

‘They were furious’: the Russian soldiers refusing to fight in Ukraine

Tuesday 17 May 2022, by [SAUER Pjotr](#) (Date first published: 12 May 2022).

Troops are saying no to officers, knowing that punishment is light while Russia is not technically at war

When the soldiers of an elite Russian army brigade were told in early April to prepare for a second deployment to [Ukraine](#), fear broke out among the ranks.

The unit, stationed in Russia’s far east during peacetime, first entered Ukraine from Belarus when the war started at the end of February and saw bitter combat with Ukrainian forces.

“It soon became clear that not everyone was onboard with it. Many of us simply did not want to go back,” said Dmitri, a member of the unit who asked not to be identified with his real name. “I want to return to my family – and not in a casket.”

Along with eight others, Dmitri told his commanders that he refused to rejoin the invasion. “They were furious. But they eventually calmed down because there wasn’t much they could do,” he said.

He was soon transferred to Belgorod, a Russian city close to the border with Ukraine, where he has been stationed since. “I have served for five years in the army. My contract ends in June. I will serve my remaining time and then I am out of here,” he said. “I have nothing to be ashamed of. We aren’t officially in a state of war, so they could not force me to go.”

Dmitri’s refusal to fight highlights some of the military difficulties the Russian army has faced as a result of the Kremlin’s political decision not to formally declare war on Ukraine – preferring instead to describe the invasion, which will soon reach its fourth month, as a “special military operation”.

Under Russian military rules, troops who refuse to fight in Ukraine can face dismissal but cannot be prosecuted, said Mikhail Benyash, a lawyer who has been advising soldiers who choose that option.

Benyash said “hundreds and hundreds” of soldiers had been in touch with his team for advice on how they could avoid being sent to fight. Among them were 12 national guardsmen from Russia’s southern city of Krasnodar who were fired after refusing to go to Ukraine.

“Commanders try to threaten their soldiers with prison time if they dissent, but we tell the soldiers that they can simply say no,” Benyash said, adding that he was not aware of any criminal cases against soldiers who refused to fight. “There are no legal grounds to start a criminal case if a soldier refuses to fight while on Russian territory.”

Many soldiers, therefore, have chosen to be fired or transferred rather than going into “the meat grinder”, he said.

A similar account to Dmitri’s was given to the BBC’s Russian service by [by Sergey Bokov](#), a 23-year-

old soldier who at the end of April decided to leave the army after fighting in Ukraine. "Our commanders didn't even argue with us because we were not the first ones to leave," Bokov said.

Pointing to Russia's military laws, Benyash said it would be more difficult for soldiers to refuse to fight if Russia were to declare a full-scale war. "During wartime, rules are totally different. Refusal then would mean much harsher penalties. They would be looking at time in prison."

While the exact number of soldiers refusing to fight remains unclear, such stories illustrate what military experts and western governments say is one of Russia's biggest obstacles in Ukraine: a severe shortage of infantry soldiers.

Moscow initially put about 80% of its main ground combat forces – 150,000 men – into the war in February, according to western officials. But significant damage has been done to that army, which has confronted logistical problems, poor morale and an underestimated Ukrainian resistance.

"Putin needs to make a decision regarding mobilisation in the coming weeks," said Rob Lee, a military analyst. "Russia lacks sufficient ground units with contract soldiers for a sustainable rotation. The troops are getting exhausted – they won't be able to keep this up for a long period."

Lee said one option for the Kremlin would be to authorise the deployment of conscript units to Ukraine, despite Putin's earlier pledges that Russia would not use any conscripts in the war. "Conscripts could fill some of the gaps, but they will be poorly trained. Many of the units that are supposed to train conscripts are fighting themselves," Lee said.

But without conscript battalions, Russia could soon "struggle to hold the territory it currently controls in Ukraine, especially as Ukraine receives better equipment from Nato," he said.

Russian authorities quietly stepped up their efforts to recruit new soldiers as it became clear that a quick victory in Ukraine was unattainable.

An investigation by the BBC's Russian service showed that Russia's defence ministry filled employment websites with vacancies, offering people with no combat experience opportunities to join the army on lucrative short-term contracts. Some large government-run companies have received letters urging them to sign up their staff for the army.

Russia has also turned to mercenaries to bolster its war efforts, deploying fighters from the shadowy [Kremlin-linked Wagner group](#).

But analysts say voluntary recruits and mercenary groups are unlikely to lead to a substantial increase in the number of new soldiers, compared with the numbers that a partial or a full-scale mobilisation would bring.

Despite speculation beforehand, Putin did not formally declare war on [Ukraine](#) during his Victory Day speech on 9 May.

Andrei Kolesnikov, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment, said the authorities may be worried that a general mobilisation would antagonise large sections of the population that support the "special operation".

Russians "might be in favour of the conflict, but they don't actually want to fight," he said, adding that a general mobilisation would entail "colossal losses of untrained soldiers".

And while the current status of the conflict gives Russian soldiers a legal path to refuse

participation, some soldiers have complained that it has also led to them not being adequately cared for.

A junior sergeant said he was injured during one of the recent Ukrainian attacks on the Russian border territory where he was stationed. His superiors argued that he should not be given the monetary compensation of up to £2,500 that wounded Russians are entitled to by law because his injury took place on Russian soil – meaning it did not fall under the rules of Russia’s “special military operation”.

“It is unfair, I am fighting in this war just as the others in Ukraine, risking my life,” the soldier said. “If I don’t get the compensation that I am entitled to soon, I will go public and make a major issue of it.”

Pjotr Sauer

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/12/they-were-furious-the-russian-soldiers-refusing-to-fight-in-ukraine>