

Ukraine Strategic Communications: Narratives and Approaches in Recruitment/Mobilisation

By anonymous strategic communications specialists

Key points

- **The Strategic Imperative:** As the war extends into 2026, the ability of the Defence Forces of Ukraine to replenish personnel has become an increasingly critical factor in sustaining the defence effort. Unit strength is well below effective levels for many units; and exhausted troops who have fought since 2022 cannot be sufficiently rested, because Ukraine lacks the necessary operational reserve. Rates of Absence Without Leave (AWOL) and desertion are consequently on the rise; while numbers being mobilised/recruited consistently fail to meet the need.
- **The Core Challenge:** The current communications approach to generating force strength is falling short. It is characterised by i) a schism between recruitment (agency) and mobilisation (coercion), and ii) by an absence of integrated policy and strategic communications (StratCom) approaches. A dearth of resources and a lack of StratCom capacity and capability in the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence (UMOD) compounds the problem. This has led to a disjointed communications landscape, where UMOD efforts are divorced from research/insight into public sentiment and have deepened societal grievances; while individual brigades operate as independent entities, creating and implementing high-quality campaigns which burnish their reputations while doing nothing to reflect on the wider institution. Russian information operations aggressively exploit this landscape, *inter alia* weaponising fear of the Territorial Centres of Recruitment (TCRs) to undermine state legitimacy.

Analysis and Key Findings

- 1) **Successes** are limited to prestige units (e.g. 3rd Assault Brigade, Azov, Khartia) which utilise data-driven, brand-centric campaigns emphasising agency, choice and distinct service culture.
- 2) **Failures** stem from attempting to use tactical media engagement to mask political disengagement and structural policy lacunae (e.g. undefined terms of service). The promotion of parallel recruitment systems (choice/dignity) as the counterpoint to mobilisation (coercion/predation), inadvertently de-legitimises the state's own primary mechanism for force generation.

¹ **HMG Definition of StratCom:** Stabilisation Unit 2016: *Strategic communications are communications with a purpose, conducted to achieve specified, agreed and measurable objectives and effects, such as mobilising support for a particular policy or promoting a desired behavioural change. Strategic communications should be fully integrated into policy making from the earliest stages.* The Government Communication Service (GCS) definition also includes the following: *achieved through organisational unity; the coordinated use of all the communication tools available, underpinned by research and given coherence in a story and communication products. This is set out in a single plan, working to milestones and properly evaluated.*

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3) **HMG Context:** Effective intervention requires policy and programming integration, a clear articulation of strategic priorities and a commensurate shift from tactical programming to enduring StratCom support for UMOD.

4) **The Way Forward:** StratCom cannot succeed where policy fails. The Government of Ukraine (GoU), supported by partners, must pivot from media engagement to data-driven, policy-led strategic communications. This requires the unification of recruitment and mobilisation narratives, the resolution of barriers to service - specifically terms of service, rotation and veteran care - and an approach to brigade recruitment which does not reinforce institutional polarity. Given the Ukrainian Government's resource constraints, HMG should urgently provide support to UMOD to establish a well-resourced and staffed StratCom capability to realise the approach so urgently needed.

Context 2022-2025

5) **Mobilisation:** Mobilisation is the obligatory enlistment of men of military age (25 – 60 in Ukraine) and women of specific professions (doctors etc.) by the Defence Forces of Ukraine (DFU), mandated under martial law. The mobilisation process is coordinated by the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence (UMOD) through the General Staff. Enlistment is managed by Territorial Centres of Recruitment (TCRs).

6) **Recruitment:** UMOD defines recruitment as the process of recruiting new military personnel through a contract. Recruitment currently happens through a) Government of Ukraine (GoU)-owned web platforms and physical centres in Ukrainian cities; and b) separately by military brigades and units. This constitutes a voluntary decision of a person to attend a recruitment centre.²

Attrition vs. Force Generation

7) Military analysts such as Michael Kofman, Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, argue that **while equipment and ammunition are vital on the Ukrainian battlefield, they cannot compensate for the fundamental lack of personnel.** From the second year of the war onwards, Ukraine has struggled to extend or maintain staffing levels in its military units. There are approximately 850,000 to 1 million active military personnel in Ukraine; while Ukraine does not regularly release information on losses, in February 2025, President Zelensky announced that the Ukrainian military's casualties were over 46,000 killed and 380,000 wounded.³ Desertion and AWOL is an additional and not insignificant complication: from Jan to Oct 2025 there were 161,461 cases of Absence Without Leave (AWOL), with a record high of 21,000 in October alone. Meanwhile, there were 21,479 cases of desertion from Jan to Oct 2025. The figures have notably increased year on year – in 2023 total AWOL and desertion figures were 24,286; whilst in 2025, the combined total to October is 182,940.⁴ The new Minister of Defence, Mykhailo Federov, claimed on 14th January 2026 that there were 200,000 AWOL and two million men avoiding the draft. The total number to October 2025 over the course of the war is 306,072. An

² <https://recruiting.mod.gov.ua/difference.pdf>

³ Zelensky: 43,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed since full-scale war began:

<https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/12/08/7488226/index.amp>

⁴ Figures from Office of the General Prosecutor: : <https://gp.gov.ua/ua/posts/pro-zarevestrovani-kriminalni-pravoporushennya-ta-rezultati-yhdosudovogo-rozsliduvannya-2>

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additional 950,000 men are in reserved occupations or have been deferred at the request of businesses, according to former Prime Minister Shmyhal (now Minister of Defence) in January 2025.⁵

- 8) **Ukraine has been reluctant to conscript its youth, in part due to demographic fears and concerns regarding public sentiment, with associated political risks for the administration.** Men aged between 18 and 25 comprise Ukraine's smallest age demographic, and a large proportion of these are students eligible for deferment. In April 2024, under domestic and international pressure, President

Zelensky reduced the age of compulsory military service from 27 to 25.⁶ In February 2025, in an effort to encourage a younger demographic to join the military (the average age of Ukrainian soldiers is 43)⁷, the Government introduced the '18 – 24 Contract', encouraging volunteers aged 18 to 24 to sign one-year contracts for a limited range of specific roles⁸, which included financial and other incentives not available to other serving personnel. However, according to an interview with Pavlo Palisa, Deputy Head of the Office of the President and military advisor to Zelensky, this generated relatively few additional recruits (1,500 were in the process of signing contracts as of April 2025).⁹ The 18–24 age group comprises an estimated 800,000 men.¹⁰ In August 2025, in a somewhat counter-intuitive move, Ukraine's Cabinet of Ministers revised travel rules to allow men aged 18 to 22 to cross the border. Since that time, the Polish border alone was crossed by around 100,000 men in that age category, up from 34,000 over the previous eight months.¹¹

- 9) According to Ukrainian and Western officials, approximately 200,000 people were conscripted into the armed forces in 2024.¹² Given the number of AWOL/desertions and casualties, this proved insufficient either to maintain unit strength or to generate an operational reserve (to allow internal rotations of exhausted troops).¹³ **To restore units to full strength, Ukraine would need to mobilise an estimated additional 300,000 personnel;**¹⁴ to facilitate an operational reserve would likely require upwards of 4500,000. Set against this figure, it would appear that as of March 2024, there were around 3.7 million men potentially eligible for military service (others are abroad, fighting, disabled or in reserved occupations).¹⁵ In December 2025, there were close to 6 million people registered on the Reserve+ App

⁵ https://lb.ua/society/2025/01/10/654653_vid_mobilizatsii_vzhe_zabronovano.html

⁶ *Zelensky Lowers Ukraine Draft Age, Risking Political Backlash*, The New York Times, April 3rd 2024: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/03/world/europe/zelensky-ukraine-military-draft-age.html>

⁷ *Old Men Belong Here*, Ukrainska Pravda, May 2024 <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/articles/2024/05/16/7455980/>

⁸ Limited to: rifleman, senior rifleman, sniper, rifleman-medic, grenade launcher assistant, grenade launcher, senior grenade launcher, scout, and senior scout

⁹ *About Syrsky, negotiations and relations between the General Staff and the Office: Zelensky's military advisor*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RABuBYZXXU>

¹⁰ *Answered: How many young people aged 18-24 in Ukraine*: https://24tv.ua/mobilizatsiya-ukrayini-2025-yakiy-potentsial-18-24-richnihdobrovoltsiv_n2758045

¹¹ *Ukrainian Men Approaching Military Age are Fleeing in Droves*, The New Yorker, Nov 2025: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-lede/ukrainianmen-approaching-military-age-are-fleeing-in-droves>

¹² *As another Trump presidency nears, Ukraine's army is on the defensive*, 4 Jan 2025, Washington Post: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/01/04/ukraine-losses-trump-negotiations/?next_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.washingtonpost.com%2Fworld%2F2025%2F01%2F04%2Fukraine-losses-trump-negotiations%2F

¹³ *Army at a Crossroads: the mobilisation and organisational crisis of the Defence Forces of Ukraine*

https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/oswcommentary/2025-03-14/army-a-crossroads-mobilisation-and-organisational-crisis#_ftn5

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ukraine needs 500,000 military recruits. Can it raise them?* 13 March 2024, Financial Times: <https://www.ft.com/content/d7e95021-df99-4e99-8105-5a8c3eb8d4ef>

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(registration with the app is obligatory for all men between the ages of 25 and 60; figures include those who may be exempted from service).¹⁶

Problem Statement: Narrative Division and the Policy/StratCom Gap

A Divided Narrative

10) Recruitment: Agency and Dignity

- UMOD recruitment started in late summer 2023 as the acceptable face of attempts to address the manpower shortage, stressing agency and dignity, as opposed to the perceived coercion of mobilisation. UMOD worked with HR companies to establish recruitment platforms such as Lobby X. army, addressing some identified barriers for potential recruits, including the initial ability to select

units and specialisation.¹⁷ However, the most popular positions were in non-combat roles.¹⁸ In parallel, some individual military brigades and units launched their own recruitment process, including recruitment campaigns. This decentralised recruitment model proved more appealing than centralised efforts, building on specific units' reputations and factors including skilled modern-day commanders and provision of effective training (explored in more detail in section 3 below).¹⁹

11) Mobilisation: Coercion, Fear, Anger

- Mobilisation presents a different order of challenge for GoU. For many Ukrainians, TCRs are predatory institutions, synonymous with corruption, illegal detention and abuse of power. A July 2025 poll indicated that only 24% of Ukrainians trusted the TCRs; 68% did not. In comparison, 94% of respondents trusted the Armed Forces of Ukraine.²⁰ Social media is rife with incidents of violence by enlistment officers against men being picked up on the street and thrown into waiting buses – a process known as *busification*; but also against enlistment officers by those disgruntled and angered by the process.²¹ Unlike recruitment therefore, it is unpopular and politically problematic, meaning no one institution or figure has taken the lead in the relevant messaging. The political leadership and messaging required have therefore been largely absent. President Zelensky has sought to distance himself from the steps necessary to address an acute manpower shortage; nevertheless, during 2025, he has been forced on occasion to react to both international pressure to increase the pace of mobilisation and an internal demand for demobilisation.

12) Russian Information Manipulation

¹⁶ Reserve+ "already has 6 million users, and UAH 1 billion in fines for accounting violations have been paid to the state budget - Ministry of Defence, 8 Dec 2025, Interfax Ukraine: <https://interfax.com.ua/news/general/1126779.html>

¹⁷ Recruitment centres or units cannot guarantee to keep recruits when they elect to join a unit. They can be moved at any time by decision of the General Staff.

¹⁸ *Be yourself: Ukraine launches PR drive to attract recruits to weary army*: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/15/ukraine-attract-recruitspr-drive-draft-russia-offensive>

¹⁹ The Economist, *Ukraine's most prestigious military units are run like businesses*

²⁰ National Survey of Ukraine, July 2025. Conducted by sociological research company Rating on behalf of the International Republican Institute, <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-survey-of-ukraine-july-2025/>

²¹ *Draft officer fatally stabbed in Lviv during papers check*, 4 Dec 2025, Kyiv Independent: <https://kyivindependent.com/draft-officer-fatally-wounded-inlviv-during-papers-check/>

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- RU has manipulated the resulting messaging gap, amplifying existing anxieties and emphasising socioeconomic, regional, language and other differences in Ukrainian society as determining factors in mobilisation. In addition, it regularly weaponises the ‘failure’ of mobilisation efforts in Ukraine, fuelling public dissatisfaction with the process and amplifying existing grievances in society.²²

13) Division and De-legitimisation

- In failing to take proactive action, GoU arguably ceded the narrative on mobilisation; it subsequently created a dichotomous system for the replenishment of manpower, with commensurate narrative division rather than unity. **By promoting recruitment (choice/dignity) as the counterpoint to mobilisation (coercion/predation), the state inadvertently de-legitimises its own primary mechanism for force generation.**

Policy and StratCom – Separation, not integration

14) A war of this nature demands a comprehensive and integrated policy/StratCom approach to address the critical deficit in human capital. GoU has been slow to recognise or acknowledge the

barriers and motivators to joining the military; and the concerns of those serving. UMOD policy changes to address some of the barrier have been largely piecemeal; and have deepened grievances between serving personnel and recruits. As noted above, UMOD introduced the 18 – 24 contract in February 2025, which it hoped would attract young recruits with clear terms and benefits. These included significant financial bonuses (up to 1 million UAH total), NATO-standard combat training, social benefits (mortgage, healthcare) and a 12-month deferral from future mobilisation after a year of service.

15) This created unequal conditions of service and monetary compensation within DFU, essentially ignoring the needs/concerns of those who had served since 2022, or indeed 2014, including recruits in the same age bracket who had previously volunteered. **Media monitoring and social media analysis of responses to the new contract**²³ **showed an overwhelmingly negative response**, highlighting discrimination between active service members and new recruits; and exploitation of youth by a ‘traitorous’ system.

16) UMOD’s 18-24 recruitment campaign to market the new contract was not based on audience understanding or insight, lacked a proper strategy with clear behavioural objectives and a pathway to achieve them; and arguably inflicted more damage in terms of confidence in the system, whilst providing limited gains in terms of new recruits (as seen above). **Tactical media work substituted for strategic communications, which would have highlighted the risks evident in terms of public/military sentiment on the proposed policy.**

17) **Ongoing Risks:** In November 2025, UMOD (press service) and Defence Minister Shmyhal began to announce further policy changes, in particular new contracts from 1 – 5 years, with clear service terms

²² How Russia’s propaganda machine weaponises mobilisation in Ukraine, Kyiv Independent, 24 Nov 2025: <https://kyivindependent.com/howrussia-weaponizes-mobilization-fears-in-ukraine/>

²³ Closed source. Media monitoring carried out from January to June 2025; social media analysis from February to July 2025 on Telegram, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and X.

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including a one year deferral from mobilisation at the end of the contract²⁴, choice of unit/specialisation, increased monthly payments, signing bonuses and an expanded social package; and amending a policy which allowed commanders singular authority regarding requests for transfers, seen as 'serfdom' by serving personnel.²⁵ The relevant legislation is expected to come into force in 2026. Whilst a step in the right direction towards consistency in terms of service, there remain profound concerns for those already fighting, for whom their previous years of service will be disregarded.²⁶

18) These changes were not introduced as part of a considered strategic communications campaign which assessed and took account of prevailing sentiment and risk, and which was designed to achieve clear attitudinal/behavioural objectives with target audiences. **Communications were an operational afterthought, detached from policy**; the policy changes were introduced as announcements and thereafter disseminated in the media, with little attempt to manage the messaging and inevitable response.

19) Media monitoring and social media analysis of public responses on the new contracts in November 2025 shows a widespread and overwhelmingly negative reaction: **The material overwhelmingly reflects deep dissatisfaction, betrayal, and exhaustion among commenters regarding the proposed new military contracts, primarily because the policy fails to address immediate demobilization. The new**

contracts are explicitly labelled as a deceptive mechanism ("наїбати" / "trick") or serfdom ("рабство") designed to keep existing personnel bound indefinitely, undermining previous agreements.²⁷ While social media discourse is understood as a snapshot of generally more radicalised contributors, the preponderance of negative views is significant, and furthermore is reflected in the media monitoring on the issue.

20) StratCom cannot succeed where policy fails; but if properly integrated in the policy process, it can influence/inform proposed policies, anticipate and plan for risks/challenges and set realistic, measurable objectives. **GoU's failure to understand audiences, integrate policy-StratCom and therefore effectively manage communications around both 18 – 24 and 1 – 5 year contracts, has arguably precipitated a crisis within a crisis, eroding public tolerance for new approaches to the manpower shortage to ever lower levels.**

21) **Knowledge Dispels Fear:** Despite recent shifts in policy, an enduring lack of certainty and dearth of information afflicts the process of joining/serving in the military. The path has not been effectively articulated or mapped by GoU, from entry to exit and beyond. While such communication will not efface fears around military service, it can help to demystify and address related barriers. As it currently stands, there is uncertainty around every element of a service person's journey, from entry into a TCR/recruitment centre, to training, service itself, and if demobilised due to injury, as a veteran. There is also uncertainty

²⁴ It is clear that demobilisation is not an option while the war is ongoing. In January 2025, UMOFD prepared a draft law on demobilisation; it was not submitted to the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament) due to opposition from the General Staff. The risk of simultaneously losing more than 100,000 military personnel would critically reduce the army's combat capability.

²⁵ **Transferring between units:** in October 2025 at the request of UMOD, the Cabinet of Ministers adopted a new procedure for transferring military personnel to other units, introducing external monitoring to prevent abuses.

²⁶ To qualify for a one-year deferral, soldiers must sign a new contract and serve at least two further years, even when they have been on the front since 2022. *New Contracts with Long-Term Leave: Will They Help the Armed Forces of Ukraine?*, Kyiv Post, 15 Nov 2025:

<https://www.kyivpost.com/post/64263>

²⁷ Closed source. Comments from the major social media platforms, including Telegram, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube. Time period: Nov 03 - 20 2025. In total more than 10k comments and reactions assessed, over 1M views.

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around entitlements for family members of those killed in action or missing; or for those who suffered disability.

Institutional Challenges

- 22) **Tactics Over Strategy:** Institutionally, as we have seen above, UMOD (in common with much of GoU) tends to prioritise tactical media work over strategic communications rooted in policy and audience insight, focusing on quantity (likes, shares etc) not quality (attitude/behaviour change). In a country in which 1.3 million people have combatant experience,²⁸ and in which roughly every 6th Ukrainian remaining in country has a family member with the status of a combatant, high societal awareness of concerns/challenges facing serving personnel cannot be obfuscated or explained away by clever marketing/communications.
- 23) **Fracture:** StratCom within UMOD and the General Staff is currently fractured. Different units/departments with responsibility for StratCom operate with insufficient coordination or overarching strategy. Separate communications components act quasi-independently, with different verticals and poor coordination. Additionally, there are fractures between civil servants, staff who joined in the past 3+ years to ensure exemption from conscription, and military personnel. Resources for strategic communications - for research, design, production, dissemination, advertising - are not prioritised, given military imperatives such as weapons supply and other essential requirements.
- 24) **Capacity/Capability:** A lack of capacity and capability prevails in UMOD. The workload is crushing, dominated by daily operational requirements - press releases, speeches, media engagement - and crisis communications. Communications teams are not sufficiently staffed to allow considered strategy development, planning or horizon scanning – a significant concern given the risks to Ukraine (domestically

and internationally) of failing to effectively shape the relevant narratives. The focus therefore becomes less on the outcomes but on the outputs. While these challenges and deficiencies are well understood by UMOD communications officials, they are not in a position to address them.

HMG Approach: Systemic Challenges

- 25) Among international partners, the UK has demonstrated clear and consistent bipartisan support for Ukraine. The UK has the necessary leverage and resources to support UMOD's transition from tactical to strategic communications, and in so doing, to buttress a critical sector with direct relevance for UK national security and shape/manage public sentiment and expectations.
- 26) To date however, relevant support has been largely *ad hoc* and tactical, as HMG practice tends to militate against effective strategic interventions.
- 27) **StratCom vs. Comms:** StratCom remains poorly understood in HMG, where institutional memory is short. StratCom (policy-aligned, behaviour change) is persistently conflated with communications (media handling, PR), and programming interventions valued for short-term visibility (i.e. media/social media impact) rather than longer-term strategic effect. Furthermore, the separation of StratCom, Foreign

²⁸ As of September 2025, according to the Ministry of Veteran Affairs: [https://fakty.com.ua/ua/ukraine/20251008-skilky-ubd-v-ukrayinidaniminveteraniv/#:~:text=Скільки%20в%20Україні%20УБД%20станом%20на%202025,бойових%20дій%20внесено%201%20326%200552%20особи.](https://fakty.com.ua/ua/ukraine/20251008-skilky-ubd-v-ukrayinidaniminveteraniv/#:~:text=Скільки%20в%20Україні%20УБД%20станом%20на%202025,бойових%20дій%20внесено%201%20326%20552%20особи.)

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Information Manipulation and Interference, and disinformation as distinct disciplines dilutes HMG's approach and militates against a strategic articulation of policy.

- 28) **Programming vs. Policy:** Programming is seen as policy's poor cousin, rather than its direct and tangible manifestation. Programming can only deliver meaningful effect if integrated with policy and driven by clear political direction and guidance, with defined priorities and outcomes.
- 29) **Strategic Objectives and Priorities:** HMG strategic objectives and priorities should drive policy and programming; yet in Ukraine they appear disconnected. This lack of clarity has permeated StratCom interventions, which have lurched from one area of focus to another without an explicit sense of strategic aim or value. HMG must be clear what its strategic priorities are if it wishes to support Ukraine where it counts. ('If a man knows not to which port he sails, no wind is favourable.' Seneca.)
- 30) **Sectoral/Contextual Expertise:** HMG approaches to StratCom exclude relevant external expertise, are internally siloed and lack effective oversight and scrutiny. Consultation and challenge functions are not integrated in practice, whether externally or in terms of x-HMG expertise. Ukraine is a strategic priority, yet too often, decision-making excludes relevant voices, resulting in programming decisions which lack strategic rigour and fail to deliver best effect. In the case of support to UMOD, civil and military professionals with Ukrainian and HMG contextual knowledge or StratCom expertise should be engaged.
- 31) **Sustainability:** If approached correctly, there is important strategic value in making support conditional on observing/implementing certain requirements. However, HMG orthodoxy regarding 'sustainability' - often a conditional factor - can be at odds with the strategic military imperative to urgently render support in war time.
- 32) **Imposing HMG frameworks:** While not universally true in StratCom, where OASIS and the GCS Evaluation Cycle offer tangible value, attempts to replicate some HMG frameworks in programming ignore the realities of the Ukrainian context, drive unnecessary permutations and lack strategic value.

Solutions that have worked and why

- 33) **There are limited examples of effective StratCom around recruitment/mobilisation in Ukraine,** largely confined to decentralised efforts by high-performing and respected units - such as Azov, Khartia, 3rd Assault Brigade, Da Vinci Wolves - relying on their own recruitment drives and fundraising. These units have successfully built brand identity, based on narratives of military efficacy, skilled, modern-day commanders, values and history, and a clear and well-managed path for recruits - provision of effective training, ability to choose roles and dedicated services for personnel and their families.²⁹
- 34) **As the war has evolved, so these units' campaigns have evolved according to changes in the context, policy changes and data** (either collected by the units or available publicly). This is demonstrated in the adaptation of their marketing tactics: from messaging to join the fight against evil to more civilian-oriented narratives showing military service as a way of life.³⁰ However, anonymous respondents from these brigades, interviewed for this paper, stressed the difficulty of creating mid-term

²⁹ *The "Azov" regiment has a Patronage Service that takes care of the wounded and dead and receives bodies*, Babel, 3 Nov 2022: <https://babel.ua/en/texts/86128the-azov-regiment-has-a-patronage-service-that-takes-care-of-the-wounded-and-dead-and-receives-bodies-this-is-the-only-such-structure-in-theukrainian-army-this-is-how-it-works-a-large-report-by-babel>

³⁰ *From Snarling Zombies to Frolicking Dogs, Recruiting Ads Trace a War's Evolution*, 2 Dec 2025, New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/12/02/world/europe/ukraine-russia-war-recruitment-campaign.html>

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and long-term strategies in recruitment messaging, given the rapidly changing context. Moreover, some believe that uncertainty is the new norm that should be communicated. As these efforts are the subject of another paper in this series, it will not be explored in detail here.

35) However, it is clear that there are some common elements to the brigades' well-received strategic communications:

- **Data-Driven Decisions:** Prestige units have research funds or *pro bono* partnerships with research vendors – targeted surveys and other research/analysis to inform campaigns (including understanding of brand recognition).
- **Barriers and Motivators:** Campaigns address both, working with emotional and pragmatic concerns to encourage behaviour change.
- **Positive Narrative:** Campaigns stress pride and prestige, trust, honesty and a sense of belonging, as well as offering a better managed path into the military. ○ **Resources:** The units have the resources - primarily through fundraising - to run marketing and creative teams, and fund research, production and promotion.

36) Nevertheless, while the campaigns are very visible and well perceived by the public, it is understood from primary sources that the numbers recruited (following initial growth earlier in the war), remain relatively low. In addition, the visibility of these campaigns contrasts with wider UMOD efforts, or the absence of campaigns from brigades which lack the reputational and financial draw of prestige units. **While decentralisation has arguably been successful for specific units (although numbers are not publicly available), it has not contributed to a compelling unifying narrative or reflected on the wider institution.**

Why others haven't: Failed efforts

37) As explored above, UMOD's campaigns or communications around recruitment were not rooted in data and understanding of target audiences and did not take account of the risks of exacerbating already existing tensions. While research shows that there is high public awareness of UMOD's centrally managed recruitment campaigns, this does not equate to success, either in terms of numbers recruited or confidence

in the process.³¹ **This clearly illustrates that awareness – so often the focus of tactical communications – should not be a metric for success, and that without prioritising outcomes such as attitude and behaviour change the policy objective sought will not be realised.**

38) The key components of failure therefore have been as follows:

- **Lack of Strategic Commitment:** Campaigns have been *ad hoc* and communications e.g. on 1 – 5 year contracts have been limited to announcements and press releases – clearly lacking the mid to longterm strategic commitment the manpower shortage demands.
- **Lack of Insight:** Failed efforts lacked sufficient data, audience insight and risk assessment prior to execution.

³¹ Closed source. May 2025 poll on mobilisation and recruitment. 84% awareness of the recruitment system.

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- **Comms Covering Policy Failure:** Attempts to disguise poor decision-making or policy gaps with media work consistently fail, due to high societal awareness of the problems.
- **Divided Narrative:** The resounding GoU silence on mobilisation and converse focus on recruitment created a two-tier system for the replenishment of manpower which de-legitimised its primary mechanism for force generation.

Recommendations

Recommendations for GoU

NB: The Narrative Direction section offers a view of possible approaches which can usefully address some of the existing barriers and motivations. However, to be able to outline comprehensive evidence-based recommendations requires direct engagement with policy development, and further research to test and assess potential narratives among key audiences.

1. Structural Arrangements

- **StratCom - Policy Integration:** UMOD StratCom must be integrated into the policy formulation stage, not the dissemination stage. Before a policy is announced or a campaign delivered, its attitudinal/ behavioural impact on the 1 million serving military personnel, the 1.3 million veterans and millions of eligible men must be modelled and understood.
- **Data-Driven Decisions:** Success is achieved by building StratCom into the policy cycle using audience insight and data to understand behaviour drivers, rather than relying on instinct.
- **Public Dialogue:** Proactively engage key audiences and experts in policy/StratCom discussion to enhance understanding and improve policy/StratCom. For example, engage with veterans' organisations and serving personnel prior to designing policy and aligned StratCom. Provide space for constructive dialogue prior to policy announcements. Ignoring or attempting to silence dissent will fail, and AWOL/desertion will keep increasing.

2. Narrative Direction

- **Unifying the Narrative:** GoU should introduce **one overarching narrative** on joining the DFU, removing the dichotomy between recruitment and mobilisation and stressing a single system with clear service terms for personnel, whether recruits or mobilised. GoU should acknowledge existing challenges and grievances, and commit to unifying the approach around force generation for DFU, both in policy and StratCom. It must 'own' mobilisation messaging as part of this wider narrative.
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- **De-mystification:** Ensure clarity on terms and conditions for all types of service personnel; and shed light on the process to demystify and reassure.
 - Address existing vulnerabilities and barriers with honest and proactive communication; use real examples. (Key barriers include: fear of poor command, fear of death and injury, poor armaments. Key motivators: opportunities for growth, financial remuneration, sense of belonging)
 - Focus on the 'User Journey' of a soldier, explicitly detailing what happens from the moment of entering a TCR/recruitment centre to training, deployment, rotation, and eventual return.
 - Use the 'Exit' to sell the 'Entry'. Visible support for veterans reduces the fear of prospective recruits regarding their post-service future.

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○ Highlight support services available to personnel and families during service. ○

Communicate the *mechanism* for rotation and rest.

- **Truth and Acknowledgement:** Strategies need to acknowledge real challenges and explain difficulties, offering solutions and telling the truth at the highest level to build trust.
- **Decentralised Recruitment – Merits and Flaws:** While the decentralised recruitment approach has discernible value for specific units, the reputational merit for the wider DFU is less clear. Prestige units are not only allowed to recruit and train, but also receive better equipment and armaments;³² whilst engendering unit-specific loyalty among their troops. UMOD should consider how best to use these units' success/reputation to reflect on the wider institution (DFU) and indeed learn lessons from their StratCom campaigns; equally, it should consider the potential dangers in reinforcing institutional division/polarity.

Recommendations for HMG

- **High-Level UK Leverage:** HMG has the necessary trust and leverage to enable a strategic shift by engaging senior Ukrainian decision-makers to ensure holistic StratCom access at policy level (see above).
- **Strategy & Policy Clarity:** HMG must clarify its strategic goals in StratCom in Ukraine, prioritising support which will help Ukraine in its existential fight. Once agreed on the priority, it must bind its programming to policy, ensuring coherence and tracking effect.
- **Urgent Institutional Support:** HMG should urgently provide requested support to UMOD to establish a well-resourced and staffed StratCom capability. This should include strategic planning, campaign/StratCom delivery, research/insight and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning functions; with a commitment to fund mid-term (during the war; and ideally when re-integrating veterans/developing long-term defence forces/reserve policy).
- **Sustainability:** When considering sustainability, focus on mid to longer-term strategic effect and delivery, building on previous/existing HMG and NATO initiatives to support enduring x-GoU StratCom capability. Securing UMOD commitments regarding institutionalisation of a donor-funded StratCom function is meaningless – a change of government post-election would render any such agreement void. True sustainability requires the overarching reform of public administration, or the introduction of specific reforms related to interoperability with NATO.
- **HMG Frameworks:** When designing programming interventions, work with both HMG and Ukrainian experts to utilise best practice, while avoiding duplication of irrelevant frameworks or models that will not translate or have value in the Ukrainian context (noting Ukraine has a very different governmental system).
- **Embed Expertise:** Hybrid structures, with experienced specialists embedded in the Embassy, could more effectively design and manage implementer programmes, drawing on extensive operational experience. Embed experienced StratCom experts at post to ensure expert policy advice, QA/QC and effective implementation. There is precedent for this hybrid structure e.g. in both Basra and the British Office for

Somalia, specialists were embedded, supporting policy and resulting programme design; and managing programmes.

- **X-HMG Coordination:** Create an additional x-HMG StratCom function (including the military, not only MOD, FCDO; and with representation from post and London) to coordinate policy and programming, in line with strategic objectives and tracking strategic effect, ensuring:

³² Army at a crossroads; the mobilisation and organisational crisis of the Defence Forces of Ukraine, *Op Cit.*

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- Policy and programming are fully aligned;
- All departments shape policy/programming in support of HMG strategic intent;
- Increased scrutiny of effect, tied to strategic intent. Bring implementers' MEL into the process to capture effect, identify challenges/failures and to adjust as necessary. ○ Efforts are not siloed and individuals cannot dominate a policy area.