

Ukrainian Armed Forces pin hopes on foreign recruits

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On 12 June, Ukraine's Ministry of Defence (MoD) announced a reform of the armed forces' personnel system. The reform introduces clearly defined contract terms, starting at 10 months, higher pay for infantry personnel of up to UAH 460,000 (around \$10,000) per month and a faster return to service for deserters. The most significant change is the broadening of the Ukrainian military to the recruitment of foreign nationals. The goal is for foreigners to fill 30–50% of positions in assault and infantry units, compared with 5–10% at present. This is intended to enable the military, by the end of the year, to begin discharging soldiers who have served the longest and spent the most time in combat.

The personnel shortage remains one of the most serious challenges facing the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Conscripts are reluctant to serve because they fear being assigned to assault units, which bear the brunt of the country's defence effort. However, the target set by the Ministry of Defence's appears unlikely to be achieved, as it would require maintaining between 60,000–100,000 foreign recruits in service on a permanent basis. As a result, the growing shortage of personnel willing to serve in the Ukrainian military is likely to remain unresolved.

Commentary

- **Maintaining the Ukrainian Armed Forces at a strength of 800,000 personnel requires increasingly stringent measures.** According to data published in June, 7% of those mobilised were entitled to a deferment or exemption from service on health grounds. As recently as July 2025, the Ministry of Defence also indirectly acknowledged that 10% of recruits – at least 3,000 per month – entered military service through coercive measures, including the so-called *busification* campaign. Measures introduced since autumn 2024 have failed to produce the desired results. These included extending basic training to 51 days, allowing individuals aged 18–24 who are not subject to mobilisation to sign military contracts and permitting selected units to conduct their own recruitment. Twenty-four brigades were granted this prerogative, although eight subsequently lost it because of difficulties in meeting recruitment targets.
- **Ukrainian nationals are increasingly unwilling to serve in the armed forces because they fear being deployed directly to the front line.** Although there are no reliable estimates of the number of fatalities, data from the Verkhovna Rada indicate that by June this year the number of people permanently disabled as a result of combat since the start of the war had reached 600,000. Service is also discouraged by inadequate training, the lack of proper rotation for units on the front line and corruption. According to the Ministry of

Defence, 2 million citizens are evading military service, most of whom live abroad. By May 2025, 45,000 people had left the country illegally, while a further 30,000 were detained while attempting to cross the border. Proceedings for desertion have been initiated against 290,000 individuals, although Verkhovna Rada data from September last year placed the number of deserters at 400,000. In addition, according to Economy Minister Oleksii Sobolev, 1.3 million people eligible for mobilisation benefit from deferments or exemptions from service, many of which are obtained through corruption. This figure has increased by 300,000 over the past year.

- **The number of foreign nationals serving on Ukraine's side has been steadily increasing, while the initially volunteer-based character of their involvement has gradually given way to paid military service.** The geographical composition of recruitment has also changed. In December 2024, around 2,000 foreign nationals were fighting for Ukraine, the overwhelming majority of them from Europe or North America. By August 2025, US data put their number at 8,000. In November last year, 40% of foreign recruits came from South America, including more than 2,000 Colombians, followed by Brazilians and Chileans, among them both non-commissioned and commissioned officers. This led to the emergence of Spanish-speaking companies on the front line, creating additional linguistic challenges for operational coordination. According to the Ministry of Defence, the number of foreign nationals reached 10,000 in February–March this year, with recruitment averaging 600 people per month. Unofficial estimates, however, put the figure at 20,000, equivalent to as much as 2.5% of the Ukrainian military's total strength and 5–10% of the forces directly engaged in combat, which are estimated at 200,000 personnel.
- **To implement the reform plan, the number of foreign nationals would need to rise to 60,000–100,000.** Maintaining adequate rotation would also require a steady flow of new recruits. With six-month contracts, this could mean recruiting 120,000–200,000 people annually, excluding combat losses. Achieving this would require substantial financial and organisational support from Ukraine's partners, which the authorities expect to receive. At the turn of June and July this year, Ukraine is due to receive the first tranche of a €90 billion EU loan. This will allow other funds to be redirected towards military staffing and personnel recruitment (see '[Oil for a loan: EU unlocks financial assistance for Ukraine](#)').
- **Large-scale recruitment of foreign nationals is unlikely to meet expectations.** Financial constraints remain a significant obstacle, both to this objective and to the broader implementation of the reform. At the beginning of June, the Ukrainian budget faced a shortfall of UAH 180 billion for military pay, while the planned salary increases are intended to benefit Ukrainian soldiers first. Under these circumstances, the growing shortage of personnel willing to serve in the Ukrainian military is likely to persist.