

UKRAINE: Growing military challenges test public and political unity

- Public resilience is gradually eroding and will be further tested by unpopular mobilization plans, uncertainty about external military assistance and the worsening situation on the frontlines.
- Unless military support from the US is renewed in the near term, Russia's military advantage will grow and might result in new territorial advances.
- Zelensky's dismissal of the army chief will likely prove an unpopular move, which is expected to lower morale within the country and broadcast internal divisions to Kyiv's allies abroad.

On 7 February, parliament approved in the first reading an updated mobilization bill. This is part of the broader overhaul of the legal framework aimed to address challenges around the conscription of military personnel. Among other things, the draft bill lowers the conscription age from 27 to 25, allows sending summons both by regular mail and electronically and introduces restrictive measures, including a ban on leaving the country and a freeze of assets and bank accounts, for evaders. The new bill will also affect Ukrainian conscripts or reservists abroad, who might be denied most consular services without military registration documents.

The draft bill will likely see multiple amendments ahead the second reading vote scheduled for 21 February. The new mobilization framework is expected to be adopted by parliament and signed by the president by early March, coming into effect in April. Newly mobilized recruits will have to undergo a two-to-three months long training, meaning that a boost in troop numbers can be expected only in H2.

In the meantime, Ukrainian forces find it increasingly challenging to defend amid alarming shortages of artillery munitions and other equipment. The city of Avdiivka in the Donetsk region appears to be the most vulnerable point and Ukrainian forces might be forced to withdraw in the near future. This would give Russian President Vladimir Putin a rare victory ahead of the presidential vote scheduled for 15-17 March. While the loss of Avdiivka would not be a major strategic setback for Ukraine, it would signal a more concerning trend – Russia's growing military advantage, which is likely to expand unless US military assistance is renewed in the near term.

A test of public resilience...

Potential new territorial losses, combined with protracted uncertainty about external military assistance and unpopular mobilization plans at home, will test the country's public resilience. Opinion surveys already indicate that pessimism is creeping in: the share of residents assessing that the country is moving in the right direction decreased from 68% in May 2022 to 54% in December 2023. During the same period, the proportion of Ukrainians willing to consider territorial concessions to achieve peace with Russia nearly doubled to 19%. However, public opinion on whether to continue fighting or seek a negotiated settlement depends on the extent of external military and macro financial support. If such support is significantly reduced, a much lower share of the population (58%) would prefer a continuation of military actions, while 32% would opt for a cessation of hostilities if unoccupied parts of Ukraine are provided with serious security guarantees from the West.

President Zelensky is known to be responsive to public opinion. If these trends persist, his administration might be more willing, or even forced, to explore the possibility of negotiations. However, as [previously noted](#), talks with Moscow would not necessarily lead to a ceasefire, nor would they prevent future Russian aggression. Moreover, Kyiv would negotiate from a position of weakness, which implies painful concessions for any agreement.

...and political unity

The replacement of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces Valery Zaluzhnyi with the commander of the ground forces Oleksandr Syrskyi will likely turn out to be an unpopular decision by Zelensky. Zaluzhnyi was a trusted and respected military leader among the general public, within the military, and in Western capitals. Zaluzhnyi's dismissal is widely perceived as an attempt by Zelensky to sideline a potential political competitor. This suggests a prioritization of his own political goals over the country's wider interests at this difficult phase of the war.

The new army chief Syrskyi is viewed as loyal to Zelensky but has a mixed military track record and reputation. Zaluzhnyi was trusted by 92% of the population in December, while Syrskyi's trust rating was at 32%. Having undergone military education still in the Soviet Union, he is seen as a proponent of more traditional military approaches, which stands at odds with Zelensky's rhetoric of renewal and adaptation in 2024. While protests over the reshuffle appear unlikely, the move could lower morale within the military.

From the perspective of Kyiv's international allies, the questionable replacement of the military leader, along with Zelensky's hints at a wider political reshuffle, broadcasts a message of divisions and competition at the highest levels. This comes on top of concerns about corruption and Zelensky's attempts to consolidate power over various institutions and the media. These optics will not help Kyiv at a time when its key allies are already struggling to find consensus on continued assistance for Ukraine.

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Andrius Tursa

Central & Eastern Europe
Advisor
+370 6792 4910
andrius.tursa@teneo.com

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