

4.5. Punishments for desertion

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4.5.1. Desertion from the Russian armed forces

According to UN Special Rapporteur Mariana Katzarova, desertion has become a primary means for individuals to avoid participating in the war in Ukraine, with over 50 000 soldiers – or nearly 10 % of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine – estimated to have deserted since 2022. Furthermore, in 2024, over 16 000 Russian military personnel have reportedly faced prosecution 'for desertion-related offences with over 13 500 conscripts and contract soldiers convicted.'[955] The number of cases against deserters and those who have left military service without permission, has also risen sharply. Currently, there are tens of thousands of such criminal cases.[956]

As reported by the Ukrainian OSINT project Frontelligence Insight, as of December 2024, most cases of desertion and absence without leave (AWOL) were reported in Russia's Southern military district,[957] which mostly comprises the North Caucasus[958] as well as the occupied regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia[959] (nearly 22 580 cases out of a total of 50 500), followed by the Central military district (nearly 13 800 cases), the Moscow military district (nearly 7 780 cases), the Eastern military district (nearly 3 380 cases), and the Leningrad military district (over 3050 cases).[960] Furthermore, in mid-October 2025, Ukraine's military intelligence service reported that over 25 000 soldiers and officers of Russia's Central military district have left their units in the period between November 2024 and July 2025.[961] The Central military district covers the Volga region, the Urals, and Siberia.[962]

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