

Volodymyr Zelensky Is in a Sea of Troubles

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is facing two troubles on the foreign front that have received a lot of media attention.

The first is that his country is actually receiving much less media attention. For the past month, international attention has been drawn away from his war to another.

The second is that he is confronting growing resistance in the U.S. House of Representatives. President Joe Biden's plan to tie aid to Ukraine and aid to Israel together is both a tactical maneuver to ensure continued congressional support for Ukraine and an admission that that support can no longer be taken for granted.

But the fact is that Zelensky is facing a sea of troubles, not only from foreign shores, but from domestic ones as well. That sea change comes from his inner circle, from the citizens of Ukraine, and from the battlefield.

A small number of current and former members of Zelensky's inner circle have gone public with concerning criticisms of the president.

Time magazine [reports](#) that in the face of "setbacks on the battlefield"—an understatement for the disastrous counteroffensive—Zelensky's "belief in Ukraine's ultimate victory over Russia has hardened into a form that worries some of his advisers," saying, concerning, that it "verg[es] on the messianic."

One of Zelensky's "closest aides" said that Zelensky "deludes himself." The aide complained, "We're out of options. We're not winning. But try telling him that."

Zelensky's ossified position "some of his aides say," has hurt his administration's ability to be flexible and adapt their strategy to the changing reality. For Zelensky, negotiating a diplomatic settlement with Russia remains "taboo."

Cognizant that the lifeline of weapons from the political West could dry up over time, Zelensky has “ramped up production of drones and missiles,” as if Ukraine could stand up to Russia on their own without the United States and its partners. All this while Zelensky simultaneously admits that without U.S. aid, “we will lose.” He recently [insisted](#) that the Ukrainian armed forces move 500 meters to a kilometer forward every day in defiance of battlefield reality.

In a second story that received less attention, former Minister of Internal Affairs and ex-Prosecutor General of Ukraine Yuriy Lutsenko [told](#) Germany’s *Die Welt* that, despite being a “successful president” and a brilliant campaigner, no one talks about the reality that in the supposedly democratic Ukraine, “Zelensky rules as a sole decision-making autocrat” who “makes decisions alone.”

Lutsenko says that “freedom of speech and freedom of the press are very seriously limited.” He says that censorship applies, not only to matters of defense and security, but to “political debates...Many voices are simply not allowed to be heard on television screens.”

Zelensky may also be facing weakening popular support for the first time. A recent USAID funded [poll](#) conducted by the International Republican Institute found that 42% of Ukrainians strongly approve of Zelensky compared to 58% in April.

And bad news is coming not just from his inner political circle and from popularity polls, but from conflict with his generals.

Zelensky’s aides told *Time* that, before winter, there would be “major changes in military strategy” and that at least one “senior general in charge of the counteroffensive” would be fired. Zelensky is [reportedly](#) in conflict with his generals, including his top general, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, over demands to defend Bakhmut and Avdiivka at all cost. Military leadership sees the defense of these towns as a strategic mistake that will devour soldiers, artillery, and equipment.

A close Zelensky aide told *Time*,

“Some front-line commanders have begun refusing orders to advance, even when they came directly from the office of the President.” A senior military officer defended the front-line commanders, saying they have no choice since “orders from the top” are, at times, disconnected from the battlefield reality. In October, Zelensky demanded the capture of the city of Horlivka. The field commanders asked, “With what?” They objected that “they don’t have the men or the weapons.”

And that is the fourth wave of troubles for Zelensky. The war is not going well. It is not just that the counteroffensive—in which everything was placed—has failed, but that Ukraine may now be facing a Russian counteroffensive. The Russian strategy of fighting from the defensive and devouring troops and equipment has left a depleted Ukrainian armed forces vulnerable to a Russian counteroffensive. That counteroffensive may have already begun.

Russia is now gradually gaining ground on many fronts; none more important than the town of Avdiivka, a massively fortified town just north of Donetsk City that Ukraine has defended since 2014. There are reports that the loss of Avdiivka to Russian forces may be imminent. It is now confirmed, including with reluctant acknowledgment from Ukraine, that Russia has solidly captured an elevated piece of land called the Slag Heap, a strategically important

position that grants Russia artillery control over the town and Ukraine's main supply route.

As in Bakhmut before, Ukraine is now suffering staggering losses in Avdiivka. Against his generals' advice, Zelensky is going all in in its defense, even redeploying troops from the southern front to Avdiivka, weakening Ukraine's counteroffensive elsewhere. This commitment has led some analysts to conclude that Avdiivka could be the pivotal and defining battle of the war. If Russia succeeds in taking it, they say, it could be the beginning of the end of the war.

The capture of Avdiivka could cause the collapse of a thirty mile line of the front. The entire Donbass front could "shatter like glass," allowing Russian forces to advance further into Donetsk and firm up its borders of the annexed territory.

The war has turned so severely against Ukraine, and the losses have been so great, that a close Zelensky aide told *Time* that even if the United States gave Ukraine all the weapons it needed, they "don't have the men to use them."

The loss of life has been matched by the loss of equipment. *Forbes* [reports](#) that Ukraine has lost six Leopard tanks in just the past week. They had already lost at least six before that, accounting for, according to *Forbes*, a fifth of the Leopards they were given. The past few days have also seen a massive loss of aircraft. On October 25, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu said that Russia had shot down twenty-four aircraft in the past five days alone. Military analyst Stephen Bryen [says](#) that unconfirmed reports from Russia are that Russia shot down twenty fourth generation MiG-29 jet interceptors in October.

While the world is looking away from Ukraine, Zelensky is facing criticism and drawbacks from all angles at what may be the most decisive moment of the war.

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Featured image: VILNIUS, LITHUANIA. 11th July 2023. Volodymyr Zelensky (Source: TLI)

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