

Ukraine cracks down on military “deserters”

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Amidst a major escalation of the war in Ukraine by NATO, the government of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has begun cracking down on “refuseniks,” or deserting soldiers, as bloody fighting continues with Russian forces for control of Bakhmut.

Under the newly signed law draft Law 8271, soldiers directly disobeying an order, threatening a senior officer with violence or deserting one’s unit would face five to 10 years in prison. Convictions of desertion in the face of fire will carry a minimum of five and a maximum of 12 years in prison.

The law enforcing stricter penalties on soldiers convicted of abandoning fighting positions or defying their commanders was initially ratified by the Ukrainian parliament in December and publicly supported by the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Valeriy Zaluzhny.

Zaluzhny—an admirer of the far-right fascist hero Stepan Bandera—complained at the time that Ukrainian soldiers could theoretically flee an assigned position or defy a commander and face little more than a 10 percent deduction from his military salary.

Earlier in December, Andrey Marochko, an officer with the Russian-backed Lugansk People’s Republic (LPR), had alleged an increase in desertion rates among Ukrainian forces.

“There have been increasingly more saboteurs and people deserting their positions [in the special operation zone], as well as more wrangling with commanders and hazing. Incidents of taking drugs and alcohol have also increased. Besides, social tensions have grown sharply in Ukraine,” Marochko said. While Marochko certainly has a strategic incentive to make such statements, the introduction of the law shortly thereafter lends credence to his remarks.

Zelensky signed the law on January 25 despite widespread criticism from Ukrainian citizens and soldiers who rightfully view the Ukrainian justice

system as corrupt and controlled by the wealthy.

Following the initial introduction of the law in December, an electronic petition appeared calling for Zelensky to veto the proposal and quickly gathered the necessary 25,000 signatures for Zelensky’s consideration.

According to the author of the petition, Tetiana Kostohryzenko, “the command will gain leverage to blackmail and punish the military with prison for almost any criticism of their decisions, even if the decisions are incompetent and based on unsuccessful combat management.”

A total of 34,941 Ukrainians signed the petition leading up to Zelensky’s signing of the law. Despite the appeal garnering the necessary signatures for an official response from the president’s office, Zelensky completely ignored public opposition and signed the bill into law anyway.

According to Ukrainian media outlets such as the *Kyiv Post*, Zaluzhny, who maintains extremely close ties to the US military, is widely viewed as a potential rival to Zelensky in the upcoming 2024 presidential elections. A Zelensky veto of the measure could have potentially undermined his own support within the Ukrainian military and the United States government.

The law is clearly intended to bolster the Ukrainian military command’s control over its troops as it is nearing a “very active phase of the war” with “intense operations” expected at the front in February and March, according to the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defense.

Speaking to the Freedom channel, Andrii Yusov, representative of the Chief Intelligence Directorate, revealed that the Ukrainian military foresaw “a difficult situation” developing at the front due to a Russian offensive and is counting on further weapons shipments from the West as the war escalates in the coming months.

Yusov's comments essentially suggest that thousands or more Ukrainian and Russian soldiers will lose their lives in an imperialist-backed war with no peaceful resolution in sight.

While both Ukrainian and Western officials have attempted to hide the scale of death within the military, Ukrainian casualties likely equal or exceed Russian losses.

In November, US General Mark Milley nonchalantly revealed that 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers had been killed or wounded in just eight months of fighting while speaking at the Economic Club of New York City.

"You are looking at well over 100,000 Russian soldiers killed and wounded," Milley said. "Same thing probably on the Ukrainian side."

Milley speaks regularly with his Ukrainian counterpart Zaluzhny and is well aware of the mass casualties taking place on the battlefield as the US government continues to escalate its direct involvement in the war.

The drive to crack down on evaders is also taking place as videos of the forced mobilization of Ukrainian men have spread on social media. In one video a man is shown being grabbed in an apartment by two men dressed in military clothing, while a small child intervenes. While such videos are denounced by the Ukrainian government as "fakes," they correspond with reports of haphazard and arbitrary forced mobilization over the previous summer and fall. Such reports were even taken up by the *New York Times*, which admitted at the time, "Recruiters approach young men on the street, but the standards are not always clear, and there are reports of unwilling men being signed up while some eager to fight are turned away."

Approximately 2,500 cases of draft dodging have been opened so far in Ukraine during the war with 400 indictments.



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