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Veterans in Ukrainian politics – what's next for Valerii Zaluzhnyi?

Amidst the prolonged war, growing corruption scandals, and declining trust in traditional elites, the military and veterans have gained significant social capital. General Valerii Zaluzhnyi's dismissal and "exile" to the UK have not weakened his position—on the contrary, they have strengthened his image as an independent leader, remaining outside the current party fray. Polls indicate he could pose a real threat to the incumbent president, although he himself maintains caution and distance from politics. Zaluzhnyi's case is part of a broader phenomenon of the growing role of veterans, who—despite the lack of unified representation—may become a key actor or target of political competition in 2026.

The crisis of power and the Zaluzhnyi's phenomenon. Ukrainian politics has recently undergone numerous significant personnel changes. These changes were forced, in part, by growing criticism of the political camp centered around Volodymyr Zelenskyy, which has been in power for over six years. This internal criticism was accompanied by external pressure, which intensified as corruption scandals were revealed. The Ukrainian authorities are criticized for halting the process of state decentralization and for the de facto recentralization of power, largely serving the interests of a single political group, and often also for personal power games. The majority of Ukrainians (as indicated by all public opinion polls) accuse the political elite of corruption and generally distrust the entire political class, both the ruling party and the opposition – a situation that has remained unchanged since 1991.

In the numerous and increasingly frequent speculations regarding the possible holding of elections, the name Valerii Zaluzhnyi regularly appears. The general's case is a significant element of the broader picture of Ukrainian politics. It has exposed, among other things, the growing role of the Office of the President, especially after 2022, and the accompanying abuses. Ultimately, these allegations led to the dismissal of the most controversial figure, Andriy Yermak, head of the Office, widely considered the president's right-hand man, or even the person holding the actual power in the country. Yermak was known for his tendency to consolidate power in the hands of the presidential center and for his actions against any perceived or actual rivals.

Support for Zaluzhnyi. In this context, the dismissal of the "Iron General" from his position as Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in February 2024, when he was the most popular figure in the country, and his subsequent "exile" to the position of ambassador to the United Kingdom, was widely perceived as a purely political and ambitious move by Zelenskyy's team, who also suspected Zaluzhnyi of political motivations and ambitions (["IEŚ Commentaries", No. 1083](#)). Indeed, according to March 2024 polls, a potential presidential election would end with a decisive victory for Valerii Zaluzhnyi. Currently, the general still enjoys the highest public trust. Although this level of trust varies depending on the methodology of individual polling centres, Valerii Zaluzhnyi is the undisputed leader¹. General Kyrylo Budanov usually comes second, and President Zelenskyy comes in third. No Ukrainian politician can compete with these three figures – the level of public trust in politicians rarely reaches the low 10s (while Zaluzhnyi's is typically 70-80%).

Similarly, if parliamentary elections were to be held, according to September 2025 polls, Valerii Zaluzhnyi's hypothetical "party" would win the most votes (approximately 30%), followed by Volodymyr Zelenskyy's "party" (approximately 20%), then only Petro Poroshenko's "European Solidarity" and the "parties" of Kyrylo Budanov and

¹ The data in the text come from research by the Rating Sociological Group and the SOCIS Centre for Social and Market Research.

Andriy Biletsky. In February 2026, following high-profile corruption scandals and personnel reshuffles at the top of the government, support for Zaluzhnyi, Budanov, Poroshenko, and Dmytro Razumkov increased, while support for Zelenskyy decreased.

If presidential elections were held in early 2026, Biletsky, Razumkov, and Budanov could expect to receive 5-7% of the vote (slightly less than Poroshenko), and a third of voters would vote for Zelenskyy, which would give him victory in the first round over second-place Zaluzhnyi. However, in the second round, the general would decisively defeat the incumbent president. Furthermore, polls indicate that Zelenskyy would not be certain of victory even if Budanov were his opponent in the second round.

Zaluzhnyi's advantages. Starting in February 2025 and the assumption of power in the United States by Donald Trump, speculations began in Ukraine regarding future elections, the balance of political forces, the chances of individual candidates, the format and date of possible elections, etc. For a few months, these discussions gave way to personnel and corruption turmoil, and then returned at the beginning of 2026 – a draft electoral law is to be prepared by the end of February and then presented to the Verkhovna Rada. While Kyiv is dealing with its own issues, the situation in the army and on the front remains very difficult after four years of war. Soldiers, journalists, and volunteers are raising alarms, reporting systemic problems within the army, such as recruitment and mobilization chaos, incompetent leadership, desertions, corruption, "creative reporting," and extreme mental and physical exhaustion among soldiers on the front. At the same time, the current commander-in-chief, General Aleksandr Syrsky, and his entourage are widely criticized within the army for numerous issues, including favouring special forces or even individual units, which negatively impacts both morale and the operations of the armed forces.

This works to Zaluzhnyi's political advantage. Relieving him of his command at the peak of his popularity and sending him to Great Britain not only didn't push him into the shadows or deprive him of public trust, but on the contrary, ultimately provided him with political capital that probably no one else in Ukraine currently possesses.

Zaluzhnyi's caution. The general himself, having been "in exile" for over a year and a half, remains reserved when it comes to any political activity. Formally, while still in active diplomatic service, he cannot engage in such activities. He consistently emphasizes that he remains outside the political arena and any political arrangements, and that elections cannot be held during wartime—and that he will not run in them (until the war ends). However, he remains a figure of public interest—and now not only in Ukrainian opinion (which is also due to his aura of war heroism). He associates primarily with military personnel and avoids any statements that could be construed as political declarations. His infrequent public statements usually concern purely military matters – however, they usually appear in large, influential media outlets, often with international reach, further strengthening his authority and increasing his visibility. He also gave extensive interviews to international media while commanding the Armed Forces – this type of media visibility was one of the reasons for the President's reluctance. Currently, despite his reserve and caution, his statements also include political themes and assessments: he discusses the failure of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in 2023, the causes of the war, the mistakes Ukraine has made since the 1990s, with its multi-vector policy at the forefront, and so on. According to numerous speculations, he is visited in London by numerous politicians, not just Ukrainian ones – Andriy Yermak and Petro Poroshenko have been mentioned, among others. At the same time, many figures in the Ukrainian ruling elite have disavowed any ties to Zaluzhnyi, likely out of fear of offending Zelenskyy's circle. The general has also been repeatedly attacked and discredited in media outlets associated with that circle.

It remains an open question whether Valerii Zaluzhnyi will become a politician. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly expected that various groups will try to exploit the general's popularity for their own political purposes (["IES Commentaries", No. 1084](#)).

The political future of veterans. Both active military personnel and veterans enjoy considerable trust and respect in Ukrainian society, which further contrasts with the typical distrust of elites and political parties in Ukraine. Veterans are also socially and politically active (this has been evident since 2014). For example, these groups initiated protests against the government's attempts to limit the competences and independence

of anti-corruption bodies in 2025. However, this popularity and trust are also a result of dissatisfaction with the current government. Zelenskyy and his "Servant of the People" won the 2019 elections in the same way, capitalizing on public disillusionment with the Ukrainian government at the time. This pattern has been repeated many times. Moreover, trust in veterans doesn't necessarily translate into real electoral support. While it's true that, amid the war in Donbas, numerous military personnel became members of parliament after the 2014 elections (Dmytro Yarosh, Semen Semenchenko), they either played virtually no role or ultimately became figures as problematic as they were controversial (Nadiya Savchenko). Currently, the number of veterans is incomparably greater (around a million), and some of them undoubtedly have political ambitions. However, they don't form any cohesive political force (perhaps with the exception of the National Corps, based on the "Azov") with crystallized views. Instead of being subjects, veterans may become objects of political infighting.

Conclusions. Despite the ongoing war, the political struggle in Ukraine is intensifying. However, unlike in previous years, society is not remaining passive. This is largely due to veterans, who enjoy considerable public trust. General Valerii Zaluzhnyi is a prime example. Trust and popularity, however, do not necessarily translate into electoral success, especially since veterans do not constitute a unified political force, and Zaluzhnyi himself has, for now, adopted a rather reserved stance. This may stem from uncertainty about how the war will end and how the Ukrainian political scene will shape itself in these unpredictable circumstances. Many variables determine whether and what role the military and veterans will play. In a positive scenario, they, like Zaluzhnyi himself, could contribute to stabilizing Ukraine; in a negative scenario, they could lead the country towards authoritarianism. They will undoubtedly be used instrumentally by all political forces, as they constitute a significant portion of the electorate. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, in turn, has political capital that poses a real threat to Volodymyr Zelenskyy – which means a very difficult political year for Ukraine in 2026.