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Ukraine: the price of centralisation of power

The reshuffle of Ukraine's government in July 2026 proved to be much more than a personnel change. The dismissal of Defense Minister Mykhailo Fedorov triggered the largest political crisis since the beginning of the full-scale war, revealing the growing tensions between state efficiency and the logic of concentrating power in the presidential center. These events could have significant consequences for both Ukraine's internal stability and its political prospects.

Government reshuffle. On July 12, 2026, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced a complete overhaul of the Cabinet of Ministers. Despite earlier rumours of possible changes, the pace and scope of the changes surprised both observers and parliament (formally responsible for dismissing and appointing the government). The official reason for the reshuffle was a "change in Ukraine's political strategy," while unofficially, the president was said to be dissatisfied with the government's performance. This wasn't the first such decision by Zelensky—he has repeatedly made personnel changes to "refresh" the government and improve its (and his own) image—the current prime minister is his fifth since 2019. What is important, the previous prime minister, Yulia Svyrydenko, was also associated with Andriy Yermak, head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, who was dismissed in November 2025 due to corruption charges.

On July 16, 2026, the Verkhovna Rada approved a new prime minister and 16 ministers. Eight names previously unaffiliated with the government were added, and also its structure was reorganized. The government is headed now by Serhiy Koretsky, an entrepreneur and manager previously little involved in public affairs, and CEO of Naftogaz, Ukraine's largest fuel and energy company. He had previously successfully managed other giants, such as Ukrnafta (formerly owned by oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky) and Ukratnafta.

However, the posts of Minister of Defense and Minister of Foreign Affairs have not been filled (they are appointed separately by the president with parliamentary consent). On July 17, General Yevhen Khmara, previously head of the Security Service of Ukraine (although formally the Ministry of National Defense should be headed by a civilian), was appointed Acting Minister of Defense, while Andriy Sybiha, who previously held that position, was appointed Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs. In practice, these posts will officially remain vacant for at least a month, as the Verkhovna Rada is on summer break until August 18. By carrying out this, yet another government reorganization, President Zelensky has triggered the largest political crisis in Ukraine after 2022. The reason was the dismissal of Mykhailo Fedorov, after only six months as Minister of National Defense.

Controversy surrounds the dismissal of Mykhailo Fedorov. In Ukrainian public opinion, the government reshuffle was seen as a pretext for the Presidential Office to dismiss the Minister of National Defense, the most important government official responsible for the country's war effort. The official reason for Fedorov's dismissal was alleged to be delays and shortcomings in the mobilization process. However, it was known that a conflict had been brewing for months between Minister Fedorov and the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, General Oleksandr Syrsky, his Chief of Staff, General Andriy Hnatov, and the military and ministerial 'old school' establishment.

Mykhailo Fedorov, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Digital Affairs from 2019 to February 2026, made enormous contributions, first to Ukraine's digital transformation (["IEŚ Commentaries", No. 1180](#)), and then, even before he became Minister of National Defense, to Ukraine's success in the asymmetric, high-tech fight against Russian aggression. He created opportunities for the development of technology and a defense industry (private and decentralized, more effective than the state-owned behemoth Ukroboronprom, as demonstrated by, for example, the "Drones Army" program and the Bravel platform).

His team implemented effective management models and numerous systems supporting the armed forces, including those based on innovative AI technologies (the Delta battlefield management system). Fedorov decentralized and optimized part of the military's supply chain (promoting truly effective units through a "points" system), contributing to reducing human losses and halting Russian advances. He initiated the UNITED24 platform, enabling donor contributions to the Ukrainian army. His ambition was to transform the Ukrainian Armed Forces into the world's first fully digitalized and robotic army. Thanks to him, Ukraine is cooperating with Palantir and can use the Starlink system – while Russia has been cut off from it. It is also thanks to Fedorov's team that Ukraine is able to strike targets deep within Russia, and its negotiating position and international image have been significantly strengthened (["IEŚ Commentaries", No. 1647](#)).

Furthermore, Fedorov led extensive efforts to eliminate corruption schemes in both the military and industry, striving for transparency and efficiency. After taking over the Ministry of National Defense, he ordered an audit, exposing himself to various groups, both civilian and military, implicated in corruption.

Mykhailo Fedorov has become not only a symbol of Ukraine's young generation (he is 35 years old), but also a symbol of change, modernity, and innovation, which both soldiers and society pinned on hopes of repelling Russian aggression. As reports of the conflict between Fedorov and Syrsky became increasingly widespread in recent months, and President Zelensky declared that dialogue between the army and the Ministry of National Defense was a priority, it was not expected that the president would decide to end the conflict by dismissing not Syrsky but the Minister of National Defense. Although Fedorov had been closely associated with the presidential ruling camp and loyal to Zelensky since 2019, his dismissal was criticized even by opposition politicians.

Moreover, the Ukrainian army was rocked this year by numerous scandals and affairs. In the "shock regiments" created at General Syrsky's initiative, soldiers were mistreated and abused, and consequently, suicides occurred. Also, media reports indicated that military units were being ordered to post online content praising and supporting General Syrsky. Public discontent grew, and the commander-in-chief and his entourage were accused of "Sovietism," corruption, and an anachronistic approach to warfare. But, Zelensky's response to this conflict was to fire Minister Fedorov, not Syrsky.

Thus, the issue took on a broader significance for Ukrainians, beginning to be perceived not only in generational terms (domineering vs. openness) and management style, but also as a symbolic victory of archaic and corrupt patterns over innovation, development, and effectiveness. Fedorov himself, previously reticent about publicizing his conflict with the army command, after his resignation, harshly exposed the situation in the ministry and the army, which further affected public sentiment.

Protests. Fedorov's dismissal resulted in a wave of public protests that swept through more than a dozen of Ukraine's largest cities. Since the Russian invasion in 2022, these were the largest public demonstrations, gathering approximately 5,000 people in Kyiv on July 17 and 18, despite the threat of Russian attacks. Protest organizers demanded Syrsky's removal and Fedorov's immediate reinstatement. These demands were supported by the media, social organizations, veterans, politicians (including opposition figures, as mentioned), and soldiers. In the case of the latter, pressure from their superiors to cease supporting the protests has backfired.

Speculation regarding a possible presidential election is intensifying again. The relatively stable situation on the front and European support for Kyiv are supposed to encourage Zelensky to hold the elections and secure his victory, among other things, by eliminating potential rivals, such as popular figures like Mykhailo Fedorov.¹ However, the scale of the protests and the wave of criticism are currently prompting the president to take steps to calm public sentiment, hence the ongoing talks with the dismissed minister about his return to power. Finally, on July 21, General Syrsky was dismissed from his position and replaced by General Mykhailo Drapaty, a 43-year-old representative of the younger generation of officers, who is popular among the soldiers.

¹ Similarly, as happened with the very popular General Valery Zaluzhny, who was "exiled" as ambassador to Great Britain, see ["IEŚ Commentaries", No. 1528](#).



Conclusions. In the fifth year of war, with parliament and government marginalized and judicial institutions weakened, the presidential centre is increasingly gaining power. The media and grassroots social reactions remain the only checks and balances – yet this demonstrates political instability and a democratic deficit. This model of state governance is essentially crisis management and ad hoc, lacking a strategic perspective.

President Zelensky makes decisions based on his own short-term political interests, which often backfires. He provokes crises, which he then has to resolve – so far, he's been quite effective, trying to calm the situation (attempting to de-escalate historical tensions in relations with Poland, negotiations with Fedorov on further cooperation) or reversing controversial decisions (e.g., the summer of 2025 decision to limit the powers of anti-corruption institutions). However, this remains crisis management, ad hoc "firefighting," or political maneuvering. Externally, this negatively impacts Ukraine's image, and internally, it contributes to a decline in public trust in the state and the government.

General Syrsky's dismissal likely won't improve the president's ratings—or if it does, it will be for the short time only. Ukrainian society recognizes that Zelensky doesn't hesitate to remove individuals (including "his own" members of his own camp) who become popular and recognizable enough to pose a potential political threat to him, while simultaneously accepting incompetence and corruption among those who pose no threat. Furthermore, in his personnel decisions, he favours technocrats without political backing—they're easy to get rid of. Therefore, Fedorov's dismissal wasn't the cause of the protests, but rather their trigger and catalyst, as the problem is much broader.

Through his actions, President Zelensky is essentially creating rivals for himself, and these are forces to be reckoned with, including those widely supported by veterans and soldiers (Zaluzhny, Fedorov). The case of Mykhailo Fedorov confirms this: from an apolitical technocrat, functioning effectively but in the shadows, he has become a recognizable and highly popular political figure.

The feasibility of holding elections depends on many factors: the distribution of political power, fluctuating trust and support for various potential candidates (and the candidates themselves), the course of military operations, international relations, and finally, organizational and legal issues – Ukraine is legally and institutionally unprepared for elections and likely won't be for a long time. From Zelensky's perspective, the decision to hold elections will also depend on a calculation of the political configuration and the potential – he won't hold elections if he expects to lose – which means there will likely be no elections this year.