

# Ukraine faces difficult decisions over acute shortage of frontline troops

Depleted army is increasingly made up of older men, but Zelenskyy is reluctant to lower mobilisation age from 25

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New recruits practice on a military training ground in Chernihiv region, Ukraine. Photograph: Dan Bashakov/AP

On a recent icy afternoon in the western Ukrainian city of Kovel, a silver-haired man in military fatigues prepared to board a train. A small boy hugged him at the knees, reluctant to let go. "Come on Dima, say goodbye to grandad," his mother told him, pulling him away.

A few minutes later, the train pulled out of the station with the man on board, headed on a long journey to the east of the country, towards the frontlines in the fight against [Russia](#). Daughter and grandson, both in tears, waved from the platform.

Similar scenes now play out frequently in Ukraine, where the depleted and exhausted army is increasingly made up of older men. As the country approaches three years of full-scale war with Russia, and [waits uneasily for the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House](#), an acute personnel shortage at the front presents a dilemma.

A Ukrainian serviceman and police officers check a man's documents in the centre of Kyiv. Photograph: Sergei Supinsky/AFP/Getty Images

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has resisted public calls from the Biden administration to lower the age at which men can be mobilised from 25, where it currently stands, to 18, citing the sensitivities of sending younger men to fight in a society that already faces a demographic crisis. But with Russia continuing to find fresh recruits for its grinding advances, the army is struggling to find enough people to fill the gaps at the front.

A series of interviews with Ukrainian officers, who spoke anonymously, given the sensitivity of the issue, paint a worrying picture for Ukraine's war effort.

"The people we get now are not like the people who were there in the beginning of the war," said one soldier currently serving in Ukraine's 114th territorial defence brigade, who has been stationed in various hotspots over the past two years. "Recently, we received 90 people, but only 24 of

them were ready to move to the positions. The rest were old, sick or alcoholics. A month ago, they were walking around Kyiv or Dnipro and now they are in a trench and can barely hold a weapon. Poorly trained, and poorly equipped," he said.

Young recruits undergo military training at the recruiting centre in Kyiv. Photograph: Libkos/Getty Images

Two sources in air defence units told the Guardian the deficit at the front has become so acute that the general staff has ordered already-depleted air defence units to free up more men to send to the front as infantry.

"It's reaching a critical level where we can't be sure that air defence can function properly," said one of the sources, saying he had been prompted to speak out by a fear that the situation was a risk to Ukraine's security.

"These people knew how air defence works, some had been trained in the West and had real skills, now they are sent to the front to fight, for which they have no training," said the source.

Commanders can use the orders to send soldiers they do not like to the front, as punishment, said the source. There is also a fear that, equipped with sensitive knowledge about Ukrainian air defence positions and tactics, there is a risk of these soldiers giving up important information if they are captured by Russians at the front.

New RDK recruits at a firing range not far outside Kyiv. Photograph: Alessio Mamo/The Guardian

Last month Mariana Bezuhla, an outspoken and controversial MP, claimed in a post on Telegram that air defence troops were being transferred to infantry units, leading to worse success rates for Ukraine shooting down Russian drones. Yuriy Ihnat, a spokesperson for the air defence forces, confirmed at the time that the transfers were taking place, saying they were "very painful". But he denied that it was affecting shoot-down rates.

Those the Guardian spoke with said the increasing demands for transfers were making it hard to run the air defence units properly, however.

"This has been going on for a year but it's been getting worse and worse," said another source, an officer working on air defence. "I'm already down to less than half [of full strength]. In recent days the commission came and they want dozens more. I'm left with those aged 50-plus and injured people. It's impossible to run things like this," he said.

Representatives of the Ukrainian armed forces and police officers walk around the suburbs of Kyiv, handing out summonses to military commissions in May. Photograph: Jędrzej Nowicki/The Guardian

While the first months of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 saw lines of Ukrainians ready to volunteer, and hundreds of thousands of people have willingly gone to the front since, mobilisation has been a major challenge for Kyiv for the past year, with [squads of recruitment officers roaming the streets](#) and handing out call-up papers. Men of conscription age have been barred from leaving the country since the start of the invasion.

Most Ukrainians understand the need for mobilisation, but the policy is unpopular on a personal level, and the recruiting squads often face anger and abuse as they look for new conscripts.

In a telling sign of the changing attitudes in the country, a poll by the Kyiv-based Razumkov Centre over the summer found that 46% of respondents agreed that there was "no shame in evading military service", while only 29% disagreed.

Posters on the streets of the capital encourage people to join the armed forces. This poster says: 'Choose your path. Master pilotless technology.' Photograph: Jędrzej Nowicki/The Guardian

The personnel shortage has soured relations between Kyiv and Washington over recent months. Officials in the Biden administration felt irritated that Zelenskyy and other officials frequently demanded more weapons, but were unable to mobilise the requisite manpower to fill the ranks.

"Manpower is the most vital need" Ukraine has at the moment, White House national security council spokesperson Sean Savett said in a statement last month. "We're also ready to ramp up our training capacity if they take appropriate steps to fill out their ranks," he said.

Ukrainian officials felt the public calls by the US to lower the mobilisation age to 18 was insensitive and inappropriate. Ukraine expanded its mobilisation drive in April, lowering the call-up age to 25 from 27, but a majority of Ukrainians, even those at the front, are wary of lowering it further, citing a need to protect the younger generation.

Many soldiers say that the way to boost mobilisation rates is not by lowering the call-up age but by offering better incentives and more

training. "It's not about age, really, they need good conditions and motivation," said the soldier from the 114<sup>th</sup> brigade. "Eighteen-year-olds are still children. Maybe they could lower it to 23 if necessary, but there are still enough people in Kyiv who could be mobilised but don't want to go," he added.

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