Ukrainian government moves to stifle dissent as military morale plunges

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The Ukrainian military is showing signs of severe decomposition and demoralization, as antiwar sentiment rises to the surface among Ukrainians in Kiev-controlled territories. In response, the government of Petro Poroshenko is cracking down on dissent.

On January 28, Ukrainian "hacktivist" group CyberBerkut published on its website documents obtained from the computer of Ukraine's chief military prosecutor Anatolii Matios. According to the documents, during the preceding two weeks, 1100 members of Ukraine's armed forces lost their lives, over 100 damaged tanks were left on the battlefield, and tens of Ukrainian soldiers and officers were taken prisoner.

The hacked documents indicate that, contrary to the affirmations of leading Ukrainian politicians, the military is disintegrating. New recruits are deserting and fleeing to Russia and other countries. Servicemen have been putting their weapons and ammunition up for sale. Commanders are the first to desert their units. Young and inexperienced fighters are being ordered into senseless attacks against rebel forces. Residents of areas near the battlefields are reportedly being terrorized by plundering deserters and "homicidal maniacs in uniform."

The documents include an order that information on war losses is to be kept secret and reported to the counter-terrorism center of the Ukrainian Security Service only. This document, as well as the figure of 1,100 servicemen lost in the second half of January, lend additional credibility to the rebels' estimates of war casualties, which thus far have exceeded those of the Ukrainian government and United Nations by approximately a factor of ten. The UN's most recently published figure was 5,400 civilians and military personnel killed since the start of the conflict.

The higher figures received further support on February 8 from the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ). Citing anonymous sources in the German intelligence establishment, the FAZ estimates 50,000 dead. It asserts that the Ukrainian government and UN figures have been greatly understated.

Matios was quoted in *Ukrainskaya pravda* on February 10 as saying that the prosecutor's office is currently investigating the desertion of 10,266 servicemen. "It is particularly offensive that we have had desertions not just among the rank and file, but among generals as well. We just filed in court charges of desertion against a brigadier general of the Foreign Intelligence Service."

Matios added that his agency does not have information on desertion and other crimes committed by members of volunteer battalions.

The Ukrainian parliament adopted a law on February 5 that creates "barrier detachments" to enforce military discipline and empowers commanders to use their weapons against deserters and other subordinates engaged in criminal activities. Another law adopted on February 3 introduces secret investigative proceedings against draft dodgers. President Petro Poroshenko has called for a law to prevent draftees from leaving the country.

Earlier, on January 29, Donetsk People's Republic Ministry of Defense Deputy Commandant Eduard Basurin made an announcement regarding prisoners of war. "[They come to us] hungry, freezing cold, and demoralized. The only thing they ask for is not to be shown on camera and for their names not to be disclosed, so that their family members who remain at home will not come under attack." Basurin insisted that the prisoners are safe, their lives are guaranteed, and they will be released after investigations are completed.

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On February 11, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), a think-tank based in London, England, published its annual "Military Balance." The report indicates that the Ukrainian army is not prepared for the conflict with the rebels. It is using obsolete equipment and is experiencing a shortage of armored vehicles, artillery, and missiles.

The Ukrainian military mobilization, a large-scale program that includes conscription, began on January 20. With a number of exceptions, men up to age 60 are subject to the draft, which is to include up to 104,000 personnel, including women.

The mobilization thus far has been massively unpopular and has provoked extremely high rates of abstention. Recruiters have been chased away by residents from the villages of Dmytrivka and Kulevcha in Odessa Province. There have been reports of employers in Kharkiv refusing to distribute draft notices to employees. There have been demonstrations against the mobilization, particularly in Zaporizhia Province. Videos have appeared on the Internet showing women speaking before crowds of people, vehemently denouncing the Kiev regime and calling for peace (see, for example: here, here, here and here).

Ukrainian journalist Ruslan Kotsaba was arrested on February 8 for treason and espionage after publicly calling for resistance to the mobilization. Kotsaba had also asserted that the rebel fighters are not "terrorists," that they do not consist of regular Russian forces, and that the majority of the population in the rebel territories do support them.

Subsequently, on February 11, Poroshenko announced that criticism of the mobilization "has no relation to democracy and the freedom of speech" and qualifies as "anti-state activity." He said that the Ukrainian Security Service had already identified 19 people who had conducted a campaign to undermine the mobilization.

Draft legislation currently on review in parliament would make "public denial of or support for Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014-2015" a crime punishable by up to three years of imprisonment.

The most intense fighting in recent weeks has centered around the town of Debaltseve, where Ukrainian forces had concentrated during the "truce" that ended last month. The town is located roughly at the midpoint between the rebel centers of Donetsk and Luhansk and occupies a strategically crucial location for the warring armies. Since February 9, rebel forces have been claiming control over the village of Logvynove on the main Debaltseve-Artemivsk road.

If the rebels manage to take control over country roads and field roads as well, then the thousands of Ukrainian troops in Debaltseve will be trapped without any supply lines. As of this writing, fighting continues as the Ukrainian army attempts to reassert control over the Debaltseve-Artemivsk road.

Under the ceasefire agreement signed in Minsk on February 12, which is supposed to go into effect at midnight on February 15, Debaltseve is to remain under Kiev's control. However, the rebel republics' leaders insist that their forces have practically surrounded Debaltseve and are simply waiting for the Ukrainian forces that remain there to surrender.

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