

Incompetence and Corruption Taint Ukraine's Military Performance

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KIEV — After more than a year of fighting in eastern Ukraine, the country's regular army remains disorganized and poorly equipped. "The Defense Ministry needed to test underpants for a year before approving them for use. I'm not kidding," President Petro Poroshenko told a meeting of regional chiefs this month.

Building up an army to withstand the threat from Russia and pro-Russian separatists has been a formidable task. When Moscow annexed Crimea and conflict erupted in Ukraine's east, Kiev had outdated Soviet equipment and just 180,000 troops, of whom only 5,000 were battle ready, according to a speech Poroshenko made last month. The government has since boosted military spending to an unprecedented 5 percent of gross domestic product and increased troop numbers to 250,000. Some 50,000 are actively serving in the east.

But examples of incompetence and corruption within the military regularly appear in Ukrainian media. In June, *Segodnya* newspaper reported that an administrative error had left eight servicemen on their way to the front stranded for days in the city of Kharkiv.

Vladislav Seleznyov, a spokesman for the Ukrainian military, denied any error and said

the eight men had gone AWOL. "They went on some adventures and came back to the collecting point in a state of intoxication and refused to go to the conflict zone," Seleznyov said. Military police guarded them for eight days and then officials from the men's brigade collected them to take them to the front. "They physically resisted, saying, 'We won't go,'" said Seleznyov.

In a separate case, a wounded serviceman took four months to prove to the Defense Ministry that he was alive after it mistakenly classified him as "killed in action" and stopped paying his salary.

In a statement, the Ministry blamed an administrative error and said the money had now been paid.

Families have also faced delays in receiving compensation for soldiers killed in combat, according to the Ukrainian media. Ukraine's military prosecutor, Anatoly Matios, has written on Facebook several times about cases where the military has been slow to compensate families.

Businessman Yuri Biryukov, who advises Poroshenko and manages voluntary efforts to equip the military, has blamed the problems on mismanagement. "There are 100,500 reasons: from the idiotic over-bureaucratization of our army to the lack of enough computers, from under-qualified military suppliers to fears of reporting problems to high command," he posted on Facebook.

Seleznyov, the military spokesman, said the Ministry of Defense was implementing "a genuine process of reform," but added: "It would not be honest to say that we don't have problems."

Military prosecutor Matios told Reuters that he has investigated numerous cases of bribery and theft in the past year and has made some progress. But, he said, it would require a sea change in attitudes for real progress. "Society wants irreversible and immediate change because the economic situation has been bad for so long. Not enough has been done either by us, by the government or by lawmakers," he said. "We have laws, (but) we don't have the culture of implementing them," he said.

The Ministry declined to comment on the corruption allegations.

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