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## Valerii Zaluzhnyi: Future Diplomat or Politician?

On 7 March 2024, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced the candidacy of former Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) Valerii Zaluzhnyi for the vacant post of Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of Ukraine to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Following the president's announcement, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba confirmed that the relevant application had been sent to the British side. It should be noted that the appointment of the new head of the Ukrainian diplomatic mission violated the standard procedure for the public announcement of the appointment of an ambassador, which requires first obtaining *agrément* (the official consent of the host state of the new head of mission). Zaluzhnyi has neither confirmed nor denied his appointment thus far.

Many experts, diplomats, and representatives of opposition parties (especially those close to the chairman of the European Solidarity party Petro Poroshenko) perceived the proposal to appoint Zaluzhnyi as political ostracism and an attempt to get rid of a possible political rival. According to this narrative, the authorities aim not only to limit Zaluzhnyi's presence in the media space but also to remove him from the political life of the country.

### Comments

– Valerii Zaluzhnyi has shown himself to be an effective Commander-in-Chief of the AFU and has gained a high level of popularity and trust among the Ukrainian public (reaching a confidence level of 94% in February 2024). Certain political forces, including the European Solidarity party and some Maidan-era politicians like Yuriy Lutsenko, would like to stage Zaluzhnyi's candidacy in the presidential elections, as he currently has the best chance of winning. However, Zaluzhnyi himself has not publicly expressed such ambitions.

– Volodymyr Zelensky's statement regarding Zaluzhnyi's appointment as ambassador to the United Kingdom can be seen as a kind of manipulation, dictated by the desire to eliminate a political rival. The way in which the nomination was announced indicates that the Ukrainian authorities are very keen that Zaluzhnyi does not reject the proposal. It is worth emphasising that the President's announcement was preceded by: (1) the publication of a poll by the SOCIS Centre for Social and Marketing Research, which showed that in future presidential elections, Zaluzhnyi would defeat Zelensky with 41.4% in the first round and 67.5% in the second round; and (2) rumours of possible criminal cases against the former AFU commander-in-chief. Consequently, Zaluzhnyi's appointment as ambassador can be perceived as a political decision.

– To some extent, this nomination can be seen as mutually beneficial. On the one hand, the president eliminates a political opponent, while on the other hand, Zaluzhnyi would avoid image losses related to future problems on the front and in the state. In addition, after going to London, he would not only be able to expand his international contacts and gain political experience but also remain publicly visible.

– If Zaluzhnyi becomes ambassador, he would serve within the structures of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but not at the highest levels. The Ukrainian authorities would undoubtedly try to control his statements and actions through the internal apparatus, security officers, or the military mission at the embassy. In this situation, Zaluzhnyi's entourage would face the task of protecting him as a politician and ensuring his presence in the Ukrainian media space. Another potential threat is the possibility of provocations by the Russian 'fifth column' in London, which could endanger the personal security of Zaluzhnyi and his family. Currently, the Ukrainian embassy does not have the capacity to provide effective security for the ambassador in the host country.

– However, it is likely that Valerii Zaluzhnyi will refuse the appointment. This, in turn, could increase the political turbulence in the country as a result of the escalating parliamentary crisis and the fact that incumbent President Volodymyr Zelensky's five-year term expires in May 2024.