

# War fatigue in Ukraine continues to grow amid peace talks

Ukrainian journalists  
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In the second half of last year, the Ukrainian army was moving towards a loss of combat capability and outright collapse at the front. Then, during the winter came a tightening of the screws in terms of discipline. The threat of a collapse on the frontline only loomed again when the US under the new Trump administration suspended military aid. The State Bureau of Investigation claims that about 21,100 fugitive military servicemen returned to the army thanks to a new law allowing them to avoid punishment for the first escape. The deadline for this expired on March 1. But even now, a criminal case for AWOL (SZCh, unauthorized leave of absence, i.e., desertions) will not be initiated if the period of absence is less than three days, and the soldier will not be deprived of pay. If the absence lasts for more than three days, a criminal case will be opened. It can be closed if the soldier ran away only for the first time and the commander allows him to continue serving.

As the effect of the patriotic brainwashing is waning after three years of war, the Ukrainian state relies more and more on fear and monetary incentives to lure people to the front. An experienced military man from Kharkov described what this looks like:

I personally know a man who went back to the army, to the air defense, because there is no work. Now he is not very happy, they are transferring him to the infantry. And he is not a patriot and does not give a shit about the country, for him it is exclusively about money. I also know a comrade who went AWOL, was bored for three months, looked for a job, did not find one, came back. Because he needed to eat something. The situation was serious, there was nothing to eat, no money. I am sure that with the prospect of no work and no income, the number of “volunteers” will increase. So, the worse people live, the better the staffing of the AFU [Armed Forces of Ukraine] will be. ...

Of course, it is more difficult at the front line, but it is also difficult to “leave” from there. Most of the deserters come from frontline units. The simplest assumption of how this [AWOL] occurs: They get to the city, say Slavyansk

[in the Ukraine-controlled part of Donbass], and from there by taxi they go either to Kharkov or Dnieper. As for the period since January of this year, there have been fewer cases of AWOL. But, firstly, it has been strictly forbidden to comment on this topic, and secondly, they began to punish [AWOL] very harshly, up to white slippers [death penalty] (all exclusively rumors).

I judge from the reports of friends. You see, the problem of AWOL is not that obvious. Holding back an unmotivated mass of fighters creates the risk of a riot. In order to educate and motivate fighters, you need a backbone [of experienced soldiers] and time, at least half a year, but there is no time. So, it turns out that it was easier to “let go” of a couple and not have the entire unit disintegrate, rather than to motivate them. Now they have started to fight AWOL, which will lead, in my opinion, to bigger problems than AWOL itself. Therefore, experienced fighters and units do not want to get involved with new arrivals, since they mean a burden and an increase in risk. As a result, new arrivals have a high percentage of losses, which leads to a further decrease in motivation and so on, it is a vicious circle.

... There is only one motive—survival. But the problem poses itself differently [to different layers]. Survival for an “experienced” soldier means a continuation of the war, there he knows everything, and in peace he will have to answer for a lot and lose a lot of material resources. But for a forcibly drafted one, survival means an end to the war. Because in a war he has little chance [to survive]. Often, people transition from the forcibly drafted to the “experienced” ones.

Recently, there have been no cases of mass disobedience by entire military units in Ukraine. However, there are still incidents of violent resistance by civilians to the forced mobilization. Thus, passers-by are responding to the kidnappings that occur as part of the daily forced mobilization with pepper spray, knives and fists.

Growing social despair amid a wild rise in the cost of living finds a way out in personal shoplifting. There were two other notable outbursts of individual violence, motivated by social distress, in 2024. They only recently came to light through court decisions. A 79-year-old resident of the Bogodukhov district in the

Kharkov region without a criminal past received a 4-year imprisonment with a probationary period of 1 year for burning down his village council building with a bottle of gasoline. The pensioner fully admitted his guilt and sincerely repented. He said the reason for the arson attack was a longstanding conflict with the village council that had refused to pay him a subsidy in 2017. He had gone through many years of bullying by village officials who also were ignoring his complaints.

The other case occurred in the city of Kharkov, where a court tried a military serviceman from Transcarpathia for particularly aggravated hooliganism. The man had been repeatedly convicted in the past. According to the court records, the man had been outraged at his unit's commanders for the lack of a response to his request for leave. One day, he drunkenly entered the headquarters with two fragmentation grenades. After saying, "do you know what this is?", he detonated them on the table. The commanders managed to run outside and were not hurt. The judge closed the case due to the defendant's death. The cause of his death was not indicated, only the date: May 29, 2024.

The only example of an enterprise strike we have recorded in Ukraine since last year occurred on April 5 in the western town of Drohobych. It was directly related to fear of the mobilization drive among workers. Afraid of being abducted and forcibly drafted, minibus drivers went on strike after one driver was taken from his workplace to the enlistment center for a medical examination the previous day. "Can drivers work in such a mode? Probably not. Is there an alternative replacement? The human resource is exhausted. There is none [no replacement] ... And making an exemption for employees is almost impossible," the chairman of this Sigma LLC stated in a Facebook post that was later removed. The regional territorial recruitment center of Lviv denied the forceful detention of the driver and added that the exemption is the responsibility of the company's management.

An ex-recruit from Nikolaev, who fled from a training center last year and crossed the border through the Carpathian Mountains, told us:

I experienced the following situation when I was still in Ukraine: I was just driving past a bus stop where the TRCists [employees of the Territorial Recruitment Center] started to press a guy, I stopped and called out to him: "jump in." The guy managed to sit down [in my car] and run away from them. And all the other videos I watch—they beat the guy, twist him, not a single beast will stop, will not help him escape. But everything is moving towards a civil war against Zelya [Zelensky?]. Because the lawlessness is increasing day by day. But as long as people cannot unite, this process will be delayed. Even abroad, Ukrainians are not very friendly with Ukrainians. Here [in Spain] Ukrainians cheat Ukrainians out of money, housing, work. But the longer this drags on, the more people unite. Not against Putin, but against the TRCists [enlistment officers]. They will fight off the guys. As one military man said: "Why fight for a country that will spit in your back anyway."

On April 4, the regional court of appeals of Chernivtsi confirmed a prison term for Angela Gurina from December 9, 2024. She worked for two local news outlets and was sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment for covering state violence during the mobilization. According to the verdict, her video, which received 8,600 views on TikTok, shows a military facility, the regional assembly point near the Military Law Enforcement Service in Chernivtsi. To depict such facilities on video is forbidden under martial law. The journalist was detained in August 2024. Her advocate insisted that she was filming not a military facility but a possible human rights violation. The video was titled "Saving a guy." Angela Gurina subsequently deleted it. The lawyer also argued that the location of the object is publicly known, and that it is not a combat unit or military formation. But the court ruled against her, arguing: "The appellant's assertion that the person did not intend to harm the internal and external security of Ukraine does not refute the commission of the charged offense by her." The defense intends to continue the process in the Supreme Court.

Far more dangerous for the regime than individual protest efforts is the possibility that a ceasefire, even if temporary, could trigger a new, more massive wave of spontaneous demobilization. The passive sabotage of the war remains widespread. Since the beginning of this year, 9,658 enforcement proceedings on overdue and unpaid administrative fines for violating military registration rules have been opened. This is almost as many as for all of 2023, when there were 10,541 such proceedings. At the same time, only 1,259 fines issued in 2025 were paid, according to the Opendatabot infographic from March 10. This means that only every seventh fine issued was paid, compared to every second in 2024. The underlying growing social distress is already a topic for a separate article on the economic and social situation in Ukraine.



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