

The Streets Are Asking Questions the Leaders Cannot Answer in Ukraine

written by Adam Novak | July 30, 2026



Protest of government's military decisions in Ukraine

For the second consecutive day, Ukrainians are on the streets — in Kyiv, Lviv, Rivne, Odesa, Dnipro, Poltava, Mykolaiv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ternopil, Zaporizhzhia, Kropyvnytskyi, Cherkasy, and in the diaspora. On 14 July, Ukraine's parliament voted to dismiss the entire government of Prime Minister Yuliia Svyrydenko. Among those who went with it was Mykhailo Fedorov — until January 2026 Ukraine's Minister of Digital Transformation, then its Defence Minister, and in both roles the principal architect of Ukraine's drone strategy. When the Koretskyy government was confirmed on 16 July, President Zelensky submitted no candidates for the posts of Defence Minister or Foreign Affairs Minister. Yevhenii Khmara, head of the Security Service (SBU), was named acting Defence Minister. It was that appointment — a security services figure placed at the head of a ministry Fedorov had been reforming around drone technology and distributed warfare — and what it revealed about the direction of military policy, that brought people into the streets. [1] The demands being raised go considerably further than any one government position.

In Zaporizhzhia, protesters re-enacted the famous Repin painting of Zaporizhzhian Cossacks writing a defiant letter to a foreign ruler, then drafted their own open letter to Zelensky: reinstate Fedorov, dismiss Syrskyi. In Ivano-Frankivsk, the placards read: "Fedorov is Defence Minister!", "Syrskyi, out!", "The government is the people!" In Lviv, demands included a full independent audit of the Commander-in-Chief's activities and the restoration of parliament's role in forming the government. In Rivne: fight corruption.

As Oksana Kozlova of the European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine (ENSU, Belgium) puts it: "I would dare to say that they are standing up not so much in support of Fedorov, and even not that much against Syrskyi. They are protesting against an army with 'Skelia', post-Soviet-style generals such as the 155th Brigade former commander, the criminal 'negligence' in Vyshneve, the old guard

apparatchiki enriching themselves through arms procurement, the absence of transparent digitalised reporting on military budget use, mobilisation squads that resemble mafia gangs, the persecution of independent media.” [2]

This is not a protest *for* a minister. It is a protest *against* a system.

The cardboard sign has become the symbol of Ukrainian wartime civic life — low-threshold, undeniable, effective. It appeared in July 2025 when the government tried to dismantle the independence of the anti-corruption agencies NABU (National Anti-Corruption Bureau) and SAPO (Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor’s Office), and parliament was forced to reverse course within nine days. [3] The cardboard sign is back now, in greater numbers and with a longer list of demands.

Two days before Fedorov’s dismissal, activists from Sotsialnyi Rukh (Social Movement), the Pryama Diya (Direct Action) student union and the Pasyazhery Kyiva (Kyiv Passengers) civic group were already outside city hall protesting a near-fourfold rise in public transport fares. [4]

Families of soldiers have been on the streets since October 2023 demanding defined demobilisation terms and rotation after eighteen months of service. [5]

Each wave has been distinct. Each has forced a retreat or a concession.

A crisis with a military logic

The confrontation that produced Fedorov’s dismissal did not begin with the cabinet reshuffle. It began with a Telegram post. [6] On 10 July, Oleksandr Syrskyi — Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces since February 2024 — published a text on Telegram claiming the situation was “far from a turning point in the war” and warning against underestimating the adversary. Nobody disputes the second point. But the first — the denial that anything has fundamentally shifted — is simply false.

Since the summer of 2025, Ukrainian drones have destroyed a significant share of Russia’s refinery and hydrocarbon export capacity, striking targets deep into Russian territory. Russian advances at the front have slowed and, in several sectors, reversed. The Crimean peninsula is increasingly isolated. Putin’s demonstration of fear at the 9 May 2026 parade has become a political fact that the Russian ruler cannot undo. Ukraine’s 40-day operation, announced by Zelensky on 25 June, combines targeted strikes in Russian territory, front pressure and the continuing isolation of Crimea. Zelensky chose Syrskyi over Fedorov. The streets have responded.

The connection is not accidental. As French APLUTSOC and ENSU member Vincent Pr  sumey writes, citing the journal *Diplomatie*: drone warfare requires “a disseminated, not centralised, and democratic, cooperative framework” — the opposite of what Syrskyi represents. The revolution in drone, AI and robotics technology, which has been accumulating since the mass uprising of February 2022, crossed a qualitative threshold at roughly the same moment as the July 2025 cardboard revolution — as Pr  sumey insists, “in no way a coincidence.” Democratic civic mobilisation and distributed technological warfare share a structural logic. Both require initiative from below. Both are weakened by the apparatus of centralised command.

This also explains what is at stake economically. As Jean Batou and I recently argued, the Western arms industry covets Ukraine’s drone expertise “exactly as they would a deposit of qualified labour or rare earths.” [7] The push for centralised procurement and large defence contractors serves not only Syrskyi’s military doctrine but the strategic interests of western firms like Rheinmetall. The two logics — authoritarian military command and oligarchic capture of the defence economy — reinforce each other.

The political consequences of that reinforcement are already visible in the streets. By the second day of protests in Kyiv, a far-right current had appeared within the broader movement. Placards named Andrii Biletskyy — founder of Azov, member of Tryzub (the Bandera organisation), commander of the 3rd Army Corps, and leader of the National Corps party — as the preferred Commander-in-Chief. “Syrskyy is Soviet-era deadweight. Fedorov is digital. Biletskyy is results.” “Fedorov makes deep strikes. Biletskyy holds the front.” [8] These slogans do not represent the protest as a whole, but they document an organised far-right presence attempting to hegemonise a crisis that began elsewhere.

The question of who replaces Syrskyy, on what criteria, chosen by whom, is not a secondary personnel matter. It is the political content of the crisis. The left might not yet be contesting the question of military command, but the far right is stepping in with an answer of its own.

The demands that could win

The protests are already raising demands that go beyond personalities. In Lviv, protesters called for the restoration of parliament’s role in forming the government. In Rivne, the demand was to fight corruption. These connect directly to the programme that Sotsialnyi Rukh and the Pryama Diya student union formulated during the July 2025 anti-corruption protests: “We demand the abolition of everything that allows those close to power to steal with impunity, both at the rear and at the front” — an independent anti-corruption investigation, real labour inspection, comprehensive social protection financed by taxation of the rich, financial transparency in times of war, “a fair state, not a state for corporations.” [9] The cardboard sign connects July 2025 to July 2026. The same forces are on the street. The demands have deepened.

The street protests reflect majority feeling that Syrskyy should be dismissed and his conduct investigated. Fedorov himself said at his 16 July press conference that Ukraine cannot “win asymmetrically, with minimum losses” under the current command structure, and called for replacing both Syrskyy and the Chief of the General Staff. [10] He is right. The same hierarchical doctrine that drove Syrskyy to suppress Fedorov’s initiatives produced the failures that soldiers have been publicly documenting for two years. Under Syrskyy, the 36-month service rotation limit was stripped from the mobilisation law before its April 2024 passage. Mobilisation has operated through methods — street round-ups, coercion, the suppression of complaints — that corrode the democratic culture on which Ukrainian resistance depends. Soldiers from the 125th Brigade’s repair battalion — drone repairers, welders, excavator operators — were sent to assault positions with no relevant training; two died. Their collective statement was not a refusal to fight: it was an indictment of command decisions that wasted specialised capacity and killed people unnecessarily. Soldiers of the 48th Separate Assault Battalion publicly opposed their commander’s replacement at a critical combat moment. Patrick Le Tréhondat, translator and ENSU solidarity activist, who brought the 125th Brigade case to international attention, was correct: “Protests within the ranks of the Ukrainian army are not signs of weakness but indices of strength.” [11] Public challenges to military hierarchy that would result in summary punishment in Russia’s armed forces are, in Ukraine, expressions of the democratic vitality that distinguishes this resistance.

Many feel that Fedorov should be reinstated — not as a personality beyond criticism, but because what his ministry was building must not be defeated by the right and far right. He championed the asymmetric strategy Ukraine needs. An audit of 7.2 billion dollars in defence overpayments was under way on his watch. His neoliberal failings are real, and Sotsialnyi Rukh has documented them consistently — most recently on the Labour Code his government was simultaneously advancing. [12] A critique of his record must be paired with concrete proposals for organising the defence economy in a democratic, cooperative way rather than through Silicon Valley entrepreneurship, deals with the western arms industry and untransparent oligarchic procurement. State coordination, transparency, worker representation, taxation of super-profits: these are the

conditions for an efficient defence sector that serves society.

The soldiers fighting this war have not waited for civilians to articulate their demands. They have been building their own. Veteranka — Ukraine's first organisation of women veterans, now with over 3,000 members — spent years filling a gap the state refused to fill: producing free women's uniform sets because the Ministry of Defence issued none until February 2024. Their legislative work has been equally concrete. Their campaign for Bill 13037, adopted by the Verkhovna Rada on 25 February 2026 with 276 deputies voting unanimously on Ukrainian Women's Day, obliges commanders to investigate every case of discrimination and violence in the armed forces and formally defines sexual harassment as a disciplinary offence requiring emergency response within fifteen minutes. Their head Kateryna Pryimak states plainly what underlies all of this: "The army is the group in society with the fewest rights, and women in the army face the greatest restrictions." [13]

LGBT Military for Equal Rights, representing more than 700 openly serving LGBT+ personnel across 59 units, is fighting a different but structurally identical battle: the right to exist legally as the person you are while risking your life for the state. Their core demand is civil partnership rights that would allow soldiers' partners to visit them in hospital, make medical decisions, inherit property, receive military pensions and arrange funerals. The case of Maria Zaitseva illustrates what the absence of these rights costs in practice. Killed in service, her partner Anna Honcharova could only see her body because "a comrade made arrangements." When Maria received the Order of Courage posthumously, Anna was not notified — the award went to "next of kin," a legal category that did not include her. Parliament has not passed the civil partnerships bill. The Parliamentary Speaker has stated it "is not a priority." [14]

In June 2026, the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine (KVPU) announced the creation of the All-Ukrainian Union of Combatants, Military Personnel and Veterans. Mykhailo Volynets, KVPU president, described the new union's purpose: veterans and military personnel "must not only enjoy society's respect, but also have effective mechanisms to influence state policy and defend their civil rights." [15] This is the first organisational link between the labour movement and the soldiers' movement. Workers and soldiers share an interest in accountability, transparency, and protection against arbitrary power.

Taken together, Veteranka, LGBT Military, and the KVPU soldiers' union represent something the Ukrainian state has consistently failed to ensure: democratic infrastructure within the military. They are not lobbying for abstractions. They are naming specific failures, winning specific legislative changes, and building institutions to defend rights the state denies. They are doing, within the armed forces, what the left needs to do politically in these protests: not just demanding that the system change, but showing what the change looks like in practice.

The defence sector as a whole needs democratic restructuring that goes further still. Sotsialnyi Rukh's March 2025 statement "For a Ukraine Without Oligarchs and Occupiers" specifies: 50 per cent worker representation on supervisory boards of infrastructure, defence and mineral extraction enterprises; nationalisation of strategic enterprises under workers' control; progressive taxation reaching 90 per cent on top incomes; confiscation of oligarch assets for the war effort. [16] Their October 2024 conference resolution insisted that "the unwillingness to nationalize production capacities, tax large businesses, and direct the budget towards rearmament makes it possible to prolong the war at the cost of significant human losses and constant mobilization." [17]

Ukraine's domestic tax revenues currently cover only defence spending. Everything else — pensions, hospitals, schools — depends on foreign loans. This is a political choice, not an economic necessity. And it is the same choice that keeps the labour inspection toothless, the anti-corruption agencies

under threat, and the soldiers' demands unanswered.

The protests have not yet fused these threads into a single programme. As Kozlova writes, the people on the streets "will not allow an arrogant mob to treat them as cattle born to obey. Not even under the pretext of military discipline." That refusal is the foundation. But refusal alone does not decide who takes command, how the defence economy is structured, or whether the legal invisibility of women and LGBT+ soldiers outlasts the war. Sotsialnyi Rukh, Pryama Diya, Veteranka, LGBT Military and the KVPU soldiers' union already have some answers to those questions. The challenge now is to make those answers the content of the protest — before someone else fills the gap.

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Source: ESSF.

P.S.

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Attached documents

- **the-streets-are-asking-questions-the-leaders-cannot-answer_a9656-2.pdf** (PDF - 1.2 MiB)
Extraction PDF [->article9656]

Footnotes

[1] Euronews, "A crisis of his own: Zelenskyy's wartime reshuffle backfires and leads to protests", 17 July 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/07/17/a-crisis-of-his-own-zelenskyys-wartime-reshuffle-backfires-and-leads-to-protests>

[2] The 425th Separate Assault Regiment "Skelia" became a symbol of command abuse and impunity after an investigation documented systematic hazing, torture, and the despatch of ill-equipped recruits to front-line positions without training. See Adam Novak, "Ukraine's Disposable Conscripts and Unaccountable Officers", ESSF, 27 June 2026, <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article79187>

[3] Adam Novak, "The Rear Collapses: Ukraine's Anti-Corruption Demonstrators Confront Wartime Neoliberalism", ESSF, November 2025, <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article77130>

[4] Olena Tkalic, “‘Transport Is Not a Privilege!’: Kyiv Residents Protest Fare Rise”, ESSF, 14 July 2026, <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article79393>

[5] Adam Novak, “We fight, we have rights”, ESSF, November 2025, <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article77000>

[6] Vincent Pr  sumey, “Notes politico-militaires sur l  volution de la guerre imp  rialiste russe contre l’Ukraine depuis le 24 f  vrier 2022 et le moment pr  sent”, Aplutsoc, 16 July 2026, <https://aplutsoc.org/2026/07/16/notes-politico-militaires-sur-levolution-de-la-guerre-imperialiste-russe-contre-lukraine-depuis-le-24-fevrier-2022-et-le-moment-present/>

[7] Jean Batou and Adam Novak, “Europe as a Great Power is not Ukraine’s Friend”, ESSF, 30 June 2026, <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article79218>

[8] Mariya Nazarova and Yan Dobronosov, “‘Syrskoho na Biletskoho’: u Kyievi tryvayt protesty cherez vidstavku Fedorova”, Telegraf, 17 July 2026, <https://news.telegraf.com.ua/ukr/ukraina/5945587-sirskogo-na-biletskogo-u-kievi-trivayut-protesti-cherez-vidstavku-fedorova-reportazh-yana-dobronosova>; “Na protesti proty vidstavky Fedorova zvyavlysyia plakaty iz zaklykamy zaminyty Syrskoho na Biletskoho”, Gordon.ua, 18 July 2026, <https://gordonua.com/ukr/section-politics/news-na-protesti-proty-vidstavky-fedorova-zvyavlysyia-plakaty-iz-zaklykamy-zaminyty-syrskoho-na-biletskoho-18-07-2026.html>

[9] Pryama Diya (Direct Action) and Sotsialnyi Rukh (Social Movement), “Ukraine: anticorruption protests”, ESSF, 23 July 2025, <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article75706>

[10] Podrobnosti.ua, “Posada radnyka prezidenta, dohany Drapatomy, konflikt iz Henshtabom: holovne iz bryfinhdu Fedorova”, 16 July 2026, <https://podrobnosti.ua/2518090-posada-radnika-prezidenta-dogani-drapatomu-konflkt-z-genshtabom-golovne-z-brifngu-fedorova.html>

[11] Patrick Le Tr  hondat, “Qu’  on ne s’y trompe pas, la contestation dans les rangs de l’arm  e ukrainienne n’est pas un signe de faiblesse, mais un indice de sa force”, cited and discussed in Adam Novak, “Ukraine’s Disposable Conscripts and Unaccountable Officers”, ESSF, 27 June 2026, <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article79187>

[12] Sotsialnyi Rukh (Social Movement), “Ukraine’s New Labour Code: An Obstacle to the Decent Work Programme”, ESSF, 4 July 2026, <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article79274>

[13] Adam Novak, “The political economy of Ukraine’s war and the politics of a coming bad peace”, ESSF, May 2026, <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article78849>

[14] Adam Novak, “We fight, we have rights”, ESSF, November 2025, <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article77000>

[15] KVPU, "Ukraine: A soldiers' union is formed", ESSF, 10 June 2026, <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article79016>

[16] Sotsialnyi Rukh, "For a Ukraine Without Oligarchs and Occupiers", ESSF, March 2025, <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article74018>

[17] Sotsialnyi Rukh (Social Movement), "Ukraine: Conference of Sotsialnyi Rukh (Social Movement), 5-6 October 2024", ESSF, October 2024, <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article72344>