

Ukraine war: Deserters risk death fleeing to Romania



Nick Thorpe writes in [BBC News](#) (first published in June):

“The Tisa was shallower than I expected, just up to my chest,” said George. “So I didn’t need to swim. I just waded across the river.”

When he reached the Romanian shore, a Ukrainian patrol spotted him.

“I heard shots first, then a string of insults. But I wasn’t afraid. When you’ve spent time at the front, you know the difference between bullets fired in the air, and bullets fired at you.”

George is a big man with a soft face and a wounded look. As a deserter from the Ukrainian army, he would face 10 years in jail if he were caught.

George is not his real name. His and the names of other Ukrainians in this piece have been changed to protect their identities.

His first night in the trenches was the worst. That was in March last year, a month after the war started.

“We had 27 dead and 57 injured.” He flicks through images on his phone of his former comrades. His forehead crumples as he does so and his big hands shake.

“All these people are dead, except me and that one” – he points to a woman in camouflage fatigues.

It took him several weeks and thousands of euros paid to a network of “guides”, to cross the whole of Ukraine from the eastern war zone to this green and peaceful western border.

Enforcing the draft in Ukraine can be difficult and corruption is recognised as a major problem by the authorities. Reliable sources in western Ukraine speak of the existence of a “monthly rate” – a payment made to keep someone out of the

army.

There are also reports from the Ukrainian frontlines, of commanders asking the recruitment office to stop sending them men who don't want to or are too scared to fight. They are just a burden in battle.

But many men see fleeing to another country illegally as their only chance of avoiding combat.

The Ukrainian army stops cars and buses every dozen kilometres on the road beside the Tisa river, looking for draft dodgers. Their database, chaotic at the start of the war, is improving.

[The Ukrainian Border Police recently reported](#) that they are detaining up to 20 men a day. The BBC has approached the Armed Forces of Ukraine for comment on rates of desertion and draft dodging.

But according to the Romanian immigration authority, 6,200 Ukrainian men of military age have crossed the 600 km (373 mile) border into Romania illegally since Russia's full-scale invasion last year and been granted temporary protection.

Some 20,000 others made it there legally, armed with exemptions – sometimes paid for, sometimes not – and chose not to return.

And according to unofficial Ukrainian figures, 90 men have died on the journey to Romania – either drowned in the Tisa, or frozen to death in the mountains – in the past 15 months.

Both sides have problems to contend with. The stories of tens of thousands of Russians fleeing the war and mobilisation have been extensively reported.

But this is the story of those Ukrainians who quit or dodged the call-up.

Dima rolls back his sock to show me his right foot. It looks

like a round, pink club.

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