

The Future Russian Way of War Part 1: State Mobilisation

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Introduction

In May 2025, the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs gathered a group of leading specialists and researchers focusing on various dimensions of Russian security and military affairs. The conference, “The Future Russian Way of War”, was organized around four broad themes: 1) state mobilisation; 2) hybrid tools; 3) military reform; and 4) nuclear deterrence.

Part 1: State Mobilisation

This is the first installment to be published from the conference, centered around its first theme, state mobilisation. It contains three papers.

The first paper, by Dmitry Gorenburg, a senior researcher at the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) in Virginia, USA, summarizes how Russia has managed the problem of mobilisation for its armed forces, with particular emphasis on the years leading up to, and beyond, the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The second paper, by Yury Fedorov, an independent expert on Russian politics and military affairs based outside of Russia, expands on this topic around two broad challenges: Russia's goal to keep enough troops in Ukraine to win the current war, and to increase its military capabilities in the Baltic Sea region and on the Kola Peninsula for a potential future conflict with NATO.

The last paper, by Margarete Klein, head of the research division for Eastern Europe and Eurasia at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Berlin, Germany, provides a detailed analysis of various Russian mobilisation efforts, and how they may be sustained into the future.

Russian Mobilisation

By Dmitry Gorenburg

Historical background

Until 2010, the Russian military kept up a tradition inherited from the Soviet Union of maintaining a large standing army backed by equally large mobilisation echelons. This was first developed as a plan to counter the German military in World War II. Throughout the Cold War, Russia forward deployed a large standing army in Eastern Europe to buy it time to mobilise its partially staffed cadre divisions based in the rear.

This mass mobilisation army was disbanded after the 2008 Georgia war and replaced by a permanent readiness force based on fully staffed brigades. This decision was made to better prepare for local wars on Russia's periphery, which required faster response and greater mobility. This plan was based in part on expectations that any war with NATO would be short because of nuclear escalation risks, so mobilisation would not be necessary.

As a hedge, Russia began to develop a nascent mobilisation capability in 2014. This comprised a combination of territorial defence battalions and the Combat Army Reserve (BARS), as well as a US-style volunteer active reserve. A target of 100,000 personnel was announced in 2021. BARS was still a work in progress at the time of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Mobilisation problems in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine

Three main problems associated with these decisions arose in the light of the subsequent invasion of Ukraine. First, Russia could have made the wrong decision when it disbanded Soviet-era mass mobilisation army without creating a viable alternative. Russia's military planners failed to anticipate becoming involved in the kind of large-scale war of attrition that Russia is now waging in Ukraine. Second, because Russia failed to invest in an alternative mobilisation capacity, when Putin finally ordered a partial mobilisation in September 2022, Russia lacked the mechanisms and structures to mobilise effectively, resulting in a chaotic, ad hoc effort. Third, despite efforts to create a nascent mobilisation capacity, Putin was unwilling to order a mobilisation during the initial phase of war because of concerns over the associated political costs. Ordering a partial mobilisation would have been inconsistent with the Kremlin's characterisation of the war as a "special military operation" to be carried out by Russia's standing army without disrupting the general populace. These constraints led Putin to favour a "covert mobilisation" strategy for much of the war, supplemented by his call for partial mobilisation in September 2022.

During the conflict, mobilisation has unfolded in three phases. In an initial covert mobilisation phase, which took place from February to September 2022, Russia resorted to a wide range of measures to mobilise additional combat troops for the battlefield while avoiding the mass mobilisation of Russian reservists at all costs. A second phase, which lasted from September 2022 to January 2023, centred on partial mobilisation. During this phase, Putin finally ordered a partial mobilisation, calling up 300,000 Russian reservists when his depleted forces came under intense pressure from Ukrainian counteroffensives at Kherson and Kharkiv.

The third phase comprised a return to covert mobilisation methods, highlighted by three principal lines of effort: recruitment of additional combat personnel by the Wagner Group and other Russian private military contractors; recruitment of additional contract soldiers for Russia's regular armed forces; and recruitment of additional volunteers for a wide range of Russian irregular forces.

During the initial phase, Russia relied on a patchwork of mobilisation measures to recruit or press into service the additional combat troops needed to support the war effort. These comprised efforts to recruit additional contract soldiers, establish volunteer battalions, mobilise separatist forces in the Donbas, form new Chechen militia units, activate Russian Combat Army Reserve active reserve units and recruit additional private military contractors. These efforts employed a combination of conscription and voluntary recruitment methods involving a corresponding mix of coercion and voluntary cooperation, with varying degrees of success.

During phase two, Russia ordered the partial mobilisation of Russian reservists. Partial mobilisation was an ad hoc, chaotic affair that suffered many problems linked to lack of proper preparation and loss of mobilisation capacity during the war. These included inaccurate reservist registries, reliance on manual processes and large-scale efforts to evade call-up. Russia also lacked the necessary bases, military trainers and equipment stores to properly train and equip newly mobilised reservists. Nonetheless, partial mobilisation generated 300,000 combat troops for the war effort, and these proved instrumental in stabilising the battlefield.

During the third phase, the Kremlin returned to the covert mobilisation methods adopted during phase one but with greater success, having applied the lessons learned during its earlier mobilisation efforts. The Kremlin concentrated on three principal lines of effort. First, the Wagner Group was given free rein to pursue large-scale prisoner recruitment, which proved highly successful in delivering tens of thousands of combat troops for operations near Bakhmut. Second, Russia secured tens of thousands of additional volunteers for both existing and new regional volunteer formations and other irregular combat units to successfully support the war effort. Finally, and most importantly, after refining its approach, Russia successfully recruited tens of thousands if not more additional contract soldiers by providing high salaries and benefits and using carefully targeted messaging to appeal to the sense of duty and patriotism of many Russian men of military age. High recruitment bonuses of up to 2 million rubles (\$20,000), and even more in some regions, plus high salaries have allowed the steady recruitment of volunteers. Demonstrating the success of these efforts, the Kremlin recruited 450,000 contract soldiers in 2024.

Impact of Russian mobilisation efforts

Russia's mobilisation efforts have had mixed effects on Russian forces in the field. Reliance on such a wide range of mobilisation measures has undermined unity of effort and resulted in a patchwork of both regular and irregular combat units at the front. This outcome undermines the cohesion of Russian combat units, leading to coordination problems and a fragmented chain of command. The influx of poorly trained personnel has also led to a general degradation in the quality of Russian combat forces, driving Russian military leaders to favour continuous infantry assaults over more sophisticated combined arms operations. These assaults contribute to further Russian battlefield losses, thereby perpetuating an insatiable demand for more combat troops.

On the other hand, mobilisation was sufficient to allow Russian forces to stabilise the front line in the winter of 2022–23, blunt Ukraine's summer 2023 counteroffensive and more recently to return to the offensive and achieve gains across eastern Ukraine. At the same time, the Kremlin's revised covert mobilisation strategy has thus far been good enough to sustain Russian forces on the battlefield without the need for a second wave of mobilisation. It has also been supplemented by 10–12,000 North Korean troops, used primarily in Kursk, probably to avoid having to use conscripts or initiate a second wave of mobilisation.

Future plans

There are early indications that Russia is planning to revise its mobilisation strategy based on lessons learned during the Russia-Ukraine war. The Kremlin recently decided to build and maintain a larger standing army to reduce the country's reliance on mobilisable reserves. Putin has ordered Russia's armed forces to be increased from 1.15 million troops to 1.5 million troops by 2026. The additional forces will be used to form a new army corps, seven additional motorised rifle divisions and 19 new brigades. This force expansion is to be achieved by increasing the number of contract soldiers to 695,000 without a corresponding increase in the length of conscription service, an increase of 290,000 compared to the size of the military in 2023. For 2025, the military has established a target of 340,000 new contract soldiers.

In addition to recruitment bonuses, the military has implemented several new financial incentives, including writing off up to ten million rubles of outstanding debt for new recruits. The military is also increasing recruitment among the prison population, a scheme first implemented by Wagner but subsequently adopted by the regular military. Some estimates suggest that 30 percent of recruits now have criminal records.

There has been an increase in conscription targets as well – to 160,000 for the 2025 spring draft, compared to 150,000 in 2024 and 134,500 in 2022. This has been accomplished in part by increasing the maximum draft age from 27 to 30 in 2024 and in part by reducing medical and other exemptions. The military has also cracked down on draft avoidance through a combination of simplifying procedures, creating a digital registry of draft eligible men, implementing stricter punishments for evasion and seeking out avoiders in public spaces.

The military is also trying to further expand Soviet-style mass mobilisation mechanisms, although thus far this has been more in the realm of discussion than any real development of mechanisms. Both BARS and the voluntary territorial defence battalions continue to exist at the same time. In other words, the Russian government is still in a phase of trying everything, possibly with the goal of sticking with what works best in the post-war period. The Russian government has also focused on expanding military patriotic education for youth in order to expand the potential recruitment pool for professional soldiers in the long term.

Many of these actions are an attempt to get ahead of future demobilisation after the active war against Ukraine has ended. Many volunteers will expect to return to civilian life but the Russian leadership still wants to have a larger military force in the long term, given its perception that it needs to be prepared to fight a potential future war against NATO. The government wants to ensure it has the means to meet these higher manpower targets while if at all possible avoiding increasing the length of conscript service. Its pronouncements offer an early view of what Russia is thinking about a revised mobilisation strategy in the short to medium term in the light of its experiences in Ukraine.

Russian manpower mobilisation: plans and prospects

By Yury Fedorov

Russia's manpower mobilisation process comprises several steps: the recruitment and training of potential soldiers, converting the unorganised mass of recruits into combat-ready units, assembling command cadres for these units, providing the units with weapons and military gear and developing men in uniform who possess professional military institutional motivation—a crucial component in times of armed conflict. Strategic objectives dictate the numerical dimensions of mobilisation. Keeping enough troops in Ukraine to combat and win the current war is Russia's primary goal. The second is to increase military capabilities in the Baltic region and on the Kola Peninsula so that it could beat Finland, the Baltic states and NATO in a planned clash with Europe.

Russian plans and the scope of manpower mobilisation

Decree no. 792 signed by Vladimir Putin on 16 September 2024 set the authorised strength of the Russian Armed Forces at 1.5 million military personnel, effective 1 December 2024. This manpower level is not arbitrary. This is precisely the number of officers and soldiers Russia needs to achieve the two above-mentioned goals and implement plans for a build-up of the armed forces to ensure achievement of those goals.

The key components of the pertinent plans were initially revealed by Russia's then defence minister Sergei Shoigu in December 2022.¹In particular, the aim was to form 20 ground-combat force divisions and 12 Air Force divisions, either new from zero or by converting brigades into divisions, to divide the Western Military District into Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts. To carry out these plans, the Kremlin mobilised over 320,000 personnel in the autumn of 2022 through the so-called partial mobilisation, but later resorted to hiring contract soldiers and volunteers as an alternative, politically less risky means of staffing the army. Bonuses and pay, which are significantly higher than the norm in Russia, are the primary reason why volunteers enlist in the army.

The plans have not been fully implemented and there is an increasing gap between the authorised armed forces and actual – or active – strength. This gap, which is currently 350,000 men, has developed because the number of new recruits joining – mostly as contract soldiers but also a number of volunteers – is almost equal to the number of irreversible losses. Consequently, since mid-2023, the number of active-duty soldiers or ground-combat troops, almost all of whom are fighting in Ukraine, has remained relatively stable at about 600,000.

1 “Zasedanie Kollegii Ministerstva Oborony” (“Meeting of the Board of the Defence Ministry”), Kremlin.Ru, December 21, 2022, available at: <http://kremlin.ru/>.

Table 1 Russia' Armed Force personnel (thousand)

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Total authorised personnel	1013	1013	1150	1320	1500
Total active personnel	900	900	1160	1100	1134
Ground-combat troops active personnel ^{a)}	360	360	620	560	595

^{a)}Ground-combat troops include Army, Airborne and Naval infantry

The Russian army suffered irreversible losses of those killed in action or wounded in action and demobilised because of their injuries of about 550,000 men between February 2022 and December 2024 . To these figures it is necessary to add approximately 80,000 missing in action and 50,000 deserters.

According to Russian officials, between 1,000 and 1,200 contracts are signed every day by people who want to enlist in the army, either as volunteers or as contract troops. When Russian officials talk about the number of new contract troops, however, they are talking not about the number of individuals who have joined the army but the number of contracts that have been signed. These include not only recently recruited soldiers, but also contract soldiers who have signed new agreements after their contracts expired and those who were mobilised in the autumn of 2022 and had to transition to become contract soldiers.

Prospects for a new mobilisation: two possible scenarios

Whatever the case, the reality remains that the current recruiting system for the Russian army cannot expand the number of military personnel to the required level. For more than a year now, the Russian military command has been demanding another wave of “partial mobilisation”, arguing that it cannot defeat the Ukrainian Armed Forces without recruiting 350,000 to 400,000 new soldiers and junior officers into the army. Putin is currently refusing to take such a decision.

It would be theoretically feasible for the Russian authorities to fully mobilise 350,000 men, given the successful completion of the first wave of partial mobilisation in late 2022. If this happens, new brigades and divisions will probably be formed using about 175,000 troops, or half the 350,000 who might be called up to the army. This number will be more than sufficient to staff, for instance, a mix of 20 regular motorised rifle, tank and airborne divisions, as is foreseen in the above-mentioned plans for bolstering the Russian military. The remaining half would probably be used to bolster the armed forces in Ukraine and make up for their losses. With this in mind, it is useful to examine two potential scenarios for the new partial mobilisation. In the first scenario, 350,000 personnel are called up to the army, while 175,000 are called up in the second.

In the first scenario, the Russian military would be able to expand its forces in Ukraine to about 775,000 soldiers and to start forming up to 20 new divisions, primarily based in north-west Russia. However, there are two main obstacles to realisation of this scenario.

The first is the shortage of the required number of command cadres. Statistics show that the Russian army requires one officer for every ten sergeants and privates, which means that it needs roughly 17,000 officers ranging in rank from lieutenant to major. Officers of this type are now lacking in combat units in the army. Experienced sergeants are often appointed to officer ranks after a one-month course in officer school.

In addition, the personnel to weaponry ratio for ground combat troops would deteriorate as a result of 350,000 personnel being mobilised. The key issue is that the army must keep the ratio of the number soldiers and officers to the amount of weaponry (tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery etc.) accurately calibrated. This ratio has been upset in the Russian army since the start of the conflict in Ukraine.

Table 2 Personnel to weaponry ratio in the Russian ground-combat force 2

Number of personnel to one piece of weaponry	2022	2023	2024	2025	Mobilisation, 2025 (000)	
					175	350
Personnel/tank	105	300	280	200	287	300
Personnel/IFV	50	115	108	156	204	225
Personnel/artillery	61	114	103	95	125	153

The Russian army's personnel to weaponry ratio on the eve of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine matched the normal standard manning and equipment of battalions, brigades, divisions, and so on, but the quantity of weapons in the ground forces declined as the number of personnel grew. As a result, there is an excess of infantry not adequately supported by tanks, artillery and infantry fighting vehicles. This has reduced the combat potential of the troops and led to a significant increase in casualties, as the infantry advances without proper armoured support. The ratio of personnel to armaments would be considerably more distorted following a new mobilisation of 350,000 personnel. There will, for instance, be three times as many soldiers per tank as would be the case for typical division, brigade and regimental structures.

It appears more plausible that around 175,000 personnel will be mobilised, as presumed in the second scenario, which somewhat minimises the need for extra officer staff. Nonetheless, if the Kremlin proceeds with implementation in 2025, this will significantly worsen the current personnel to weaponry ratio for troops fighting in Ukraine, which will immediately result in a large increase in casualties without any assurance of success.

Ceasefire and the manpower mobilisation

All factors considered, it is unlikely that a fresh mobilisation – including the second of the above-mentioned options – will occur during the conflict with Ukraine. However, a protracted ceasefire cannot be ruled out and could occur by the end of this year if the objectives of the current Russian offensive are not met. This might significantly alter the situation.

2 Calculated according to IISS. Military balance, 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025.

In the event of a truce, some 250,000 soldiers would need to be demobilised by the Russian authorities. These include contract troops whose contracts have expired and who do not want to extend them, as well as those who were mobilised in the autumn of 2022. They have remained in the army during the war since no one would allow them to leave. If all these 250,000 soldiers were to leave the army, the Russian armed forces would need to mobilise up to 600,000 personnel to reach the 1.5-million level that is prescribed. This would be highly implausible for political, legal and technical reasons. In addition, the problems related to the shortage of officer corps and weaponry would start to show up in full.

The Kremlin will therefore most probably decide against demobilising in spite of the truce. In this instance, it will have to draught 350,000 personnel into the army while reducing losses to zero. In theory, this objective could be accomplished in a few months or perhaps a year. However, the political rationale of such a strategy would require a high level of military confrontation with Ukraine and Europe to be maintained – even to the point of teetering on the brink of war. As a result, both the military danger posed by Russia to Europe and the ability of Russia to carry out this threat will increase considerably.

The main factors preventing an increase in the numerical strength of the Russian army to 1.5 million men in uniform will be the shortage of trained and combat-experienced officers, and the shortage weaponry. Equipping 20 new divisions would require between 2000 and 3000 tanks and a corresponding number of infantry fighting vehicles, armoured personnel carriers, artillery, and so on, and would take five to seven years. About the same amount of time might be required to prepare the necessary number of commander cadres. Thus, the West, primarily Europe, has a “window of opportunity” to prepare to prevent highly likely Russian aggression.

It is quite possible, however, that in the event of a ceasefire in Ukraine, Moscow might simply redeploy half of its current fighting forces in Ukraine—roughly 300,000 men—to the north-west for an offensive or “pressure by force” on the Baltic states, Finland, Poland and the Scandinavian nations. The question that remains unanswered is whether Europe can stop such Russian aggression without resorting to nuclear deterrence by reliving the experience of the “first Cold War”.

Mobilising for the war: Russia's recruitment efforts ¹

By Margarete Klein

Manpower has become a critical issue in Russia's war against Ukraine. Russia has suffered heavy losses. Mediazona and BBC Russian Services have been able to identify the names of at least 119,000 Russian soldiers and fighters who had died as of 18 July 2025. The British Ministry of Defence estimates up to 1 million casualties killed or wounded. How is Russia trying to compensate for losses on the battlefield and beat Ukraine in a war of attrition? How sustainable are its efforts? What are the political implications of the specific method of mobilisation since 2022?

Theoretically, the Kremlin has a broad range of options available for recruiting personnel. These can be differentiated according to two criteria. First, the underlying principle – whether recruitment is voluntary, at least at the formal level, or involves coercion. Second, whether the target group is regular soldiers from Russia (conscripts, contract soldiers and officers); volunteer fighters from Russia or abroad; or regular soldiers from other countries.

The principle chosen and which target group is the main focus or exempted reveal how Moscow's leadership weighs up domestic risks and military requirements at a certain moment in time. The decisions made in the specific setting of Russia's war of attrition against Ukraine do not automatically create a path dependency for Russia's post-war recruitment policy but will have an impact on it.

Phases of recruitment

Three phases in Russia's recruitment policy can be identified since the full-scale invasion. At the start, Russia's leadership took hasty ad hoc measures based on the principle of voluntariness. The main effort was to increase the number of contract soldiers and accelerate the use of forces outside of the regular armed forces. For this purpose, existing structures such as "PMCs" and the Chechnya-based National Guard (Kadyrovtsy) were used, and new formations such as regional volunteer battalions mushroomed.

These measures failed to compensate for Russia's losses or to repel Ukraine's first counteroffensive. Putin therefore resorted to a compulsory measure that he had previously explicitly ruled out. On 21 September 2022, he declared a partial mobilisation and called up 300,000 men. This decision proved politically costly for the Kremlin but also militarily insufficient, given the fact that Russia's mobilisation system lacked the capacity to adequately train and equip the mobilised soldiers.

¹ This summary is based on articles by the author: Margarete Klein, How Russia is Recruiting for the Long War. Covertly Mobilising Volunteers while Preparing for a New Round of Compulsory Mobilisation, SWP Comment C24/2024, 27.6.2024; Margarete Klein: Russia's Volunteer Formations: Instruments for Recruitment, Proof of Loyalty or Diffusion of Power?, Russian Analytical Digest, No.323, 20.01.2025, p.19-23; Margarete Klein, Russia's Covert Mobilization: Instruments, Actors and Repercussions for Regime Stability and Confrontation With the West, in: Pentti Forsström (ed.): Russia's War Against Ukraine. Trends and Lessons, Helsinki 2025 (forthcoming), p. 176-194.

The Kremlin responded with a damage limitation strategy of “divide and rule” aimed at confining the human costs of partial mobilisation to a fairly small group, thereby separating their concerns from the rest of society. Although the minister of defence, Sergei Shoigu, declared the partial mobilisation to be complete at the end of October 2022, the surviving mobilised soldiers have not been demobilised. Putin’s decree did not contain a specific time limit has not been formally revoked.

The third phase was characterised by three developments. First, enhancing the legal foundations and administrative capacities for a potential new round of compulsory mobilisation. For example, a centralised and digitalised database with information about all Russians liable for military service was introduced in April 2024. Despite these expanded mobilisation capacities, however, the third phase of recruitment has been characterised by an attempt to avoid resorting to overt coercion in Russia. This can be seen in the second pathway chosen by the Kremlin – the deployment of regular soldiers from other countries. When the Russian armed forces came under pressure from Ukraine’s Kursk offensive in August 2024, North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong-Un, offered to send regular soldiers. It remains to be seen whether this singular case indicates an increasing desire to reinforce Russia’s invasion force by foreign soldiers. However, the main effort has been to step up the recruitment of contract soldiers and volunteer fighters. This process has been labelled “covert mobilisation” and can be traced back to the first phase of recruitment. The establishment of new volunteer formations and the use of existing structures has not followed a master plan but is based on incremental logic. In consequence, a patchwork of volunteer formations has emerged with a heterogeneous funding structure and recruitment base, a different legal status and varying degrees of autonomy from the Ministry of Defence and military command.

Covert mobilisation

Covert mobilisation – or alternative terms such as “silent” or “market” mobilisation – is not an academic term or an elaborated concept but a description of diverse, war-driven measures to generate manpower. The main characteristic and crucial defining feature is the principle of formal voluntariness, although in practice pressure is exerted and deception is used.

In order to increase the number of contract soldiers and volunteer fighters, Russia’s leadership is not following a masterplan drawn up before the full-scale invasion. Rather, it is proceeding incrementally step by step with numerous separate measures.

- **Expanding the recruitment pool and lowering standards for recruitment**
 - extending the age limit for conscripts from 18–27 years to 18–30 years expands the pool of men who can be pressurised to sign military contracts
 - raising the age limits for contract soldiers from 40 to 65 years for Russian nationals and from 30 to 65 years for foreign nationals
 - reducing health and other requirements
 - criminal proceedings can be suspended after signing a contract
 - reaching out to foreigners who have just become Russian nationals

- **The methods used to recruit contract soldiers encompass incentives, deception and indirect coercion.**
 - With regard to incentives, financial benefits play a decisive role.
 - Since the full-scale invasion, both the monthly wage and the enlistment bonus have been raised significantly. Enlistment bonuses are up to €40,000.
 - Social and other financial benefits have been extended, such as preferential tax status, free land and postponement or even writing off of loans.
 - Foreigners can obtain Russian citizenship for themselves and their families after serving a one-year military contract.
 - Recruitment efforts focus on concepts of duty, love for the motherland and nationalism, as well as traditional concepts of masculinity and eagerness for adventure.
 - Reports show that men have been lured into signing contracts while being told that they will serve as cooks or drivers.
 - Veiled coercion:
 - Although it has always been easy to exert pressure on conscripts, the possibilities have been extended still further since the full-scale invasion. While previously young men were prohibited from enlisting as “kontriktniki” without having served at least three months as conscripts, since April 2023 18-year old males have been allowed to sign up immediately after high school and can be sent to the frontline after only four weeks of training.
 - A strong focus on recruiting prisoners, who constitute a specifically vulnerable group.
 - Veiled coercion applies to contract soldiers too. According to Putin’s decree on partial mobilisation, the contracts of all kontraktniki remain valid until the end of the “special military operation”. In consequence, kontraktniki cannot cancel their military service and contracts about to expire are automatically renewed. This clearly shows that Russia is in a de facto state of permanent mobilisation not only with regard to the mobilised soldiers from September 2022 who have not been rotated, but also with regard to the group of “contract soldiers” more generally.

This mix of incentives, deception and coercion also applies to the recruitment of fighters to volunteer formations. Monthly wages and enlistment bonuses are higher than in the regular armed forces while volunteer fighters are entitled to the same social benefits as contract soldiers. Some formations, such as “Rusich” or the “Russian Imperial League” in particular, appeal to nationalist sentiments. The so-called deputy battalions use a specific type of motivation. In addition, members of the elite demonstrate their loyalty by joining specific units that are not directly deployed on the front line.

What do we know about those recruited through covert mobilisation?

The data is insufficient. BBC Russian Services and Mediazona provide verified data only on those who have been killed in Ukraine. However, the data shows that the target groups for

recruitment have changed since the start of the full-scale invasion. While in the early weeks, it was mainly contract soldiers who were killed, volunteer fighters have borne the main burden since the summer of 2022. The number of former prisoners killed rose significantly following the battle of Bakhmut until the disbanding of “Wagner”. Since the summer of 2023, volunteer fighters have borne the brunt of the losses.

Until the beginning of 2025, most of those killed were between 30 and 41 years old (43.2%) while roughly half the proportion fell into the category 20–29 years (23.9%) and 41–50 years (22.6%). Several reports indicate that the age of new recruits in some regions has risen in recent months.

The regions with the highest death toll are located mostly in poor regions in Siberia, the Urals, the Far East and the southern regions with a high percentage of Cossacks like Kuban and/or in regions with a significant non-Russian population such as Buryatia, Tatarstan, Dagestan, Bashkortostan and Dagestan. The only exception is Moscow Oblast.

However, caution is advisable to avoid generalising from the data on verified casualties to the background and relative share of those being recruited through covert mobilisation. Although Russia's recruitment strategy for war is mainly about quantity, emerging quality might be overlooked. There is good reason to assume that those deemed expendable – older men, men with health problems or men from ethnically non-Russian or poorer regions – are sent disproportionately to the frontline, while those of a younger age, fit and ethnically Russian are more often spared in order to better train them for further offensives or as reinforcements in Russia's long war against the West.

How sustainable is covert mobilisation?

There is no reason to believe that Russia's recruitment efforts are not sustainable in the short term, given the high wages and enlistment bonuses. However, two sets of questions arise for the future:

- 1) How long will Russia's leadership be willing or able to offer high financial incentives? Would it risk abandoning the principle of voluntariness and resort to coercion by declaring a second round of partial or even general mobilisation? The recruitment bonuses in the budget show that the number of soldiers recruited was still very high in the first quarter of 2025, but fell significantly in the second quarter of 2025. Between April and June 2025, the number of newly signed contracts was two and a half times lower than in the second quarter of 2024.
- 2) How will Russia achieve and maintain the target size of 1.5 million men for its armed forces? Retention of contract soldiers will probably be the most critical issue. Russia's leadership is eagerly reaching out to the younger generation by increasing paramilitary training in schools and universities, and in a plethora of volunteer activities by “Yunarmiya”, the “Movement of the First” and similar programmes.

What are the political effects of covert mobilisation?

Not resorting to obvious coercion but instead focusing on the idea of voluntariness has had a stabilising effect for the Kremlin. Covert mobilisation conceals the genuine death toll, privatises the human losses and helps the leadership to avoid a new unpopular round of compulsory mobilisation. However, covert mobilisation has entailed and continues to entail risks for the Kremlin too.

The first challenge is related to the proxyfication of structures of violence outside of the regular armed forces. Since the full-scale invasion, several individuals and structures have gained experience of different aspects of covert mobilisation – from administrative management of the process to financing and recruitment.

Thus far, the Wagner mutiny has been the only case of a volunteer formation coming into open conflict with the military and political leadership. Wagner was a special case among the plethora of volunteer formations. Its ambitious financier, Yevgeny Prigozhin, had direct control over its financial means and its independent recruitment sources (prisoners), and autonomous command of its frontline operations. The “Wagner model” was destroyed following the mutiny but the Kremlin’s lessons learned went beyond that peculiar case. The Kremlin and the Ministry of Defence reduced the remnants of autonomy and turned the volunteer formations into pure recruitment vehicles. Cross-financing through regional administrations, business leaders and other entities is still expected, but any elements of autonomy have been significantly reduced. (Although true in general, this does not apply to the Kadyrovtsy, which has been expanded and the military and political autonomy of which have not thus far been touched.)

Currently, the chances that other individuals engaged in covert mobilisation might seek to turn their investment into political capital are very limited. Most actors regard their contribution as a way to demonstrate loyalty to the president. Only in a highly unlikely scenario might some of the volunteer formations become an instrument for their patrons. Three developments would have to coincide:

- a power vacuum at the top of the country
- a massive escalation in tensions among the elite
- crumbling security forces and armed forces.

As long as these factors do not coincide, there is no incentive for Putin to question the model of covert mobilisation. In the polycentric system of Russia’s security structures, competition through structural duplication and financial overlap is a proven model of presidential control.

The second challenge is how to deal with war veterans, in particular if they return in great numbers following a ceasefire or even a peace agreement. They might pose a greater challenge to the Kremlin than the opposition in exile. Even if the veterans are unlikely to become a political force by developing a common political programme or agreeing on a visible leadership figure, masses of returning men, potentially discontented with their actual or future material and physical situation, would be a burden for the regime. In particular, they could challenge the leadership’s narrative about a successful special military operation by sharing first hand experiences of military failures, incompetence and neglect. In consequence, Putin will have to avoid leaving these men free-floating without jobs and prospects, as was the case with the Afghanistan and Chechnya war veterans who helped to undermine the legitimacy of Moscow’s leadership.

What are the Kremlin's options for dealing with veterans?

- 1) Keep soldiers and fighters in the armed forces: In addition to the political risk of allowing masses of veterans to return home, keeping them in the armed forces is also beneficial from a military point of view, to reach the target of 1.5 million soldiers and use veterans' combat experience in further professionalisation efforts. Since retention is always a problem, Moscow must either continue to pay high salaries or resort to compulsory measures by extending contracts even after a ceasefire or peace deal has been reached.
- 2) Rewards and promotion: The Kremlin has launched various programmes to keep veterans busy and close to the regime. Putin has paid tribute to veterans by declaring them "the new elite". The newly established "times for heroes" programme offers a way for promotion in the bureaucracy. Similar programmes are being established in the regions. Their limited scope, however, means that the programmes thus far appear to be more cosmetic measures than a genuine attempt at elite rotation.
- 3) Send former fighters and soldiers on military operations abroad: In order to reduce the prospect of veterans becoming a domestic political problem, and at the same time to consolidate Russia's foreign policy position, former fighters and soldiers could be used as mercenaries abroad.



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