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# Vadym Sukharevsky, the man in charge of Ukraine's drones

Ukraine hopes its new drone command will help it regain the upper hand



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VADYM SUKHAREVSKY IS used to a seat in history's front row. Ten years ago, in April 2014, his machineguns were the first to fire in Ukraine's anti-terror operation, as the initial phase of the [armed struggle against Russia](#) was known. At the time, Ukraine's forces were under a strict "no fire" order, even as Russian proxy fighters ran amok in the eastern Ukrainian town of Slovyansk. But the then lieutenant had little hesitation when it became clear that the enemy was preparing an ambush. "See it, shoot it," he told his soldiers at the time. His fast thinking is credited with saving a dozen lives. The phrase is now embroidered on the gaming chair that swivels at his new command desk.

Freshly installed as the head of Ukraine's Unmanned Systems Forces, the first position of its kind in the world, Colonel Sukharevsky is shaping history once again. The 39-year-old commander has long stood out as a new type of military boss: a technological whizz, whose focus on electronic warfare and drones as a battalion and then brigade commander caught the attention of those at the very top. But now he must deliver across the board in the fastest-developing arena of war. He must do so against a much better resourced enemy, backed by Iran, North Korea and probably China and in a uniquely challenging environment of jamming and other electronic warfare; and with a low and uncertain budget. He believes he can do it.

His new command office in downtown Kyiv hums with the chaotic buzz of an underfunded startup. The air smells of fresh paint, coffee and shisha tobacco, to which Colonel Sukharevsky appears addicted. Wires, drone-boxes and computers lie scattered over the floor. Swords, an extensive collection of daggers, and Warhammer models, which he glues together in spare evenings, complete the eccentric image of a modern-day Cossack *hetman*. Speaking quickly, his sentences punctuated by an infectious laugh, Colonel Sukharevsky recounts how he became obsessed by the potential of unmanned systems in the Donbas in 2014. He realised that he needed eyes in the sky to help guide artillery. His actual drone war started in 2016. "Soon, I wasn't firing a single mortar without the sights of a reconnaissance drone. By 2017 we were using UAVs to drop grenades." He later observed the Russians were adopting his tactics, a pattern that persists today.

Russia's full-scale invasion marked a step change in drone warfare. "February 2022 was the start of school for everyone," says Colonel Sukharevsky. Initially it was Ukraine that got ahead, developing an army of cheap, small drones to counter Russia's overwhelming artillery and missile advantage. That has since changed. Now, enemy drones outnumber Ukrainian ones six to one. But superior tactics and innovation still keep Ukraine competitive. Ukraine tends to be first in developing and adopting new technologies, driven by a policy of diversification. Russia's advantage in mass production means it can adapt and scale up much faster. The pace of change is frenetic, with feedback loops meaning that some software is updated every few hours. By the time Russian drones reach the front lines, Ukraine has sometimes already developed counter-measures, Colonel Sukharevsky claims. "Quantitatively Russia is ahead, but qualitatively we are keeping them at parity."

Ukraine hopes its new drone command will help it regain the upper hand. Colonel Sukharevsky says Western military leaders he has spoken to since his appointment on

June 10th are impressed by the scope of his new role. "It's the most decisive change in military organisation since the creation of air forces in the beginning of the 20th century," he says. "Ukraine was the first." Yet changing strategies within the current system will be far from straightforward. Not every Ukrainian commander is ready to embrace the new vision, and much of the job will be about bringing together disparate cultures inside the army, some of them Soviet legacies. He says his organisation will take about a year to fully form.

Colonel Sukharevsky says drones will not overturn the fundamental principles of warfare. The primary role of artillery or infantry are undiminished, he says: "Military operations still depend on combined arms, and other kinds of troops will continue to be just as important." Drones will serve as a complement to traditional forces, offering better reconnaissance and more precise strike capability at a reduced risk to soldiers. The commander dismisses headlines promising "killer drone swarms" operating independent of human control. Yes, Ukraine already employs AI to optimise functionality—for example if the link between drone and pilot is lost. But the use, he says, is specialised and limited. "As a commander I will never relinquish the bulk of decision making to artificial intelligence... in the distant future we need such a decision, we'll look at it carefully. But you don't need AI to create swarms."

Colonel Sukharevsky says Ukraine's problems are far more immediate than this theoretical discussion. The world has changed: Russia has aligned itself with other tyrannies, and its drone programme is benefiting from the tie-up. Ukraine is an "outpost...standing between the civilised and authoritarian world", but is not sure what it can expect from its backers. Funding for drone innovation is insufficient. "We are fighting for our freedom, but we don't have any idea of the resources we have to get us there." He jokes that he has two predictions for the direction of drone warfare, one good and the other fairly bad. "We are the ones already in the trenches. You can't scare us. But the rest of the world? They might be in for a rude awakening." ■



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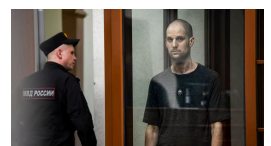

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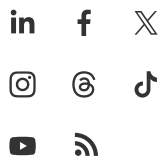
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