the President is behind the decision to dismiss Zaluzhnyi from the position of commander-in-chief. The Office of the President (and not the Ministry of Foreign

¹ From the term "Cargo 200" (*Груз 200*), meaning the transport of the body of a fallen soldier.

Affairs) is also responsible for the decision to nominate him as ambassador to Great Britain. This is further proof of the growing political frictions in Ukraine as well as the growing importance and influence of the Office of the President of Ukraine, which has in fact dominated and marginalized both the government and the parliament.

Sending Zaluzhnyi to Great Britain may, objectively, bring tangible benefits to Ukraine. London is one of the key Western political centres, the General is recognizable there, and he enjoys a good reputation, which may be useful from the point of view of Ukraine's interests. However, it also proves Zelenskyy's determination to get rid of political rivals, even just potential challengers. Especially since the president can easily dismiss the ambassador, as he unexpectedly did in July 2023 with Vadym Prystaiko, at the time the ambassador in London.

Zaluzhnyi's situation can also be treated as a disturbing symptom of the breakdown of the previously respected social contract, which assumed the separation of current politics from the issue of conducting military operations. This may translate into a deterioration of both the public mood and the morale of the army – especially since the new commander-in-chief does not enjoy its trust.

At the same time, however, it cannot be ruled out that Valerii Zaluzhnyi, regardless of whether he takes up the post in London or not, will actually appear as an important figure on the Ukrainian political scene. Given his popularity and authority, he may even successfully run in the presidential elections (it is unlikely though that they will take place in the near future). However, it is highly probable that various groups will try to use the General's popularity for their own political purposes.