

Ukraine: Growing unrest in the population, army, amid hype of peace talks

Ukrainian journalists
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It is now officially recognized that after the law on partial decriminalization of unauthorized leaving a military unit (SZCh in Ukrainian) and desertion came into force, desertions from the Armed Forces of Ukraine have increased significantly. “I spoke with our elite units, both the Airborne Assault Forces and the Marines: the number of SZCh increased by 60%,” said Roman Kostenko, secretary of the parliamentary defense committee, at the end of January. Seeing that the ground is slipping from under its feet, the Ukrainian state is trying to take punitive measures.

We recently wrote about the post of war correspondent Yury Butusov on December 31, which received a wide resonance in Ukraine. In the post, Butusov described how 1,700 people fled from the 155th Mechanized Brigade “Anna of Kyiv” before the first shot was fired. By the time it was sent to France, there were already 935 fugitives. In France itself, more than 50 fled. Less well known is that on January 8, the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) detained a senior lieutenant from this brigade, who himself went into SZCh and incited his fighters to do the same. He was taken from the Rivne region to Kiev and sent to custody without bail. Then, the former brigade commander, Colonel Dmytro Ryumshin, was detained with the possibility of bail for 90 million hryvnya (\$2.161 million, a very large sum of money in Ukraine). According to the SBI, there may have been a scheme operating in the brigade in which those wishing to leave the country were registered for money. “If I’m not mistaken, about 12 draft dodgers were included in the lists for training in France,” said bureau spokesperson Tatyana Sapyan.

The magazine *Forbes* reported on January 27 that the second brigade of the Ukraine’s Armed Forces was in the process of disintegrating within a month during deployment at the Donetsk front. We are talking about the 157th Mechanized Brigade, which consisted of new recruits and was sent to defend Pokrovsk. There are a total of 8 such brigades of the 150th series “that formed in 2023 or early 2024 and, after a lengthy period of training, began arriving on the front starting late last year. The brigades are big, some with roughly double the usual 2,000 manpower billets of a Ukrainian ground combat brigade. But they’re also fragile—with inexperienced leaders, too few modern armored vehicles and poor morale that often results in a high desertion rate. ... There were reports of brigade troopers taking one look at their trenches—and promptly abandoning their positions,” the publication noted. According to it, the brigade had not received the necessary combat training and “began falling apart before they even arrived in Pokrovsk.” It was the second such case in a month.

On December 25, in the public Telegram group UFM, which provides assistance in leaving Ukraine, a member wrote:

My wife’s brother escaped from training without a weapon (I won’t say the exact date), three days later the cops were already looking for him at his registered address, and he was on the cops’ criminal wanted list..... So everything is going fast now. It was a week ago. He went to the place of registration to surrender himself, there were familiar cops (he wanted to negotiate), but something went wrong, and as far as I understand, he was again shoved in the training center, but in where he lived. Before that, he was caught by TCR [Territorial Center for Recruitment and Social Support] in Kirovograd region. Now he’s in Kharkov, [there is] no contact with him. All this he personally told, as well as the fact that in the training schools of Vinnitsa region they kick people with a buttstock if you f*** off, he lost a few teeth.....

Despite this intensification of the efforts to persecute deserters, the possibilities of the repressive system are still very limited. A man from Kharkov named Andrey reported on January 12:

As for the search. There is one character who disappeared into the sunset in June. Recently cops checked him for the 4th time when he was coming from work—he was not wanted. So it’s a lucky break. He works as a packer in the workshop. Unofficially, of course. He’s been on a relatively quiet sector, northbound, so it didn’t come to the meat grinder. It’s more likely the liver that needs to be repaired, not the head.

There is another resident of Kharkov, who went into SZCh last summer together with his commander and the entire company from the southern front. We mentioned his case last month—he now lives at home and goes to the store, and no one is looking for him. On the morning of January 13, the disappearance of the first company commander with the rank of captain was discovered in the 3rd Mechanized Battalion of the 143rd Mechanized Brigade near Kupiansk. The mobilized officer left his weapon, took his personal belongings and personal car.

There is also new evidence of mass desertions from training camps in the Dnipropetrovsk region, where those mobilized in Kharkov are usually sent. We reported for the WWS a little earlier about desertions in this area. One woman in Kharkov shared the following information anonymously on January 30:

I talked to a local policeman, he says every day there are about 100 people near Novomoskovsk who go into SZCh. The efficiency of efforts to catch them is so-so. In my opinion, network marketing has better recruitment rates. How many a day they catch out of

these 100 he will not, of course, say. He complained that there is a lot of paperwork.

On the same day, January 30, the above mentioned journalist Yury Butusov posted information, according to which in some radio engineering brigade of the Ukrainian Air Force, ten radar station operators had been taken for marine rifle positions. "Each operator has more than two years of experience, but no one asked for their opinion. After receiving the information, three military men made certificates of care and resigned, three went into SZCh." It is strange that there were only three! On February 2, the Assembly received the following information:

In our military unit, in the summer, you could still officially go abroad on vacation. Then two of us didn't return and the unit commander forbade us from going abroad on vacation... and I was transferred from the Air Force to the Land Troops at zero [front line], and it took me 7 days to figure everything out. And I went into SZCh. And then a buddy policeman picked me up in his car, he drove from home. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't have left there. They would hit the brake at every checkpoint, but the [service] certificate decides. He gave me a ride home. If only it had been to the border... I was going from the Zaporizhzhia region, the checkpoints there are crazy. We had many guys who went into SZCh on their own, then they were caught at the checkpoint and sent them back to the infantry on the move to zero [to the front line].

Since the interlocutor is still in Ukraine, we will not give other details.

The luckiest ones simply do not end up in a military unit. On January 4, in the central united enlistment center of Zaporozhye, 7-8 men who had been kidnapped to be sent to the front, barricaded the entrance with beds and other objects in the room. They began calling for help from the only remaining phone, demanding respect for human rights and a "legal solution" to this issue. The police used tear gas in response. One of the kidnapped men, who suffered from epilepsy, began to have a seizure. According to others under siege in the center, he was taken away somewhere by the employees, and looked like he was dying. Nothing is known about his fate. The footage shows how other people also began to choke and ask for help. The riot was suppressed and the barricades were dismantled the same day. No violations of the mobilization process were noted by the authorities.

Against this background, individual rebellions receive a particularly strong resonance in the media. On November 25, a border guard in the Khmelnytsky region was sentenced to 12 years in prison for the premeditated murder of his immediate superior (the chief of the communications group). The 36-year-old junior sergeant ... served as a technician-driver and was mobilized to the State Border Service in August 2023. He went on duty with a weapon on February 6, 2024. While on duty, he met the commander, with whom he had an unfriendly relationship. After that, he went with him towards the canteen and shot him in the stomach with an AK-74. The colonel died on the spot. At the trial, the accused claimed that the murdered man had previously beaten him and another colleague, that he had obsessive thoughts due to the conflict, and that he fired the shot in a state of passion. A forensic psychiatric examination rejected this claim, arguing that the defendant had shown no signs of a severe mental disorder. Witnesses also confirmed that the accused was calm and balanced that day. Perhaps, the prosecution only allowed witnesses that confirm its version of events.

On November 27, in the village of Trostyanets in the Vinnytsia region, a

57-year-old man came to the enlistment center after receiving a summons and stabbed a 53-year-old sergeant of the facility in the right collarbone. The sergeant appeared in an ICU with arterial damage. The visitor explained his act, stating: "*Because he wanted to send me to war.*" According to the Rivne Regional TCR, during the check of military registration documents on February 11, unknown persons of mobilization age inflicted bodily harm on their employees and damaged transport. Despite the arrival of the police, the attackers fled and are wanted. The next day, according to the Kharkov Regional TCR, in some district enlistment office of Kharkov their serviceman was sprayed with tear gas and injured with a knife. The suspect was detained by the cops.

Back on January 13, on one of the main streets of Kharkov, people blocked the road to a "bus of invincibility" [a bus used to transport people kidnapped off the streets during mobilization] of the district enlistment center. Two men and a woman got out of civilian cars, one of them had a starter pistol. Having smashed the van's window with the pistol, they got into a fight with the pixels. The cops detained the owner of the pistol and seized his car. It is alleged that he is a 49-year-old entrepreneur who came to save his nephew who worked as a driver. He was notified of suspicion under Part 1 of Art. 114-1 of the Criminal Code (obstruction of the lawful activities of the Armed Forces) and Part 4 of Art. 296 of the Criminal Code (hooliganism with especially aggravating circumstances). Another defendant is still wanted.

The loudest story of this winter occurred in the usually quiet Lubny district of the Poltava region. On January 31, a resident of Poltava, Yevgen Shcherbak, was being transported to a military unit for training, accompanied by servicemen from the district enlistment office. Intent on evading service, he called his relative's partner, Vadym Kuzub, from Lubny and told them the bus route. During a stop in Pyriatyn, the Lubny resident in a grey balaclava and pixelated pants killed one of the guards with a hunting rifle he had brought with him. Shcherbak and Kuzub disappeared with the dead soldier's automatic rifle. However, the next day the head of the regional police reported their arrest. The two men were born in 1984 and 1988, respectively. Unconfirmed rumors suggest that the shooter previously served in the territorial defense at road checkpoints.

The murder suspect Vadym Kuzub admitted his guilt at a court hearing on February 3, confirming that he had helped his woman's relative escape. According to him, he wanted to scare the guards, but he failed, and then he fired his weapon. "The ambulance arrived about 40 minutes later, and he died quickly. I didn't know that he had died, I thought he was alive. I didn't want to kill him, I just wanted to take Shcherbak Yevgen." The shooter's lawyer, Valery Masyuk, said that his client is actively collaborating with the investigation. Yevgen Shcherbak, who fled from the enlistment agents, is now charged with obstructing the activities of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Both are in custody without the right to bail.

Overall, our forecast from last year is being confirmed step by step. The number of Russian assaults and their pace of advancement since the start of 2025 have dropped sharply, the trend seems too long and strong to have been caused only by the weather conditions. It appears that the drop is due to the upcoming peace talks, during which the Russian authorities hope to achieve a deal with the new administration of US President Donald Trump.



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