

## Army at a crossroads: the mobilisation and organisational crisis of the Defence Forces of Ukraine

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In early 2025, Ukraine was shaken by a scandal triggered by reports of mass desertions from the French-trained 155th Mechanised Brigade. Alarming signs of growing problems within the Defence Forces of Ukraine (DFU),<sup>1</sup> had already begun to emerge on a broader scale in the autumn of 2024. The government and military leadership avoided decisions that could have improved the situation quickly, including measures to ensure the stable expansion of the DFU. Fearing public discontent, they opted for half-measures, which failed to eliminate the entrenched dysfunctions, including corruption, afflicting the mobilisation process. Serving personnel and potential recruits are still waiting for clear guidelines on service terms and rotation procedures. The decentralisation of responsibilities, particularly the burden placed on frontline brigades to manage recruitment and supplies, has deepened the disparities between elite and other units. Troops are exhausted; tensions between soldiers and their superiors, both within individual units and between frontline troops and the central command in Kyiv, are increasingly spilling into public view. Adding to the government's difficulties is the evolving international environment: the US administration has begun talks with Russia on terms for ending the war. This is likely to fuel defeatist sentiment among the population, potentially undermining mobilisation efforts.

### Army strength: a clash between requirements and capabilities

In the first months of the war, the DFU faced no difficulties in recruiting personnel. Most of those mobilised volunteered for service, and their numbers were sufficient not only to replenish existing units but also to form new ones. By the summer of 2022, the armed forces had reached a strength of one million soldiers. By the end of that year, 47 brigades had been either created or expanded from cadre status, including 30 Territorial Defence brigades – 25 expanded and five newly established. This almost doubled the number of brigades compared with the period before Russia's full-scale

<sup>1</sup> The Defence Forces of Ukraine, often identified with the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which constitute their core component, also include military formations subordinated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine: the National Guard, the State Border Guard Service, the Security Service of Ukraine, and various intelligence agencies.

invasion.<sup>2</sup> A similar pace was maintained in 2023, when a further 26 brigades were formed. However, the DFU's total strength increased by only 50,000 soldiers, suggesting that new tactical formations were created by drawing on manpower reserves left unused the previous year, or that many units were not fully staffed.

**Table. The number of general-purpose and support brigades in the DFU**

	January 2022	January 2023	January 2024	January 2025
Defence Forces of Ukraine	49	96	122	126
National Guard of Ukraine	6	7	7	7

Establishing new tactical formations was (and remains) justified by operational needs, particularly the requirement to maintain an adequate reserve at this level. This goal was largely achieved in preparation for the 2023 offensive. Two corps were assembled from newly established brigades and subsequently deployed in the operation. However, their engagement on the battlefield meant that Ukraine lost its operational reserve and was forced to create additional units – particularly as Russia was committing ever larger numbers of troops to the battlefield.

While in 2022 the invading forces (150,000 troops) were significantly outnumbered by Ukrainian defence forces, by 2023 the Russian contingent had grown to 400,000 soldiers, rising to 600,000 the following year. This allowed Russia to establish a necessary numerical advantage over Ukrainian forces along the main lines of operation. Meanwhile, despite continued expansion, the DFU's troop strength has not exceeded 1,050,000 – a level reached in 2023 and still officially maintained.<sup>3</sup> However, the number of troops directly engaged on the battlefield is significantly lower: according to Ukrainian estimates, it does not exceed 300,000.

Growing personnel shortages forced the military to halt the formation of new brigades, a decision formally implemented in late January 2025. In 2024, Ukraine had

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planned to establish ten new units at this level, but only eight began formation. Ultimately, just four of these brigades were retained, while the personnel from the remaining ones were redistributed among frontline units.<sup>4</sup> This decision amounts to an admission that Ukraine is currently unable to build an operational reserve; it is now assembling only an *ad hoc* reserve by rotating units out of combat zones for regeneration. Moreover, given Russia's sustained pace and intensity of operations, Ukraine is unlikely to regain the initiative on the battlefield. At the same time, it is failing in its efforts to resolve the shortage of recruits for existing units. The average manning level in the DFU likely exceeds 70 per cent.<sup>5</sup> However, the strength of frontline brigades is often significantly lower – between 50 and 60 per cent, as acknowledged by President Volodymyr Zelensky; unofficially, this figure is as low

<sup>2</sup> Just before the outbreak of the war, the Armed Forces of Ukraine comprised 49 brigades, while the National Guard had six, most of which reached full operational strength only after the start of the full-scale invasion. Within the Armed Forces, there were 36 general-purpose brigades (including armoured, mechanised, air assault, and marine infantry units) and 13 artillery brigades. Since 24 February 2022, only one new artillery brigade and one National Guard brigade have been formed. Most of the newly created units are mechanised or motorised formations; within the Territorial Defence Forces, they operate essentially as light infantry.

<sup>3</sup> I. Khurshudyan, S. Korolchuk, 'As the Trump presidency nears, Ukraine's army is on the defensive', The Washington Post, 4 January 2025, [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com).

<sup>4</sup> A separate issue was the shortage of equipment for newly formed units. According to President Zelensky, Western partners who had reportedly committed to equipping 10 brigades in 2024 delivered weapons and military equipment for only two and a half brigades.

<sup>5</sup> In October 2024, the Secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council stated that mobilising an additional 160,000 soldiers would allow unit manning levels to be raised to 85 per cent. Based on the figure of 1,050,000 personnel he provided at the time, the average manning level in the DFU at that point was just under 74 per cent.

as 30 per cent in some cases.<sup>6</sup> To restore these units to full strength, Ukraine would need to mobilise an additional 300,000 personnel – a target that appears out of reach under current conditions.

## The military is rotting from the front

From the very outset of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainian soldiers have faced situations far removed from official regulations. Their commanders have been forced to adapt to orders issued from Kyiv that often failed to reflect the actual conditions on the battlefield. They were assigned tasks without being provided with the forces and resources needed to carry them out. As the war dragged on and signs of fatigue among Ukrainian troops became more apparent, these problems deepened and assumed increasingly severe forms. Dysfunction within the armed forces was thrown into sharp relief by high-profile incidents, including the desertion of journalist and civil activist Serhiy Hnezdilov, who abandoned his unit in the 56th Mechanised Brigade in September 2024, and the refusal of soldiers from the 187th Battalion of the 123rd Territorial Defence Brigade to carry out an order, followed by their desertion and an act of protest in October 2024.

These problems were primarily caused by the DFU's rapid expansion, which required the recruitment of all available personnel, including, in many cases, retired or near-retirement officers shaped by the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a time when the military was plagued by some of its most serious dysfunctions. A significant proportion of these officers demonstrated low professional and ethical standards, although there were notable exceptions. Many of them tolerated, and even actively introduced, criminal practices into their units, most notably extortion payments to superiors, including in exchange for avoiding combat duties. The situation was further exacerbated by the lack of understanding between these ageing officers with a Soviet mindset and those trained in the West after 2015, or drawn from volunteer formations that had been fighting in the Donbas since 2014 – a far smaller group.

Negative perceptions of the senior military leadership among rank-and-file soldiers stemmed from tolerance of dysfunction within units and the dismissal of commanders who were seen as taking care of their personnel and, from the soldiers' perspective, fulfilling their duties effectively. In cases where brigade commanders began to oppose what they regarded as the senseless sacrifice of soldiers' lives, their subordinates increasingly spoke out publicly against their dismissals. In the days leading up to Ukraine's military operation in Kursk Oblast in late July and early August 2024, the commanders of three brigades subsequently involved in the operation were replaced.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in the final stages of the battle for Vuhledar, the commander of the 72nd Mechanised Brigade, which was defending the city, was dismissed, a move that paradoxically hastened its fall. In January 2025, former subordinates of commanders arrested on charges of mishandling preparations for the defence of Kharkiv Oblast ahead of a Russian offensive in May 2024 openly criticised the decisions taken in Kyiv.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Transcript: An interview with Volodymyr Zelensky', *The Economist*, 12 February 2025, [economist.com](https://www.economist.com).

<sup>7</sup> The dismissed commanders included: Leonid Khoda of the 1st Tank Brigade, Andriy Usanov of the 31st Mechanised Brigade and Emil Ishkulov of the 80th Air Assault Brigade.

This figure was three and a half times higher than in 2023. Unofficial estimates by military sources put the actual number of deserters in that period at between 100,000 and 150,000.<sup>8</sup> The scandal surrounding mass desertions from the 155th Mechanised Brigade revealed that soldiers were abandoning their units even during training, including abroad; with confirmed cases in France and Poland. The scale of this phenomenon – and the scant prospects for curbing it – were underscored by the decision to waive punishment if a deserter voluntarily returned to service.

## Mobilisation in crisis

Ukrainian military authorities have not disclosed the details of their mobilisation plans, but occasional statements suggest they envisage recruiting several tens of thousands of soldiers each month. This presents a considerable challenge, primarily due to the reluctance of young men to join the bloody fighting on the battlefield.

According to Ukrainian and Western estimates, only approximately 200,000 people were conscripted into the armed forces in 2024.<sup>9</sup> Given the scale of desertions and personnel losses, this number proved insufficient to maintain unit strength at an adequate level. This was confirmed by the decision to replenish frontline brigades with soldiers drawn from inland regions. In late 2024, reports began to emerge that Air Force personnel, including aircraft mechanics and radar station operators, were being deployed to the battlefield as regular infantry. The military command initially denied these claims, but eventually acknowledged that mobilisation was failing to meet the needs of frontline units. In an effort to find additional manpower reserves, the military authorities have continued spot ID checks in restaurants and nightclubs popular with young men.

The shortage of personnel is directly linked to the government's unwillingness to announce a general mobilisation. The 18–24 age

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group comprises an estimated 800,000 men.<sup>10</sup> The decision not to recruit from this cohort has been justified by concerns over further deterioration in public sentiment, potential negative demographic consequences (particularly declining birth rates), and the need to maintain sufficient employment levels to support the economy.<sup>11</sup> On 10 January 2025, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal stated that, at the request of businesses, approximately 950,000 men had received deferments from military service.<sup>12</sup>

The government has resorted to half-measures that have done little to significantly increase mobilisation potential. Yielding to pressure from the military, on 11 February 2025, it approved a scheme allowing volunteers aged 18 to 24 to sign one-year contracts<sup>13</sup> that include basic military training, specialist training, and an adaptation course in a military unit. Recruits will receive a one-time bonus of one million hryvnias (c. \$25,000) paid in instalments: 200,000 upon signing the contract, 300,000 after completing training, and 500,000 upon discharge. In addition, they will receive a monthly salary

<sup>8</sup> For comparison, a total of 24,000 such proceedings were initiated throughout 2023. М. Матвейчук, 'Чому військові йдуть у СЗЧ і що з цим робити', BBC News Україна, 18 November 2024, [bbc.com/ukrainian](https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian).

<sup>9</sup> I. Khurshudyan, S. Korolchuk, 'As the Trump presidency nears, Ukraine's army is on the defensive', *op. cit.* In February 2025, President Zelensky reported a much more optimistic figure of 30,000 individuals mobilised per month, which would amount to 360,000 annually. However, this figure is contradicted by other available reports. 'Transcript: An interview with Volodymyr Zelensky', *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> П. Буянова, "'Це більш ніж достатньо": в ОП відповіли, скільки в Україні молоді віком 18–24 років', 24 Канал, 20 February 2025, [24tv.ua](https://24tv.ua).

<sup>11</sup> S. Matuszak, P. Żochowski, 'The Gordian knot of mobilisation: Ukraine balancing the needs of the military and business', *OSW Commentary*, no. 632, 20 November 2024, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>12</sup> Т. Матяш, 'Від мобілізації вже заброньовано 900–950 тисяч осіб, понаднормово уряд забронює ремонтні бригади облгвзів, – Шмигаль', LB.ua, 10 January 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Т. Олійник, 'Міноборони: Добровольці, які приєдналися до ЗСУ до змін умов контракту, теж отримають мільйон', Українська правда, 11 February 2025, [pravda.com.ua](https://pravda.com.ua).

of 120,000 hryvnias (over \$2,800). Additional benefits include bonuses for participation in combat missions and reimbursement of housing rental costs during the contract period. Afterwards, participants will also have access to interest-free mortgage loans. The government's decision should be seen as controversial: large payouts to new recruits from a specific age group risk fuelling resentment among experienced personnel who have served on the battlefield for an extended period. Moreover, the preferential recruitment terms may discourage men over the age of 24 from enlisting.

Facing difficulties in meeting mobilisation targets, the government is now refraining from prosecuting those who have left their units without permission for the first

time. In October 2024 alone, courts in Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Volyn, Zakarpattia, and Ternopil oblasts issued around 100 such rulings, contingent on soldiers returning to their original units. Under Ukrainian military law, those who leave a unit or duty station without valid justification during combat conditions face a prison sentence of up to 10 years.<sup>14</sup>

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Mobilisation efforts remain hampered by widespread corruption, particularly the issuance of false medical certificates exempting individuals from military service and the organised smuggling of draft dodgers out of the country. In January 2025, the Security Service of Ukraine detained the Chief Psychiatrist of the Armed Forces – responsible for assessing fitness for service – after he acquired property and luxury vehicles worth over \$1 million between 2022 and 2024. The State Bureau of Investigation reported that, in 2024, 120 officials were suspected of involvement in schemes to illegally transfer conscription-eligible men abroad. Sixty-one indictments were filed in court, with investigators documenting bribes totalling 11.4 million hryvnias (c. \$270,000) and seizing assets worth approximately 11 million hryvnias (over \$250,000). The most common methods used to facilitate illegal departures included falsifying medical diagnoses, issuing driver permits for humanitarian aid convoys, and transporting individuals across the border outside official checkpoints.<sup>15</sup>

## The training dilemma: between quality and speed

Since the start of Russia's invasion, Ukraine's mobilisation effort has not been matched by the expansion of the country's training infrastructure sufficient to prepare newly conscripted personnel for service. This stems from two objective constraints: a lack of resources, as these were allocated primarily to combat operations, and a shortage of instructors, as most, including the most experienced, have been deployed to the battlefield. As a result, the DFU have found themselves in a difficult position, needing to deploy reasonably well-trained recruits while maintaining the highest possible pace and scale of deployment.

Training provided to Ukrainian soldiers by partner states has not resolved the underlying challenges. Owing to their own limitations, particularly the lack of sufficiently developed infrastructure to accommodate more trainees, these countries have been unable to conduct training on a mass scale. By October 2024, when the General Staff last released relevant figures, just over 100,000 Ukrainian troops had been trained abroad.<sup>16</sup> Basic and lower-level unit training has been provided by the EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM), primarily in Poland and Germany, as well as through the UK-led Interflex

<sup>14</sup> В. Романенко, 'Амністія за перше СЗЧ: у жовтні суди винесли близько 100 рішень не ув'язнювати військових', Українська правда, 31 October 2024, pravda.com.ua.

<sup>15</sup> 'За рік ДБР викрило 120 посадовців, які організували незаконне переправлення громадян через кордон', Державне бюро розслідувань, 8 January 2025, dbr.gov.ua.

<sup>16</sup> К. Катишев, 'Стало відомо, скільки бійців для ЗСУ підготували на Заході', Корреспондент.net, 19 October 2024, ua.korrespondent.net. The figure of 100,000 Ukrainian troops trained in the West was reported as of February 2025. Г. Соколова-Стех, 'Бойцы ВСУ об обучении за границей: помогло ли это на фронте?', Deutsche Welle, 20 February 2025, dw.com.

programme.<sup>17</sup> Specialist personnel are also being trained abroad to operate the weapons systems and military equipment supplied to Ukraine. The shortcomings of this training include inadequate coordination of larger units (or, more often, its absence) and, in the view of Ukrainian officials, the failure of these programmes to reflect the realities of the war.

Ukraine's training system is built around several large centres. However, these facilities are unable to adequately train recruits, leading to a decline in the quality of military personnel.

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Despite lower intake numbers compared with 2022, these centres remain consistently overcrowded. As a result, they cannot ensure proper training or even basic living conditions, particularly for older recruits and those in poor physical condition. Another problem is the short duration of training courses. In 2024, basic training lasted only 30 days. This was extended to 45 days in December in an effort to allow as many conscripts as possible to complete it – at least formally. Training centres have also been repeatedly targeted by Russian missile and drone strikes.

### A decentralised army of ‘different speeds’

Since the start of the full-scale war, Ukraine has been unable to independently supply and equip all DFU units, remaining dependent on foreign partners in this regard. However, Western military assistance has not been comprehensive. Ukrainian and foreign volunteer networks, including the foundations of Serhiy Prytula and Taras Chmut, have stepped in to plug major gaps, particularly in personal equipment, medical supplies, and drones. Aid organised by former President Petro Poroshenko and Kyiv Mayor Vitaliy Klitschko has been particularly important due to its scale and the consistency of supplies. Their efforts have enabled the equipping of a number of brigades that effectively function as patronage units affiliated with their political factions.<sup>18</sup>

Support from Poroshenko and Klitschko has exceeded that provided at the state level by some of Ukraine's foreign partners. The former president has even financed the delivery of armoured combat vehicles. In this context, President Zelensky's decision to impose sanctions on him must be regarded as controversial. One of the restrictions prohibits Poroshenko from making defence-related purchases, a measure that is certain to negatively affect the level of equipment available to the armed forces.<sup>19</sup>

While Ukraine has no control over how much weaponry, ammunition, and defence materiel the West sends to the DFU, Ukrainian military leadership decides how these supplies are distributed among specific brigades. This allocation is determined by a unit's position in the country's political and media landscape, rather than by current battlefield needs. Elite units, such as the 3rd Assault Brigade and the 47th Mechanised Brigade, actively engage in self-promotion across media platforms. In addition to receiving state resources with relative ease, they also benefit from crowdfunding and volunteer support. By contrast, the majority of less prominent tactical formations receive insufficient supplies

<sup>17</sup> According to combined data from the EUMAM mission and the Interflex programme, a total of 114,000 Ukrainian troops had been trained by the end of 2024: 63,000 under EUMAM (a figure expected to rise to 75,000 by the end of winter 2025) and 51,000 under Interflex. See ‘Ukraine: EU extends mandate of Military Assistance Mission for two years’, EU NEIGHBOURS east, 11 November 2024, [euneighbourseast.eu](https://euneighbourseast.eu/); ‘UK to train hundreds more Ukrainian soldiers in mental health first aid for combat’, Gov.uk, 28 December 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Klitschko has mainly supplied equipment to the 3rd and 5th Assault Brigades as well as the 24th and 28th Mechanised Brigades. Poroshenko has supported the 53rd Mechanised Brigade, the 25th, 46th, 80th, and 82nd Air Assault Brigades; as well as the 45th and 148th Artillery Brigades.

<sup>19</sup> S. Matuszak, K. Nieczypor, ‘Sanctions against Poroshenko: the start of Ukraine's election campaign?’, OSW, 14 February 2025, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

to carry out their assigned tasks. Their command structures often lack the necessary connections – or capacity – to secure essential patronage.

The consequences of this inequality are evident on the battlefield. Territorial Defence battalions, typically equipped only with small arms and lacking assigned means of transport, are routinely deployed to reinforce general-purpose brigades of the armed forces. They are commonly used to plug gaps in frontline positions, often facing a significantly stronger enemy. Commanders of tactical formations have deliberately employed these battalions to reduce losses in their own subunits. The destruction of the 155th Battalion of the 117th Territorial Defence Brigade in November 2024, after it was attached to the 63rd Mechanised Brigade, also demonstrates that such ‘second-tier’ units cannot rely even on basic reconnaissance or fire support.

The decisions to establish recruitment cells within each brigade (in November 2024) and to appoint officers for the supply of goods and services (a month later) ex-

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acerbated these disparities and further decentralised responsibilities. While intended to streamline recruitment and procurement, in practice these measures have partially shifted responsibilities away from Ukraine’s Ministry of Defence and diluted accountability for fulfilling its statutory tasks. As a result, units under permanent patronage, led by ‘entrepreneurial’ commanders, are becoming increasingly autonomous. These changes have also sparked unprecedented competition between elite tactical formations for dwindling resources. In November 2024, several brigades declared their willingness to accept deserters returning to service. For example, the K-2 Battalion of the 54th Mechanised Brigade announced it would accept soldiers who had fled other units. In January, the 3rd Assault Brigade, the 72nd Mechanised Brigade, and the ‘Code 9.2’ Battalion of the 92nd Assault Brigade launched media recruitment campaigns, offering financial incentives and additional training. The 3rd Assault Brigade also opened a drone operator training school in Lviv, known as the Kill House Academy.

### **(Un)solvable problems**

The DFU reached their peak growth in the second year of Russia’s full-scale invasion. Since then, Ukraine’s ability to continue expanding its military, or even to maintain adequate staffing levels in existing units, has steadily declined. Under current conditions, it is extremely difficult for the state to build a new operational reserve that would allow the military to attempt to regain the initiative on the battlefield. The DFU now stand at a crossroads where each reform path pursued by the government generates new political and social challenges.

Resolving the personnel shortage requires more than simply changing mobilisation rules, particularly the current lower age limit of 25 for recruits. Ukraine needs to significantly expand its training capacity, something it cannot achieve without support from its Western partners. Most importantly, however, it should develop a new system that genuinely motivates individuals to serve in the military. Without this, it will be unable to stem the growing tide of desertions and draft evasion.

The decentralisation of responsibilities – and the resulting autonomy of elite units within the Defence Forces of Ukraine – poses long-term risks by enabling these formations to play a role in post-war internal power struggles as actors capable of influencing the domestic situation. The political ambitions of their commanders remain an open question, but some have already spoken out publicly against the government and senior military leadership.