

ВЕЛИКИЙ НАУКОВИЙ ПРОЄКТ

OLEKSANDR KRASOVYTSKY

# KHARKIV

20 TALKS ON INVINCIBILITY



KHARKIV  
FOLIO  
2025

## **Volodymyr ARAP**

*Head of the Kharkiv Oblast Territorial Center for Enlistment (TCE) in 2021-2023*



I was born on October 13, 1974, in the village of Velyka Novosilka in the Donetsk Oblast. It's right on the border of the Zaporizhzhia and Dnipro Oblasts—an agricultural area, not a mining one.

In 1991, I entered the Volsk Higher Military School of Rearward Services in the Saratov Oblast (at that time, the USSR). I studied to become a food service chief officer. Our class was the last one, consisting of students from all over the Soviet Union. When the putsch happened in August, the Balts<sup>1</sup> who had enrolled in the first year packed their things and all left back for their home countries. None of them continued their studies in Russia, but they were the only ones who left.

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<sup>1</sup> The Soviet name for the people living in the Baltic countries—Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. (Hereinafter—the editor's note.)

In the second year, the Russians began to, artfully and wickedly, agitate us to sign a contract, according to which one had to serve in the Russian Armed Forces for five years after graduation. Some 80 percent of cadets from other countries signed these contracts because they were motivated by money. For example, at that time, a cadet received a scholarship of 60,000 rubles, while those who signed the contract received 260,000 rubles, plus a thirteenth salary equivalent to three monthly wages. Back then, with the thirteenth salary, one could buy a VCR. The Russians went above and beyond to encourage people to stay in their armed forces.

I did not sign this contract. That's why it created the following situation at the graduation ceremony: those who did not sign the contract were not given uniforms. It was their small way of getting back at us. At that time, Russia switched to a new uniform, of a different color. Our instructors, colonels, wore a uniform made of very expensive fabric, and it turned to be inadequate. We were on good terms with our instructors, even became friends with some of them, and one of them said to me, "Vova, I'm giving this uniform to you as a gift, take it." And there I was, standing at graduation in colonel's uniform with lieutenant's shoulder straps on it.

In fact, there were no confrontations back then; we were all friends, saying our tearful goodbyes to those who were leaving. We had lived in the same barracks for four years. But I decided to return to Ukraine. In 1995, I was assigned to arrive to the Ministry of Defense in Kyiv and was offered posts that were available in Ukraine.

I was sent straight to Mariupol. At that time, there was an air defense brigade there, a bunch of divisions, 75, 125, S-200 systems that were covering the Azov coastline: Berdiansk, Yuriiivka, Gurzuf and Mariupol itself. In 1999, they started

cutting everything down, and when a plane was shot down<sup>2</sup> over the Black Sea by the S-2002 system during the training firing, the command came to dismantle the S-200s as well.

In 2002, our military unit was being reduced, and we were told: either you get apartments in Mariupol and we discharge you, or you find a place to serve on your own. I was a captain at the time, and had some health issues, so I transitioned myself to the system of military registration and recruitment offices.

For four years, I served as a deputy military commissar for mobilization in the Mariinka District. And at the end of 2005, I was appointed the military commissar of my native Velykonovosilky District. I served there until 2015; and in December 2015, all military commissars from Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts were rotated and sent to other Oblasts. That's how I ended up in Kharkiv.

\* \* \*

When Yanukovych came to power, we still did not consider Russia our enemy. We were taught the idea of brotherly nations, but in reality, it was a completely different story. At that time, military units were removed from our Donetsk Oblast. They only kept a military unit of the National Guard, which was located in Donetsk.

It's only now that we understand why everything was done this way, but back then, it all seemed just a planned routine. We had a huge tank division stationed in Artemivsk<sup>3</sup>, and it was dismantled. Combat military units were precisely the ones that were reduced, and Air Defense units were removed. Our Mariupol Air Defense Brigade, which protected the entire coastline of the Sea of Azov, was also reduced.

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<sup>2</sup> On October 4, 2001, a Tu-154 aircraft of the Siberia Airline, which was on the Tel Aviv to Novosibirsk flight, crashed over the Black Sea. All 66 passengers and 12 crewmembers died.

<sup>3</sup> The old name. Since 2016, it is called Bakhmut.

Following the appointment of defense ministers such as Salamatin and Lebedev, everything was done to reduce the size of the army, including military recruitment offices.

During the first reduction, 50 percent of the military recruitment offices were eliminated. During another wave of reduction in 2012, the third category military recruitment office where I was serving was reduced to the point where only I—the military recruitment officer—and two civilian women remained. There are so many people now that the offices fail to fit them all, and still, they do not manage to do all the work because they have to do things that we didn't do back then.

Afterwards, those unfit for military service in peacetime and those of limited fitness in wartime were removed from the military register.

In 2014, when military operations began in the Donetsk Oblast, we were struggling to find enough workers. All the work had to be done by three of us. During the first three waves of mobilization, we did not take people from Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts; we only looked for those who were willing to volunteer and sent them to other Oblasts. And only with the fourth wave, we were able to find a few new staff members and started mobilizing.

\* \* \*

In Kharkiv, I first served as a military commissar of the Dzerzhynskyy District (former name of the Shevchenkivskyy District,—*ed. note*). By that time, there was already a new staff, and we were hiring people to work. There were deputies and heads of departments, and assistants... There were enough people to work with, those you could give tasks to, and those who would carry them out. Although since 2016, the focus has shifted on contract and conscript service. Conscripts were drafted twice a year and they wouldn't be sent to area of the

Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO). Meanwhile, contract soldiers were required to spend at least a year in the ATO and then to Joint Forces Operation (JFO) zone, according to one of the contract clauses. So, they were aware of this and it was not news to them.

Even in those years, the government did not engage in campaigning or conducting massive military recruitment activities. Everything was brought down to the local level, to the military recruitment offices. Around 2012, Territorial Centers for Enlistment were created, and they were responsible for promoting contract service at the military recruitment offices. They did not justify themselves and were canceled about a year later. All the work was handled by the military recruitment offices. Each of them had both a military draft department and a recruitment department which were involved in promoting, carrying out work in conjunction with military educational institutions that held open-door days. We had some kind of a plan according to which we had to conduct constant methodological work with eleventh-grade graduates regarding admission to higher military educational institutions and ninth-grade graduates to sergeant colleges.

In 2020, I was appointed as the deputy head of the Kharkiv Oblast Military Commissar for Territorial Defense. The system of military recruitment offices was just being reformed, and the transition to Territorial Centers for Enlistment was underway. They started to pay more attention to territorial defense issues, and training camps for reservists were held. At the end of 2021, a separate branch of the Armed Forces of Ukraine was created—the Territorial Defense Forces (TDF), which previously were part of the Land Troupes; at which point these functions were moved from the military recruitment offices to the management of the Territorial Defense Forces.

Since late October 2021, I was appointed as the Head of the Kharkiv Oblast Territorial Center for Enlistment. From the end of

2021 to beginning of 2022, we were forming Territorial Defense battalions. At that time, the territory of the Oblast was divided into districts, with a separate Territorial Defense battalion created for each district, which was part of our 113th Brigade of Territorial Defense. We had to recruit the organizational core of the brigade—from the battalion commander and deputy commander, and to the core personnel.

At the end of December 2021, we were forming this organizational core in a “run-and-gun” mode, with each battalion looking for a place for location and deployment. But they entered the war, roughly speaking, “naked,” as they had neither their own accounts for financing, nor material assets, nor inventory. When the occupation of the Oblast’s territory began, the TDF units managed to evacuate from Kupiansk and Chuhuiv. In Izyum, they were involved in the defense of the city, where they took part in a battle. Unfortunately, some of them were killed, and some are still missing. However, when we started forming the units in the first days of mobilization, we actually began with forming the TDF: the 113th Brigade, its battalions, as well as our Kharkiv units: the 92nd Brigade, National Guard (military units 3005, 3017), Border Guards, and air defense units.

Before the full-scale invasion, many people already had a feeling that something was impending. We did our best to calm ourselves and those around us so there would be no panic, and we just kept doing our job. A week before the full-scale war, we sent a certain number of people to the training camp for reservists, who later on joined the 92nd Brigade. There were constant meetings of law enforcement forces led by Mr. Dudin (Roman Dudin—former head of the Security Service of Ukraine in the Kharkiv Oblast, accused of high treason,—*ed. note*). He kept saying that everything was under control. Even at the last meeting, he reassured everyone that everything would be fine.

\* \* \*

And in the morning, it all started. We were all summoned again at the SBU (Security Service of Ukraine). There were no meetings, but total chaos. We stayed there for a while, and then went back to our respective organizations. The working day started on February 24 and continued for several days without interruption. There was a large flow of people. People kept coming, and we accepted them non-stop around the clock; we registered them, recruit them into teams, and transported them to their units. Our main task was to supply personnel to the military units.

All the military recruitment offices from Chuhuiv and Kupiansk arrived in Kharkiv. They managed to leave just in time. Secret documents were prepared for destruction well in advance. They managed to take away some things that were of material value, and what they couldn't bring, they buried somewhere, and hid in basements. In Lozova, Novovolodarsk, and Krasnohrad (from 2024, renamed Berestyn), work continued non-stop, and all the workload was put on people there. They also kept working in Izyum as long as the situation allowed. When it became impossible to work there, the military recruitment offices moved toward Barvinkove.

When the Russians were approaching the outskirts of Kharkiv, we moved to Nova Vodolaha and Krasnohrad (now Berestyn) to receive people there, register them, and send them to the units. We could not stop the process; we did not stop it even for a day. The Kharkiv Oblast did not stop mobilization for a single day. In the military recruitment offices of Kharkiv, there were several staff members who gathered individuals outside the recruitment offices, welcoming those who arrived on foot, as transport in the city was not operating, and those who came by their own cars. However, to avoid crowding near the recruitment offices and risking getting caught in an airstrike,



we designated meeting places. For example, we chose location near the supermarkets like “Vostorg,” “Klass,” and others. We gathered people there, and our servicemen transported men in their vans or cars to Nova Vodolaha, where we registered them and sent them by bus to the military units.

At the beginning of the war, we had a wide choice of places where to send people. However, we also had specific plans, according to which we had to form military units, and duties that had existed before the war. To register each person, it was necessary to create name lists, and we didn’t even have doctors in the city to conduct medical examinations. “Do you have any complaints?”, “No complaints!”—that’s how it went on. People would come motivated, but we still had to put everyone in the records, because time would pass and a person would say, “I fought, but I have no documents.”

We divided these people into groups and teams and transported them at a certain time to the assembly points of military units. They took these people in according to name lists. This process was meticulous, with each person being checked thoroughly. An official record was to be made for everyone, and a military ID was to be issued (for those who didn’t have one).

There were people over the age of 60 who volunteered to fight. However, later they came and asked us to register them, but our mobilization age is up to 60, and we had no right to do so. There were also people under 27 years old, whilst at the time we had the right to mobilize people aged 27 to 60 years. Young people were mobilized, especially those who claimed to be from occupied areas, because there was no way to verify that. Young conscripts had the opportunity to serve under a contract. We had a separate department that dealt with conscription and which is now dealing with contract enlistment. We found volunteers, conducted appropriate campaigning and explanatory work,

compiled lists, and sent them to Kyiv, where they collected information about contract soldiers from all over the country, and once a month we received name lists of those who had to be sent to the relevant training centers. There they studied and trained for two months, and from there they were assigned to units.

They added a security company to our staff. It was involved in mobilization activities, and was engaged in protecting facilities. In addition, they also guarded bridges, served at checkpoints, and performed functions not typical for this unit. However, it was clear to us that someone had to do this, because the National Guardsmen who were supposed to be responsible for this were actually engaged in the defense of Kharkiv and the Oblast.

Many facilities of the Territorial Centers for Enlistment—Izyum, Kupiansk, Shevchenkivskyy, Novobavarskyy in the city of Kharkiv—were hit by the enemy “arrivals” of aerial bombs, missiles, etc. In Kupiansk, there were actually more than one strike. The premises became unsuitable for work. Military recruitment offices in Bohodukhiv, Zolochiv, Chuhuiv, and others were under constant shelling.

I remember when in June, around midnight, the military recruitment office in Shevchenkivskyy District of Kharkiv had an “arrival”; thank God, there were no casualties among the personnel. Since then, we tried not to leave anyone in the recruitment offices at night, so we would lock them up. We only worked during the day, and each recruitment office had a backup spot; we constantly changed our location. The heads of enterprises and institutions cooperated with us, and gave us the opportunity to work on in order to carry out mobilization in the city. The civil-military administrations of all Districts and the Oblast, as well as local authorities at all levels, greatly assisted us in that, for which I personally thank them.

\* \* \*

Today, the range of functions and services of Territorial Centers for Enlistment is expanding. There is plenty of work to be done here: mobilization, recruitment for contract service, and registration of persons liable for military service and conscripts, as well as registration of the dead and missing, social protection, payments to the families of the deceased, and much more. It is possible that after the war is over, the Territorial Centers for Enlistment will take on the responsibility for the rehabilitation of military personnel and their treatment. Moreover, military registration will remain even after the war.

Kharkiv will always have a special status due to its proximity to the border with Russia. I am convinced that a buffer zone, a gray zone, needs to be created on Russian territory so they are aware that our weapons can reach them, not to mention Western ones, and that there is no point meddling with us. We understand that the Russians have plenty of ballistic missiles and S-300 systems, and they have found a use for them—to strike Kharkiv. We also understand that shooting down a missile from an S-300 system is practically impossible, so we need to destroy the S-300 system itself; and therefore, we need a gray zone on the territory of the Russian Federation to ensure our city's safety.

But later we will have our victory. I believe people will cry, and then they will rejoice. I will definitely cry first when the day of the long-awaited Victory comes.

Glory to Ukraine, Glory to the Heroes, eternal memory to all those who have fallen.

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## Serhii BYSTROV

*Volunteer, military man*



I remember one story from my childhood. After first grade, for the first time in my life, I went to a children's camp in Zhdanov—that's what Mariupol was called back then—and when I returned to Kharkiv a few weeks later, I got on the subway and felt an overwhelming joy. For me, Kharkiv is something I definitely could not live without. Many times in various arguments, for example, with those in power, I have proven that Kharkiv is much more vibrant and exceptional than other cities. You can really feel life here. For me, Ukraine starts with my city, with my children.

In 2014, I didn't have such feelings towards the country or the flag, but I certainly had the understanding that I did not want Kharkiv to share the fate of Donbas.

During the Maidan in 2004, I was definitely supporting Viktor Yushchenko (the President of Ukraine at the time), and

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