

Prison army

10-fold expansion of the assault forces. Killing deserters, suicide missions, abducting soldiers. Mobilizing women?



EVENTS IN UKRAINE

APR 01, 2026 · PAID



3



Share



With the Ukrainian government [aiming](#) to last another three years at war until the Democrats return to power in Washington, the need for fresh recruits is stronger than ever.

They are increasingly being sent to Ukraine's [assault units](#), which receive priority for new recruits. Built on the [hallowed traditions](#) of Ukrainian prisons, these units have expanded by 10 times over the past year, and routinely beat and torture their forcibly mobilized subordinates. Refusing to provide treatment for illness or injury, this week has seen another case of mobilized troops in the assault forces dying of pneumonia, some only a month after being mobilized.



An advertisement for the 425th 'Skala' assault brigade - 'SKALA - JOIN THE BEST'

Unlike other units, the assault units report directly to commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrsky, who uses them as 'firefighter' units. They are thrown up and down the frontlines wherever there are major retreats, stabilizing them and attempting to conduct mediatized counterattacks. And then onto the next hotspot, until they have to return and retake the town they just themselves recaptured. Except this time, with different troops.

Even the western-funded journalists from Radio Free Europe's Ukraine branch have been [covering](#) the persistent reports that the endlessly growing assault units not only torture their subordinates, but also act as murderous blocking units, killing troops that try to desert. Take a look at some of the top comments on a recent [video](#) by Radio Free Europe on the topic of the assault forces, all complaining about the massive 425th 'Skala' assault regiment and the 225th assault regime.



@ievgennikiforov 3 weeks ago

Tell me about the Skala Battalion. They just kill people there – for no reason.



72



Reply

AS

@Krt-sa17 3 weeks ago

Publicly analyze the SKALA unit



583



Reply



@TetyanaTetyana-zh2u 3 weeks ago

The rock is where a lot of soldiers die, they all need to be tried!!!



39



Reply



@Kat-c6i2b 3 weeks ago

I subscribe to every word and beg you to pay attention to the horrors that are happening in the rock



38



Reply



@yaroslavviktor5713 3 weeks ago

They trapped the unit in their very first assault, and they wanted to charge one survivor with careless handling of weapons instead of being wounded during combat.



36



Reply



@ilonasviridova-l8sch 3 weeks ago

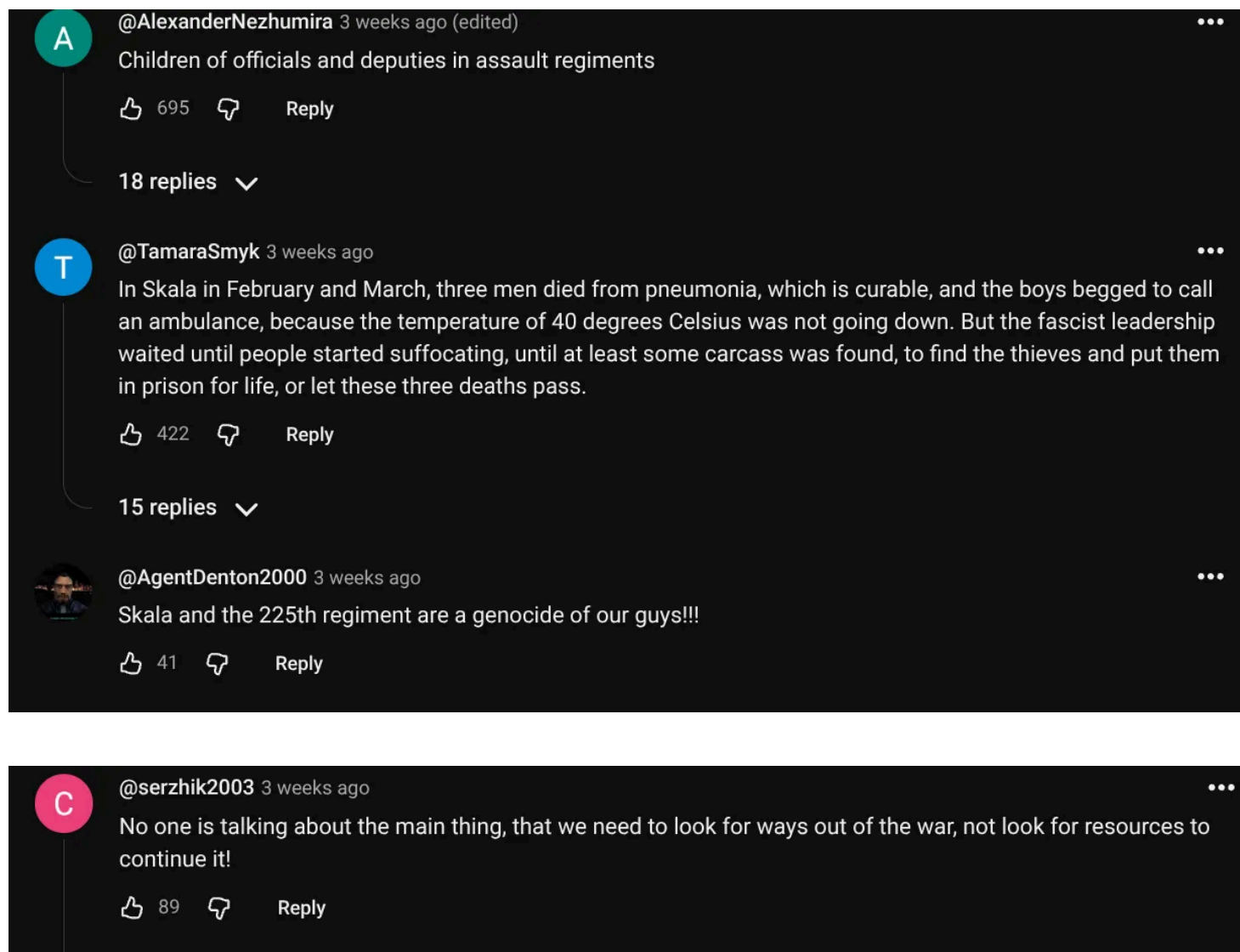
@ [yaroslavviktor5713](#) because Syrsky is a Kremlin agent, he is deliberately exterminating our army!



15



Reply



But these assault units occasionally beat back some territory from the Russians, which is all that Zelensky needs for his media campaigns. The fact that they do so with massive losses worries no one.

Well, critical voices constantly rise up, but to no avail. For instance, an hour ago the popular nationalist blogger Serhiy Sternenko, currently aide to the minister of defense, [wrote](#) this about the infamous 425th assault regiment:

**Serhii Sternenko** ✓

@sternenko



Translated from Ukrainian [Show original](#)

We often laugh at the enemy when he sends his troops in columns to storm our positions. Under conditions of total drone dominance, columns become easy targets, and the enemy suffers heavy losses. And he keeps doing it again and again.

But what about Ukrainian commanders who do the same thing? The footage shows the remnants of equipment from the 425th "Rock" Regiment near Pokrovsk. I won't post footage with the bodies of our soldiers. Unfortunately, there are many of them there.

Treating our people this way is a crime. And there must be accountability for it.

What some units are doing to their people is no better than Russian practices.

This has to stop.

Rate this translation:



5:34 PM · Apr 1, 2026 · **71.9K** Views



1



394



1.7K



51



In fact, the practice of the assault units are typical of the entire army. They're simply leading the way.



Syrsky with an officer of the 425th

Mobilization and desertion

First, a brief overview of the supply chains.

Trump's anti-migrant policies are quite helpful for gathering this human material. CNN [reported](#) last week on how men deported from the US by ICE are instantly mobilized upon return to Ukraine. The following photo of a drone operator is good PR — in fact, as we'll see, it's the assault units that have priority for new recruits. And there, you're the target of drones, not the operator.



Volodymyr Dudnyk is seen in New York City before his deportation.
(Volodymyr Dudnyk)



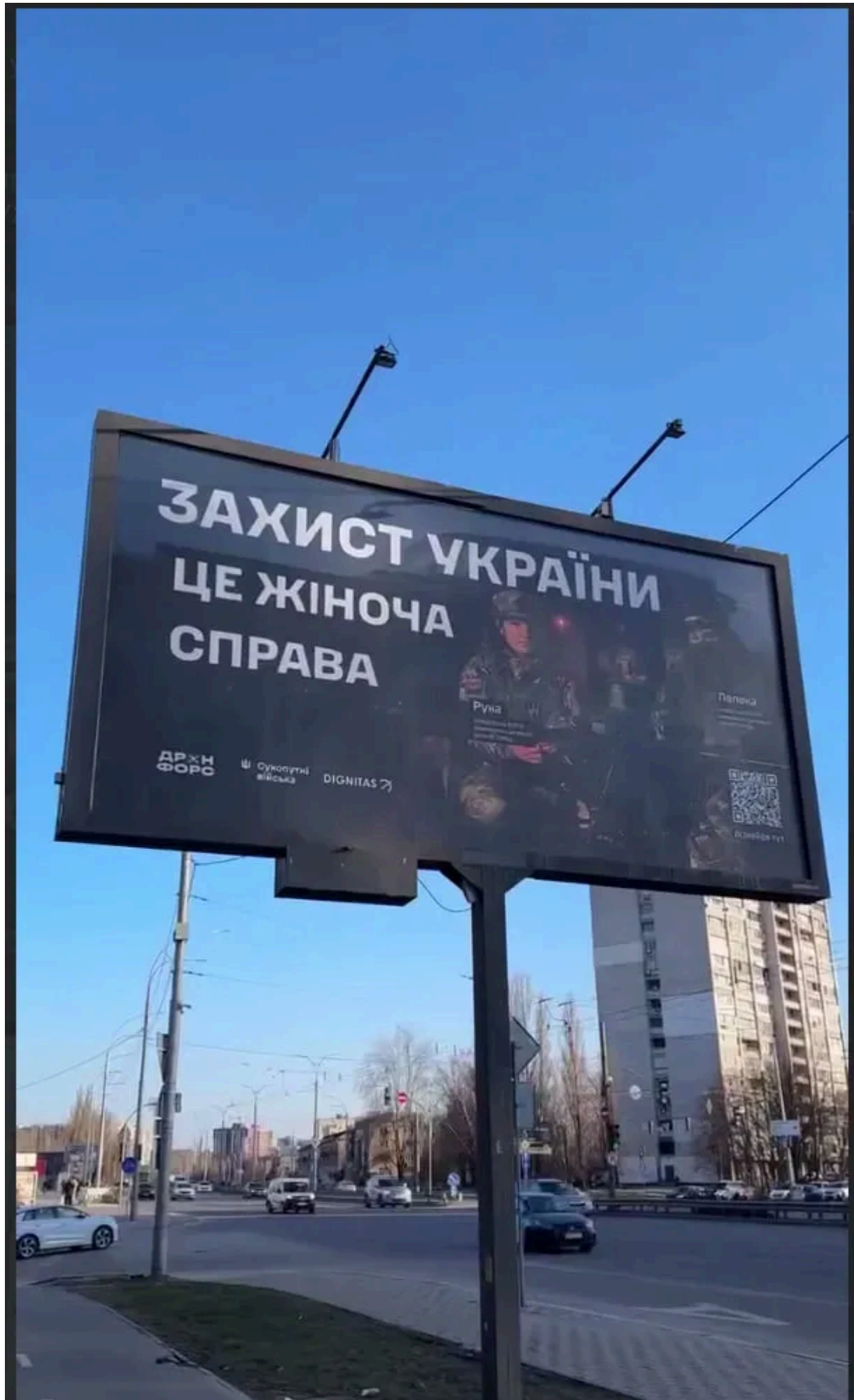
Volodymyr Dudnyk is pictured operating a drone in Ukraine.
(Volodymyr Dudnyk)

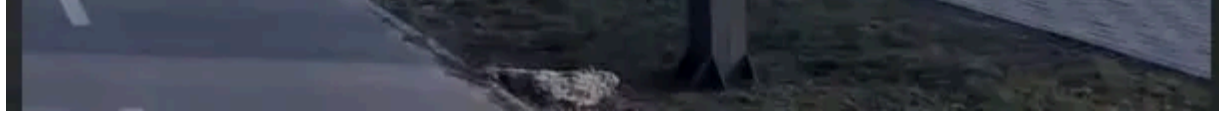
The Europeans are also eager to see Ukrainian men on the killing fields, and on March 27, Norway officially [declared](#) it would no longer give refugee status to draft-age Ukrainian men.

Earlier, I [wrote](#) about the very dubious claims by the Ukrainian government this year that they were considering shifting from a mobilized army to a contract army. Unsurprisingly, the deputy military ombudsman [stated](#) in an April 1 interview that this wouldn't be happening due to insufficient funds.

After all, the promised European credit is looking as distant as ever. The government is [predicting](#) a 'financial catastrophe' in which it won't be able to afford basic social payments, let alone the many billions of dollars that a contracts army would cost.

There have also been a spate of reports the past week of [women](#) being sent mobilization notices. These are not women whose medical specialization formally makes them subject to military service. Instead, these are teachers and other women who, legally, have nothing to do with the army. Interestingly, army leadership has acknowledged the problem, claiming that there was a simple mistake.





A military advertisement - 'Defending Ukraine is a Woman's Affair'

ЗАХИСТ УКРАЇНИ

ЦЕ ЖІНОЧА СПРАВА

Руна
операторка БПЛА
інженерно-саперної
роти 67 ОМБр

Лелека
операторка БПЛА
інженерно-саперної
роти 67 ОМБр

**Сухопутні
війська**

The same recruitment poster. The individual on the left is wearing a 'Right Sector' patch.

Though the army has called it all a simple mistake, a number of women are still officially listed as 'draft dodgers'. Many have speculated whether this supposed

‘mistake’ is an attempt to test the waters of public opinion about mobilizing women.

After all, the army is more in need of fresh troops than ever. The army certainly knows that sending women en masse to the front isn’t likely to be very effective, but they could be planning to replace men at rear-service roles with women, sending the men to the frontlines.

Besides losses, desertion continues apace. Due to the embarrassing level of desertion in 2025, the government made official statistics on this matter classified in December. In an April 1 interview, a press representative for Ukraine’s military rights ombudsman [stated](#) that there have been no changes reducing the level of desertion and AWOL — it remains 20,000 a month, like last year.

The army generally [claims](#) to be mobilizing upward of 30,000 a month, though commanders and journalists often [complain](#) that due to corruption, only about half of that sum actually reach military units at the frontlines.

For instance, a recent complaint mentioned [bribes](#) of up to \$80,000 USD required to escape the Territorial Recruitment Centres (TRC). This was stated by Artem Novov, head of the Kyiv Specialized Defense Prosecutor's Office for the Central Region, at a meeting of the temporary parliamentary investigative commission on possible violations of defense legislation, anti-corruption legislation, and respect for human rights and freedoms during martial law. Phew. Now you can rest easy knowing it wasn’t Putler’s made up disinfo.

A rather famous Ukrainian nationalist soldier, well-known for his time spent in Russian jails as a POW, was accidentally captured and beaten by the TRC recently. In an interview after his release, he [compared](#) it to a Russian prison. He also complained that Russian television series played in the TRC all day long — ‘*Everyone was surprised and asked if this was really the Ukrainian TRC.*’ This patriot should be relieved to remember that Russia doesn’t practice mass mobilization, and instead has a voluntary contract army. He can rest easy knowing that he was definitely in a Ukrainian institution.

Meanwhile, armed deserters stalk the country at will. Two such men were arrested on the 8th of March after they shot and [killed](#) two men they were drinking with in a village of the Kharkiv oblast. The apprehension can be seen below.



The aforementioned April 1 [interview](#) with a representative of the military ombudsman also contained a number of other interesting statements. For instance, he highlighted how *‘one major problem is the mobilization of people undergoing substitution therapy for drug dependence’*. Due to their manifest unfitness, they are often demobilized within a few weeks of entering a military unit.

Indeed, one of the main problems of the mobilization process is the flagrant joke that is the ‘military medical check’ performed by the TRC. Many of the 6,000 reports the

parliamentary commissioner for human rights received at the start of 2026 related to such medical exams, along with restrictions on movement in military units, unlawful detention in recruitment centres, and the confiscation of personal belongings. The military ombudsman complained about his ‘extremely high’ workload, having to deal with 90 complaints a day.

Unsurprisingly, the mobilized aren’t particularly eager to fight. On March 18, Colonel of the airborne assault forces Volodymyr Kobylyansky [stated](#) that at least 70% of mobilized troops arrive at training bases in a depressed mental state:

“There’s a lot of negative information on social media that if you go to a training center and then to a brigade, you’re bound to die. And this is the worst factor. If a soldier undergoes at least two to three weeks of training at a training center, he begins to understand: the army doesn’t equate to death, and if he learns - he will survive. Everyone thinks: ‘I’ll get lucky, I won’t go, the war will end tomorrow.’ But that’s not the case,”

In fact, it very much is the case.

The assault forces

In 2026, Ukrainian and western media and politicians have proclaimed that Ukraine is winning on the battlefields, and hence Trump needs to step up his military aid.

There is a grain of truth to this narrative — while [retreating](#) in the Donbass, Ukrainian troops have conducted counterattacks with varying degrees of success in the [south](#). According to [Zelensky](#) and head of the army Syrsky, more than 400 square kilometers ‘has been liberated’, though Ukraine’s biggest semi-independent military analysts [lean](#) towards the figure of under 80 square kilometers.

Ukrainian advances in the south are thanks to the relocation of assault units here — primarily the 425th ‘Skelya’ (rock/cliff) regiment and the 225th assault regiment. The 425th was [sent](#) to the Zaporizhzhia oblast (Huliaipole) in late December 2025, and the 225th was [sent](#) there around November. Following the arrival of the assault units,

Russian advances here slowed down, and there were even the aforementioned local Ukrainian counterattacks.



“BE A ROCK” — recruiting advertisement for the 425th

In mid March, the 425th got plenty of likes on X when it [arranged](#) for Dwayne ‘the Rock’ Johnson to release a promotional video about their unit. ‘

Commander Major Yuri, the ROCK, SKAYA... It's the Rock here... From one rock.. to another.. Brother, I'm sending you love from the Iron Paradise.. I just got my workout in.. and I found it appropriate to send you this message after my training.. because I heard that you were a fan of mine.. and I'm honoured.. that you're a fan... plus with a name like that.. Rock... SKAYA.. I'm honoured... and I also know that you're commanding your troops... and... I'm sending you strength, and, support, I'm sending you MANA, it comes from in here **slaps chest*, and I'm sorry that you have to endure this.... but you were born for this... and you were born to lead.... Because your name is THE ROCK. Thank you very much for being a fan, and one day, we gotta get a workout in here. I appreciate you, and give all the boys my best. Stay strong and as a good friend of mine says, fight like hell. Okay my brother, SKAYA, the rock, I'm out!



Inspirational. Johnson may have one-upped Sean [Penn](#) when it comes to his aid to the Ukrainian army.

But the forcibly mobilized Ukrainians in the 425th aren't smiling quite as rock-hard.

The military ombudsman [stated](#) today that the 425th 'Rock' regiment is the source of the most complaints about abuses of all units in the army. This includes beatings,

torture, removal of phones and all forms of communication with relatives, unlawful detainment, not to speak of suicidal assault operations (there are no survivors to make such complaints).

The journalist Anna Kalyuzhna made waves in early March when she [condemned](#) Syrsky's endless inflation of the size of the assault units:

Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Oleksandr Syrskyi, has, essentially, outmaneuvered everyone.

Publicly, we hear from Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Pavlo Palisa that personnel have started being assigned to line brigades, and that some “crumbs” of reinforcements are finally reaching the main defensive units.

But unofficially, Syrskyi is gradually funneling the entire Ukrainian army into his assault *non-forces*.

...

Influential and very hardline individuals within these “forces” have received 10 times more personnel under their command compared to last year, and 5 times more than their official staffing allows.



Kalyuzhna

Kalyuzhna pointed out how commander Oleh Shiriaev recently stated that his 225th assault regiment now commands 15 battalions. This is absurdly large for a regiment, and is in fact division size. As Kalyuzhna pointed out, it's the size of three brigades. One result, as the military ombudsman pointed out today, is that his regiment has far too few dedicated personnel to deal with the safety and health of his subordinates. The civil-military cooperation staff of a regiment might consist of only four to six people, while in a brigade it would be around twelve.



Shiriaev

Kalyuzhna also noted that the 225th suffered higher losses during the 2024 Kursk adventure than even the air-assault units. The assault forces largely [grew](#) out of the Kursk operation, since no other units were particularly keen on Syrsky's absurd ploy. The assault forces were simply the units whose commanders were willing to do anything to please Syrsky's whims. Back in mid-2025, I [covered](#) Shirshin's complaints to social media about the massive, pointless losses his 47th Brigade was forced to sustain during the Kursk operation and similar attacks on Russian border areas. Shirshin was [dismissed](#) as a result of his criticism.



Shirshin is very much supported by the liberal nationalist press, unlike Syrsky and his assault units

Besides losses, these assault forces are also renowned for their disciplinary brutality. To begin with, such an approach is quite natural given the high losses — the best way to get someone to risk their life is to present them with an even worse option. In late 2025, military ombudsman Reshetilova was [pleading](#) for defense minister Shmyhal to do something about the constant complaints of beatings and extortion she received from troops in the 425th assault regiment.

Kayuzhna's final point is broader. The assault units and army leadership, she writes, are blaming all retreats on the underfunded territorial defense units. These units, whose dissolution or reform has long been called for, are then forcibly attached to the assault units as cannon fodder. We'll see this a bit later with the story of the abduction of troops from 108th territorial defense brigade by the 225th regiment.

Quite ironic, given that the [corps reform](#) of 2025 was explicitly aimed at preventing more influential units from this irresponsible practice of 'attaching' other units willy nilly, and 'spending' their infantry at will. This is how she ends her tirade against Syrsky:

It's very convenient to have your own "private army" inside the army to fix your own serious failures—if not worse.



Syrsky (front, third from left) with the 225th, his favorite unit alongside the 425th.

As a result of her criticism, Kalyuzhna [received](#) a wave of threats and violent criticism, including against her children. She was also publicly threatened while shopping on March 18 — the man introduced himself as an ex-con who had done time for organized crime. Hardly surprising, given the fact that the assault units started out with large numbers of prisoner troops. Nowadays, there is little difference between the way they treat their prisoner troops and their forcibly mobilized ones. The original leader of the assault units, Valentin [Manko](#), is also an infamous bandit who was searched for by INTERPOL in 2015.



Manko

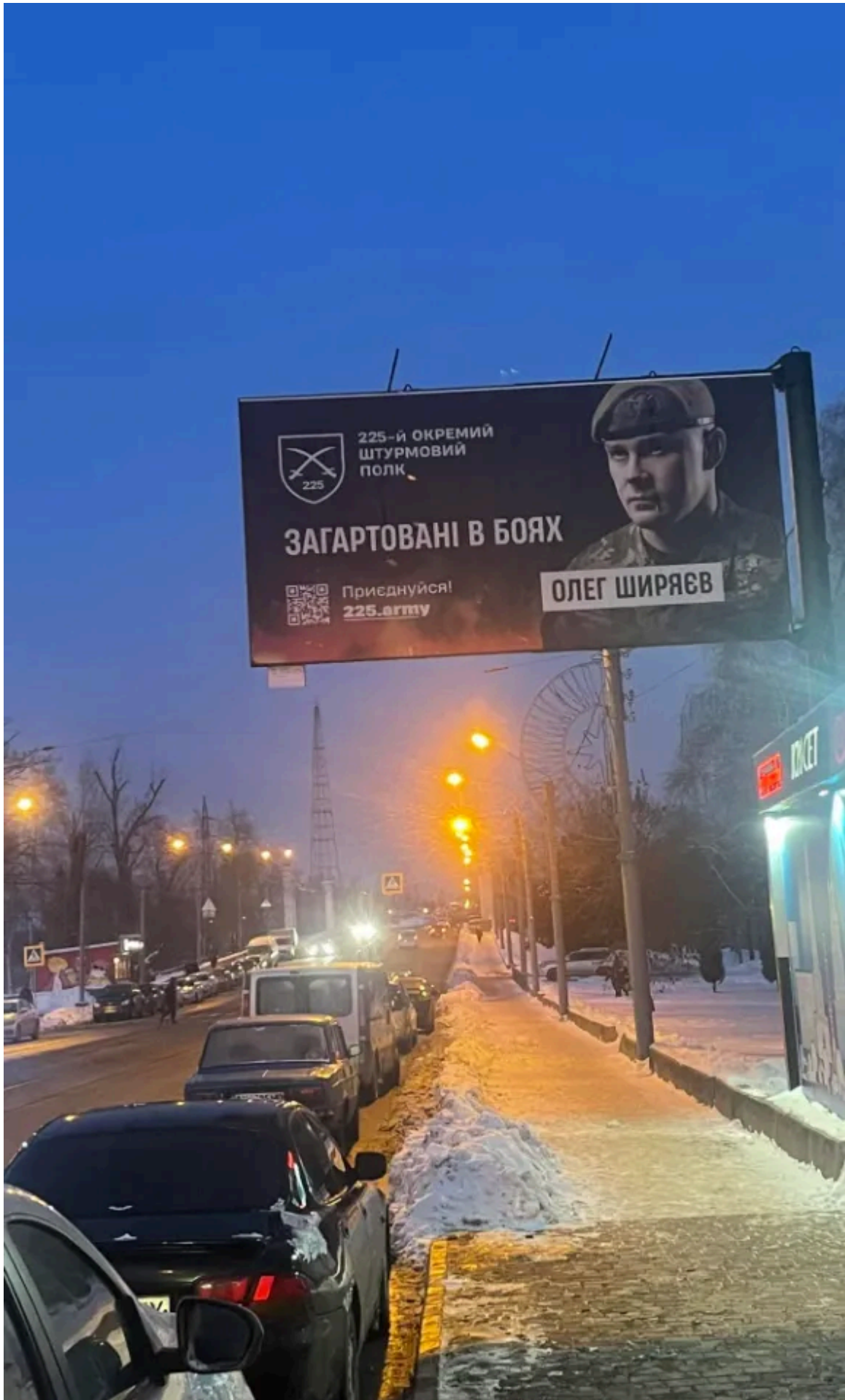
The aforementioned ex-commander of the 47th brigade Oleksandr Shyrshyn [wrote](#) about the problems of the assault units on March 9. Here is an excerpt from Shirshin's long rant calling for the sacking of commander-in-chief Syrsky, which received 1300 likes on Facebook:

If we put aside, for a moment, the not entirely unfounded emotions regarding the methods of some units that have signs of criminal behavior—which only deepen an already existing demographic crisis (I perceive it as an attempt to exterminate the Ukrainian nation, whether intentional or not)—and look at it from a broader perspective, I see the following:

First of all, I have respect for many fighters in the so-called assault units, and I feel very sorry that they have such “effective” commanders.

Unfortunately, when certain individuals are given power, despite their talk of responsibility (for example, the constant reminders from commander of the 225th Shiraev), it has nothing to do with the concept of responsibility except loyalty to their senior officer. Somehow, responsibility for human lives, for the country's future—which exists and will exist beyond the front line—and even for the strategic goal of maintaining the nation's defense, is forgotten. Responsibility for committed

crimes, for unjustified losses, for lies about “super-forces” with “super-commanders” who supposedly liberated and stabilized everything—none of that exists. I have seen Kursk, Belgorod, Donbas... I’ve heard reports and knew the reality.



A recruiting ad for Shiraev's 225th regiment. 'STEELED IN BATTLES'.

On March 16, Shirshin complained that the general staff was trying to charge him with desertion. He [posted](#) a photo of himself with a wound on his shoulder at a military hospital.

Before we go into more detail about some recent cases of the assault units' brutality, let's end our overview of the assault forces with today's interview with the representative of the military ombudsman.



Скарги на «полки Сирського», переведення, СЗЧ, «поверхневе» В

Радіо Свобода

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is
funded in whole or in part by the ...



Watch on



Continue reading this post for free, courtesy of Events in Ukraine.

[Claim my free post](#)

Or upgrade your subscription. Upgrade to paid

© 2026 Events in Ukraine · [Privacy](#) · [Terms](#) · [Collection notice](#)
[Substack](#) is the home for great culture