



**POLICY BRIEF**

# **GLIMPSE INTO MOBILIZATION IN RUSSIA**

**OVERVIEW, METHODS AND PROSPECTS**

IAROSLAV CHORNOGOR  
PAVLO RAD  
ANATOLII CHERNYSH  
ANTON OKSENTUIK



## **GLIMPSE INTO MOBILIZATION IN RUSSIA: OVERVIEW, METHODS AND PROSPECTS**

The policy brief was prepared within “Russian and Belarusian Studies” Program of the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism” with the support of the International Renaissance Foundation. It’s content is the exclusive responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the views of the International Renaissance Foundation.

### Authors:

Iaroslav Chornogor

Pavlo Rad

Anatolii Chernysh

Anton Oksentuik

# Content

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Replenishment of the ranks of the Russian Armed Forces since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine</b>	<b>4</b>
Mobilization in the occupied territories	4
Partial mobilization	5
Recruitment to the so-called “private military companies”	5
Recruitment on contract service	6
<b>2. Methods of mobilization at the current stage</b>	<b>7</b>
Recruitment for contract service	7
Recruitment of foreigners	7
<b>3. Future prospects for mobilization in Russia</b>	<b>8</b>
Factors that determine the continuation of mobilization	8
Possible start and course of a new wave of mobilization in Russia	9
<b>Conclusions and recommendations</b>	<b>10</b>

# Introduction

In February 2022, Russia's leadership expected to crush the Ukrainian army with several powerful strikes, capture the capital and several regional centers, and thus in a matter of days defeat Ukraine and force its leadership to surrender. These plans did not come true. Ukraine was able not only to hold out, but also push the Russian troops back. At the same time, the Russian Federation suffered significant losses which caused the need to replenish them. The most effective solution could have been mass mobilization coupled with the introduction of martial law. But since the Russian leadership officially announced only the so-called "special military operation", there was no reason to announce a general mobilization. A way out was sought in the implementation of partial mobilization in the Russian Federation, forced mobilization in the occupied territories, the transfer of conscripted soldiers to contracts, the recruitment of "volunteers" into the ranks of the Russian Armed Forces and so-called "private military companies", including persons burdened with debts, prisoners foreigners, etc.

## 1. Replenishment of the ranks of the Russian Armed Forces since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine

To carry out a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Federation used approximately 200,000 men. Already in December 2023, according to Vladimir Putin, there were about 617,000 soldiers in the combat zone. Manpower needs in the framework of a war of attrition are reduced not only to replenishing losses, but also provide for the implementation of rotation and the formation of reserves for further operations.

In the Russian Federation, general mobilization was not announced, but within the framework of partial mobilization, which at one time caused an information boom both inside Russia and beyond, about 300,000 people entered the ranks of the Russian Armed Forces. The total number of mobilized and contingent that participated in a full-scale invasion does not correspond to the number of Russians currently at the front. This means that the process of recruiting new recruits takes place with the help of other mechanisms, some of which are hidden and not well known to the general public. Therefore, it is analyzed below how Moscow, using several mechanisms in a complex, replenished losses and increased the number of troops.

### **Mobilization in the occupied territories**

In February 2022, on the eve of the full-scale invasion, a mass mobilization in the so-called “DPR” and “LPR” was announced. Within this framework of this process, even students and cadets were forced into the ranks of the Armed Forces, and due to mass roundups on men of the conscription age, some businesses and municipal services stopped their work. According to the “Eastern Human Rights Group”, about 140,000 people were mobilized by mid-July 2022, and another 80,00 during the so-called partial mobilization. Although the flow of those mobilized from occupied territories, as well as Russian volunteers, partially ensured the replenishment of the losses and the growing need for manpower, serious problems could not be avoided.

## **Partial mobilization**

For the first time, the Russian Federation seriously faced the need to replenish the losses in early autumn 2022, when during a successful Ukrainian offensive in the Kharkiv region, it became obvious that the flow of volunteers and residents of Ukraine’s occupied territories to the front was not enough to fulfill the growing need for manpower. Therefore, at the end of September 2022, the Kremlin was forced to announce a partial mobilization which officially lasted until the end of January 2023. This made it possible to increase the number of troops by 300,000 people in a short period of time. However, during the recruitment, it became evident that Russia was not ready for a full-fledged unfolding of this process. As a result, a number of problems related to shortcomings in the registration of citizens and the inability to ensure the reception of such a large number of recruits arose. To partially solve this issue, a regional grouping of the troops of Belarus and Russia was deployed - a step that served as a cover for the arrival of Russian mobilized soldiers on the territory of Belarus, where they were trained.

Although the announcement of partial mobilization did not provoke serious problems for the Kremlin, it caused a feeling of dissatisfaction and tension in society. Thus, the share of Russians who supported the start of peace talks with Ukraine increased from 44% in August to 57% in September 2022, and according to various data, approximately 500,000 Russian men left the country. Most of them probably returned but the onset of panic became a signal for the Kremlin, especially taking into account a lack of personnel in the labor market. Therefore, Moscow has somewhat changed its approach to manpower recruitment.

## **Recruitment to the so-called “private military companies”**

As early as the summer of 2022, the leader of the “Wagner PMC” Yevgeny Prigozhin started a recruitment campaign among Russian prisoners and debtors. Closer to autumn, the process gained significant momentum, as the result of which the number of “Wagner” fighters increased to 50,000 men. Later the Russian Ministry of Defense took over the function of prisoner recruitment, in particular to the so-called PMCs under its control. So it is quite likely that by the fall of 2023, approximately 1000,000 prisoners appeared on the frontlines.

At the same time, the use of the so-called “private military companies” did not only fit into the logic of internal struggle within the Russian political system and power bloc, but also was an alternative for those who did not want to burden themselves with a contract with the Russian Ministry of Defence. In fact, the Kremlin has created a romanticized image of adventurers

who supposedly operate autonomously from the regular forces and are able to leave the service at the end of a short-term contract.

In 2023, the Russian Federation did not stop recruiting prisoners and people in a difficult financial situation. However, the Kremlin made a bet on attracting as many people as possible for contract service.

## **Recruitment on contract service**

Before the spring conscription campaign, an aggressive media campaign was launched aimed at promoting the signing of a contract with the Russian Ministry of Defence. On the streets of Russian cities, mobile selection points for military service were stationed, managers of enterprises and educational institutions received recommendations to advertise among employees and students the possibility of signing a contract. In addition to the information component, the financial factor was also involved. Russian federal authorities promised a one-time payment, a salary much higher than the average in Russia, as well as many benefits for both the servicemen and their families. This became an attractive factor for some recruits, and also reduced the financial burden on the regional authorities which were unable to ensure the formation and proper functioning of volunteer battalions in many regions.

The Ministry of Defence paid much closer attention to conscripts. Active recruitment of young men continued throughout 2023. Unit commanders and senior servicemen used various mechanisms of influence: from individual conversations to threats and intimidation. A combination of encouragement and coercion allowed to implement the recruitment plan for contract service. According to the Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, approximately 490,000 men joined the ranks of the army.

In order to carry out more effective recruitment for conscript service with subsequent luring for contract service, the Russian State Duma adopted certain legislative changes which increased the conscription age to 30 years and introduced a reformed mechanism for the formation of military records. Thus, electronic summonses were introduced. They are considered to be handed over from the moment they appear in the electronic cabinet of a conscript on the Gosuslugi portal. In case of non-appearance at the military commissariat, restrictive measures may be introduced, including a ban on traveling abroad, driving a vehicle, entering into real estate deals, taking out loans, etc. In 2023, the system of electronic summons functioned in a test mode, but already in December 2023, Vladimir Putin signed a decree instructing the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation to ensure military registration without a personal appearance at the military commissariat in the second half of 2024.

## 2. Methods of mobilization at the current stage

### Recruitment for contract service

Currently, the most common official method of mobilization is signing contracts with Russians who volunteer to join the army. There is constant encouragement to join the Russian army among the population. The most effective argument for attracting Russians to the army is the high salary, compared to the average for Russia, as well as significant one-off payments after signing the contract. The Russian authorities are also currently considering a number of additional incentives, such as loan interest waivers. The Russian authorities officially emphasize the large number of Russians signing contracts. In December 2023, for the first time since the start of the full-scale invasion, Putin himself named the number of contract soldiers in the Russian army as 640,000. Deputy Chairman of the National Security Council and former President Dmitrii Medvedev said that in 2023, 410,000 Russians signed contracts, and since the beginning of 2024, this figure has reached another 53,000. At the same time, it should be understood that a potentially large number of these Russians have already been mobilized and signed contracts. A similar situation applies to the so-called “Wagner PMC” militants, who were forced by the Russian authorities to sign contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defence. Thus, the actual number of Russian troops did not increase by the declared amount.

The Russian authorities are actively working on preparing a legislative framework to increase the Russian army by signing contracts with Russians who are under criminal investigation. Currently, the Russian parliament is considering a bill to exempt those Russians who took part in the war with Ukraine from minor and medium criminal punishment. This would legalize a process that has been operating illegally.

### Recruitment of foreigners

The Russian authorities use a number of networks to recruit foreigners and their subsequent participation in the war. The countries where this work is carried out include those with low incomes and loyalty to Russia. The Russian authorities promise foreigners high salaries, jobs not on the contact line, and Russian citizenship in the future. Recruitment is most active in Syria, India, Nepal, Africa and Central Asia.

For example, in March 2024, a scheme to recruit Indian citizens against their will by offering them to study at private Russian universities and then sending them to war was officially exposed. It is stated that at least 180 Indians were affected by this scheme.

The standard method of recruiting foreigners is to offer them to perform auxiliary work in the rear of the Russian army and then send them to the contact line. It is known that in 2023, more than 100 Indian citizens signed a contract with the Russian army. A similar method was used to recruit citizens of Nepal, whose authorities in early 2024 began to combat such activities and stopped issuing work visas to Russia to its citizens after media reports of the deaths of 10 Nepalese.

The network aimed at recruiting Cuban citizens was officially exposed. In September 2023, the Cuban authorities announced its liquidation. It is likely that a certain number of Cuban

citizens were involved in the 106th Airborne Division. The total number is estimated at more than a hundred Cubans who have signed contracts with the Russian army.

Inside the country, the Russian authorities consistently conduct searches in the places of residence of labor migrants, mostly from Central Asia. As a result of these actions, representatives of law enforcement agencies use threats to force migrants with Russian citizenship to sign contracts with the Russian army. In recent months, this practice has gradually become more widespread. On New Year's Eve 2024, Russian security forces conducted an unprecedented action in St. Petersburg and detained several thousand migrants from Central Asia. In addition, they are being used to carry out construction work in the rear of the Russian army to build up Russian defense lines. This practice was most actively used to build defensive structures in the occupied territories of southern Ukraine. In the case of direct participation of migrants in hostilities, it almost always involves the use of deception by the Russian authorities when signing labor documents by slipping contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defence into them. At present, given the large number of migrants in Russia, this practice is not widespread due to the need to maintain domestic political stability on the eve of the presidential elections in Russia. It is likely that after the elections, the authorities will become more active in this area. The same applies to the potential for continued "partial mobilization" among Russian citizens.

## 3. Future prospects for mobilization in Russia

### Factors that determine the continuation of mobilization

Officially, the Russian authorities reject the need for additional mobilization. Both Putin himself and other government officials have expressed objections to the new wave of mobilization. In particular, Vladimir Dzhubarov, Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council Committee on International Affairs, stated that "Russia does not need additional mobilization" and that "about 1,500-2,000 people join the army under contract every day". However, in fact, an additional wave of mobilization in Russia is inevitable and this is justified by the following factors:

1. The need to replenish the losses of the Russian army. According to the media resource Mediazona, since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Russia has lost about 75,000 people as killed in action, and 44,600 military personnel have been identified by name (as of the end of 2023). At the same time, the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine reports that Russia's total combat losses amount to more than 424,000 killed and wounded (as of 10 March 2024).

In addition, the statistics of losses on the Russian side began to grow rapidly in 2023, due to the conduct of long and resource-intensive assault operations in many parts of the front line. These include, in particular, hostilities in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka areas and in the south of Zaporizhzhya region.

2. Replacement of the first wave of mobilization. A large number of Russian soldiers who have been involved in hostilities since the beginning of the full-scale aggression, as well as those who joined the Russian army since the beginning of the so-called "partial



mobilization", need to be rotated due to health and moral and psychological issues. This is emphasized by various Russian information resources, including telegram channels.

3. Preparing a reserve for new offensive operations and defense of the occupied territories. Given the current losses among the Russian army personnel, the preparation of an additional reserve at the expense of mobilized personnel is also obvious, especially if Russia plans to conduct large-scale offensive operations. The former head of Roscosmos and now the so-called "Russian senator from Zaporizhzhya region" Dmitry Rogozin. According to him, in order to reach the "borders of new regions of the Russian Federation" and hold them, "a quantitative advantage over the enemy is needed" and, accordingly, an increase in personnel. In particular, there is a significant need for narrow-profile specialists and UAV operators.

## Possible start and course of a new wave of mobilization in Russia

It can be expected that a new wave of mobilization in the Russian Federation could potentially begin shortly after the presidential elections. The stabilization of the media space after the elections will allow for the strengthening of existing and the introduction of new methods of recruiting people into the Russian army, such as the introduction of the "electronic summons" mechanism and forced mobilization in the occupied Ukrainian territories.

As for the attempts to recruit residents of the occupied territories into the Russian army, we can see that measures are already being taken that can be considered potential preparations for this process. For example, in the territories of the so-called "DPR" and "LPR", it was planned to conduct visits of "representatives of election commissions" directly to people's places of residence in order to enter their data on their place of residence. This was intended to enable them to "vote directly at their place of residence". Potentially, all the personal data obtained could be further used to exert pressure on residents of the occupied territories and to recruit them into the Russian army by force after the elections.

At the moment, we see additional elements that can be interpreted as preparations for a potential future wave of mobilization:

- In February 2024, the Russian Ministry of Defence officially proposed to raise the maximum age of service during the mobilization period for contract soldiers and conscripts. Currently, for soldiers below the rank of officer, this figure is 50 years. The Ministry of Defence proposes to increase it to 65 years, and to introduce a single age limit of 70 years for officers.
- In December 2023, Putin issued a decree to increase the size of the army by 170,000 people. Prior to the first wave of mobilization, in August 2022, he similarly ordered an increase in the army by 137,000.

The following processes can also be identified that will characterize the new wave of Russian mobilization. First, the Kremlin will continue to use the "stick and carrot" approach to recruit new people into the Russian army. The "carrot" may be new methods of keeping records of persons liable for military service, including the previously mentioned "electronic summonses" and increased control over persons subject to conscription under "partial mobilization". On the other hand, the authorities will continue to incentivise people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds with promises of high financial payments and social security, backed up by extensive information campaigns.

Secondly, the practice of mobilizing convictions and recruitment to the so-called “PMCs” may continue, in particular in the event of the successful adoption of a law exempting Russians who participate in the aggression against Ukraine from criminal liability. The effectiveness of “PMC” recruitment will depend on the success of scaling up these structures, establishing control over them, and promoting them in general. Third, Russia will continue to seek ways to recruit people abroad through deception or in exchange for promises of high financial rewards. Finally, significant efforts may be directed at the forced mobilization of the population of the occupied territories of Ukraine, as it is the most vulnerable to such actions.

An obstacle to increased mobilization could be the growth of social tension within Russia, in particular due to dissatisfaction among families of those mobilized with the conditions of military service, the need for rotation and improved social security. An increase in these sentiments could lead to a significant increase in casualties among the Russian army.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Although Russia has been actively recruiting fighters hidden from the public, the scenario of a new full-fledged wave of mobilization being announced in Russia is real. It will all depend on the strategy chosen by Moscow: creating permanent pressure on several frontline areas or launching large-scale offensive operations. In any case, since the end of 2022, the Russian Federation has been gradually trying to use its superiority in manpower, which allows it not only to effectively hold the occupied territories but also to slowly advance in certain areas of the front, albeit at the cost of heavy losses.

For Ukraine, with its limited mobilization resources and problems with recruiting new fighters, both scenarios mean that it will be impossible to carry out major offensive operations in the near future, as it will be extremely difficult to gain a numerical advantage in a certain section of the frontline to make a breakthrough. At the same time, a full-fledged wave of mobilization in Russia could create preconditions for a more serious push through Ukraine's defensive borders due to the enemy's greater fire density and numerical superiority. However, such a step would potentially exacerbate problems within Russia itself.

Regardless of the scenario, Western partners need to increase military and technical support for Ukraine, which will include not only munitions and ammunition, but also engineering equipment and mines, which will allow for the preparation of an extensive system of defensive structures and positions. Moreover, the West needs to increasingly act from a position of strength, demonstrating its readiness to move to a new level of support for official Kyiv.

It should be emphasized that it is important for Ukraine and its Western partners to have a prepared contingency plan for different scenarios, which will include a wide range of tools with a set timeframe. This includes not only logistical cooperation, but also work within Russia itself at the level of sabotage, diversions, and information campaigns aimed at destabilizing it internally. Adjusting our approach will allow us not only to react to Moscow's actions, but also to be proactive.



# Ukrainian Prism

FOR  
RENAISSANCE  
FOUNDATION



The Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism” is a Kyiv-based nongovernmental think-tank with robust expertise on the foreign policy of Ukraine and international security.

Prism UA consists of 10 study programs, covering all functional and geographical directions of Ukrainian foreign policy. Annually, the expert team produces a comprehensive assessment of the activity of Ukrainian foreign service under the authentic methodology.

Experts of the organization take part in the intersectoral task forces, working on the strategic framework of Ukraine in the foreign policy and security domain. The team’s members contributed to the Foreign policy strategy of Ukraine, Maritime Strategy, Publicly Diplomacy Strategy, MFA’s strategy for Asia and Asia.

From the start of 2023 there has launched an office of the “Ukrainian Prism” in Brussels to extend outreach for in-house expertise to European governments and EU institutions.

The Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism” implements several projects to increase the level of foreign policy expertise in Ukraine, consolidate international support for Ukraine and raise awareness of foreign experts, politicians, and journalists about the events in Ukraine.

Prism UA cooperates with many international donors and partners: OSF, NED, EU, Ebert Stiftung, Adenauer Stftung, IVF, BST, GMF etc.

“Ukrainian Prism” is one of the leaders in the implementation of innovative practices of expert diplomacy. In particular, jointly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it promotes the concept of bilateral expert forums with partner EU states to discuss potentially sensitive issues.



[info@prismua.org](mailto:info@prismua.org)



<http://prismua.org/en/>



[/PrismUA](#)