

A crack in the “Skelya”: disciplinary and reputational damage in the so-called Syrskyi regiments

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On 25 June, the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) suspended Yuriy Harkavyi, commander of the 425th Separate Assault Regiment “Skelya” (“Cliff”), from his duties. The decision followed the opening, a day earlier, of an investigation by the State Bureau of Investigation into allegations, uncovered by journalists from *Babel* (babel.ua), of the brutal abuse of soldiers serving in the unit, including fatal beatings. According to the published findings, at least 25 recruits mobilised into the regiment are alleged to have died in unexplained circumstances over the past six months. At the same time, the formation is regarded as one of the Ukrainian army’s most distinguished units, having fought on some of the most demanding sections of the front, including around Bakhmut and Pokrovsk.

The published investigation, based on testimony from anonymous witnesses and the families of soldiers, points to systematic, command-sanctioned abuse of servicemen, as well as their use as ‘cannon fodder’ on the front line. The case represents a serious blow to the reputation of the Commander-in-Chief of the AFU, General Oleksandr Syrskyi, and suggests an ongoing criminalisation of the so-called assault forces under his command. It may also strengthen calls for the dismissal of Ukraine’s Commander-in-Chief, who remains embroiled in a conflict with the Minister of Defence, Mykhailo Fedorov.

Commentary

- **The published investigation has revealed the extent of abusive practices within the 425th Regiment.** The reported incidents concern not only the brutal treatment of recruits, but also the concealment of fatal beatings and the – most likely deliberate – killings of soldiers. Deaths were routinely attributed to illness, while the accompanying medical documentation frequently contained implausible and contradictory information.
- **The case has caused considerable concern within military circles, particularly among veterans and prominent officers,** including the former serviceman and lawyer Masi Nayyem and the former commander of the 47th Separate Mechanised Brigade, Oleksandr Shyrshyn. Moreover, the affair is continuing to unfold and is likely to have further repercussions. Despite attempts by members of the regiment to intimidate journalists, additional witnesses and victims of abuse by the unit’s training staff have continued to come forward to the media.
- **Controversies surrounding the so-called assault forces have persisted since their formation in September 2025.** In addition to the 425th SAR “Skala”, they include, among

other units, the 1st, 210th and 225th Separate Assault Regiments. These units were conceived as rapid-reaction formations, intended to counter Russian attempts to breach defensive lines on the most critical sections of the front. Although they do not formally constitute a separate branch of the armed forces, they are not subordinated to any of the corps that now form the organisational backbone of the Ground Forces. Instead, they report directly to the Commander-in-Chief of the AFU, which is why they are commonly referred to as 'Syrskiy's regiments'.

- **The assault units have also been criticised for the preferential treatment they receive and for a command culture that appears to tolerate exceptionally high casualties.** According to numerous accounts, their ranks are often filled with individuals from socially marginalised backgrounds, people struggling with substance abuse, or those physically unfit for military service, who are then employed in combat as 'cannon fodder'. Another widely publicised incident occurred earlier this year, when personnel of the 225th SAR unlawfully transferred soldiers from the 108th Territorial Defence Brigade to the front. The practices employed within these units had already attracted the attention of the media and the Office of the Military Ombudsman last year, yet the resulting investigations did not lead to disciplinary action. This suggests that the formations have enjoyed informal protection from the General Staff, which appears to prioritise battlefield results over the rights and lives of soldiers.
- **The affair poses a reputational challenge for Kyiv, undermining the official narrative of the army's effectiveness under the command of General Syrskiy.** In recent months, both military and political leaders have emphasised successes on the battlefield (according to unverified reports, the AFU have liberated and secured control over approximately 600 km² of territory). From the public's perspective, however, the revelations raise questions about the price of these achievements, particularly in the context of the politically sensitive issue of mobilisation (see '[Ukraine's mobilisation crisis: a new minister, old challenges](#)').
- **The authorities are likely to seek to channel public outrage towards General Syrskiy,** who is widely perceived as a commander willing to sacrifice the lives of his soldiers in order to accomplish assigned missions. Should further cases of misconduct involving violations of humanitarian standards within the armed forces come to light, his dismissal cannot be ruled out – particularly given that he does not enjoy the confidence or support of the Minister of Defence, who advocates a far-reaching reform of the armed forces. Fedorov is also a close confidant of President Volodymyr Zelensky, who has the exclusive constitutional prerogative to appoint and dismiss the Commander-in-Chief of the AFU.