



Russia Turns to “Crypto-mobilisation” to Bolster Forces

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The hostilities in Ukraine are leading to such high losses among Russian troops that replenishing and rotating them is becoming a problem. In order to maintain the occupied territories, Russia is supplementing its combat potential by increasing the number of conscripts and contract soldiers, recruiting volunteers and prisoners, and forcibly mobilising the population in the occupied territories. The ongoing war makes Russia’s existing methods insufficient and the authorities may resume partial mobilisation.

According to estimates by independent portals Meduza and Mediazona, 47,000 Russian soldiers had been killed in Ukraine as of May this year. Ukrainian defence ministry figures from early September show more than 265,000 dead and wounded. For every soldier killed, there are about 3-4 wounded. The difficulty of replenishing losses and rotating troops is evidenced, for example, by the deployment to the front of a strategic reserve unit, the 25th Army. Given the time required to train new recruits (at least 3-6 months) and logistical constraints, the Russian government may be forced to resume partial mobilisation within a few months. According to the Ukrainian military intelligence service (HUR), 450,000 new recruits could be drafted into the army as a result. However, the decision on this will depend on the course of the Ukrainian counteroffensive and the level of losses on the Russian side in the coming months.

Actions to Increase the Number of Soldiers. The Russian government is attempting to build up its forces with professional soldiers (permanent service), contract soldiers (fixed-term), and conscripts, who should be transferred to the reserves after training. In December 2022, as part of the [reform of the armed forces](#), Vladimir Putin signed a decree increasing the number of professional soldiers by 137,000. As a result, the full-time strength of the Russian army is to number more than 2 million, including 1.1 million soldiers, but the actual strength is around 830,000 (including 260,000 conscripts). At the beginning of the year, the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD) announced that it would recruit 420,000 new soldiers in 2023, and Putin increased the quota for spring conscription by 13,000. The Russian

government also raised the upper age limit for conscripts from 27 to 30, which will increase the pool of reserves by more than 2 million by 2030. The target size of the Russian armed forces is 1.5 million soldiers, which is linked to the plan to create two new military districts (Moscow and Leningrad), an army corps, five divisions, and 26 brigades, a combined army and air force headquarters, and a regional naval formation named Azov.

Attractive salaries are supposed to encourage people to serve in the army. Before the invasion, a lieutenant in the Russian military earned RUB 81,200 (about \$850) per month. Nowadays, even newly conscripted privates receive an emolument of nearly RUB 200,000 (\$2,100) per month. In addition, they receive combat action allowances and social packages. At the end of May this year, the deputy head of the Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, stated that more than 117,000 people had been recruited for contract service. At the beginning of September, the figure had already reached 280,000, but this included formations that had long fought in Ukraine, volunteer battalions, and semi-private armed formations (including Redut, Patriot, Convoy, Potok, and others) that had signed contracts with the MoD and had been under its supervision since 1 July this year. Listing them as “new soldiers” indicates the difficulty of achieving the intended recruitment targets.

Crypto-mobilisation. From the beginning of the war, the Russian authorities avoided declaring a general military mobilisation, maintaining in their propaganda that a “special military operation” rather than a full-scale war was taking

place in Ukraine. They feared an undesirable public reaction and used methods to replenish losses without the need for a politically costly decision. This task was entrusted to regional authorities organising [volunteer battalions](#) and [mercenary companies](#). After the [Prigozhin Revolt](#), the defence ministry took over the recruitment channels of sports clubs, veterans' associations, and penal colonies from the [Wagner Group](#). By May this year, more than 10,000 prisoners had been recruited and were placed in Storm-Z units. They are subordinated to the individual operational units and are used for assaults and battlefield reconnaissance.

Russia is also carrying out forced mobilisation in the occupied territories. Previously, mainly residents of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk separatist republics were mobilised (around 140,000), but operations are now also underway in Crimea, where 60,000 people have been drafted into the army. For military service, Russia is also trying to recruit migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus by offering them attractive salaries and the possibility to obtain a Russian passport after one year of military service (rather than five years as before). Those granted Russian passports are to be forced to register with military commissions. Russian MPs are preparing a bill to allow passports to be taken away from those who fail to do so within two weeks of receiving the document.

Internal Effects of Partial Mobilisation. During the [mobilisation announced in September 2022](#), according to the MoD, 300,000 people were recruited, although Mediazona's data indicate that it was around 40,000 short of its target. At the time, 492,000 Russians received a summons to appear at military commissions, but many sought ways to avoid conscription (e.g., by bribing officials, self-harm, or attacking military offices). Some 700,000 people who could have been mobilised left Russia, emigrating mainly to Kazakhstan and Georgia. To avoid a similar situation in the future, Russia has introduced a ban on travel abroad for potential conscripts and those subject to mobilisation from the date of dispatch—rather than receipt—of a summons, which is then deemed to have been “delivered” seven days after being entered into an electronic register, regardless of whether the recipient actually received it. Digitalisation of the system is expected to streamline administrative work, as well as to make it easier to sanction those who avoid appearing at the required commands. The government also backed a project to introduce a five-year prison sentence or a fine of RUB 500,000 (about \$5,200) for failing to appear at a military commission. Previously, the only sanction was a fine of between RUB 3,000 and RUB 30,000 (\$33-327). Lawyers are banned from representing people who wished to appeal against military service or file a complaint. Only family members can represent them, which will make it much more difficult for the conscripts to assert their rights and will increase the scale of abuse by the administration.

This form of mobilisation has caused public discontent, but the scale of demonstrations against it have been small. Protests took place mainly in regions dominated by ethnically non-Russian populations (e.g., Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Yakutia, and Tuva), not in large cities, and were spurred by the fact that conscripts and others from these regions make up the largest proportion of Russia's dead and wounded. The criticism of the MoD focused primarily on the poor living conditions of the soldiers, their poor quality equipment, poor treatment by their superiors, and insufficient training time. At the same time, [the legitimacy of Russia's war against Ukraine was not questioned](#). The authorities compensated families for the loss of their loved ones with financial measures, which dampened the public protests but exacerbated Russia's [economic problems](#).

Conclusions and Perspectives. The need to replenish losses and rotate troops fighting in Ukraine may force the Russian government to resume partial mobilisation. The decision to do so may be influenced by the progress of Ukraine's counteroffensive, particularly if it breaks through defensive lines in the Zaporizhzhia region, which threatens the Russians' land connection between Donbas and Crimea. Concerns about a public reaction likely led the Russian authorities to delay announcing the decision about mobilisation until after the Russian regional elections scheduled for 9-10 September, and they may even hold off until after the presidential elections scheduled for spring 2024. Until then, Russia will continue to use alternative methods of recruiting its armed forces through cryptomobilisation, which should provide it with around 20,000 recruits per month. This will allow Russia to replenish losses, but are insufficient to mount an offensive.

The next wave of military mobilisation could lead to greater public discontent in Russia than in September 2022 through a “zinc coffin effect”. In a poll from March this year, 20% of Russians admitted to knowing a person who had been mobilised and then died at the front (returning in zinc coffins). Tightening the rules restricting evasion of mobilisation will exacerbate pathologies in the Russian military, such as corruption, desertions, and illegal escapes abroad. It may also provoke a stronger public reaction, such as an increase in attacks on replenishment commands (e.g., arsons), or larger-scale demonstrations. An unfavourable public reaction would hit Putin's standing, weakened after the [Prigozhin Revolt](#), further deepening internal political divisions threatening the stability of the regime. The West should increase the scale of military aid to Ukraine to maintain its ability to continue its counteroffensive into next year. The increasing losses and fear of mobilisation will exacerbate Russia's internal problems even as it seeks to discourage support for the Ukrainian armed forces through diplomacy and disinformation.