

EUROPE

Ukrainian troops join in outcry over defense chief's ouster



Protesters rally against the ouster of Ukraine's defense minister, Mykhailo Fedorov, in a public square near President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's office in Kyiv, Ukraine, on July 20, 2026. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

By [SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA](#)
STARS AND STRIPES

Published July 21, 2026 · Updated 3 minutes ago

KYIV, Ukraine — The nature of warfare has changed dramatically since a 23-year-old Ukrainian soldier who goes by the call sign Architect enlisted in Ukraine's National Guard in 2021.

Back then, before Russia's full-scale invasion the following year, combat was largely conventional, with heavy reliance on major weapons systems. Now drones and robots rule the battlefield.

“The war today is more of a technological one. The kill zone is so large that it's no longer 10 or 15 kilometers — it's now 40 and 50 kilometers,” said Architect, referring to the drone-saturated strip of territory along front lines.

Given that reality, it makes more sense to send drones into combat rather than people, he said. That view is shared by other Ukrainian service members and most prominently, by Ukraine's recently ousted defense minister Mykhailo Fedorov.

Fedorov's dismissal last week has sparked widespread protests across the country as scores of demonstrators, many of them young people, rally in support of his vision for the future of warfare.

"Let Fedorov cook!" read one sign held by a woman at a Monday night protest in a square near President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's office in central Kyiv, Ukraine's capital.

Loki, a 21-year-old soldier serving in Ukraine's National Guard, arrived at the demonstration in his fatigues and with his face covered. He credited Fedorov for successful drone strikes on supply lines into Crimea and oil depots inside Russia.

The campaigns have led to lines and rationing at gas stations in multiple regions of Russia and upended life on the Crimean Peninsula, causing power outages, fuel shortages and cancellations of popular summer camps.

"I consider this to be Fedorov's absolute achievement," Loki said. "He had a very direct and significant influence on this, which is why he is the best defense minister we've ever had."

The young, tech-minded Fedorov had championed the use of robotic systems to act as infantry, artillery and armored vehicles, saying the "speed of innovation" was key to defeating the much larger Russian military.

The same words have been used by the Pentagon as it heavily invests in a vast range of offensive and defensive drone technology to adapt to an increasingly machine-dominated battle space, including in the Iran war.



Kateryna Kosetska participates in a rally in Kyiv, Ukraine, on July 20, 2026, in support of recently ousted Ukrainian Defense Minister Mykhailo Fedorov. Fedorov is seen as an innovator of the country's successful drone technology, but clashed with the traditional military establishment. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth last month ordered the creation of a new office to oversee drone programs across the military, describing the proliferation of unmanned systems as the “most consequential battlefield innovation of this generation.”

The U.S. has been slow to field such technology at scale, he wrote in a memo, and the Defense Department “must move at the speed this moment demands.”

American military officials have said they are closely studying the war in Ukraine and incorporating Ukrainian tactics, techniques and procedures into their own planning and doctrine.

“They have fundamentally altered how humans engage in conflict,” Army Secretary Dan Driscoll said in testimony to Congress this year. “They have done an absolutely amazing job of innovating.”

That innovation has saved precious lives in a country dwarfed by its warring neighbor, Ukrainians say.

Service members who attended Monday’s protest said they want the reinstatement of Fedorov and the firing of his chief military rival, Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi. Zelenskyy has attributed Fedorov’s dismissal to tension between Fedorov and Syrskyi.

Syrskiy, the commander in chief, is known by some troops as “the butcher” due to his reputation for accepting heavy casualties. He has argued that infantry deployments continue to be needed in the trench fighting in Ukraine’s east and that drones alone cannot replace all aspects of warfare.

“We are facing an enemy that is superior in every respect, one that fights using artillery, aviation, and infantry, among other things,” Syrskiy wrote Monday in a column in the *Militarnyi* news outlet. “I cannot switch a million-strong army ‘to drones’ in two months and say, ‘Now we’re fighting this way.’ ”

Architect said he simply wants to fight without relying on old Soviet meat grinder methods, where “young men are thrown into assaults and they die simply because of one old man’s foolish ambitions.”

“We want to fight using our skills and new technologies,” he said.

Another protesting service member, a 29-year-old soldier with the call sign Mage, praised Fedorov for reforming Ukraine’s defense procurement process.

The website Brave1 allows units to buy their own weapons directly, bypassing traditional bureaucracy and established contractors.

“We procure more of what we actually need,” Mage said.



Hundreds of protesters gather in a square near Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s office in Kyiv, Ukraine, on July 20, 2026, unhappy over Zelenskyy’s firing of defense minister Mykhailo Fedorov. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

The Pentagon is working on its own reforms to cut bureaucratic red tape and fast-track acquisition from new defense technology startups. It wants to triple spending on drones in its 2027 budget to more than \$74 billion.

Oleg Rogynskyy, the chief executive officer of Uforce, a consortium of Ukrainian drone manufacturers, said the U.S. is sending an “extremely strong” signal to the defense industry with the changes.

“They have centralized all of the budgets for autonomous systems in a way that is now moving capital extremely efficiently at large scale,” he said in a recent interview with Bloomberg.

Fedorov had fostered ties with executives in Silicon Valley during his six-month tenure, eager to bring advanced technology to the Ukrainian armed forces and help implement his high-tech vision of warfare.

Architect said Fedorov’s approach to war was not only more cost-effective, but also humane.

“It’s better to fight soulless robots than living people who have hopes and who want to live,” he said.



Ukrainian soldiers take part in a rally in Kyiv, Ukraine, on July 20, 2026, in support of recently ousted Ukrainian Defense Minister Mykhailo Fedorov. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)

FEATURED ON INSTAGRAM