

WAR

Frustration and corruption, Ukrainian conscripts flee call to fight

WORLD

16_08_2023



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The latest corruption and embezzlement scandal in Ukraine's war effort came to light yesterday with the arrest in the east-central region of Khmelnytsky of a military commissioner caught by the internal security services receiving a bribe. This was

reported by the investigative bodies, pointing out that the man allegedly received USD 4,500 from a person who wanted to escape conscription. In exchange for the bribe, the commissioner allegedly promised to influence the military medical commission to declare him disabled and therefore unfit for military service - a diagnosis that allows Ukrainian males between 18 and 60 years of age to be exempt from conscription and the ban on travelling abroad.

The commissioner was removed from office and faces up to eight years in prison.

The corruption of recruitment commissioners is certainly not only a problem in the Khmelnytsky region (one of the worst hit in recent weeks by the Russian precision bombardment of weapons and ammunition depots), and on 11 August, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced at a meeting of the National Security Council that all regional military committees would be disbanded. The decision was taken after the results of inspections that led to criminal proceedings being initiated against 112 officials and commissioners in the regions of Donetsk, Poltava, Vinnitsa, Odessa, Kyiv, and Lviv.

According to the findings of the inspections, Zelensky explained, there have been cases of “illegal enrichment and irregularly obtained funds for personal gain”. In the past month, some heads of the Territorial Recruitment and Social Support Centres have been involved in scandals, even in outrageous cases such as those in Odessa and Dnipropetrovsk, where officials obtained foreign real estate and luxury cars in exchange for clearing the names of some men called to arms.

"The solution is to dissolve the regional military committees. Cynicism and corruption in times of conflict are tantamount to treason”, Zelensky said, adding that 'this structure should be run by people who know exactly what war is, by soldiers who have been to the front and can no longer be in the trenches because they have lost their health or limbs, but have retained their dignity and have no cynicism. Before the new military commissioners are appointed, there will be checks by the security service”, assured Zelensky.

Malfeasance and embezzlement are certainly nothing new in Ukraine, which has been at the top of all the negative rankings of bad governance and corruption since long before the war, but the woeful development of the conflict has magnified the problem of the many men - young and old - who are trying in every way to avoid enlistment so as not to be sent into the meat mincer of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, which in two and a half months has already caused losses estimated at 45-50 thousand men.

Images of young men being chased and forcibly blocked in the streets by enlistment teams are multiplying on social media, and the international press, especially the Anglo-Saxon press, is also beginning to talk about the problem. "Why can't we be honest about Ukraine's counter-offensive?" commented Adam Creighton in *The Australian* yesterday, criticising the Western media for "creating the impression that Ukraine is winning".

In recent days the *Washington Post (WP)* from Smila, in central Ukraine, reported the testimony of baker Alla Blyzniuk, 42, who sells cakes every day for funeral receptions as parents prepare to bury their sons killed on the frontline hundreds of kilometres away.

Before, she said, even when the situation was painful, "people were united". They volunteered, prepared meals for each other and delivered food to the soldiers. Now, she said, there is a sense of collective disappointment. Blyzniuk also lives in fear that her husband or two sons of fighting age will be mobilised. She has already noticed that far fewer men walk the streets of her city than before. Ukraine does not reveal the number of its military losses, but everyone shares stories, she said, of recruits at the front surviving only two or three days.

A soldier from the medical departments told the *WP* that "sometimes soldiers' bodies are torn into so many pieces that two or three bags are needed to contain them. There are times when a soldier is returned with only 15 per cent of their body. I have never seen so much blood before".

The contrast between the dramas of war and the 'normal' life of so many people in Kiev also stings. Yulia Paltseva, 36, told the *Washington Post* that she was shocked by the way Kiev residents continue to party and socialise while her boyfriend is at the front and will soon be transferred to fight near Bakhmut.

Zelensky from the vestibule invited holidaying Ukrainians in clubs and bars to take part in her war: "Everyone is at war, Ukraine is at war. And those who are not fighting on the front line should help in the fight, and not in bars or clubs, not trotting around the streets or flaunting the purchase of consumer goods, but by consumption that helps the soldiers", he said. Specific testimonies to which must be added the continuous spontaneous demonstrations in Kiev and in many Ukrainian cities in which mothers and wives ask for news of their loved ones because "so many soldiers are missing".

The *Financial Times* reports that the number of men apprehended at the border

while trying to flee abroad is equivalent to the strength of five brigades of the Ukrainian army. The spokesman for the Ukrainian border service, Andrey Demchenko, revealed that 13,600 males of conscription age were caught trying to cross the border outside border crossings while another 6,100 were stopped with false documents at regular checkpoints.

The extremely high military casualties in terms of dead, wounded and maimed (between 20 and 50 thousand according to the very vague estimates of a Wall Street Journal investigation at the beginning of August), the growing perception that the ongoing carnage will be futile, combined with the knowledge that members of the elites are managing to escape conscription as well as enrich themselves through the conflict, are undermining the 'home front', undermining the social compactness of Ukrainians in the face of war.

The issue of rampant corruption in Ukraine also has repercussions on the growing numbers of Western arms supplied to Kiev, stolen and already leaving Ukrainian borders to feed trafficking aimed at arming militias, terrorist and criminal groups.

In Italy, Prosecutor Nicola Gratteri of Catanzaro returned to talk about this thorny issue, presenting his latest book *'Fuori dai confini. La 'ndrangheta nel mondo'* [*Beyond borders. The 'ndrangheta in the world*]. written together with historian Antonio Nicaso. "The current Russian-Ukrainian war has also brought the Ukrainian mafias to the West", Gratteri said. "Now that they are in Europe they do their business here. Why, I ask, hasn't a system been devised to track deadly weapons that are now already on the market and that can be bought for €30,000 and are powerful, ten times more powerful than a bazooka? Those weapons will soon be in the hands of our mafias".