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Research Report

How Russia is recruiting for the long war: Covertly mobilising volunteers while preparing for a new round of compulsory mobilisation

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SWP Comment

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How Russia Is Recruiting for the Long War

Covertly Mobilising Volunteers While Preparing for a New Round of Compulsory Mobilisation

Margarete Klein

In its war of attrition against Ukraine, the Kremlin is counting on outnumbering the enemy over a long period in terms of both hardware and personnel. Following the unpopular partial mobilisation in autumn 2022, the recruitment of contract soldiers and volunteer fighters was stepped up significantly in order to conceal the human costs of war. At the same time, the “Wagner mutiny” showed that the diffusion of the structures of violence as part of the covert mobilisation poses risks for the regime. For this reason, control over the volunteer formations has been tightened, while the Kremlin is laying the groundwork for a new round of compulsory mobilisation. However, Russia is not only recruiting for the war against Ukraine; the plan to increase the number of soldiers to 1.5 million clearly shows that the Kremlin is preparing for a prolonged confrontation with the West.

Since the full-scale invasion, Russia’s regular army and other forces involved – the National Guard and various volunteer formations – have suffered heavy losses. Mediazona and the BBC Russian services were able to verify the names of 56,858 soldiers killed as of 21 June 2024; they assume that the real number of casualties is roughly twice as high. Western intelligence services estimate around 500,000 casualties but also include the wounded and prisoners of war. Based on that estimate, Russia’s personnel losses are already more than two-and-a-half times higher than the total number of soldiers deployed in the full-scale invasion in February 2022 (around 190,000).

However, Moscow’s search for more manpower is not related solely to the war. It also reflects the general trend towards the militarisation of Russian foreign policy. The Kremlin perceives the threat and use of military force as a legitimate, effective and efficient means of asserting its interests. This is evident from the increased number of military operations – from Georgia, Crimea and Donbas to Syria and several African countries – as well as military muscle-flexing towards NATO and EU states.

As part of this trend, Russia has gradually increased the targeted size of its armed forces. Before the full-scale invasion, that



target was 1 million soldiers, including conscripts drafted for 12 months, contract soldiers who sign up to serve in the armed forces for a certain period (known as *kontraktniki*) and professional officers. Russian President Vladimir Putin initially announced increasing their number to 1.15 million by January 2023 and later ordered another increase – to 1.32 million – by December 2023. The aim is that the armed forces comprise as many as 1.5 million soldiers by 2026. In order to achieve that goal, the Ministry of Defence will have to recruit huge numbers of new personnel while compensating for the enormous war losses. The extent to which it is successful in this endeavour will not only be decisive for the course of the war but will also shape NATO's and EU's strategic military stance.

Partial mobilisation 2022

To date, there have been three, partly overlapping phases in the recruitment of personnel for the war against Ukraine. First, after the full-scale invasion had been launched with too few soldiers in expectation of a quick victory, and Russia had suffered a high number of losses within the first few weeks, the Kremlin took hasty ad hoc measures to compensate, including the vastly expanded deployment of private military companies.

When those efforts proved insufficient, Putin initiated the second recruitment phase by announcing partial mobilisation on 21 September 2022. As part of that drive, 300,000 men – the so-called *mobiki* – had been called up by the end of October 2022. According to Putin, it was only reservists with undefined specialisations who had been mobilised, while conscripts and employees of the defence industry were exempt. However, media outlets reported that people over the age limit and those with health problems were called up, too. Ill-equipped and poorly trained, the *mobiki* were sent directly to the front.

The partial mobilisation was unpopular and entailed domestic political risks for the

Kremlin. Hundreds of thousands of men, many of them well educated, left the country. Surveys conducted by Levada suggest that unconditional support for the “special military operation” had fallen from 52 per cent in March 2022 to 44 per cent in October 2022, while negative emotions such as fear and anxiety had increased. Despite the ever more drastically shrinking space in which public discontent could be voiced, there were several protests against the partial mobilisation and attacks on enlistment offices. The Kremlin responded with a mixture of harsh repression and improved financial benefits for those mobilised: the protests were quickly crushed and the *mobiki* were granted the same pay and disability and survivor benefits as military personnel serving under contract.

At the end of October 2022, the then defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, declared that the partial mobilisation had been completed. But the surviving *mobiki* continue to be deployed in the war zone to this day as Putin's decree set no time limit and has still not been formally revoked. In order to reduce the risk of discontent among large swathes of the population by announcing a new round of (partial) mobilisation, the Kremlin has so far opted to ensure that the human costs of compulsory mobilisation are confined to a fairly small group of people and thereby contained.

Covert mobilisation

In the third recruitment phase – which is ongoing – the Kremlin is focusing on so-called “covert mobilisation”. This term refers to the continuous recruitment of “volunteers”, who fall into two categories: *kontraktniki* and fighters from a broad range of volunteer formations. The Kremlin's calculation is that the potential for discontent in society is lower under “covert mobilisation” than under a second round of compulsory mobilisation. That is because those who go off to fight are formally categorised as volunteers even if they have been recruited through the exploitation of

power imbalances or through the use of deception or coercion.

Kontraktniki

In March 2020, Russia had 405,000 contract soldiers, according to official sources, and that figure was set to rise to 500,000 by 2027. After the war had begun, the target figures were hiked significantly and the timeframe for achieving them shortened. In December 2022, the minister of defence announced that 695,000 *kontraktniki* would be serving in the armed forces by 2026; one year later, in December 2023, he called for 745,000 contract soldiers by 2027. In contrast with the military reform of 2008, the recruitment of *kontraktniki* from 2022 onwards has not been aimed primarily at professionalising the armed forces but at recruiting as many soldiers as possible to be sent to the front line as quickly as possible.

Russia's leadership is not following a master plan that has been drawn up in detail. Rather it is proceeding step by step via numerous separate measures.

In order to expand the recruitment pool, the age limits have been gradually raised. In May 2022, the 40-year age limit for *kontraktniki* was abolished; and since then, applicants have been able to sign a contract up to the age of 65.

At the same time, it has become easier to recruit conscripts, foreign nationals and prison inmates. Since 2023, conscripts have been able to sign up as contract soldiers from the first month of service rather than the third, as was the case previously. Before the full-scale invasion, foreigners were accepted as *kontraktniki* only up to the age of 30 and with sufficient knowledge of Russian, but that age limit was raised in May 2022 and language skills no longer deemed a formal criterion. Since June 2023, prisoners can sign a contract for the so-called "Storm-Z" units, thereby legalising a practice that had existed since the beginning of that year.

In order to encourage the recruitment of *kontraktniki*, the Ministry of Defence adver-

tises high wages and generous social benefits, the possibility of remission of punishment and supposedly easier contract conditions. Before the full-scale invasion, contract soldiers received a monthly wage equivalent to of €330; today they earn at least €2,110 a month. In addition, there is a one-off recruitment bonus of around €2,000, which is significantly higher in some regions. Given that the national average income is €800 a month and just €400 in the poorer regions, where most of the recruits come from, it is possible for contract soldiers to earn as much in one year in the army as in several years in a civilian job. Moreover, there is the entitlement to relatively high payments in the event of disability (€30,000) and death (€50,000). Since the end of September 2022, the procedure for foreign recruits to obtain Russian citizenship has been simplified: whereas previously they had to complete a five-year contract in the armed forces, a period of service of just one year is now sufficient for them and their family members to qualify for Russian citizenship. Prison inmates who sign up as contract soldiers can have their sentence reduced or be pardoned if they are decorated.

Besides incentives, there are other factors that play a decisive role in the recruitment of contract soldiers – namely, deception and coercion. For example, conscripts can easily be pressurised into signing a contract as they are serving far from home and are often subject to systematic harassment by superiors under the practice of hazing (*dedovshchina*). Media reports suggest that foreign citizens have been either deceived about the nature of their prospective employment or, if guilty of having broken the law, given the choice of serving a prison sentence or joining the army. It is particularly easy for government agencies to exploit the power they inevitably hold over prison inmates.

The new one-year contract demonstrates just how easily even supposed facilitating measures can end up being used to coerce. The one-year period mentioned in the contract applies on paper only, as Putin stipu-

lated in the partial mobilisation decree of September 2022 that the contracts of all *kontraktniki* are to remain valid until the end of the “special military operation”. During this period, the contracts of servicemen cannot be cancelled, while all contracts about to expire must be renewed. This means that de facto there is a permanent mobilisation under way not only of the *mobiki* but also of the *kontraktniki*.

Rapid proliferation of volunteer formations

The second pillar of the “covert mobilisation” is the recruitment of fighters from the broad range of volunteer formations. At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the Russian leadership drew on existing structures – such as private military companies (PMCs) and Cossack groups – but quickly began to promote the ad hoc establishment of new units. As a result, there was a rapid proliferation of volunteer structures with different legal statuses, heterogeneous funding and recruitment bases and varying degrees of autonomy from the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff.

The formations established before 2022 include PMCs, such as “Wagner”, “E.N.O.T.” and “Rusich”, as well as Cossack units and militias in occupied Donbas. Following the full-scale invasion, the number of PMCs, in particular, grew significantly, as did their battlefield importance. While the founding, financing and recruitment of “illegally armed formations” is prohibited in Russia to this day, close cooperation between mercenary groups and state agencies – from financing to training, arming and recruitment – is openly practised. For example, Wagner was allowed to recruit in prisons until spring 2023; and it was, above all, those men who were deployed in the “human wave tactics” that cost so many lives. Of the 78,000 or so Wagner fighters, 22,000 are reported to have fallen at Bakhmut alone.

Unlike mercenary groups, the Cossacks are recruited primarily not because of monetary incentives but rather, in the tradition of the “warrior peasants” in Tsarist

Russia, because of ideological motives. Patriotism, militarism and orthodox Christianity are core values of the Cossacks. According to the All-Russian Cossack Society, 27,000 Cossacks were fighting in Ukraine at the end of 2023.

Since 2014, Russian militias have emerged in the occupied Ukrainian territories, too. In particular, the Union of Donbas Volunteers has been recruiting fighters for front-line operations both there and in Russia itself.

After the full-scale invasion, a new phenomenon emerged: the mushrooming of volunteer formations through which the regions and companies recruit. In July 2022, even before the partial mobilisation, the government instructed the administrations of the 85 subjects of the federation (including the illegally annexed Crimea and Sevastopol) to form battalions of around 400 men each. The aim was to quickly recruit 34,000 fighters. And since the summer of 2022, (semi-)state and private companies, too, have been recruiting among their own employees to send fighters to the war. Units from Gazprom (“Potok”, “Plamia”, “Fakel”), Roskosmos (“Uran”) and Rusal (“Sokol”) were all formed in this way. As in the case of the PMCs and regional volunteer battalions, the wages received by the members of these units are far in excess of those for regular *kontraktniki*.

Diffusion or control of volunteer formations?

Although the volunteer formations have been able to rapidly recruit a large number of fighters, this development poses risks for Putin’s regime and the state. They range from the Ministry of Defence having insufficient control over individual structures to the state’s monopoly on the use of force being eroded. The Wagner mutiny, which clearly demonstrated the challenges for the Kremlin, ushered in a new phase of dealing with volunteer groups.

Initially, in autumn 2022, a dispute over the allocation of resources developed into an open power struggle between the finan-

cier of Wagner, Yevgenii Prigozhin, and then Defence Minister Shoigu. Prigozhin called the military leadership incompetent and the elites decadent, while he styled himself as a kind of tribune of the people and Wagner as a patriotic people's army.

In mid-June 2023, Shoigu responded by instructing all volunteer formations to sign a contract with the Ministry of Defence by 1 July 2023. In this way, previously illegal structures such as PMCs were to be legalised and put under the control of the Ministry of Defence. Prigozhin refused to obey the order and some of his fighters set off towards Moscow on 23 June 2023 on a "march for justice". Even though the mutiny failed, it revealed the dangers posed by the "proxification" of Russian structures of violence not only for the Ministry of Defence but for the regime as a whole.

The Kremlin responded by destroying the Wagner model. The PMC had played a special role not only because of its size but also because it was integrated into the broad corporate network of an entrepreneur of violence who had political ambitions. Prigozhin's company structure was demolished and he himself was killed, together with the founder of Wagner, Dmitrii Utkin, in an airplane crash on 23 August 2023. The Wagner fighters were given the choice of signing a contract with the Ministry of Defence or going into exile in Belarus.

For its part, the Ministry of Defence seized the mutiny as an opportunity to implement its plan to enforce tighter control over all volunteer groups. To this end, the latter have been subordinated to three larger umbrella organisations controlled by the Ministry of Defence: "Redut", "BARS" and the "Africa Corps". Although it is formally a PMC, Redut is considered a front organisation of the military intelligence service (GRU). BARS was founded in 2015 as an "army combat reserve" of the Russian armed forces. Instead of training reservists, it developed into an umbrella organisation for diverse volunteer formations. Units from the Union of Donbas Volunteers, the All-Russian Cossack Society and groups established by (semi-)state and private firms

are fighting under the banner of Redut and BARS. Meanwhile, the newly founded "Africa Corps" has taken over many of the operations previously led by Wagner in African countries.

The risks posed by the diffusion of the structures of violence have not been eliminated in principle as those very entities have been formally subordinated to the Ministry of Defence; indeed, they could even grow, as a large number of actors outside the military continue to be involved in the recruitment and (co-)financing of these groups – from regional elites and entrepreneurs to more ideologically driven forces. Although such actors regard the founding and financing of volunteer formations as, above all, a means to show their loyalty to the president, it increasingly appears that their motivation is to demonstrate their own standing within the elite network and ensure a safeguard in the event of an escalation of conflicts within the system itself.

There is no compelling reason for the Kremlin to fundamentally question recruitment via volunteer formations as long as the presidential vertical of power remains unchallenged. In the polycentrically organised system of Russian security structures, competition through functional overlaps and structural duplication is an important instrument of presidential control. Against this background, the diversity of volunteer formations may thus serve as an insurance policy for Putin against the military becoming more powerful at a time of war.

Limits of the covert mobilisation

However, the covert mobilisation will likely face challenges in future owing to constraints and changes in the recruitment pool. Thus, assuming that its political objectives remain the same, the Kremlin may not be able to avoid a new round of compulsory mobilisation.

According to official figures, 305,000 *kontraktniki* were recruited in the first 10 months of 2023 and 100,000 in the first three months of 2024. But the longer the war lasts, the more difficult it will likely be

to recruit regular contract soldiers. While volunteer fighters have the same level of wages and social benefits as the *kontraktniki*, they receive higher recruitment bonuses and are allowed to terminate their contract themselves at the end of the agreed period. As a result, it is to be expected that those willing to fight will prefer to sign a contract with a volunteer formation in future.

Furthermore, part of the recruitment base for the “covert mobilisation” has already been severely depleted. This applies, in particular, to prison inmates, whose number has fallen by 105,000 since the full-scale invasion to 249,000 as of December 2023. A significant proportion of the inhabitants of the poorer Russian regions and those segments of the population who see military service as a way out of their precarious economic situation are likely to have already been recruited, too. Moreover, the fact that the benefits promised have often been paid only in part or not at all is likely to have a demotivating effect.

There is a much larger potential to recruit among foreigners and ideologically motivated forces from Russia. The number of fighters from the “Global South” has risen significantly since mid-2023; and owing to Russia’s stronger position in poor and conflict-torn countries in particular, it will probably increase even more. However, the lack of language skills and insufficient training mean that their military use is largely confined to serving as “cannon fodder” at the front. This, combined with reports that deception and coercion played a significant role during the recruitment of such fighters, could well damage Russia’s image in the Global South. The Nepalese leadership, for example, has already banned its citizens from working in Russia.

For the Russian authorities, it is easier to put pressure on labour migrants who live in the country, especially those from Central Asia. A massive campaign could lead to the (forced) recruitment of tens of thousands of fighters. However, that would not only exacerbate the labour problem for Russia’s economy but also severely strain relations with the countries of origin.

The group that could yield a larger number of recruits is those of Russian citizens who are ideologically motivated, including the entire spectrum of nationalist forces, towards which the Kremlin has an ambivalent attitude. On the one hand, Putin instrumentalises and promotes them as part of his strategy to strengthen the patriotic-militaristic education of society; on the other hand, Moscow is concerned about those forces not being easily controlled and some of them being able to mobilise independently.

As part of their recruitment efforts, the Kremlin and the Ministry of Defence are focusing on the nationalist forces considered loyal to the regime – in particular, the registered Cossacks. It is from among this group that the “mobilisation reserve” of 60,000 Cossacks, approved in April 2024, is to be formed.

More problematic for the Russian leadership are nationalist forces whose demands for tougher action against Ukraine and the West go hand in hand with more far-reaching criticism of the leadership and an alternative vision of Russia’s future. They include former Donbas fighters and high-reach “Z” bloggers such as Igor Girkin (“Strelkov”). Girkin, who advocates a return to Orthodox tsardom, helped lead the attack on Donbas in 2014 but criticised the course pursued by the military leadership after 2022 as too hesitant and wanted to run in the 2024 presidential election. The fact that Girkin was sentenced to four years in prison for “extremism” in January 2024 demonstrates that the Kremlin is worried about such individuals.

In contrast with Ukraine, the female population of Russia has so far been excluded from the recruitment campaigns for the front line, apart from such isolated cases as the female snipers of the “Española” battalion. Given the largely traditional image of women and the family, this is unlikely to change.

New round of compulsory mobilisation?

Not only is covert mobilisation expensive; it also carries the risk of diffusing proxy structures and has its limits in terms of numbers recruited. The fact that the Kremlin has persisted with such an approach shows that the domestic political risks of a partial or general mobilisation are considered higher. However, if personnel losses continue to rise and/or the Kremlin wants to pre-empt the impact of Western arms deliveries and security assurances by launching a new major offensive or create a favourable starting position for negotiations in the wake of the US elections, a new round of compulsory mobilisation can hardly be avoided – even though the new defence minister has denounced such a step.

Indeed, the necessary legislative and administrative steps have already been taken in parallel with the covert mobilisation. In July 2023, Putin ordered the upper age limit for reservists to be raised by five years; and starting from January 2024, men between the ages of 18 and 30 – instead of between 18 and 27 as previously – are to be conscripted, as are males in the newly occupied Ukrainian territories. As a result, the number of conscripts drafted in spring 2024 reached 150,000, the highest level since 2016.

At the same time, it is becoming more difficult for Russian men to evade conscription as either draftees or *mobiki*. Since April 2023, conscription notices no longer have to be handed over in person; a digital notification is now sufficient. The fines for failing to appear at the enlistment offices on time have been massively increased, and there is also the threat of consequences that make everyday life much more difficult – such as having a driving licence revoked or not being allowed to apply for a loan. Furthermore, once a call-up notice has gone out, the recipient is no longer permitted to leave the country.

However, a new round of compulsory mobilisation would be extremely unpopular. In a survey carried out by “Russian

Fields” in October 2023, 58 per cent of respondents were against such a step. Even though the level of regime repression is extremely high, the potential for discontent could exceed even that in September 2022. This is because those who have so far deliberately escaped the massive recruitment campaigns, including well-educated residents of the largest cities, would now be forced to fight at the frontline. The earlier approach of keeping the group of *mobiki* isolated and therefore easier to control would no longer be tenable. Furthermore, given the impact on larger segments of society, it is possible that the protest potential among mothers or women would grow, not least as the new *mobiki* would be sent into battle insufficiently trained and ill equipped; indeed, the structural problem of a lack of both training facilities and junior officers to serve as instructors has not been solved. The “*Put domoi*” (The Way Home) movement, which was formed after the first round of mobilisation, initially criticised not the war itself but the lack of rotation of those who had been mobilised. When the authorities failed to respond to the complaints, criticism of the country’s leadership became more focused on more fundamental political issues.

It can therefore be assumed that if the Kremlin were to call for a new round of mobilisation, the justification narratives would have been tweaked in advance. One option would be to postulate a massively increased level of threat posed, for example, by the Ukrainian shelling of Russian military facilities and/or by Western arms supplies. Or the new round of mobilisation could be framed as a question of fairness, as it would relieve those already serving as *mobiki*. Such an approach could dispel the main criticism made by “*Put domoi*” and portray the new call-up as a regular rotation under the still valid mobilisation decree of September 2022. While for some time now Moscow’s leadership has been pushing the narrative of the growing external threats to Russia, the thorny issue of fairness has not yet been directly addressed. Rather, Putin adopted a new tone in late

February 2024 when he praised the front-line fighters and war veterans as the country's "new elite".

Preparing for the long war

Russia is counting on a long war of attrition in which it will be able to draw on considerably more manpower reserves than Ukraine and the latter will increasingly run up against it limits following a general mobilisation that started at the beginning of the war almost two-and-a-half years ago. Alone the number of men aged 18 to 60 is more than three-and-a half-times higher in Russia (at 39 million) than in Ukraine (11 million). Against this backdrop, it is all the more essential that Kyiv obtain sufficient supplies of modern weapons and equipment as well as long-term security commitments from Western states.

At the same time, Russia is preparing for a lengthy confrontation with the West. Its defence budget has doubled to the equivalent of €108 billion in 2024 compared with the previous year. This means that 28 per cent of government expenditure is allocated to the military, which corresponds to 6 per cent of gross domestic product. Combined with classified expenditure in other budget items used for military purposes, the figure is higher than 7 per cent. The increased military expenditure is intended not only to boost Russian defence production but also to increase the size of the armed forces to 1.5 million soldiers. In 2024, 16 new divisions and 14 brigades are to be formed.

Meanwhile, more fundamental changes in the structure of the Russian armed forces are becoming apparent. The direction of travel is away from the 2008 reform, which was aimed at transforming the outdated mass mobilisation army of the Soviet era into a more professional and combat-ready force capable of pursuing the Russian quest for a zone of influence in the post-Soviet space and performing limited out-of-area operations. Now, the Russian armed forces

are returning in part to the concept of the mass mobilisation army. In future, NATO and the EU will be confronted with a militarised Russia whose armed forces have – despite all the problems – gained combat experience in a major war in Europe and increased their capacity to engage in such conflicts.



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