

Ukraine: A wave of desertions turns into an avalanche amid the US elections

Ukrainian Journalists
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This article was submitted to the WSWS by Ukrainian underground journalists of the assembly.org.ua website. It provides further evidence of the ongoing disintegration of the NATO-backed Ukrainian army in a war that has already claimed the lives of half a million or more Ukrainian workers and youth. You can support the work of these journalists financially by following this link.

In the lead-up to the US elections, the flight of personnel from the Ukrainian Armed Forces since the middle of 2024 has taken on the character of an avalanche, threatening to leave the regime without an army in the near future. According to Ukraine's Office of the Prosecutor General, from January 2022 to September 2024, almost 90,000 criminal proceedings were opened because into such cases, and the majority were initiated since the beginning of the current year: 35,307 out of 59,606 cases concerning the unauthorized leaving of a unit (Article 407 of the Criminal Code) and 18,196 out of 29,521 cases of desertion (Article 408 of the Criminal Code). The largest number of desertions was registered in the regions of Zaporozhye (6,144), Kharkov (5,771) and Donetsk (5,318), while the regions of Donetsk (8,574), Dnepropetrovsk (3,308), Zhytomyr (2,433) and Lviv (2,170) are leading in terms of cases of unauthorized leaving of units (SZCh in Ukrainian). These are only the cases to which the authorities reacted. However, even of these, only 4,698 cases of unauthorized leaving and 442 cases of desertion reached the court. 2,592 and 414 cases were closed, respectively, during the same period.

Nine-thousand-forty-eight criminal proceedings were registered in Ukraine under these two articles in October 2024 alone. For comparison, in January 2024, there were initiated only 3,448 criminal proceedings. And in total, from February 2022 to November 1, 2024, already 95,296 criminal cases were opened. (One brigade in the Armed Forces of Ukraine comprises between 3 and 5 thousand people). Although both these articles may apply not only in the Armed Forces, much less is heard about escapes from other structures of the Ukrainian armed structures, as, in particular, our source did, who deserted from the State Border Guard Service.

Since August, information has been leaking out from time to time about people who escaped their units before being sent to the Kursk operation [Kursk is a Russian region bordering Ukraine. Parts of it have been occupied by Ukraine since August]. For example, the following was reported about the 82nd Airborne Assault Brigade, which took part in last year's southern counteroffensive and is considered an elite and one of the best equipped units.

On August 10, I found out that my acquaintance is in SZCh [unauthorized leaving of a unit]. They had to go to the Kursk

[region], [and] he says that more than 40 people left everything and went home. He says: "they gave me some dispatch letter, I looked at it and realized that it's a one-way ticket." He doesn't live in the place [where he is officially registered], got a job, I don't know exactly how he got out, he doesn't really want to talk about it. He has a normal medical form, he was a sergeant in the army, by conscription. He was taken near the house, but he wouldn't budge, and then I learned that he's at home. [At first] Every day 1-2 people, and then, after they found out that they were going to Kurshchyna, many fled [...] I'm sorry, but I can't provide more information. I don't think he will want to either. Such are the times," a resident of the Khmelnytsky region told us on October 9.

Those sent to NATO training grounds are deserting en masse too. This is what a user named Ruslan wrote on September 13 in the open Telegram chat UFM for mutual aid in crossing the border.

The main thing is to have a foreign passport with you; 29 people left our battalion in Poland. Everything depends on the situation, at the first opportunity [they will flee], they are there for a month, there will be many chances. [They wear] Civilian clothes so that they don't take them. Most likely, they will soon tighten the screws in training centers abroad, or will stop transporting the caught elite stormtroopers there altogether... too many want to get out of a foreign training center) Now they are already transporting many times less for training abroad than at the beginning. And soon they will probably shut this down all together or will make some kind of "bail", like in North Korea. These f**** earn money that Europe allocates, our battalion took everyone who wanted to go, after Poland they went to Germany for exactly one week. Recently, a law was passed [in Ukraine], according to which after the first SZCh you can return with a transfer to another unit, but they will immediately send you to slaughter, such laws are not attracting [more soldiers].

Our recent material "Run away, guys, I'll be back!" also tells the dizzying story of a Ukrainian who was captured as he was trying to cross the border, forcibly drafted, and then escaped from the training unit with the one he acquainted in captivity of border guards, managed to finally leave via the Carpathian Mountains and has received

protection in Europe. Migrant smugglers also admit that, if previously deserters were rare among their clients, since about May, at least one fugitive military man has appeared in almost every group.

On August 20, Law No. 3902-IX was adopted; it came into effect on September 7. It allows soldiers to return to a unit after the first unauthorized leaving or desertion without any punishment. This has had consequences: the collapse of the defense in the Donetsk region within just a couple of months. The lack of motivated personnel and the loss of the ability to control the troops are an even more important reason for the surrender of settlements than the lack of weapons and ammunition. Due to the retreats, morale is declining ever more. With the fall of Ugledar a month ago (and the first public demonstration of those who left their unit at the front and returned to their region without permission), plus the fall of Gornyak and Selidovo at the end of October, the Ukrainian front in Donbass is falling not by the day but by the hour.

El País, one of the largest newspapers in Spain, wrote on October 21: “The Ukrainian military on the Kurakhovo front claim that the number of troops has been sharply reduced, which is a worse obstacle than the need for more weapons.” In addition to the unauthorized leaving of units and desertions, the newspaper mentioned that soldiers of the 116th Territorial Defense Brigade from the Poltava region refused to carry out an order in Kurakhovo (also in the south of Donbass) and that the brigade was transferred to Sumy. The British liberal establishment’s magazine *The Economist* notes in an article on November 7 about the same section of the front:

The worry now is less what is happening at the front lines than what it reveals about stresses behind them. Amid a breakdown of trust between society, the army and the political leadership, Ukraine is struggling to replace battlefield losses with conscription, barely hitting two-thirds of its target. Russia, meanwhile, is replacing its losses by recruitment with lucrative contracts, without needing to revert to mass mobilisation. A senior Ukrainian military commander admits that there has been a collapse in morale in some of the worst sections of the front. A source in the general staff suggests that nearly a fifth of soldiers have gone AWOL from their positions.

If the latter estimate is not inflated, this may be even more than our estimate of 170,000 fugitives from the military since February 2022 that we provided a month ago.

At the same time, if earlier the state usually resorted to beatings to drive civilians into the army, on October 24 it became known that it is now also using mass violence against front-line soldiers. News about this was spread by relatives of fighters from the 210th Battalion of the 120th Territorial Defense Brigade from the Vinnytsia region. According to their relatives, the soldiers refused to die in the fight for Gornyak.

Based on the account of these women, on the night of October 24, the leadership of the 110th Mechanized Brigade arrived at the battalion’s location along with unknown armed persons in military uniform. The soldiers were ordered to immediately board a bus that had been brought in; when they refused, physical force was used and, in some cases, “visitors” reportedly shot at them. Some men were packed into buses and taken away in an unknown direction, others

managed to escape. Those who were not caught by force were ordered to be transferred to Barvenkovo in the Kharkov region without permission to take leaves of absence to rest and recover. Not knowing where their male relatives are, the families of those serving in the 210th Battalion rallied in Vinnytsia. They were told to wait for information. The fate of those who escaped from there is unknown, too.

Acts of individual terror against the war and the state have become much less frequent with the US elections approaching (apparently due to the reluctance of many people to risk a long prison term when peace talks may begin soon). Nevertheless, on the morning of October 13, an enlistment center’s employee in Poltava found a grenade tripwire at her gate, which is suspected of being the work of some local draft dodger previously had threatened to throw grenades at her. On November 5, news emerged from the Dnepropetrovsk region about civilian-clothed enlistment agents who wanted to mobilize a truck driver who had come to pick up his children. He fought them off and drove away, filming everything on his phone. Then they came to his home, demanding that he delete the footage. The man met them with a rifle and a Molotov cocktail – he managed to force them to leave by threatening to burn the car and shoot them. On September 26, two residents of the Ukrainian-Romanian borderland received each more than 3 years of imprisonment for hooliganism, having attacked enlistment servicemen and their vehicle with axes (traditional Hutsul weapon) on March 7. An image from a viral video of that attack has acquired cult status in Ukrainian anti-war circles.

This text was prepared on the eve of the 107th anniversary of the October Revolution, which was accompanied by the self-demobilization of the Russian army, which eventually led to Russia’s withdrawal from World War I. The collapse of the army accelerated so much that it actually dispersed and ceased to exist by the beginning of 1918. A bit later, the nationalist Ukrainian People’s Republic also failed because its own troops did not want to defend it. Paradoxically, the rise to power of Trump, with whom many associate the expectation of an end to the US support for the agonizing dictatorship in Ukraine, might, in the end, save this regime from military defeat.



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