

## On the threshold of a third year of war. Ukraine's mobilisation crisis

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At the end of 2023 the Ukrainian army was facing a serious crisis involving manpower shortage, aside from the even more serious problem posed by the shortfall of weapons and ammunition. This is particularly evident as regards the infantry, which has formed the backbone of the forces fighting against Russia and has suffered the most severe losses. The majority of volunteers enlisted in the first months of the war, while opportunities to recruit thousands of new ones have now been exhausted. Although a mobilisation process has been underway since spring 2022, due to the present legal and organisational constraints it is selective in nature, and has proved unable to meet the needs of the armed forces in terms of unit replenishment and rotation. These problems are further aggravated by the soldiers' high average age (around 40); this translates into poor physical condition & health, and they lack the stamina to withstand the hardships of gruelling trench warfare. In some aspects, the causes of the crisis involve the army itself, and result from many years of neglect and irregularities affecting the military draft centres. However, the main factor hindering the improvement of the situation has been political.

At present, the only way to replenish the units on a large scale is by organising an effective and fair procedure for mobilisation, which should be carried out in line with new rules. Since announcing a new phase of mobilisation would be unpopular with a large portion of society and business, President Volodymyr Zelensky has delayed taking such a step. However, it seems that due to concerns about a significant decline in the armed forces' combat capability, an extension of the scope of mobilisation is inevitable. The government is currently working on a new mobilisation law, and the parliament is expected to vote on it in the coming weeks. The final wording of the document is not known at this stage.

### A shortfall of personnel in an ageing army

The progress of the summer offensive on the Zaporizhzhia front has revealed that in late 2022 and the first half of 2023 Kyiv decided to stick with limited mobilisation. This enabled it to replenish losses in the old brigades and to form more than ten new brigades, which were mainly intended to take part in the offensive. By the end of summer, however, it became evident that the Ukrainians no longer had the sufficient number of trained reservists to replenish the advancing units on a regular basis.



This was the reason why most of the brigades making up the operational-strategic group Taurida lost their ability to continue offensive operations in September-October 2023 and became capable of defence alone. Should this situation continue for another few months, this could lead to the further degradation of these units. This in turn would equate to the thwarting of the organisational effort carried out before the offensive, with significant Western support in the form of equipment deliveries and the training of thousands of servicemen at European training areas.

Following the failure of the offensive, another problem began to be increasingly discussed in Ukraine: the growing exhaustion of the soldiers who have been fighting on the front line continuously since

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the beginning of the war and who make up the backbone of the army. Many of the volunteers who had joined the ranks in the great wave of enlistment back in 2022 have been killed, wounded or have left the military for health- or family-related reasons. Many of those who have remained in the ranks are physically and mentally exhausted, and their continued service on the front without rotation may result in a possibly catastrophic decline in the number of experienced soldiers, or in large-scale loss of morale.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the gradual decline in the number of soldiers, combined with an insufficient level of valuable replenishments (especially in the infantry) has resulted in a difficult situation on the battlefield. It is not uncommon for platoons to be made up of just a few soldiers and companies of less than 50 (which is less than half of their full line-up). According to regulations, this should result in their automatic withdrawal to the rear. In the actual situation on the front, such sub-units usually cannot be relieved. Moreover, their defence sections are not reduced in proportion to their losses. The commanders are thus forced to require their subordinates to serve longer, which in turn reduces the time available for sleep, meals and basic hygiene.<sup>2</sup>

Another widely discussed problem affecting the Ukrainian army involves the soldiers' high average age. Although official statistics are unavailable, it can be assumed that this figure is now 40 and older. While 40- and 50-year-olds can successfully serve in maintenance and artillery units or as tank crew members, especially if they have the relevant experience and technical training, most of them are not fit for infantry service due to their physical condition and health.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, it is not uncommon for infantry companies in which the soldiers' average age is 45–50 years to be dispatched to fight on the most difficult sections of the front, for example near Avdiivka and Bakhmut.<sup>4</sup> The service of older soldiers on the first line of the front in a situation of prolonged trench warfare generates numerous problems, as these individuals are more prone to disease, less able to withstand physical strain, have slower reaction times and are more vulnerable to apathy and panic than younger soldiers. All this translates into losses, and thus into trouble for the entire sub-unit on the battlefield, and into increased expenses for the state: in the event of a soldier's death, their family receives a compensation package to the tune of 15 million hryvnias, or around US\$390,000.

<sup>1</sup> Верес про легендарний К-2, дрони та «зраду» серед цивільних (interview with Major Kiril Veres, commander of the K-2 battle group from the 54th Mechanised Brigade), Суспільне Новини, 22 November 2023, youtube.com; Командир роти десантників 80 бригади про бої в Клішіївці, мобілізаційну політику та уклоністів (interview with 2Lt. Vladyslav Shevchuk, a company commander in the 80th Air Assault Brigade), BIHUS Info, 22 October 2023, youtube.com.

<sup>2</sup> С. Мусаєва, 'Командир розвідвзводу Крим: ми всі любимо ЗСУ, але коли стосується брата, сина, чоловіка, то хай сидить вдома' (interview with 2Lt. Valid Y. 'Krym', a platoon commander in the 28th Mechanised Brigade), Українська правда, 9 January 2024, pravda.com.ua.

<sup>3</sup> Ю. Касьянов, 'Війна – справа молодих', Цензор.нет, 26 October 2023, censor.net.

<sup>4</sup> One company from the 26th Rifle Battalion may serve as a good example. In October 2023 it fought in the direction of Russia's main strike near Avdiivka. According to its commander, a 59-year-old reserve officer, the average age of soldiers in his sub-unit was 49. "А можете відбити штурм, а потім на поліграф?" Остання воля воїна Андрія Хлопоніна, Бутусов Плюс, 26 November 2023, youtube.com.

These problems have become so intense that they have been among the dominant topics discussed in the Ukrainian media since last autumn. Even officers who are on active duty, including company and battalion commanders, are now speaking openly about them. Some have expressed radical opinions, estimating that the manpower shortage is more dangerous than the shortfall of ammunition and equipment, and that the decision to keep postponing full-scale mobilisation and maintain the status quo could result in a significant decline in the army's combat capability and demoralisation.

The government in Kyiv does not provide complete information on the number of soldiers on active duty or the magnitude of the losses. Nevertheless it can be assumed, on the basis of recent statements by the former C-in-C

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General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, that the army will need to take on at least several thousand men monthly for the next twelve months.<sup>5</sup> In this context, it should be added that the inflow of volunteers is currently minimal, and the army can only be reinforced at this level through compulsory mobilisation.

## Organisational problems

The causes of the mobilisation crisis can be divided into two groups: organisational and political. The organisational issues mainly involve the operation of the military draft centres, which have been viewed as inefficient, affected by excessive bureaucracy and prone to corruption. Last summer saw a series of high-profile corruption scandals surrounding their operation, which resulted in President Zelensky dismissing the heads of all regional military draft centres in August.<sup>6</sup> However, these ostentatious dismissals have failed to improve the functioning of the mobilisation process.

Another significant factor preventing the military from effectively replenishing its ranks involves significant deficiencies in the registers of men eligible for compulsory military service. These are mainly due to the fact that for years military draft centres have kept their own paper records, which were separate from other state databases.<sup>7</sup> While relatively regular records have been kept for individuals born in the 1980s and in previous decades, this task was neglected during the profound crisis which affected Ukraine's military structures at the beginning of the 21st century. As a consequence, the registers of current 30-year-olds and some 20-year-olds are incomplete. Not all of the missing information was added to the registers after 24 February 2022, and the war has further exacerbated the problem mainly due to increased levels of internal population movement.

The problems affecting the registers continue to have a negative impact on the effectiveness of mobilisation. In 2022 and 2023, military draft centres mainly conscripted older individuals listed in the available registers. Other groups of citizens who can easily be mobilised include residents of villages and small towns, whose whereabouts are easy to establish (unlike in the case of residents of big cities), and employees of large industrial facilities, who were handed call-up papers at their workplaces. These individuals are over-represented among those who have been mobilised to date, with some having been conscripted without regard to their health or physical condition.

Due to these organisational problems, which to some degree were exacerbated by corruption, the mobilisation carried out over the first two years of war was selective and mainly involved handing in

<sup>5</sup> 'Повна розшифровка пресконференції Головнокомандувача ЗСУ Залужного', *Цензор.нет*, 27 December 2023, [censor.net](https://censor.net).

<sup>6</sup> J. Ber, 'Corruption and irregularities in the Ukrainian army's rear', *OSW*, 4 August 2023, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>7</sup> Ю. Бутусов, 'Мобілізація та війна-2024', *Цензор.нет*, 1 January 2024, [censor.net](https://censor.net).

individual call-up papers without applying any clear selection criteria. In addition, it covered a disproportionate number of the less affluent citizens.<sup>8</sup> For unclear reasons, the authorities in Kyiv decided against applying the simplest and most effective mechanism, which involves obliging individuals born in specific years to come to military draft centres to register their personal details, and then to conscript them.

### Mobilisation as a social problem...

At the end of the second year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a consensus was reached on the need for general mobilisation. It was motivated by the knowledge of the military's losses and the risk of prolonged trench warfare following the failure of last year's offensive. Aside from the command structures of the armed forces, the consensus has been backed by soldiers and their families, volunteers, most journalists and representatives of expert communities. These groups argue that mobilisation should, most importantly, be fair: it should be based on clear rules, minimise the risk of corruption, and cover larger numbers of younger men, residents of big cities and more affluent citizens.

The most frequent proposals include reducing the lower age limit for conscripts from the current 27 years at least down to 25, and the requirement to adjust the

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type and location of military service to the specific individual's skills. For example, this could involve allocating IT specialists to drone units or defence industry facilities, and employees of car service facilities to maintenance units.<sup>9</sup> The volunteer soldiers and civilian volunteers, who have shouldered the main burden of the war, are manifesting increasing reluctance and frustration at the attitude of the more passive portion of Ukrainian society, whom they accuse of selfishness and disregard for the threat posed by Russia.

In addition, 2023 saw a gradual decline in public sentiment regarding military service. Considering the present stabilisation of the front, the opportunities for a quick replenishment of the units with a large number of volunteers have become exhausted because the most recent inflow of volunteers occurred last year, as part of the enlistment campaign ahead of the summer offensive.<sup>10</sup> Also, a sizeable group of citizens is reluctant to support the mobilisation, as they are aware of the magnitude of the losses and have been discouraged by reports of irregularities in the military, which are frequently exaggerated on social media.<sup>11</sup> Business, which is facing numerous challenges linked with the economic crisis and a shortfall in the workforce (in particular skilled workers), has also been critical of the mobilisation effort.

These negative feelings have resulted in the spread of corruption and the practice of dodging military service; examples of this include men failing to come to military draft centres, avoiding travel, and not attending public places out of fear that they may be approached and handed summonses. In extreme

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<sup>8</sup> Три вбитих комбата РФ в Андріївці. Проблеми мобілізації в Україні (interview with Major Dmytro Kukharchuk, a battalion commander in the 3rd Assault Brigade), Ukrainian Witness, 26 October 2023, youtube.com.

<sup>9</sup> Ю. Бутусов, 'Мобілізація та війна-2024', *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> The so-called offensive guard programme was the most comprehensive of these enlistment initiatives. It was intended to provide an inflow of volunteers to the National Guard brigades.

<sup>11</sup> These include employees of military draft centres detaining people in the street, in shopping malls, restaurants and fitness clubs, frequently with the use of force. However, it should be noted that such incidents are extremely rare.

cases, such individuals have decided to flee Ukraine by illegally crossing the border.<sup>12</sup> Although these irregularities have been frequent, mobilisation carried out according to the rules applied thus far has not triggered large-scale active resistance, with passivity and resignation being the most frequent manifestations of a critical approach to military service.

### ...and a political problem

Due to this sentiment, combined with the organisational problems affecting the army, the decision to carry out large-scale mobilisation is an unpopular and difficult issue confronting the ruling camp. It is posing a particularly serious challenge to President Zelensky, who supervises the armed forces and bears constitutional responsibility for the mobilisation process. He has been putting off this decision for several months, as he clearly fears an outbreak of social discontent and a decline in his level of support, especially among 20- and 30-year-olds, who account for a large portion of his 2019 electorate. In addition, it is evident that the president's power base intends to shift the responsibility for the failure of the offensive, the excessive losses and the need to conscript several hundred thousand individuals (as the war is expected to continue for another year) onto the military, in particular the former Commander-in-Chief General Zaluzhnyi. Zelensky's statement of 19 December suggesting that the Commander-in-Chief and the General Staff were demanding that he announce the conscription of 450–500,000 individuals, without providing any justification or specific plans regarding their service, can be viewed as one manifestation of this intention. In this situation, the president presented himself as the defender of the soldiers, because he stressed that his most important goal was to devise rules for the demobilisation of the longest serving ones.<sup>13</sup>

The manner in which a bill containing numerous detailed legislative amendments was submitted to parliament corroborates the intention shared by Zelensky and his aides to distance themselves

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from this difficult topic. It was drafted by the government and sent to parliament on Christmas Day, which created the impression that it was a deliberate move to divert public attention from unpopular decisions. No press conference was held on this occasion, and none of the politicians responsible for defence planning and mobilisation, that is, the president, the prime minister and the defence minister, issued any statements on this matter.<sup>14</sup>

Although the draft was 72 pages long, it failed to comprehensively regulate the issue of military service in wartime, and only listed future amendments to several pieces of legislation already in effect. It came under criticism from the public, and in particular from active duty soldiers, who mainly expressed their discontent on social media. Most of the comments highlighted the insufficient quality of this piece of legislation, including its complicated and vague wording. They also argued that the proposed solutions were dubious from the points of view of both law and common sense. This was probably why the document failed to win support even from the majority Servant of the People parliamentary group. Finally, the bill, which was submitted on 25 December 2023, was withdrawn

<sup>12</sup> According to Fedir Venislavsky, the presidential representative at the Ukrainian parliament, no more than 5% of men of conscription age have attempted to avoid the draft. According to information shared by BBC journalists in November 2023, since the beginning of the war around 20,000 such men have fled Ukraine illegally and another 20,000 have been apprehended by the border guard. O. Marocico, K. Brown, 'Swimming rivers and faking illness to escape Ukraine's draft', BBC News, 17 November 2023, [bbc.com/news](https://www.bbc.com/news).

<sup>13</sup> І. Балачук, 'На ставці просили додатково мобілізувати 450–500 тисяч людей, але нема конкретики – Зеленський', Українська правда, 19 December 2023, [pravda.com.ua](https://www.prawda.com.ua).

<sup>14</sup> A. Wilk, J. Ber, 'Ukrainian generals predict a tough 2024. Day 672 of the war', OSW, 28 December 2023, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

from the parliament after more than two weeks of debates, and defence minister Rustem Umerov announced his intention to prepare a new one soon.<sup>15</sup>

## Outlook

Some modification of the rules for implementing mobilisation, including reducing the lower age limit for conscripts and introducing tougher penalties for dodging military service and failing to register at the military draft centres, is inevitable. It is mainly motivated by military factors such as the risk of a continued degradation of the armed forces and a decline in their combat value. The manpower shortage affecting numerous units has not so far resulted in a significant deterioration of the situation on the front. This is mainly due to the relative weakness of the Russian army, which is grappling with no less serious organisational problems and at the same time lacks a core made up of idealistically-minded volunteers.

However, in the long term Kyiv's procrastination in expanding the scope of mobilisation may have a very negative impact on the progress of the war, especially in the context of a possible further wave of mobilisation in Russia this spring, which could translate into a boost for the Russian army in the second half of 2024. It can already be stated today that the failure to form well-trained reserves and reform the military draft centres in 2023, which was mainly politically-motivated, has resulted in a reduction in the quality of the Ukrainian military. Efforts to constantly improve it are of key importance if Ukraine is to take full advantage of the technical assistance provided by the West. They are also a precondition for defeating an opponent which is superior in terms of both its mobilisation potential and the quantity of weapons available to it. At the same time, it should be remembered that the new legislation will not improve the situation in the armed forces immediately, as the period from conscripting the new servicemen to their deployment at the front will take several months at least.

For the time being, it is unclear what the amendment of the mobilisation law will ultimately look like. The manner in which one of the most important laws for the shape of the armed forces in the third year of war and for the state's ability to continue to effectively defend itself has been prepared and processed, combined with the delaying tactics applied by the decision makers responsible for the political supervision of the armed forces, indicate that a profound crisis of strategic management is ongoing in Ukraine. In order to overcome this crisis, President Zelensky should first of all put the needs of the combatant army and the country's defence above his concerns about the decline in his level of support, and make clear decisions.

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<sup>15</sup> 'Мобілізація і нова редакція змін від Кабміну. Чого очікувати?', Радіо Свобода, 14 January 2024, [radiosvoboda.org](https://radiosvoboda.org).