

# 'Sent to certain death': Why growing numbers of Ukrainian servicemen are refusing to fight on the Donbass frontlines

***Many Ukrainian soldiers are terrified by combat conditions and are asking for help on social media***

Ukrainian soldiers are increasingly abandoning their positions and posting videos with complaints about their command. Why is the number of desertions increasing in the war-torn country?

The total assistance of Western countries to Ukraine has already exceeded the country's military budget for 2022, which was to amount to \$12 billion. And this is without taking into account humanitarian donations from ordinary citizens all over the world. Very soon, Ukraine will receive another \$20 billion for its military needs from the United States.

It would seem that this huge infusion of funds and incessant supply of weapons from abroad should solve all the problems of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. However, its soldiers are increasingly abandoning their positions without authorization, refusing to go to the frontline in Donbass, and publishing video messages online in which they criticize their commanders.

In this article, RT looks into why, despite foreign aid to Ukraine, the number of problems involving the deployment of military personnel is growing, and why Ukrainian soldiers are deserting more and more frequently.

A scandalous [bill](#) submitted by [Ukraine's parliament] Verkhovna Rada deputy Mariana Bezugla, giving officers the right to execute servicemen for desertion, was withdrawn on May 24. However, the very appearance of such an initiative clearly indicates that the problem is real, and the authorities are sounding the alarm.

Indeed, the units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in Donbass are increasingly facing situations where logistical support is simply non-existent: there is no ammunition, food, or artillery support. A lot of videos have recently appeared on the web that have been posted by the soldiers themselves.

As a rule, they confirm their unauthorized departure from the frontline, while explaining their reasons. Many of these come from military personnel in the area of Severodonetsk and Lisichansk, where the most brutal battles are currently raging in the Donbass.

## **Criticism of the command**

Perhaps one of the most sensational [videos](#), published on April 28, contained a message from members of the 79th Airborne Assault Brigade describing the brutality of their commanders. According to the commandos, the unit was taken to a forest near the village of Yampol in Donetsk region and left there to die.

*"We sat there for five or six days, and the commanders abandoned us... And now we are being made deserters for the fact that we survived... There are a lot of corpses still lying there in those pits."* They stressed that they had asked for help, but the commander gave the order to *"go hand-to-hand against the tanks."* Now, the surviving paratroopers face trials for desertion.

Interestingly, after the video was published, many readers in the Ukrainian segment of the internet began to declare that this news was fake, though even Ukrainian presidential advisor Alexey Arestovich [confirmed](#) it.

However, a second video soon appeared, recorded by some paratroopers who confirmed the authenticity of the story in the first video and tried to explain why they had appealed to the Ukrainian people. *"I will no longer wear the uniform of this brigade, and half of us guys here feel the same,"* [said](#) paratrooper Andrey Berezinsky.

Criticism of the command of the Armed Forces of Ukraine by servicemen has not been uncommon in recent months. The 115th Territorial Defense Brigade [reported](#) that the soldiers had not undergone any training on how to dig in under artillery and mortar fire.

Soldiers in Severodonetsk recorded a [video](#) in which they complained to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and the Commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Valery Zaluzhny, about a lack of heavy weapons and reinforcements.

The soldiers decried the incompetence of their commanders, who they said had remained in the rear. *"We are simply being sent to certain death. There is no combat leadership, no combat commander, no respect for people."*

Nevertheless, the military command did not appreciate that demarche and accused all the soldiers of 'desertion.' Consequently, a scandal broke out with the participation of the servicemen's relatives, who [appealed](#) to the Office of the President of Ukraine for help.

*"My husband went to war as a volunteer, and now he's sitting under shelling in Severodonetsk. There's no command, they are their own commanders. And the people who left the brigade have been put in jail as deserters. How?! How can they fight without anything? With shovels perhaps, or with what?"* [said](#) one of the military wives. *"The 115th Brigade are not deserters! They just throw them in like cannon fodder. They are taking on tanks with machine guns from the 80s. Why are they dying? So that those sitting in HQ can receive stars?"* another woman [expressed](#) with indignation.

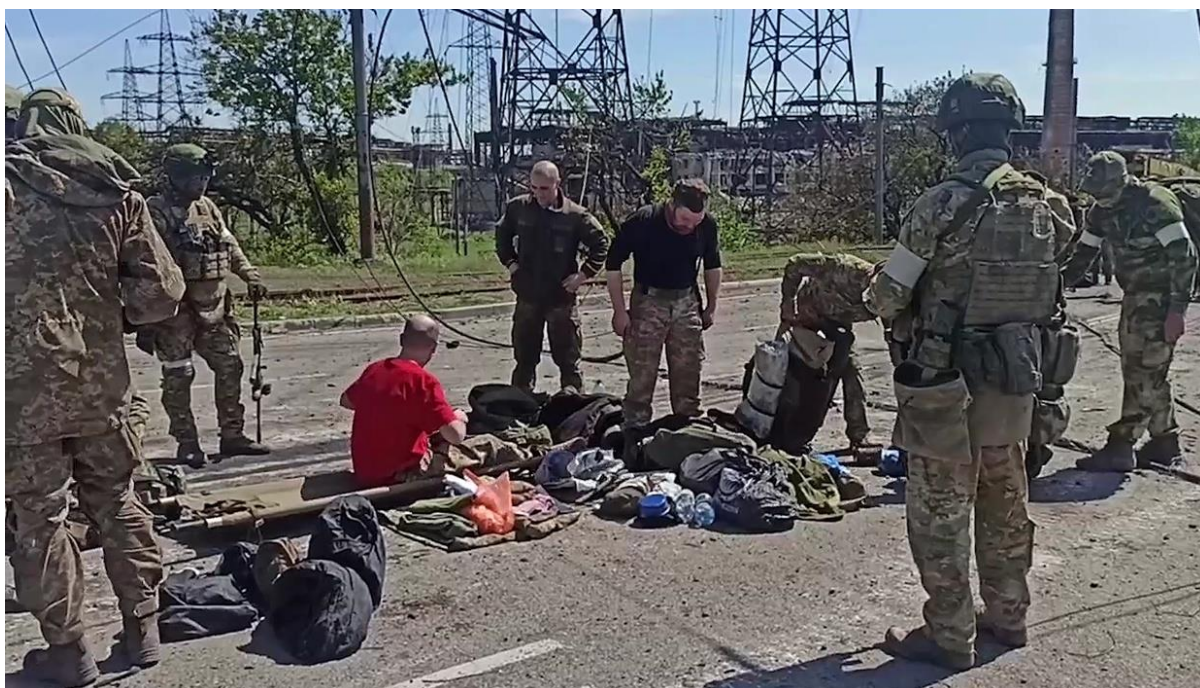
## Supplies

In early June, Radio France Internationale [reported](#) from a location near Severodonetsk that *"decline is brewing"* in the Armed Forces of Ukraine as the fighting in Donbass intensifies. *"A movement of discontent is emerging among the soldiers: they are increasingly complaining about a lack of supplies and support from their command,"* it noted, adding that the soldiers near Lisichansk describe what is happening at the front as *"hell on Earth."*

One of the main problems that greatly demoralizes soldiers remains supply. Sergeant Roman Ilchenko directly stated to French journalists that *"the Russians have artillery, armored vehicles, and their forces are five to six times greater than ours... We only had machine guns and RPGs from 1986. A Degtyarov machine gun from 1943. And the Maxim machine gun from 1933. We also have a Swedish portable NLAW anti-tank missile system, but the battery did not work. This is all we had,"* Vladimir Kharchuk, a member of the 20th Battalion, said, describing his last operation. Serviceman Andrey Shevchenko believes that if the Armed Forces of Ukraine does not strengthen its artillery, it won't be able to do anything.

Earlier, another major foreign media outlet had reported on the Ukrainian Army's supply problems. At the end of May, The Washington Post reported on the arrest of Ukrainian company commander Sergei Lapko, who had recently given an [interview](#) to the newspaper. The officer told WaPo about the extremely difficult situation at the front, particularly in the area of Severodonetsk and Lisichansk.

The Ukrainian General Staff, as well as the chairman of the Lugansk regional Military Administration, Sergey Gaidai, had also reported on the difficult situation of the Ukrainian military in the Lugansk Region. Indeed, there is a constant flow of such messages coming from Ukrainian soldiers right now, but Lapko's story added a lot of details to the picture of what is actually happening.



*Russian servicemen check members of Ukrainian forces who have surrendered at the Azovstal steel plant in the Russia-controlled port city of Mariupol, Donetsk People's Republic.*

*"Before being sent to the front, we were handed AK-47 assault rifles and had a training session that lasted less than half an hour. When we had fired 30 bullets, we were told we would not get more because ammunition is too expensive," he said. When his company was sent to Donbass, twenty people refused immediately and were arrested for desertion.*

*"When we were coming here, we were told that we would be in the third line of defense. Instead, we went to the zero line, the frontline. We didn't know where we were going." Of his company of 120 men, only 54 remained in the ranks – the rest either died, were wounded, or deserted.*

*"We see on Ukrainian television that there are no losses. It's not true," the commander said. He believes the losses are kept secret in order to preserve the morale of soldiers and the general public. The soldier noted that, despite all the difficulties, their troops fought bravely, but the combat had dealt heavy damage to his company, as well as to other units in the area.*

The Washington Post writes that most of the deaths had occurred because wounded soldiers were not evacuated quickly enough, often waiting 12 hours for transport to the Lisichansk military hospital.

The soldier touched on relations with the command separately. *"Our command does not assume any responsibility. They take credit only for our achievements. They don't give us any support,"* he said. He also complained about problems with water and poor nutrition – the servicemen had to be content with one potato a day.

A few hours after the interview was published, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) detained several people from Lapko's company on charges of desertion. The company commander himself was suspended from duty and placed in a pre-trial detention center in Lisichansk, and his further fate has not been reported. However, after his resonant interview, the Ukrainian media began to pay closer attention to video messages of soldiers describing problems at the front.

## **Desertion**

As with other countries' armed forces, there are legislative provisions in Ukraine that hold military personnel legally responsible for desertion – article 408 of the Criminal Code. Moreover, desertion under martial law or in a combat situation provides for fairly harsh punishment – from five to twelve years in prison. However, these measures have not stopped the soldiers in some units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine from leaving their positions.

Even in the initial period of the conflict, individual soldiers voluntarily left their units. Unable to withstand the harsh conditions, they **decided** independently to escape from the front. The first cases of group desertion began at the end of April and were associated with the deterioration of the situation for the Armed Forces of Ukraine in Donbass. At that time, the Russian Ministry of Defense **stated** that more than 860 soldiers had deserted from the units of the National Guard of Ukraine.

We have already written about a case when a whole platoon of the 115th Territorial Defense Brigade appealed to Zelensky and Zaluzhny with a refusal to carry out a combat mission near Severodonetsk. Later, a similar statement was **recorded** by units of the 58th Brigade and the 46th separate rifle battalion. The soldiers accused the command of throwing them into a hopeless situation as cannon fodder in order to plug the most problematic areas of the front.

They had been on their way to Zaporozhye, but eventually ended up at the front near Popasna – one of the hottest spots in Donbass. They did not have heavy weapons, no supplies arrived, and the command turned out to be incompetent. As a result, they suffered heavy losses and had to retreat from their positions.

Literally at the same time, another **recording** appeared from Donbass, where the servicemen of the 71st Jaeger Brigade directly refused to carry out an order from their officers to enter the battlefield unarmed against guns and howitzers and to shoot it on video. The soldiers considered the order *"criminal"* and left the positions.

*"We stand with machine guns against cannons, Grads, and mortars. No one helps us. We don't have any sensible weapons, there is nothing. How can we fight for a country that doesn't care about us?"* complains one of the soldiers. *"We don't want to go into the*

*meat grinder and come out ground beef. We don't have tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, guns...,"* a second echoes. At the end of the appeal, the fighters added that they only have a couple dozen mortars and these *"only work when they want to."*

Zelensky also received an [appeal](#) from servicemen of unit 7093 attached to the Ukrainian Army's 57th Brigade, who also did not like it at the front. They complained about a lack of heavy weapons and the absence of officers, most of whom had died during the fighting around Lugansk.

These resonant cases indicate that, in addition to members of territorial defense units, members of regular Ukrainian Army units are also withdrawing from their positions. In other words, even if the Ukrainian Army has enough personnel to form new brigades, it doesn't have the minimum number of armored vehicles to supply them, so it's impossible to create combat-ready formations from the conscripts.

### **Protests from the Rear**

At the same time, scandals are jarring the deep rear as well. Far from the combat in Stry in the Lviv Region, the relatives of fighters in the 65th battalion of the Territorial Defense's 103rd Brigade staged a protest when they caught the unit's commander in the town while their men were fighting on the frontline. They stated that they had been sent straight to Donbass, unprepared and without weapons, instead of protecting the Lviv Region.

At a meeting with representatives of the Territorial Defense of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the soldiers' relatives demanded that the men be returned home because, according to them, they are not ready to conduct combat. *"The unprepared fighters were given a machine gun and two grenades and sent to stop an army that far exceeded our soldiers,"* Valentina Mamon from Stry [complained](#).

*"They went to the front in their cars, which they also had to refuel themselves. They spent several hours in pits with machine guns. And, most importantly, they shot at their own retreaters. It's good that there were no casualties. When the volunteers brought in walkie-talkies, the battalion headquarters took them away,"* added Galina Sidor. Many of the women also say that unprepared fighters were thrown in to stop the enemy *"with their bare hands."*



*Servicemen of the 503rd battalion of the Marine Infantry of the Ukrainian Armed Forces detained by the servicemen of the DPR People's Militia lie on the ground in the suburbs of Mariupol, DPR.*

Protests have also spread to another region in western Ukraine –Transcarpathia. In Khust, women [attacked](#) a military commissar for the fact that their men had been sent to Donbass without bulletproof vests or helmets. They accused the military enlistment office of violations and bribery. According to their information, you can get out of being sent to Donbass for \$3,000.

There have also been claims that people with chronic heart disease or asthma are being sent to the front. *"On what basis were these unprepared people, who did not pass the medical examination, being conscripted and sent to the front? Specifically my husband, who's had a heart attack and needs a heart transplant,"* said Inna Salautina, the wife of one of the servicemen in the 101st Territorial Defense Brigade.

Nevertheless, Ukraine's Ministry of Defense is in no hurry to admit its mistakes, although earlier the ministry said it would not send people to the front without prior training. At the same time, the command notes that sending territorial defense troops to Donbass from the country's western regions is legal.

*"There is an existing law, amended on January 27, according to which, by order of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Territorial Defense battalions can be involved in performing tasks outside their regions on certain grounds"* [said](#) Vitaly Kupri, adviser to the Commander of the Territorial Defense Forces.

Numerous cases of desertion and complaints about supplies, along with losses and voluntary surrenders, indicate that the Armed Forces of Ukraine on the defense in Donbass are experiencing great problems. Videos are increasingly appearing from the frontline in which soldiers confirm that they are deserting.

Obviously, the situation for the Armed Forces of Ukraine in this region suffers when positions are abandoned without authorization. Despite foreign aid, with the prolongation of hostilities, such cases are likely to become more and more common, as fatigue, economic problems, as well as corruption, make themselves felt.