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Executive Summary

In the first months after Russia's full-scale invasion, many Ukrainian volunteers joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), including the Territorial Defence Forces, to rescue their fatherland. The ability of the AFU to push back the many times larger Russian army in 2022 surprised the outside world. Equally astonishing has been Ukraine's ability to largely hold the frontline against Russia until today.

Nonetheless, since 2023, the recruitment of additional Ukrainian men and women for military service has become increasingly challenging for Kyiv. A 2024 mobilization law and further reforms – some currently being implemented, some planned – are addressing the discrepancy between Ukraine's continuing need for soldiers and the growing reluctance of men and women to serve. However, these advances have not thus far stopped the growth in the Ukrainian state's shortfall of active service men and women.

The main factors responsible for the AFU's continuing manpower shortage are Ukrainian institutional weakness and corruption, social fatigue and mental exhaustion, deficiencies in military training and leadership, demographic and economic constraints, and the impact of Russian propaganda. There is an intense public, political and expert debate in Ukraine about how to motivate more Ukrainians to volunteer, be recruited into and continue serving in the AFU.

Foreign partners can back Ukraine by helping the AFU to better equip and train its soldiers as well as to increase its ability to defend Ukraine with long-range arms, and to accomplish as many frontline tasks as possible with the help of unmanned vehicles. Ukrainian organizations and individuals promoting military reform and anti-corruption measures should be supported. Efforts to treat wounded or traumatized soldiers, and to reintegrate veterans into society, need more support from abroad. Those countries that are currently hosting significant numbers of refugees from Ukraine should consider, together with Ukraine's embassies, what initiatives might motivate Ukrainian men and women to return home to join the AFU.

Introduction

On 24 February 2022, the day of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky signed a General Decree introducing martial law. In the first months of the full-scale war, the Ukrainian army and territorial defence forces (locally based ground troops) grew rapidly following an influx of highly motivated volunteers and reservists. During 2023, however, particularly after the failed counteroffensive in the summer of that year, the declining number of new recruits to the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) was becoming an increasing problem. By the end of the year, manpower shortages began to be publicly acknowledged by Ukrainian officials.

On 19 December 2023, President Zelensky told journalists at a press conference that the Ukrainian military had identified a need to mobilize an additional 450,000 to 500,000 troops. This turned out to be a complex task. Mobilization was and is urgently needed to replace losses, rotate exhausted troops, and build up enough manpower to resist and, if possible, reverse Russian offensives. However, mobilization has become increasingly unpopular among the population and is an economic burden for a country with a shrinking gross domestic product (GDP).

The 2024 mobilization law

The first draft of a new mobilization law was introduced to the Ukrainian parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, on 25 December 2023. It was immediately criticized by politicians and various institutions, as well as the Ukrainian public for restricting the rights of conscripts and increasing the risk of corruption.1 A new bill (No. 10449) was published on 30 January 2024. Even though over 4,000 amendments were submitted, it was swiftly approved by the Verkhovna Rada on 11 April and signed into law by President Zelenskyi five days later. This law, which entered into force on 18 May as Law No. 3633-IX was a significant legal reform of military service, mobilization and military registration. It streamlines the process, ensures more transparent procedures and sets clear guidelines for citizens and the authorities on conscription and military obligations. The main provisions of the law are set out below.

Military registration:

- All men eligible for military service (conscripts and reservists aged 18 to 60) must update their personal data in the military register at the territorial recruitment centre (TRC), Administrative Service Centre (ASC), or through an electronic cabinet called "Reserv+" within 60 days of the law's entry into force.
- Registered citizens must carry their military registration documents with them at all times and present them on demand to the authorities or the police.
- > The law allows for voluntary rather than mandatory registration by electronic means and removes measures such as restricting violators' travel or seizing funds.

¹ The present report primarily covers the period after the new mobilization law in April 2024. A <u>previous report</u> by SCEEUS from March 2024 analyses the law-making process that had led to the new law.

Deferral from and enforcement of conscription:

- > All full-time students are allowed deferral if they are pursuing tertiary education.
- > Stricter penalties are introduced, including fines, for individuals who do not comply with the rules on military registration.
- Certain individuals with criminal backgrounds (except those who have committed serious crimes) may be mobilized for military service, sometimes resulting in the suspension of court proceedings against them.

Additional measures:

- "Oberih" (talisman), a unified electronic register of conscripts, persons liable for military service and reservists, and a digital military ID system were introduced to modernize and streamline record-keeping and communication.
- Ukrainians abroad for more than three months are required to update their data in the registry, or their record will be removed.
- Guaranteed annual basic leave, monetary compensation and other benefits were introduced as incentives for men who enlist.

Key challenges of mobilization

Although the new law improves the process, mainly by introducing a streamlined, digital system for military registration and conscription, Ukraine still faces many serious challenges. The intense public debate in Ukraine links the AFU's continuing manpower shortage to corruption, societal fatigue, institutional inefficiencies, Soviet legacies and the negative impact of Russian propaganda. These challenges collectively undermine Ukraine's ability to sustain troop levels and maintain a strong frontline defence against ongoing Russian advances.

The manpower shortage

The problem of insufficient troop numbers in the AFU had become severe by late 2025, and now represents a <u>central challenge</u> to Ukraine's ability to defend itself against Russian advances. Ukrainian frontline units often operate at as low as 30 per cent of their intended strength. Some brigades are running out of infantry and becoming unable to man defensive lines adequately. In early 2025, Ukraine was estimated to <u>need around 300,000 new recruits</u> to replenish units and restore combat power, but has managed to recruit only around 200,000 since – a number insufficient to compensate for losses from casualties and desertion. Meanwhile, monthly recruitment is between 17,000 and 24,000 per month, while Russia is recruiting roughly 30,000 per month, further widening the manpower gap.

President Zelensky <u>has stated</u> that Ukrainian troops on key front sections, like that at Pokrovsk, in the Donetsk Oblast, are outnumbered eight to one by Russian forces, exemplifying the generally dramatic imbalance that stems from the Ukrainian troop shortage. As Ukraine's ability to defend the very long front line is hampered by a lack of recruits, there is a risk of further losses of territory.

Like Russia, Ukraine has started to allow convicts to exchange prison for the frontline. As of early July 2025, more than 9,400 convicts who had expressed a desire to be mobilized had been released from penal institutions. Another 1,500 convicts were awaiting approval to serve in the army instead of a prison term.

Especially during the last two years, desertion rates have soared in Ukraine. Reports cite tens of thousands going absent, reflecting not only the fear to become a battlefield casualty but also deep societal fatigue, declining morale and mistrust of the combat units as some deserters leave their ascribed unit to join other units. In 2024, 51,000 soldiers left their units without permission – more than double the number in the previous year.

Corruption and institutional weakness

Various <u>corrupt schemes</u> have degraded Ukraine's war effort by enabling draft evasion in exchange for bribes, wasting defence funds and weakening overall war readiness and resource allocation. For instance, the issuance of false medical certificates by corrupt military and civilian medical officials to exempt eligible men from conscription has undermined the integrity of fitness assessments for service.

Other examples include the organized smuggling of conscription-eligible men out of Ukraine using false documents such as medical diagnoses and driver permits for humanitarian aid convoys to facilitate illegal border crossings at official checkpoints. In 2024 alone, over 120 officials were suspected of involvement in such schemes.

Societal resistance

The ongoing mobilization is increasingly undermining Ukrainian <u>social cohesion</u>. While Ukraine's society demonstrated unprecedented solidarity at the start of the war, the prolonged conflict, economic difficulties and contradictory attitudes to mobilization are straining national unity. Mobilization-related issues, including the perceived unfairness of the recruitment process and a lack of transparent rotation rules, have led to feelings of injustice that threaten social cohesion. Segments of society feel excluded or overwhelmed by the demands of the war.

Other factors complicate general social cohesion, such as the strain of internal and external displacement, the differing experiences of Ukrainians abroad compared to those at home, mental health challenges and political disagreements. These elements exacerbate social fatigue and emotional exhaustion, further stretching societal bonds. The mobilization has been crucial to Ukraine's defence and resilience, but will also increase domestic polarization if it is not managed transparently and fairly.

Insufficient training and leadership

Inadequate training, mistrust of commanders and poor morale are also <u>problems</u> in Ukraine's mobilization process. Ukraine's commanders have expressed concern that many newly mobilized soldiers lack basic training and require weeks of catch-up on fundamental military skills. <u>Insufficient training</u> leaves soldiers vulnerable on the front line and contributes to high casualties. There are also issues with poor management, inexperienced or otherwise inadequate leadership and a lack of coordination within newly formed brigades, which undermines morale and effectiveness. Trust in commanders is critical, and its absence has led soldiers to leave weaker units in favour of those with better leadership. These factors further impact troop motivation and confidence, and can contribute to operational setbacks and losses on the battlefield.

Demographic and economic constraints

Demographic and economic constraints create a complex trade-off for Ukrainian decision makers between maintaining an effective military defence force and ensuring sufficient economic stability to support the war effort and civilian economy.

Over the last decades, <u>Ukraine's demographic outlook</u> has changed from a country with a modest birth rate to one with a rapidly aging population and ever smaller number of young people. For much of the 1980s, Ukraine's total fertility rate (TFR) was two children or more per woman. By 2001, however, the TFR had declined to a low 1.1. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the economic crisis following the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to low birth rates and increased out-migration. Ukraine's population declined from a peak of over 50 million in the early 1990s to around 37 million in 2024.

This means that the age cohorts that would be most relevant for mobilization today and in the near future, i.e. those in the 20-35 age group, are relatively small compared to previous cohorts. Furthermore, they are also those that should be in the family-forming phase that creates future generations. Mobilization of these age groups has a major negative long-term effect on Ukraine's demography and future cohorts.

Unsurprisingly, the decline of the population in Ukraine has further accelerated since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion. <u>In 2024</u>, for instance, Ukraine registered 495,090 deaths, which is almost three times more than the number born in that year. Births declined by 35.5% in 2024 compared to 2021.

Ukraine faces significant <u>labour shortages</u> due to mobilization, making it difficult for businesses to recruit and retain workers. This shortage affects both skilled and unskilled labour, creates conflicts between military needs and economic interests, and undermines business operations and economic growth. The aging of military personnel and declining volunteer numbers exacerbate this issue.

Although salaries and bonuses for military personnel have increased several times since the start of the full-scale war in 2022, they remain below average western salaries and are lower than current Russian bonuses. In 2025, the minimum basic monetary allowance for AFU personnel was UAH 20,130, or approximately €400. In addition, there are payments for soldiers who sign a contract, are wounded, are held captive, or have academic degrees, honorary and sports titles or other personal achievements. The region of deployment, type of unit, length of service and likelihood of participation in combat missions also play a role. The average overall monthly salary for military personnel on the frontline in 2025 was approximately UAH 100,000, or around €2000.

Funding mobilization and the war effort, and the repair and reconstruction of destroyed infrastructure at the same time places a heavy strain on Ukraine's state budget and administration. There are rising costs for training, equipping and maintaining soldiers. An economic deferment system, in which payments by companies can exempt certain workers from military service, is expensive relative to average salaries, but changes little in the overall budgetary situation. The Ukrainian government is struggling to balance military demands with economic sustainability, leading to large fiscal deficits and pressure to increase taxes and cut social expenditure.

Negative impact of Russian propaganda

Russian propaganda is targeting Ukraine's morale and unity, and hampering its mobilization effort through extensive misinformation and psychological operations. This includes spreading false narratives aimed at discrediting and undermining Ukraine's military and political leadership, creating mistrust between the military and civilians, and amplifying internal regional tensions by, for instance, overstating discrimination in mobilization efforts. Russian propaganda exploits social media networks to distribute real and fabricated content showing, among other things, alleged torture, hazing and abuse within the Ukrainian army to intimidate potential conscripts and civilians. One story spread by Russian propaganda alleged that Ukraine's Supreme Court had issued a ruling that allows citizens to shoot employees of recruitment centres.

The propaganda also leverages the <u>narrative</u> that only poor Ukrainians are being mobilized while the rich evade service, encouraging civilian-military conflict and spreading a "meat hunt" motif to dissuade enlistment. It targets Ukrainians both domestically and abroad, claiming that Europe is rejecting Ukrainian refugees, and painting Ukraine as corrupt, inefficient and a puppet of western powers. These measures are integrated parts of a broader Russian strategy to weaken Ukrainian society's collective resolve and its trust in its leadership and military forces, thereby slowing mobilization and degrading the country's overall defence capability against the invasion.

The way ahead

The <u>ideas being debated</u> by the Ukrainian government, the national and international expert community and civil society to resolve the AFU's manpower problem are multifaceted. The changes discussed are mostly designed to increase the attractiveness of military service, and range from larger financial incentives for frontline service to improved training and military command, fighting corruption and mismanagement, increased use of unmanned vehicles for assault operations, increased rotation and longer leave for soldiers. There are also debates about gender neutral conscription and more intense recruitment of foreign mercenaries.

In 2025, Ukraine implemented various <u>reforms</u>, such as the introduction of fixed-term contracts, a permission for men aged 18 to 22 to leave Ukraine in spite of martial law, and a new basic military training programme for 18- to 25-year olds. Another reform led to the <u>transition to a corps-based command structure</u> to improve operational efficiency. The government has increased conscription targets by raising the maximum draft age and reducing exemptions, while simultaneously cracking down on draft evasion through stricter punishments and the introduction of a digital registry. In November 2025, Minister of Defence Denys Shmyhal <u>announced</u> a forthcoming further revision of the Ukrainian army's contracts with its soldiers. The new contracts will set limits on the length of service from one to five years, increase the basic monthly allowance (from UAH 50-60,000) as well as sign-on bonuses and combat payments, and allow recruits to choose their brigade and position.

One of the most consequential issues of the 2024 mobilization law is that it does not include a clear specification of the procedure for <u>demobilization</u> of existing soldiers. At the last minute, the General Staff of the Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence requested that demobilization provisions be excluded from the main mobilization law because they feared it would lead to a loss of experienced soldiers and weaken the country's defence capability amid ongoing conflict. Once a person is mobilized, he or she is currently set to serve until the end of the war. This indefinite commitment is one of the most psychologically difficult aspects of military service, which undermines troop morale.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine has performed unexpectedly well in defending itself and the European security order without the support of direct military intervention from any other state, but with deliveries of military equipment alone. This is a feat that few other European nations would have been able to accomplish. Moreover, Ukraine has done this while largely preserving a relatively open and pluralist political order. It still has an active opposition as well as independent civil society and is on a stable EU integration course.

As of the end of 2025, however, military service has become one of the most divisive issues in Ukraine, which creates threats from outside and inside. The Deputy Commander of the 3rd Separate Brigade, Lieutenant Colonel Maksym Zhorin, has complained: "In such a large-scale war, when it is important to involve the entire population, not only motivated volunteers and those who could not buy a place in the reserve should have to fight. Representatives of all categories of society should fight. This includes the children of politicians, officials, bloggers and activists, and representatives of show business". Complaints such as these illustrate that the issue has become a major challenge for the defence of Ukraine that is undermining Ukrainian resilience.

There is a growing gap between those who serve, and do not know when they will be demobilized, and those who have been able to evade mobilization. This injustice is demoralizing and creates problems for social-political cohesion. Kyiv needs to create more credible and predictable conditions for its soldiers, and to demonstrate that it is doing all it can to ensure that as many as possible serve. Mobilized soldiers need to feel that they are taken care of and have as low as possible risk of being killed or wounded.

Moreover, the unresolved mobilization issue challenges Ukraine's reputation among international partners. In the past, some US analysts have argued that Ukraine has received the weapons it needs from its western partners, and that it is now up to Ukraine to provide the necessary manpower to use them effectively. Military recruitment has become a credibility issue for Ukraine.

This report does not provide specific advice for the Ukrainian government and relevant NGOs about how to address the <u>various</u> issues outlined above and <u>elsewhere</u>. There are a plethora of ideas and an intense domestic debate on how the situation can be improved. We only reiterate ideas previously voiced by numerous commentators that the Ukrainian government and parliament should aim to: (a) create more just, fairer and more attractive conditions for military service; (b) tackle the issue of demobilisation according to transparent rules; (c) resolutely address such issues as corruption and incompetent command, and (d) work tirelessly to preserve public trust, social cohesion and national unity.

A large number of international governmental and non-governmental partners of the Ukrainian people are ready to support them in their fight for survival. These foreign actors could assist with resolving the AFU's growing manpower problem in the following ways:

- Support Ukraine financially so that its soldiers receive adequate training, attractive pay, and excellent kit.
- > Support the Ukrainian state with as advanced weaponry as possible that can help to reduce losses of Ukrainian soldiers on the frontline.

- > Support the AFU with long-range artillery, missiles and drones, as well as fighter planes, allowing fighting with reduced risk to its soldiers.
- Support the defence of western and central Ukraine with air protection zones ("SkyShield") that would allow Kyiv to move troops from the rear to the front.
- Support the Ukrainian state with technological cooperation aimed at accomplishing risky frontline tasks with the help of unmanned vehicles, Al and robotics.
- Support Ukrainian institutions, organizations and individuals engaged in the design, advocacy, and implementation of military reform.
- > Support the efforts of the Ukrainian state to motivate its citizens residing in foreign countries to return to their homeland and join the AFU.
- > Support the training of combat medics and paramedics to take care of and evacuate the wounded and the dead quickly and professionally.
- Support the Ukrainian state with the treatment of wounded or traumatized soldiers, and the reintegration of military veterans into society.

Last but not least, Kyiv's friends should support Ukraine with all the available leverage they have – political, economic and security – to safeguard the country's sovereignty during the ongoing US-led process for a negotiated settlement to the war and by creating the conditions for a just and lasting peace. Russia is entering the negotiations with demands that Ukraine's sovereignty be limited in terms of the size of its army and its ability to receive assistance from external partners. These restrictions would further exacerbate the challenges Ukraine faces in its self-defence, in the mobilization and training of its soldiers, in its political system, and in its social cohesion. They would increase the likelihood of future Russian aggression that could directly affect not only Ukraine but also other European countries.



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