

# Ukraine war veterans on how Kiev plundered US aid, wasted soldiers, endangered civilians, and lost the war

Lindsey Snell and Cory Pop write in [GrayZone](#):

“The weapons are stolen, the humanitarian aid is stolen, and we have no idea where the billions sent to this country have gone,” a Ukrainian complained to The Grayzone.

In a video sent via Facebook messenger in July, Ivan\* can be seen standing next to his car, an early 2010s model Mitsubishi SUV. Smoke is pouring out of the rear window. Ivan laughs and pans his phone’s camera across the length of the vehicle, pointing out bullet holes. “The turbocharger died in my car,” he said, panning his phone toward the front of the vehicle. “My commander says I should pay to repair it myself. So to use my own car in the war, I need to buy a new turbocharger with my own money.”

Ivan flipped the camera toward his face. “Well, you fucking motherfucker members of parliament, I hope you fuck each other. Devils. I wish you were in our place,” he said.

Last month, Ukraine’s parliamentarians voted to [give themselves a 70% salary increase](#). [Filings](#) indicate the raise was enabled and encouraged by the billions of dollars and euros of aid that have poured in from the US and Europe.

“We, the Ukrainian soldiers, have nothing,” said Ivan. “The things the soldiers have been given to use in the war came directly from volunteers. The aid that goes to our government will never reach us.”

Ivan has been a soldier since 2014. Currently, he's stationed in the Donbas region, where he is tasked with using small, consumer-grade drones to spot Russian positions for artillery targeting. "There are so many problems on the frontline now," he said. "We don't have an internet connection, which makes our work basically impossible. We have to drive to get a connection on mobile devices. Can you imagine?"

Another soldier in Ivan's unit sent us a video of himself from a trench near the frontlines in Donbas. "According to documents, the government has built us a bunker here," he says. "But as you see, there are only a few centimeters of a wood covering over our heads, and this is supposed to protect us from tank and artillery shelling. The Russians shell us for hours at a time. We dug these trenches ourselves. We have two AK-47s between 5 soldiers here, and they jam constantly because of all the dust.

"I went to my commander and explained the situation. I told him it's too hard to hold this position. I told him I understand this is a strategically important point, but our squad is broken, and no relief is coming for us. In 10 days, 15 soldiers died here, all from shelling and shrapnel. I asked the commander if we could bring some heavy equipment to build a better bunker and he refused, because he said the Russian shelling could damage the equipment. Does he not care that 15 of our soldiers died here?"

"If you tried to explain the situation Ukrainian soldiers are facing to an American soldier, they would think you were insane," said Ivan. "Imagine telling an American soldier that we are using our personal cars in the war, and we're also responsible for paying for repairs and fuel. We're buying our own body armor and helmets. We don't have observation tools or cameras, so soldiers have to pop their heads out to see what's coming, which means at any moment, a rocket or tank can tear their heads off."

Illya\*, a 23 year-old soldier from Kiev, says his unit is facing the same conditions in another part of the Donbas region. He joined the Ukrainian Army shortly after the war started. He has a background in IT and knew such expertise was in high demand. "If I had known how much deception there was in this Army, and how everything would be for us, I never would have joined," he said. "I want to go home, but if I flee, I face prison."

Illya and the other soldiers in his unit lack weapons and protective gear. "In Ukraine, people cheat each other even in war," he said. "I've watched the medical supplies donated to us being taken away. The cars that drove us to our position were stolen. And we have not been replaced with new soldiers in three months, though we should have been relieved three times by now."



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A billboard calls on Ukrainians to report "Russian collaborators." Photo by Cory Popp.

## **"Everyone is lying": US doctor describes shocking corruption**

Samantha Morris\*, a doctor from Maine, went to Ukraine in May to try to help provide medical training for soldiers. "The first time I crossed the border from Poland, I had to hide my medical supplies under mattresses and diapers to prevent them from being stolen," she said. "The border guards on the Ukrainian side will just take things, and tell you, 'we need this for our war,' but then, they just steal the items and resell them. Honestly, if you don't hand-deliver donations to the intended recipients, the items will never reach them."

Morris and a few other American medical professionals began to hold training courses in Sumy, a mid-sized city in northeastern Ukraine. "We drew up a contract with the governor in Sumy, though all they provided to us were meals and lodging, and the lodging was just us sleeping in the same public university we held our training courses in," she said. "The Sumy governor had a friend, a local businessman, and he demanded that this businessman be added to the contract as a 'liaison' between us and the city of Sumy. And as a liaison, he would get a percentage fee of the contract. Our lawyers tried to negotiate the businessman out of the contract, but the governor of Sumy wouldn't budge. We ultimately just signed the contract so we could hold our trainings."

In the two months she spent in Ukraine, Morris says she encountered theft and corruption more times than she could count. "The lead doctor at the military base in Sumy has ordered medical supplies from and for the military at different points in time, and he has had 15 trucks of supplies completely disappear," she said. The military first aid kits she had intended to give to soldiers once they graduated her

training program were stolen. She saw the same kits for sale at a local market days later.

“I got a call from a nurse at a military hospital in [the Ukrainian city of] Dnipro,” Morris recalled. “She said the president of the hospital had stolen all the pain medications to resell them, and that the wounded soldiers being treated there had no pain relief. She begged us to hand-deliver pain medications to her. She said she would hide them from the hospital president so that they’d reach the soldiers. But who can you trust? Was the hospital president really stealing the medications, or was she trying to con us into giving her pain medications for her to sell or use? Who knows. Everyone is lying.”

Donated protective military equipment and combat medical supplies have flooded Ukraine’s online marketplaces. Sellers are careful to hide their identities, often creating new vendor accounts for each sale and willing to fulfill orders exclusively by mail. “We have found armored helmets given as aid from the Americans for sale on websites,” Ivan said. “You know, inside the helmet, the class of protection and brand are written. We saw this brand before and realized the helmets were the ones given to us as aid. Some of us tried to contact the sellers to set up a meeting, so we could prove they were selling stolen aid, but they were suspicious and stopped responding to us.”

Ivan says he has heard about the theft of weapons donated from Western countries, but pointed out that several soldiers in his unit are sharing a single AK-74. “I wouldn’t know about how they’re stealing the weapons, because the weapons never reach the Ukrainian soldiers in the first place,” he said. “And if they were giving more than small missiles and rifles, if they were giving us what we actually need to fight Russia, they would be weapons too big to steal.”





A Ukrainian army vehicle on the road to Dnipro. Photo by Cory Popp.

## **“I don’t think they want us to win”: Ukrainians scoff at Western aid**

Ivan is not optimistic about Ukraine’s chances to win the war. “There won’t be a Donbas left,” he said. “The Russians will destroy it, or they’ll control all of it, and then they’ll move on to the south. And now, as it is, I’d say 80% of the civilians who have stayed in Donbas support Russia and leak all of our location information to them.”

When asked if he thought the US and European countries truly want Ukraine to win the war, Ivan laughed. “No, I don’t think they want us to win,” he said. “The West could give us weapons to make us stronger than the Russians, but they don’t do this. We know Poland and the Baltic countries want us to win, 100%, but their support isn’t enough.”

“It is obvious that the US doesn’t want Ukraine to win the war,” said Andrey\*, a Ukrainian journalist based in Mykolayiv. “They only want to make Russia weak. No one will win this war, but the countries the US is using like a playground will lose. And the corruption related to the war aid is shocking. The weapons are stolen, the humanitarian aid is stolen, and we have no idea where the billions sent to this country have gone.”

Andrey is especially appalled by the lack of services provided to internally displaced Ukrainians. “It really isn’t a mystery why everyone wants to go to Europe,” he said. “There’s a refugee center near Dnipro, for example, and displaced people are only allowed to stay there for three days. And it’s 45 or 50 people in one big, open room with one bathroom and a tiny kitchen. Horrible conditions. So after the three days, if they have no money, no clothes, nothing, they are kicked out and have no choice but to go back to their homes in dangerous



areas. We must ask our government where all the aid money has gone, when our soldiers don't have what they need, and our civilians don't have safe places to stay."

## **Foreign journalists cover up grim reality with triumphalist delusions**

Before the war started, Andrey spent several years reporting on corruption and crooked politicians in Ukraine. After an investigation into a government official in Odessa resulted in death threats against his wife and young daughter, Andrey sent them to live with relatives in France. "Ukraine is a democracy, right? So the government won't press on you in an official way. First, you get phone calls warning you to stop. Then, they offer you money to stop. And then, if you refuse to be bought, you should be prepared for an attack.

"Real journalism is dangerous here," he continued. "You see, since the war started, we have these new star reporters, and every day, they write that 'Putin is bad, the Russian soldiers behave very badly...today, the Ukrainian army killed 1,000 Russians and destroyed 500 Russian tanks.' They get a million followers on Twitter because they lie, and this isn't real reporting. But if you write about the corruption in the Armed Forces, and have real examples...you won't be famous, and you'll be in trouble."

Andrey has been picking up extra work as a fixer, arranging interviews and translating for foreign journalists in Ukraine to cover the war. "I have worked with about a dozen journalists from different countries in Europe," he said. "All of them have been shocked. They left Ukraine shocked. They said they could not believe the situation here. But this shock did not make it into any of their articles about the war. Their articles said that Ukraine is on the road to victory, which is not true."



A billboard promoting the Azov Battalion in Kramatorsk. Photo by Cory Popp.

## **Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers confirm Ukraine's Armed Forces endanger civilians**

In July, we spent the night at a hotel in Kramatorsk and were concerned to see that neo-Nazi Azov battalion soldiers were among the hotel's guests. On August 4th, Amnesty International [published a study](#) revealing that since the start of the war in February, Ukrainian forces have endangered civilians by establishing bases in schools and hospitals and operating weapons systems in civilian areas, which is a violation of international law.

Amnesty International now plans to ["re-assess"](#) its report, in response to a massive public outcry after its publication, but Ukrainian soldiers and foreign volunteers have confirmed that Ukrainian armed forces maintain a heavy presence in civilian

areas. "Our bases were mostly built in Soviet times," said Ivan. "So now, Russia knows our bases inside and out. It's necessary to spread the soldiers and weapons out to other places."

A former US serviceman who goes by the moniker "Benjamin Velcro" was a volunteer fighter for the International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Armed Forces' official unit for foreign volunteers. He spent five months in various parts of Ukraine, and says that soldiers being stationed in civilian areas was a common occurrence.

"Whenever I hear that Russia bombed a school, I just kinda shrug," the American foreign fighter said. "Because I garrisoned inside a school. That's a fact. The school didn't have kids in it, so it's not like they were endangering children. So all it takes is for Ukraine to say, 'Ah! They hit a school!' And that cumulates into an easy media narrative on their part."

Like Ivan, Velcro is also pessimistic about Ukraine's chances to win the war. "Man, I want everything in the world for Ukraine to win this. I want Ukraine to get its pre-2014 borders back. But do I think that's tenable? No. You can't sustain a war by crowdfunding forever."

*\*Several interview subjects requested to be quoted under assumed names to protect themselves from potential danger*