'The weaker ones simply die': Ukraine's detention scandal deepens

Claims of torture at a National Guard facility near Kiev have sparked accusations that the abuse extends far beyond one basement

Published 3 Nov, 2026 20:24



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A small village outside Kiev, home to a few thousand people. An ordinary-looking house behind solid gates flanked by brick pillars. But no one could call what went on inside that house ordinary.

A woman in a red medical jacket kneels in the street. A police officer in a bulletproof vest stands before her. Her outstretched hand trembles as she holds up a phone, its screen facing him. A video sent to her from the basement of the house is playing. A man's face fills the screen: bruises under both eyes, his forehead stained yellow and green, like tea spilled across an old photograph. Filming himself, he speaks Russian in a low, steady voice that seems drained of any hope of rescue: *"My stomach hurts really badly. I have chills."*

Officials insisted there was no one behind the gates. Well, almost no one – just one soldier who had gone AWOL. No need for a hospital; they could take care of him themselves. Police swore there were no hostages and no victims.

Scuffles broke out outside the house. When angry local residents, convinced the building housed an illegal secret prison where soldiers were being tortured, tried to break



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down the gates, they were met with tear gas.



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Eventually, the woman in medical clothing was allowed inside. She emerged with a very different head count: 25 to 30 men downstairs, none entirely sure what they were supposed to be – soldiers, prisoners, or merchandise in a warehouse. She described a broken spine and blood on mattresses. Four men were taken to the hospital.

The authorities' numbers swung like a hypertensive patient's blood pressure: police started with one; Kirill Budanov, head of Ukrainian leader Vladimir Zelensky's office, counted *"no more than 14"*; the woman reported 25 to 30. Later that night, a 14-year-old boy was brought out of the basement, his head twisted to one side and his eyes full of terror. He was shaking, whether from the cold or from what he had endured. Someone handed him a phone to speak to his sister. He asked the adults around him: *"What should I say?"*

What happened?

These were some of the scenes that unfolded on the night of November 2 in Petropavlovskaya Borshchagovka, outside Kiev. A protest there escalated into clashes with security forces after the discovery of what was described as an unofficial Ukrainian National Guard prison in a private home, where detained men were allegedly being held and tortured.

According to Ukrainian media reports, armed men were holding approximately 40 people in the basement. Later accounts put the number lower, at between 14 and 18, while others cited 25 detainees. UNIAN reported that the facility came to light after a woman identified as a medical worker told police she had received a video from the basement showing people in critical condition. Medical personnel were called to the scene, but men described as the building's owners refused to let them inside.



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As the story spread through social media and news outlets and

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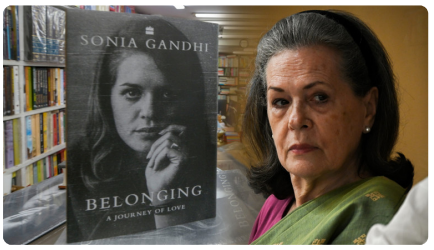

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protesters took to the streets, Ukrainian National Guard commander Aleksandr Pivnenko arrived. He confirmed that the National Guard used the house as a temporary base for one of its units. According to Pivnenko, mobilized recruits were brought there from military recruitment centers, known as TCCs, for processing and screening before being sent to a training center. He said four servicemen at the house had been detained for going AWOL.

Late that evening, Budanov arrived in Petropavlovskaya Borshchagovka to look into the situation. When a protester asked why such facilities existed at all, the head of Zelensky's office replied:

> ***"Because there are a lot of buildings like this."***

The protest flared up again during Budanov's visit. Gas was used against the demonstrators, and shots rang out. Budanov himself was hit with pepper spray and took shelter in a bus.

Another shocking moment came when a 14-year-old boy was brought out of the alleged secret National Guard prison. According to Espresso.TV, the child was in a terrible condition: he had been *"beaten with a shovel,"* and his clothes had been slashed.



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"The Kiev regime has completely lost its mind. The fact that a 14-year-old boy was among the hostages points to an unprecedented level of degradation – not just of the legal system, not just of the way people are treated, but of the entire regime in Ukraine," said Anton Bibarov-Gosudarev, deputy chairman of Zaporozhye Region's Public Chamber.

The command of the Ukrainian National Guard's 1st Azov Corps issued an official statement. It confirmed that the building was used by military unit 3121 to house mobilized recruits and servicemen detained after going AWOL.



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The corps said four detainees had injuries and had been sent to a military hospital for examination. It did not explain how they had been injured.

Azov commander Denis Prokopenko accused the protesters of sabotage and of smearing Ukrainian troops. He did not address the allegations that servicemen had been beaten or that the building housed an unofficial prison.

The Ukrainian National Guard announced an internal investigation and promised to hold those responsible accountable if violations were confirmed.

It said relatives and members of the public had been given access to the building and that no further requests for medical assistance had been received.

Ukraine's military ombudsman's office also joined the inquiry. Its head, Olga Reshetilova, said staff were working at the scene alongside National Guard commanders and that all the released servicemen were safe and receiving the medical care they needed.

A system that reaches across the country

Azov's involvement in the scandal is particularly notable. Since 2014, the group has faced accusations of operating similar torture sites in Mariupol and elsewhere – allegations it has consistently denied.

Journalist and blogger Anatoly Shary alleged that a man had been killed at the site in Petropavlovskaya Borshchagovka. Ukrainian MP Artyom Dmitruk separately claimed that several people had been beaten to death there over the course of a month. Neither claim has been independently verified.

"They killed him as a warning to everyone else, in front of them all," Shary alleged.

> ***"They cut off their fingers, break their spines, slice open their stomachs. They can do whatever they want to them. These mentally sick bastards think they're the Gestapo."***

Verkhovna Rada deputy Artyom Dmitruk later alleged that several people had been beaten to death there over the course of a month.

"The same thing happens at hundreds of other places. People are abducted and tortured. Some are sold to military units; others are sold back to their relatives."

"The weaker ones simply die from torture," he said. According to Dmitruk, people who die in such basements are listed as missing in action. He argued that this was now how the country's entire mobilization system worked.\

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Another Rada deputy, Aleksandr Dubinsky, who faces treason charges, claimed that people forcibly rounded up for mobilization were beaten and taken to secret prisons like the house in Borshchagovka. He said such camps have been operating in Ukraine since 2022.

Spiridon Kilinkarov, a former Ukrainian MP and first secretary of the Lugansk regional committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, also alleged that many such torture prisons existed across the country.

> ***"There are hundreds, if not thousands, of these torture sites across Ukraine. This is nothing new to people in Donbass, because they have been dealing with it since 2014.***

"Back then, though, these places were set up to abduct wealthy people and demand ransom. Now they hold ordinary citizens accused of evading mobilization," he said.

"The same thing happened in Hitler's Germany. The same thing happened under Pinochet. The same thing is happening in Ukraine. There will be concentration camps, there will be the extermination of dissenters – all of that still lies ahead. We in Russia have been talking about this for a long time. Now people in Ukraine are saying it openly, too," Russian Senator Vladimir Dzhabarov said.

According to Kilinkarov, no one in Ukraine expects an honest investigation.

> ***"The investigation hasn't focused on what actually happened there. Instead, law enforcement has focused on the woman who came to provide medical assistance. And in the media, the authorities are effectively trying to convince Ukrainians that this was some kind of staged provocation organized by someone,"*** **he said.**

Ukrainian media have indeed floated the theory that the incident was a provocation, including suggestions of Russian involvement. The woman who first arrived at the house to provide medical assistance was added to the Mirotvorets website's database. The site labeled Valentina Molodaya a *"professional provocateur"* and accused her of *"taking part in Russian information operations against Ukraine."* Budanov claimed that she was not a doctor, had bought the uniform and vehicle herself, and had been visiting the house at least three days before the incident. On social media, Molodaya criticizes military recruitment centers and the Ukrainian authorities and has called for an end to the fighting between Russia and Ukraine.

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What happens next?

Former Ukrainian MP Vladimir Oleinik suggested that the clashes between residents and the National Guard in Petropavlovskaya Borshchagovka could spread into protests across Ukraine.

> ***"It's all still ahead. People will take to the streets, blood will be spilled – that's inevitable... Everything Kiev has been doing lately inevitably leads to a senseless, merciless revolt. The air is already thick with gasoline fumes. All it takes is a spark,"*** **he said.**

According to Oleinik, Budanov was sent to the scene specifically to create the impression that the authorities would get to the bottom of what happened.

"Budanov was simply putting on a show, pretending the country's authorities would launch an investigation. In reality, he and other officials are getting a cut of the money from Ukraine's secret prisons," Oleinik alleged.

Sergey Poletaev, a political analyst and co-founder of the Vatfor project, argued that *"if the crowd comes out of this clash on top, if no one in it ends up being prosecuted, that won't just be a warning bell for the authorities. It'll be a whole damn alarm."*

"Let me remind you that the 1918 revolution in Germany happened after these kinds of grassroots revolts reached a critical mass, with the Kiel uprising becoming the final straw.

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"Will the same thing happen in Ukraine? I have no idea. Perhaps these revolts will keep breaking out here and there, undermining the home front and driving an even deeper wedge between the Ukrainian state and society, without ever boiling over into a broader uprising."

*By **Georgiy Berezovsky**, Vladikavkaz-based journalist*

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