

Outgunned and outnumbered, Ukraine's military is struggling with low morale and desertion

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Pokrovsk, Sumy and Kyiv, Ukraine CNN — normal

Dima never puts out a cigarette until he smokes it right down to the filter, risking burning his fingers to squeeze out one more drag. He spent years on the Ukrainian front lines. He knows the price of a good smoke.

As a battalion commander, Dima was in charge of around 800 men who fought in some of the fiercest, bloodiest battles of the war – most recently near [Pokrovsk, the strategic eastern town](#) that is now on the brink of falling to Russia.

But with most of his troops now dead or severely injured, Dima decided he'd had enough. He quit and took another job with the military – in an office in Kyiv.

Standing outside that office, chain smoking and drinking sweet coffee, he told CNN he just couldn't handle watching his men die anymore.

Two and half years of [Russia's grinding offensive](#) have decimated many Ukrainian units. Reinforcements are few and far between, leaving some soldiers exhausted and demoralized. The situation is particularly dire among infantry units near Pokrovsk and elsewhere on the eastern front line, where Ukraine is struggling to stop Russia's creeping advances.

CNN spoke to six commanders and officers who are or were until recently fighting or supervising units in the area. All six said desertion and insubordination are becoming a widespread problem, especially among newly recruited soldiers.

Four of the six, including Dima, have asked for their names to be changed or withheld due to the sensitive nature of the topic and because they are not authorized to speak to the media.

“Not all mobilized soldiers are leaving their positions, but the majority are. When new guys come here, they see how difficult it is. They see a lot of enemy drones, artillery and mortars,” one unit commander currently fighting in Pokrovsk told CNN. He also asked to remain anonymous.

“They go to the positions once and if they survive, they never return. They either leave their positions, refuse to go into battle, or try to find a way to leave the army,” he added.

Unlike those who volunteered earlier in the war, many of the new recruits didn't have a choice in entering the conflict. They were called up after Ukraine's new mobilization law came into force in the spring and can't leave legally until after the government introduces demobilization, unless they get special permission to do so.

Yet the discipline problems clearly began way before this. Ukraine went

through an extremely difficult patch during last winter and spring. Months of delay in getting US military assistance into the country led to a critical ammunition shortage and a major slump in morale.

Multiple soldiers [told CNN at the time](#) that they would often find themselves in a good position, with a clear view of the approaching enemy and no artillery rounds to fire. Some spoke of feeling guilty for not being able to provide adequate cover for their infantry units.

“The days are long, they live in a dugout, on duty around the clock and if they can’t shoot, the Russians have an advantage, they hear them advancing and they know that if they had fired it wouldn’t have happened,” said Andryi Horetskyi, a Ukrainian military officer whose unit is now fighting in Chasiv Yar, another eastern frontline hot spot.

Serhiy Tsehotskiy, an officer with the 59th Separate Motorized Infantry Brigade, told CNN the unit tries to rotate soldiers in and out every three to four days. But drones, which have only increased in number over the course of the war, can make that too dangerous, forcing soldiers to stay put for longer. “The record is 20 days,” he said.

As the battlefield situation deteriorated, an increasing number of troops started to give up. In just the first four months of 2024, prosecutors launched criminal proceedings against almost 19,000 soldiers who either abandoned their posts or deserted, according to the Ukrainian parliament. More than a million Ukrainians serve in the country’s defense and security forces, although this number includes everyone, including people working in offices far away from the front lines.

It’s a staggering and – most likely – incomplete number. Several commanders told CNN that many officers would not report desertion and unauthorized absences, hoping instead to convince troops to return voluntarily, without facing punishment.

This approach became so common that Ukraine changed the law to decriminalize desertion and absence without leave, if committed for the first time.

Horetskyi told CNN that this move made sense. "Threats will only make things worse. A smart commander will delay threats, or even avoid them," he said.

Pokrovsk has become the epicenter of the fight for Ukraine's east. Russian forces have been inching towards the city for months, but their advances have sped up in recent weeks as Ukrainian defenses begin to crumble.

'Everything feels the same'

Russian President Vladimir Putin has made it clear his goal is to gain control over the entirety of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions and taking over Pokrovsk, an important military and supply hub, would be a

major step towards that objective.

It sits on a key road that connects it to other military cities in the area and a railroad that links it with Dnipro. The last major coking coal mine still under Kyiv's control is also just to the west of the city, supplying coke to make steel – an indispensable wartime resource.

Ukrainian soldiers in the area paint a grim picture of the situation. Kyiv's forces are clearly outnumbered and outgunned, with some commanders estimating there are 10 Russian soldiers to each Ukrainian.

But they also appear to be struggling with problems of their own making.

An officer from a brigade fighting in Pokrovsk, who asked for their name to be withheld for security reasons, told CNN that poor communication between different units is a major issue there.

There have even been cases of troops not disclosing the full battlefield picture to other units out of fear it would make them look bad, the officer said.

One battalion commander in northern Donetsk said his flank was recently left exposed to Russian attacks after soldiers from neighboring units abandoned their positions without reporting it.

The high number of different units that Kyiv has sent to the eastern front lines has caused communication problems, according to several rank-and-file soldiers who were until recently fighting in Pokrovsk.

One said it was not unheard of to have Ukrainian signal jammers affecting vital coordination and drone launches because units from different brigades didn't communicate properly.

A group of sappers – or combat engineers – spoke to CNN near the border between Ukraine and Russia's Kursk region, where they have been

recently redeployed from just south of Pokrovsk.

Kyiv launched its surprise incursion into Kursk last month, taking Moscow by surprise and quickly advancing some 30 kilometers (19 miles) into Russian territory.

Ukraine's leaders, including President Volodymyr Zelensky, said one of the goals of the operation was to prevent further attacks on northern Ukraine, while also showing Kyiv's Western allies that, with the right support, the Ukrainian military can fight back and eventually win the war.

The operation also gave a major boost to an exhausted nation. Ukraine has been on the backfoot for most of the past year, enduring relentless attacks, blackouts and heartbreaking losses.

But the sappers were not too sure about the strategy. Having just finished a long mission over the border, they were slumped around a table outside a closed restaurant near the frontier, waiting for their car to turn up.

Chain smoking and trying to stay awake, they questioned why they were sent to Kursk when the eastern front line is in disarray.

"It felt weird entering Russia, because in this war we were supposed to defend our soil and our country, and now we're fighting on the other country's territory," one of them said. CNN is not disclosing their identities because they were not authorized to speak to the media and due to the sensitive nature of their words.

All four have been fighting for more than two-and-half years and theirs is a tough job. As sappers, they spend days on the front lines, clearing mine fields, preparing defenses and conducting controlled explosions. They can find themselves under attack, ahead of even the first line of infantry, dragging around some 40 kilograms (88 pounds) of kit and four anti-tank mines, each weighing about 10 kilograms (22 pounds).

Speaking to CNN, they appeared completely exhausted. They had no rest between their Pokrovsk mission and the one in Kursk.

"It depends on each commander. Some units receive rotations and have time off, while others are just fighting non-stop, the whole system is not very fair," one of the soldiers said. Asked if the advances in Kursk gave them the same boost as the rest of the nation, they remained skeptical.

"After three years of this, war, everything feels the same," one of the men told CNN.

'Rotten approach'

[Speaking to CNN on Thursday](#), Ukraine's Commander in Chief Oleksandr Syrskyi admitted low morale is still an issue and said raising it was "a very important part" of his job.

"The Kursk operation... significantly improved the morale of not only the military but the entire Ukrainian population," he said.

He said he had been going to the front lines regularly to meet with the soldiers there and do what he could to make them feel better. "We understand each other no matter who I am talking to, whether it is an ordinary soldier, a rifleman, for example, or a brigade commander or a battalion commander... I know all the problems that our servicemen, soldiers, and officers experience. The front line is my life," he said.

And Horetskyi – an officer specially trained to provide moral and psychological support to troops – is part of the plan to boost morale.

During recent leave in Kyiv, Horetskyi told CNN that while his role has existed for a while, it consisted mostly of paperwork. Now he spends a lot more time with his unit, checking in, making sure they are not burning out. Not that his help is always appreciated.

"They have this idea that I'm a shrink that will make them take thousands of tests and then tell them they are sick, so I try to break down the barriers," he said, adding that little distractions can prevent a downward spiral.

In the monotony of war, any break from the routine can help, he said. This can include a wash in a real shower, a haircut or going for a swim in a lake. "It's such a little thing, but it gets them out of the routine for half a day, it makes them happy, and they can return to their positions a bit more relaxed," Horetskyi explained.

Even officers with many years of experience are finding the situation in the east difficult.

Some, like Dima, are transferring to posts away from the front lines. He said his decision to leave the battlefield was mostly down to disagreements with a new commander.

That, too, is increasingly common, several officers told CNN.

The ranks of Dima's battalion grew thinner and thinner, until the unit disappeared.

They never received enough reinforcements, Dima says, something he blames squarely on the government and its reluctance to recruit more people.

The battalion suffered painful losses in the past year, fighting on multiple front lines before being sent to Pokrovsk without any rest. Dima saw so many of his men killed and wounded, he became numb.

Yet he told CNN he is determined to go back to the front lines, but will make one change first.

"I've now made the decision that I will stop getting attached to people emotionally. It's a rotten approach, but it's the most sensible one," he said.

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