

Making the Ukrainian Army Attractive Again: The Need for a Second Civil Wave

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Key points

- After four years of high-intensity war, Ukraine cannot sustain its defence without sufficiently expanding its military's size and appropriately resting the individuals who have been a part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) since the beginning of 2022, or even 2014.
- While mobilization could, in theory, provide AFU with the numbers that it needs to enable these two aims, the current system has fallen well short of these numbers due to a combination of evasion, desertion, and absence without leave. In addition, mobilisation in its current form can (partially) meet quotas, but not necessarily competencies or the need for an adequately motivated force.
- Accordingly, efforts to address Ukraine's critical manpower shortage should prioritize professionalisation of all occupational specialties and the Ministry of Defence's (UMOD) personnel management system, with complementary policies that address the separate categories of civilian specialists who will serve in noncombat roles and civilians who will serve in combat (particularly infantry) positions. This must include initiatives to restore trust in military leadership.
- Standardisation of contracts and terms of service should apply regardless of whether an individual in an occupational speciality volunteer or is mobilised. Further, in the interests of fairness and internal cohesion, policies that propose new systems of entitlements or contractual arrangements for new servicemembers must in some way provide commensurate benefits and terms to individuals who were already serving prior to the given policy's date of implementation. Given recent missteps with policies designed to attract new recruits, UMOD should make highly visible policies aimed at taking care of long-serving volunteers (those who joined in 2022 or earlier).

Analysis and Key Findings

1. **In the opening year of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine was able to withstand Russia's initial onslaught due in no small part to the hundreds of thousands of volunteers who joined the AFU.** These volunteers can broadly be divided into two categories: highly-skilled civilians who took on noninfantry roles that mapped to their civilian professions, and highly-motivated civilians from an array of professional backgrounds who, alongside professionals, participated in combat (or direct combat support) against Russian forces.
2. **The former category of volunteers was instrumental in producing innovations that enabled Ukraine's survival.** In complement to military thinkers—who focused on combined arms operations, conventional artillery fire, and armoured manoeuvre—these civilians applied their unique talents and creativity to systematically find the most effective means of stemming Russia's advances. It was this ingenuity that led to the advent and widespread adoption of drone warfare.

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3. **The latter category of volunteers provided the essential manpower and motivation to enable AFU to resist and repel the Russian invasion such that Kyiv remained standing and a frontline behind which civilians could live relatively normal lives emerged.** These individuals—though not professional soldiers at the beginning of 2022—folded into structures that were part of Ukraine’s defence forces (the National Guard, the Security Service, the Main Directorate of Intelligence, etc.) since before 2022 and, alongside professional soldiers and those in related professions, have borne the brunt of combat. Those still serving are, in terms of experience, essentially “career” military (though lacking in some of the formal training and classic doctrinal knowledge).
4. **The impact of these individuals was and continues to be enormous with over 100,000 volunteers joining in the first month of the invasion.** As the initial fear that the country would be overrun gave way to the realisation that the war would be protracted, and the blank canvas of what defence of the nation would look like began to be filled in by those with first- or second-hand knowledge of the problems with military service, volunteer recruitment declined.
5. **However, the scale and intensity of the war, as well as Russia’s superiority in manpower and materiel, required the government to continuously source a large number of troops.** Faced with this demand and a declining number of recruits, UMOD began to mobilize the male population aged 27-60, later dropping the minimum age to 25 in April 2024.
6. **Despite ongoing mobilization, AFU is experiencing a severe and urgent shortage in manpower. This is a result of the limited scope of mobilisation, casualties, evasion, desertion, and unauthorized absence from service.** In public statements and private conversations, high-ranking current and former military officials estimate that brigades—including those at the front—are operating at roughly 30% capacity. Per Ukraine’s own military doctrine, these brigades are unfit for deployment; yet they are regularly tasked with defending many kilometres of frontline and even mounting counteroffensive operations.
7. **This shortage in qualified, motivated personnel affects military occupations across the spectrum but especially the infantry, and the defensive infantry, in particular.** In a conversation between the author and a member of the command staff of a prestige unit, the latter estimated that most defensive infantrymen are deployed on position for 20-50 day stretches. Rest or dwell periods are usually 5-15 days in length, with a heavy skew towards the low end of that range. While on position, they face constant threat of simple drone strike, precision artillery bombardment, air glide bomb strike, non-lethal chemical attack, complex assault, and rear area infantry ambush. Upon regular return to the rear for those not hospitalized, there is an approximately 90% chance of minor concussion and an approximately 40% chance of major concussion.
8. **Given these realities, the current deployment to dwell ratio is unsustainable and significantly degrades Ukraine’s ability to stabilise the front and execute counteroffensives.** Further downstream, these deployment conditions significantly impede AFU’s ability to recruit and effectively mobilise civilians to serve in both infantry and non-infantry roles. With such difficult conditions and bad command practices (like failure to place appropriate value on casualty recovery) being something of an open secret in Ukrainian society, even those who would be willing to fight at the front are disinclined to do so. At the same time, civilians who would gladly serve in non-infantry or non-combat occupational specialties are unwilling to do so due to their credible fear that poor management and battlefield exigencies will lead to them being utilized as infantry. Knowing what that entails and how likely an outcome it is, they prefer to abstain from participating in AFU in any capacity.
9. **Recognizing the seriousness of its manpower problem and the need to make military service an attractive option for civilians, UMOD introduced an “18-24 contract”** that offered volunteers age 18-24 the ability to sign one-year contracts for a select role among a proscribed set, and offered a range of

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financial and other incentives not available to any other personnel (including long-term volunteers serving in the same specialties as those that recruits could choose).

10. **This effort was largely unsuccessful.** In addition to resulting in poor recruitment numbers, the proposed scheme has had a tangible negative impact on morale among existing troops, who understandably feel that the discrepancy between the terms under which they serve and those being offered to new recruits are unfair. Moreover, it premised the effort to increase AFU's numbers on exactly the wrong distinguishing factors—age of recruit and pathway into AFU—instead of addressing the factors that actually distinguish individuals from a force management perspective—their backgrounds and intended military occupations. This focus exacerbated existing societal frictions (between those who are excepted from mobilisation and those who are not, between long-serving volunteers and new recruits, between men who were mobilised versus those who were recruited) and did nothing to meaningfully address personnel shortages in military occupations across the board.
11. **To solve these shortages, UMOD must address what the population identifies as key obstacles to motivated service, namely, fear of death and disability, lack of appropriate training, likelihood of being assigned to a bad commander, fear of being captured by the enemy, and fear of the unknown.** All of these fears can be addressed by policies aimed at professionalisation of AFU, both at the level of the individual and the institution. The details of these policies and related communications depend on the type of occupational specialty an individual will fill in the military.
12. **For example, the way to address a civilian's fear of death and disability will differ for someone who will serve in the infantry versus someone who will serve in a non-infantry combat versus someone who will serve in a non-combat role.** The first individual will benefit from being offered highstandard training and being in a unit with promising casualty recovery statistics and adequate deployment to dwell times; the latter two will benefit from a realistic understanding of the risks to their occupational specialty and knowledge that their employment in that specialty is guaranteed. The infantry soldier's fear can be addressed by professionalization at the level of the individual and the level of his immediate command; the latter two individuals' fears can be addressed by professionalization of AFU's overall personnel management.
13. **UMOD must also offer equitable terms of service appropriate to respective military occupations and the attendant conditions thereof, and provide clear off-ramps from service to individuals in all roles and who fit every profile of service member**—individuals who voluntarily join AFU from a civilian post, serve in non-combat roles and intend to return to civilian life once the war has concluded; individuals who are mobilised directly into the infantry without an established civilian employment track record; individuals who are long-serving volunteers in direct combat support roles (drone pilot, drone navigator, electronic warfare specialist, etc.) and want to transition to relevant civilian employment; etc. Fear of the unknown is a significant cause of hesitance around service, and the unknown includes not just tenure of service but when that service will end and what comes after.
14. **Finally, UMOD must tackle the issue of lack of confidence in military commanders head on and at all levels of command.** Regardless of any other reforms, poor leadership will invariably result in deterioration of military readiness.
15. **Current recruitment and mobilisation attempts are characterized by a vicious cycle.** The greater the deficiency in requisite troops, the worse the conditions of service become; the worse the conditions of service become, the less the ability of AFU to successfully recruit or mobilise an adequate number of troops.
16. **Encouragingly, the means to transform this cycle from vicious to virtuous do exist.** There are millions of service-eligible individuals (male and female) among Ukraine's civilian population, as demonstrated by the number of registered individuals in the Reserve+ app. As an example, even if just half the number of males aged 18-24 (estimated at 800,000) joined AFU and just half of that contingent

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(200,000) signed contracts to join the infantry, this would be enough to more than double the size of today's infantry (estimated at roughly 150,000-175,000). This increase would allow for infantry to be adequately trained, rotated, and retired upon serious injury. Combined with other measures, such as command emphasis on casualty recovery, this would greatly improve conditions of service. As these conditions improved, so too would the desire to participate in the defence of the nation (indeed, the author's conversations with current and former military suggest that the desire exists at present, albeit with rational hesitation due to flaws in the AFU's current administration of personnel and competence of command). In other words, the primary problem plaguing AFU is quite solvable.

17. **But solutions do not implement themselves, and time is of the essence.** Ukraine cannot sustain its defence—and in particular, the operational tempo of its defensive infantry—under current conditions.

Recommendations

1. **Establish policies and programmes that are multi-pronged and address the needs and motivations of skilled civilians who wish to serve in non-combat military occupations that parallel their civilian roles, versus those in combat (infantry and direct combat support) professions.** Initiatives targeting the former must make military service blend with individuals' civilian lives in a relatively seamless fashion; initiatives targeting the latter must make serving as a professional soldier a sustainable way of life. While the complete array of such initiatives is beyond the scope of this paper and requires a systematic and full investigation to develop in detail, possible initiatives include:
 - a. **A personnel management initiative that establishes well-defined combat and noncombat occupational specialities and associated standard contracts and terms of service.**
 - b. **A “match” program that allows individuals in highly-skilled, in-demand civilian professions (including reserved professions) to apply for military occupational roles that map to their civilian specialties and serve 6-month to 1- year “rotations” in these roles.** While technically serving in AFU, these individuals may continue to be employed by their civilian employers (who benefit from their employees completing a “broadening” assignment and minimizing disruption to their workforce). These rotations would further and complement recruits' civilian careers and be minimally disruptive, with an abridged “basic training” that serves as an orientation to AFU and the option to extend a rotation, complete back-to-back tours in different units (widening exposure to the military while maintaining functional specialization), or segue from a rotation to an employment contract with AFU. The program could send civilians who previously served in a military specialization related to their role to speak at universities and businesses and share their stories, demystifying and dispelling false narratives about service. It could also pair civilians in the recruitment pipeline with a civilian from the same profession who previously served and a military member in the recruit's intended role, ensuring strong support during on-boarding, tenure of service, and off-ramping.
 - c. **For infantry and non-infantry direct combat support roles, clearly-defined service terms (1-year or 3-year, depending on where in their career trajectory an individual is and with a 2-month probationary period for new recruits) with recourse for contract violations; reenlistment perks such as bonuses or additional training opportunities; minimum deployment to dwell ratios that account for operational tempo, type of terrain, recovery from injury, retraining, intelligence updates, and mission planning; regular and guaranteed block leave to allow for time with family; and wounded / killed in action benefits.**

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- d. **Deployment to dwell ratios that consider the factors above are 14:60 days for defensive infantry operating in static, known terrain; 30:60 days for defensive infantry operating in unknown, evolving territory; and 30:14 days for non-infantry, direct combat support roles.**
 - e. **For those new to combat roles, a “buddy” program that allows soldiers to enter service, train, and initially deploy with a fellow soldier in the same service year group.** For those already serving, the opportunity to request “tandem deployments” and “tandem leave” with friends.
 - f. **For families of individuals serving in infantry and direct combat support roles, programmes designed to foster community and resilience, with the understanding that these populations are responsible for meeting almost all household management and caregiving needs.** Specific programs may include:
 - i. Childcare assistance programs that provide regular care for families with children younger than school-age and emergency relief care for unexpected circumstances.
 - ii. Community support programs that establish “pods” of three or four families that live in close geographic proximity and have a member serving in the same unit. Pods can be supported by AFU personnel or volunteer groups and families in the same pod can provide each other with social support, everyday living assistance, networks of informal child and elderly care, etc.
 - iii. Employment programs for spouses of service members that help match them to flexible civilian jobs in their areas of interest.
2. **Launch targeted, strategic communications campaigns that emphasise the equitability of these policies and the ways in which they benefit not only new recruits but those currently serving (especially long-term volunteers).** These campaigns should focus on the uniform professionalization of AFU under the recommended reforms and the fair treatment of all military members, regardless of their pathway into AFU.
 3. **Ensure that any proposed benefits tied to length of service are retroactively granted to those who volunteered during the initial invasion based on their initial date of onboarding.** For example, if a policy establishes re-enlistment bonuses beginning January 01, 2027, a military member who has been serving since February 28, 2022 would receive a bonus equal in value to a three-year reenlistment bonus immediately, and would be eligible for a second bonus on February 28, 2028, with the value of the bonus determined by the length of the contract for re-enlistment that he signs at that time.
 4. **Require UMOD to take immediate action to restore a general sense of trust in military leadership and institutions.** This includes replacing the current commander-in-chief of AFU with a proven military commander who is widely respected by those in AFU; ensuring that members of the General Staff have a background in infantry or direct combat support; and adopting systems of command accountability and independent mechanisms of internal oversight.