

Understanding Success: Why Certain Ukrainian Military Formations Run Consistently Successful Recruitment Campaigns

By Jimmy Rushton, independent foreign policy and security analyst, reporting from Kyiv since May 2022.

Key points

- Ukrainian military units recruit in a competitive marketplace. Volunteers have considerable choice over where they serve, and many mobilised men attempt to direct themselves toward specific units. Brigades that recruit successfully often have waiting lists to join; those that do not routinely struggle to fill their ranks.
- There are material differences between units that consistently recruit successfully and those that do not. Units with a strong track record of military success, as well as a reputation for good training, competent leadership, strong military culture and “esprit de corps”, are also those who run the most successful recruitment campaigns.
- These military units demonstrate that when training, leadership, and military culture are of a high quality, volunteers actively seek out service.
- Ukrainians in general, and prospective recruits especially, are well aware of the variation in quality between military units and typically choose to join those units which a) fight the Russians most effectively and b) give them the best chance of surviving the war.

Analysis and Key Findings

- 1) The Ukrainian military is currently suffering from a well-documented and severe manpower shortage. “Many brigades on the front line are operating at only 30% of their standard strength”, Bohdan Krotevych, former Chief of Staff of the Azov Brigade of the Ukrainian National Guard, told the author during an interview in Kyiv in November 2025. **The Ukrainian military is currently unable to recruit or mobilise enough soldiers to fill vacancies.**
- 2) The problems are compounded by high rates of desertion by mobilised soldiers. According to Ukrainian politician and member of the 72nd Mechanised Brigade Ihor Lutsenko, **21,602 cases of desertion were officially recorded by the Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office in October, 2025**, the highest number of desertions since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion. 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.
- 3) Brigades that receive mobilised men note they are often unwilling and ineffective soldiers. Officers in the 1st Assault Regiment, commonly known as the “Da Vinci Wolves battalion” noted that of 200 conscripts their

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unit had received, only 25 showed a desire to fight, with the remainder being “absolutely unmotivated”. Krotevych echoes this sentiment, viewing the activities of the Territorial Recruitment and Social Support Centre’s recruitment officers as unhelpful. **Against this bleak backdrop, a small number of military units consistently avoid these problems by applying notably different organisational practices.**

- 4) Despite broader problems with recruitment and desertions, there are a number of military units that have a track record of consistently successful recruitment and correspondingly low levels of desertions. This paper will focus on three such units¹; the Azov Brigade of the Ukrainian National Guard, the 13th Khartia Brigade - also part of the Ukrainian National Guard - and the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade, part of the regular Ukrainian army. All three of these units have recently been expanded to army corps status, as part of Ukraine's move from a brigade-based to a corps-based command structure. All of these brigades currently have waiting lists to join, as well as relatively strict entry requirements. **These formations provide a clear window into what effective recruitment looks like in practice and allow us to identify replicable organisational behaviours.**
- 5) These brigades - and others with similarly strong reputations - attract the most recruits. Brigades compete intensely for motivated volunteers, who remain the most valuable and limited resource. Volunteer motivations map closely onto perceptions of unit quality, so brigades with credible performance records gain disproportionate recruitment advantage. Ukrainians driven to join the military through patriotic sentiment seek out brigades that have a proven track record of fighting the Russians most effectively. According to polling conducted by Ukrainian research agency Info Sapiens in February 2024, **a significant majority of Ukrainian men who were ready to be mobilised were motivated either by the desire to defend their country and their family (71%) or the desire to seek revenge on the Russians (64.6%)**. It is logical that such individuals will join the military units that are seen as most effective in accomplishing these tasks. Ukrainian men who face the prospect of impending compulsory mobilisation will also often seek out such brigades, as a soldier in such a brigade is seen as having a better chance of surviving the war.
- 6) The most effective advertising campaigns are run by brigades with strong reputations for military effectiveness. **The core advantage is credibility: their messaging matches their soldiers’ lived experience.** According to a senior serving officer in Khartia, speaking to the author on condition of anonymity, Khartia’s advertising campaigns (as well as similar campaigns run by Azov and Third Assault Brigade) are successful not just because they are well conceived, but also because they are truthful. He points out that with so many Ukrainian soldiers currently under arms, and with a relatively robust media, advertising campaigns that don’t reflect the reality of the units they represent are generally unsuccessful. Successful units also run their own recruiting centres, bypassing the unpopular centralised recruiting centres completely, where members of the unit - very often combat veterans - can explain the reality of army life and answer any questions a potential recruit might have.
- 7) A recurring theme is administrative reliability—delivering on promises, matching skills to roles, and providing predictable processes. Units that keep their promises to recruits - for example, by appointing them to a role they applied for, or by giving them modern, NATO standard training - recruit more successfully. “All recruits

¹ There are many other Ukrainian military units that both recruit and fight effectively. Due to this paper’s limited scope it is impossible to list them all here.

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understand that this is a brigade that keeps its promise”, according to Krotevych. “And they understand which brigades do not”. Successful brigades use recruits in roles they are suitable for. “Azov uses people according to their best skills”, Krotevych says. This enables recruits who might not consider themselves typical soldiers to still be military useful, every military unit needing logisticians, mechanics, drivers, cooks, and a plethora of other roles apart from frontline infantry. It is a misconception that allowing individuals to choose their role would result in no recruits choosing frontline infantry; as in Azov and in 3rd Assault Brigade, assault infantry roles are some of the most requested and prestigious positions. Additionally, Third Assault Brigade offers a no obligation seven-day trial training period where individuals considering signing a contract can experience military life. If at the end of the seven days they do not wish to join they can return to civilian life. **This reduces fear of the unknown, a major barrier to mobilisation.**

8) Training quality is the single largest controllable factor influencing volunteer willingness to join. Volunteers seek out brigades with effective training programmes. For example, in its marketing campaigns Khartiia explicitly advertises that recruits will be given NATO standard training. Both 3rd Assault Brigade and Azov also run their own basic training programmes, bypassing regional training centres, as training given to recruits at these regional training centres is notoriously poor. During a July 2025 embed with 3rd Army Corps, the author interviewed members of the 60th Mechanised Brigade, who had recently been absorbed into 3rd Army Corps’ command structure. The 45-day basic training they had received at the 169th Training Centre, more commonly known as Desna, consisted mainly of “chopping wood”, according to multiple interviewed soldiers. Recruits only received a total of 12 hours of tactical medicine training, and received no training on how to conduct even basic military manoeuvres such as fire and manoeuvre. The brigade’s armoured crews were only trained to “drive the vehicle”. In both 3rd Assault Brigade and Azov, training is almost exclusively conducted by instructors with relevant combat experience, which is also advertised in recruitment campaigns. Addressing such concerns is crucial for successful recruitment. According to Info Sapiens, 64.3% of Ukrainian men who considered themselves “not ready to be mobilised” claimed “lack of appropriate training” as a key reason for their reluctance to join the military. This was virtually identical to those that cited the possibility of dying or suffering a debilitating wound during service (64.1% of respondents). **The gulf between brigade-run training and state-run centres is widely known and drives volunteers to self-select into units with proven competence.**

9) **Perceptions of leadership quality determine whether men see service as survivable.** Volunteers seek out brigades with effective leadership who do not waste their soldiers on pointless “meat wave assaults”. Brigades that recruit successfully typically have a reputation for effective, combat proven leadership. In the 3rd Assault Brigade, all officers are promoted internally, and almost all have served in the infantry. Internal promotion ensures competence and inspires confidence amongst subordinates. Kyrylo Berkal, deputy commander of 3rd Army Corps, was a key figure in the defence of Mariupol, along with Denys Prokopenko and Bohdan Krotevych of the Azov Brigade. Brigades that have combat proven leadership inspire confidence in their recruits. During an embed with 3rd Assault Brigade in July 2025, Vitaly, a senior sergeant

in the brigade’s assault training company, explained to the author that recruits understood that their leadership “will not ask them to do anything they wouldn’t be willing to do themselves”. Concerns about poor leadership have a negative impact on recruitment, with 59.6% of Ukrainian men who considered themselves unready for mobilisation citing “the likelihood of being assigned to a bad commander” as a reason they did not want to join the military, even higher than those who feared being captured by the enemy (50.8%). According to founder of Khartiia, Vsevolod Kozhemyako, the brigade does not “use people like animals”. Soldiers take

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part in mission planning and understand the overall goals of every operation, a concept (commander's intent and mission command) taken from Western military leadership. "Our men are involved in planning, they understand what they're doing, they're part of the mission 100%".

- 10) Military units that recruit successfully attempt to demystify and normalise service in the army, presenting it as just part of life in contemporary Ukraine; and even as a positive experience rather than something to be feared or avoided. Khartia presents the brigade as an attractive career path for Ukrainians, with their "Grow in Khartia" campaign promising personal growth and career development in the brigade. "We're Here to Live", a recent campaign for Third Assault Brigade, shows soldiers cuddling babies and playing with dogs. Another poster in the same campaign shows a member of the brigade receiving a medal from 3rd Army Corps commander Andriy Biletsky, who is shown smiling paternally. Azov runs similar campaigns. "Mum, I'm in Azov" shows a soldier phoning his mother, the clear implication being that a soldier's parent will be less worried (and have a sense of pride) as their son is part of a capable military unit. This also plays into the strong "esprit de corp" and sense of belonging these units engender in their recruits. **Normalisation and emotional reassurance counteract two of the main deterrents identified in national polling: fear and uncertainty.**

Recommendations

Reinforce success: Support recruitment efforts by military units that have a track record of military effectiveness, whilst heavily incentivising meaningful military reform making future deliveries of military aid to other military units conditional.

1. Short to medium term: Support successful units with proven recruitment models to increase their ability to recruit and train additional soldiers as they rapidly expand.

- 1st Azov Corps, 2nd Khartia Corps, and 3rd Army Corps are currently ramping up recruitment as they expand to full army corps capacity. However, all are currently struggling to train the numbers of recruits that wish to join their formations. Direct support to such successful military units should be considered as they utilise recruits - a valuable and limited commodity - more effectively than other military formations.
- Utilise the engagement with these successful Ukrainian brigades to facilitate knowledge exchange: whilst aiding successful Ukrainian military units with recruitment and training, British military advisors should be learning lessons on how to successfully fight a peer or near-peer opponent on a drone saturated battlefield. Understand that knowledge gained through such an exchange will have a direct impact on the number of casualties British forces take during a future war, which inevitably involve large numbers of drones.
- The UK should use its experience in training Ukrainian soldiers to rapidly increase the training capabilities of these extremely effective military units, allowing them to rapidly expand. (Partner nations are already following this direct support model, with Norway recently agreeing a \$300m agreement to provide unmanned systems directly to 3rd Army Corps, whilst Latvia provided 42 Patria armoured personnel carriers.

2. Medium to long term: scale best practices across the force: encourage military reform via conditional military aid and increased political pressure on the Kyiv government.

- In the medium to long term, the most effective way to boost Ukrainian recruitment is through encouraging rigorous military reforms. **This begins with the replacement of the current Commander in Chief, Oleksandr Syrskyi, who has comprehensively lost the confidence of the average soldier in the**

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Ukrainian military. Understand that not every brigade can enjoy the same status or effectiveness as a unit such as Third Assault Brigade, Khartia, or Azov, but by replicating best practices in these units (particularly their high standards of leadership, competent training, and inclusive and respectful military culture) combat effectiveness will inevitably improve.

- Recognise that Ukraine is currently engaged in a war of attrition with a larger country with a significantly larger population. Force preservation and effective utilization of limited manpower resources is of utmost importance. Motivated volunteers are an incredibly valuable resource and should not be squandered. **Understand that many Ukrainian men are not implacably opposed to military service, but are scared of poor leadership, poor training, and poor military culture (not being treated with respect).**