

## **Council of Servicemembers' Representatives (CSR)**

*By anonymous soldiers serving in the Ukrainian military since 2022.*

### **Key points**

- The war of attrition has exposed not only material and technical challenges but also a crisis in the moral contract between Ukrainian soldiers and the State.
- Fear of arbitrary punishment, perceived unfairness in combat payments, and the lack of safe mechanisms for appealing command decisions undermine both mobilisation and retention.
- The Council of Servicemembers' Representatives (CSR) offers an internal, elected oversight mechanism designed to protect rights, monitor fairness, and strengthen trust within units.
- If piloted and institutionalised, the CSR could become a key tool for improving motivation, reducing unauthorised absence, and enhancing the overall resilience of the Defence Forces.
- Internationally, comparable mechanisms exist to provide structured representation of servicemembers' concerns inside the armed forces, without undermining operational command. For example, France uses internal consultative bodies and representative structures to channel issues around conditions of service and morale. However, the proposed CSR is not a direct replica of the French model

### **Analysis and Key Findings**

Fear of Arbitrariness and Subsequent Unauthorized Abandonment of Unit (AWOL)

- 1) **The fundamental problem of the current model of military relations is the critical asymmetry of power within a rigid hierarchical structure, which is not balanced by effective independent mechanisms of internal control.** The imperative nature of military subordination, necessary for the execution of combat tasks, creates prerequisites for the abuse of power in the absence of external oversight. A servicemember finds themselves in a legal vacuum: the legislatively enshrined right to appeal an order is de facto blocked by vertical dependency on the subject of the appeal (the commander). The absence of anonymous or autonomous communication channels (e.g., a military ombudsman institution with real powers at the unit level) makes any attempt to protect one's rights a priori risky for the initiator.
- 2) An analysis of the dynamics of non-statutory relations indicates a transformation of pressure methods: from direct physical influence to the use of administrative-command resources as a tool of repression. **The command, possessing a monopoly on personnel and operational-tactical decision-making, has the opportunity to disguise persecution as lawful official activity.**

Two main vectors of such influence are distinguished:

- **Disciplinary-Administrative:** Systematic imposition of penalties, deprivation of bonus payments, or the creation of artificial obstacles to the realisation of social rights (leave, medical treatment).

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- **Operational-Tactical (Latent):** Transferring a "disloyal" servicemember to another unit with worse service conditions or, most critically, purposefully assigning them to combat tasks with an elevated level of risk to life (so-called "punitive tasks").
- 3) The threat of applying such measures acts as a preventive mechanism for suppressing any criticism or attempts to restore justice, creating an **environment in which loyalty is enforced through pressure rather than earned through trust.**
- 4) **Statistics and the nature of military criminal offenses, particularly Unauthorized Abandonment of Unit (AWOL), demonstrate a clear correlation with the quality of command management.** In this context, AWOL should not be viewed exclusively as an act of evasion, but as a forced reaction to an institutional dead end.
- 5) When legitimate legal protection mechanisms (reports, complaints, appeals to the Military Law and Order Service) are ineffective or dangerous, the servicemember resorts to deviant behavior as the only available means of self-preservation. Consequently, it is the authors' view that **a significant proportion of desertion and AWOL cases are a direct consequence of a management crisis:** the inability to resolve a conflict within the legal field forces personnel to step outside of it. This indicates that responsibility for such offenses lies not only with the perpetrator but also with the system that failed to ensure the realization of the right to protect the servicemember's honor, dignity, and life administratively.

#### Financial Justice and Corruption Risks

- 6) The issue of fair distribution of monetary allowances is quite acute, especially regarding combat payments. **The lack of transparency and internal control has spawned corruption schemes, confirmed by law enforcement agencies.** Suspicions fall on military officials who fictitiously accrued payments to persons who did not participate in combat operations or misappropriated funds. **When servicemembers see that their comrades risking their lives are underpaid, while staff officers profit from this, it destroys trust and creates fundamental demotivation.** It also leads to the feeling that the system does not value their efforts and that commanders can abuse power with impunity. **The current ways to solve the problem are either transferring to another brigade (which reduces the combat capability of the military structure due to personnel shortages) or, as described above, unauthorized abandonment of the army altogether.**
- 7) The scale of the problem is confirmed by figures; from January to October 2025 there were 161,461 cases of Absence Without Leave (AWOL), with 21,000 in October alone.<sup>1</sup> The new Minister of Defence, Mykhailo Federov, claimed on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2026 that there were 200,000 AWOL and two million men avoiding the draft.
- 8) An analysis of the causes of AWOL conducted by non-governmental organizations shows that 46% of servicemembers cite command that does not protect subordinates as the cause, while 34% point directly to corruption in the army.<sup>2</sup> To answer these challenges, **a new institutional innovation compatible with military discipline is needed, one that corresponds to the time and nature of the war. Such an innovation is the proposed Council of Servicemembers' Representatives (CSR).**

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<sup>1</sup> Figures from Office of the General Prosecutor: : <https://gp.gov.ua/ua/posts/pro-zarevestrovani-kriminalni-pravoporushennya-ta-rezultati-yihdosudovogo-rozsliduvannya-2>

<sup>2</sup> Darina Tkachenko, "Хто й чому пішов у СЗЧ і за яких умов повернеться. Результати опитування," *Texty.org.ua*, January 16, 2025, <https://texty.org.ua/articles/114257/hto-i-chomu-pishov-u-szch-i-za-yakih-umov-povernetsya-textyorgua-provely-doslidzhennya/>

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- 9) The **Council of Servicemembers' Representatives (CSR)** is an elected, independent consultative and supervisory body within a military unit that functions on a permanent basis. It is designed not to replace the command but to create an additional layer of internal accountability and trust.

The mission of the CSR consists of:

- Ensuring the realization of the constitutional rights of personnel;
  - Preventing abuse of power by the command;
  - Monitoring fair service conditions, monetary allowances, and adherence to social guarantees.
- 10) **The CSR concentrates on points of maximum tension: disciplinary sanctions, payments, leave, awards, and appeals of decisions**—exactly where the servicemembers themselves see problems in their unit.
- 11) A fundamental requirement ensuring the real independence of the CSR is the **categorical exclusion of all senior command staff from the Council**: the unit commander, their deputies, and headquarters staff. This prevents conflicts of interest and direct administrative pressure. Without this, the CSR would turn into another "meeting with the commander."
- 12) **Membership in the Council is available exclusively to representatives of the sergeant, NCO, and officer corps of the unit who directly interact with personnel and share the same risks.** This is what gives them legitimacy in the eyes of the fighters.
- 13) **Formation of the CSR is carried out on the basis of proportional representation through secret electronic rating voting.** The quantitative composition of the Council is approximately **10%** of the actual presence of the sergeant and officer corps of the unit. Such a proportion allows combining representation with manageability: the Council is large enough to cover different subunits and specialties, but not too cumbersome to be paralyzed or pose a threat to the execution of combat tasks. Furthermore, its convocation in full composition should be conducted no more than once a month, at different periods of the month.
- 14) Initiating and ensuring the possibility of holding elections is the responsibility of the Deputy Commander for Moral and Psychological Support, who must bear legal liability for failure to provide personnel with the opportunity to create this body. **Thus, the creation of the CSR is a mandatory element of the unit's institutional composition.**

The CSR Chairperson

- 15) From among the elected members, **a CSR Chairperson and their deputy are elected**, forming the Executive Committee. **The term of office is six months.** The functions of the CSR Chairperson must be:
- To be **fully released** from performing their military tasks and official duties;
  - To focus exclusively on the activities of the Council.

This is a critical guarantee of effectiveness: without a person dedicated to this full-time, the CSR inevitably turns into a formality.

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16) **Protection Guarantees:** An extremely important safeguard against persecution is the strict prohibition of:

- Transferring a CSR member to another military unit without the approval of the CSR;
- Sending them on a mission to a high-risk zone (outside of general rotation) without the written consent of the Council itself.

A command order for such a transfer is automatically qualified as one having signs of abuse of power and is subject to mandatory immediate verification by Internal Security, the Military Law and Order Service, or the State Bureau of Investigation. This not only protects specific representatives but also reduces the risk of "punitive transfers" as a tool for suppressing activity.

How the CSR Works in Practice and Changes the System

17) To enable the CSR to effectively fulfill its mission, it is necessary to enshrine procedural, not declarative, guarantees of its independence and influence.

1. The **full-time release of the CSR Chairperson**, as detailed above, allows them to focus entirely on protecting rights, rather than "squeezing" this work in between combat missions. In conditions of constant fatigue, any function that is "secondary" simply disappears.
2. **Protection against punitive transfers** is implemented. Any order to transfer a CSR member or send them to a high-risk zone without the Council's consent is automatically flagged for abuse of power, **as outlined in the Chairperson section**. Such actions must be immediately referred for verification to the VSP or SSU before execution.

18) **This changes the balance of power:** the command formally retains authority, but its discretion is no longer uncontrolled. The CSR should not just record problems but actively influence their resolution. Therefore, the list of functions should be as follows:

- **Mandatory Review:** A submission by the CSR to the General Staff and Military Ombudsman regarding a violation of rights is mandatory for consideration by the command.
- **Investigation:** The command is obliged to appoint an official investigation within 24 hours.
- **Escalation:** Submitting letters/statements to the senior leadership of the Armed Forces regarding fundamental violations and/or risks to the rights of servicemembers.
- **Ombudsman Interaction:** Interacting and communicating with the Office of the Military Ombudsman regarding identified risks and rights violations.
- **Support for Wounded:** CSR representatives have the right to accompany wounded fighters of the unit during evacuation and treatment stages, demand certificates regarding the circumstances of the injury, and monitor the timeliness of injury payments.

19) A CSR representative has the right to participate in any investigation concerning personnel, with the right to a dissenting opinion. The most important lever is the right of the CSR to temporarily **suspend the effect of commander's orders** regarding the imposition of certain disciplinary sanctions (reprimands, demotion), deprivation of bonuses, or leave, until the dispute is reviewed by higher command or a court.

20) **Documentation and Procedures:** CSR activity is conducted both through the direct activity of the Executive Body and the general meeting of all CSR members. CSR activity is recorded exclusively in written form by drafting the following documents:

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- **Meeting Protocol:** The main internal document recording the date, time, list of attendees, agenda, summary of speeches, and voting results. The protocol is evidence of the collegiality of the decision.
- **CSR Decision:** An internal administrative document of a procedural nature regarding the meeting's decision.
- **CSR Submission:** An external document of an imperative nature, addressed to the Unit Command or higher headquarters. It contains a demand to eliminate violations of servicemembers' rights or proposals for improving service.
- **Verification Report (Act):** A document drafted by a commission of CSR members (at least 3 persons) to certify a certain fact in real-time.

21) The CSR accepts appeals from unit service members both in the form of **anonymous appeals** and official personalized appeals. **Combating Favoritism and Inequality:** To overcome the problem of favoritism, the CSR is granted access to **anonymized consolidated data** regarding the accrual of combat payments, leave, and awards. The Council also has the right to verify combat logs to the extent necessary to crosscheck the actual presence of personnel in areas of task execution. In case of discrepancies, the CSR draws up a Statement of Non-Compliance, which is grounds for escalation.

22) **Wartime Specifics:** Understanding the specifics of wartime, CSR activity:

- Is conducted exclusively through secure communication channels;
- Categorically prohibits holding in-person mass gatherings of personnel;
- Cannot block combat orders;
- Is suspended during the announcement of a combat alert.

23) Thus, **the rights protection mechanism is integrated into the logic of wartime, not opposed to it.** This is an important signal for both the command and partners that the CSR has the right to appeal directly to the Office of the Military Ombudsman, the Command of the Branch of Forces, and Law Enforcement Agencies with a petition regarding the unsuitability of command officers for their positions in case of systemic rights violations. The command is obliged to provide a motivated written response to the CSR Submission no later than **7 calendar days**. In case of ignoring, the CSR automatically sends a complaint to the Ombudsman's Office, and refusal to accept documents is qualified as obstruction of the body's activity.

Why this helps mobilisation and retention

24) A war of attrition is, in essence, a competition between two systems for the ability to convince their citizens to fight longer, with more motivation, and with less internal sabotage. **When a soldier knows that their rights are protected by an independent body and that a commander's abuse can be challenged without fear of immediate revenge, they are ready to serve longer, more motivated, and with greater dedication.** Therefore, the CSR is based on the following advantages:

- **Reduction of fear.** Contrary to popular belief, the appeal mechanism does not undermine discipline but strengthens it, as it is based on justice, not naked fear. Fear may produce short-term compliance, but in a prolonged war it leads to exhaustion and disengagement. Sustained motivation requires a sense of fairness and predictability.

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- **Increased trust.** Fair distribution of payments and awards reduces the feeling of favoritism or corruption, strengthening respect for military leadership. People accept risk better if they know the system is not playing against them.

25) Thus, the CSR is not just a human rights tool, but a **strategic advantage**, where the decisive factor is the quality, resilience, and motivation of human resources. It is a mechanism that transforms military duty into a conscious choice based on mutual respect.

26) If Ukraine is to sustain mobilisation and retain experienced personnel, **the CSR model cannot remain theoretical**; it requires practical implementation and testing.

27) **The Council of Servicemembers' Representatives (CSR) is not the final goal but a critically necessary tool for systemic reform.** To transform this model into an effective army-wide mechanism, the Defence Forces of Ukraine and the General Staff must move to the implementation phase.

## Recommendations

1. **Pilot the CSR model** in several brigades of different branches of troops—preferably where there is already a strong internal culture and a basic level of trust. This will allow testing the model in relatively favorable conditions before scaling it to more problematic units.
2. **Create legislative or departmental consolidation** of the CSR status, its powers, and key guarantees for its members (especially protection against transfers).
3. **Integrate with the Office of the Military Ombudsman** to create a priority channel for escalation and control.
4. **Develop training standards** for CSR chairpersons and members (legal foundations, conflict resolution, ethics, basic documentation).

Only through official recognition, standardisation, and scaling of this mechanism is it possible to ensure the necessary level of justice, transparency, and accountability within the Defense Forces of Ukraine. The CSR represents a strategic investment in the most important asset—people. By increasing justice, transparency, and accountability within units, **the CSR strengthens the moral contract between the soldier and the State.**