

Russia Pulls Out All the Stops to Find Fresh Troops

Quote:

“The Russian army is suffering high casualties in the war against Ukraine and Vladimir Putin badly needs fresh troops. He wants to avoid a general mobilization, so the military is relying on other methods.

By [Christina Hebel](#) in Moscow

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Kirill Krechetov still has clear memories of the moment he found the white-and-red envelope in his mailbox. Inside was a summons instructing him to show up the next day at his local draft office. "Damn it, now I have to go to Ukraine," he recalls cursing to himself. Over the telephone, he says he was immediately filled with fear.

Krechetov, 35, is a construction worker and the father of a two-year-old daughter. He lives in Nizhny Novgorod, located about seven hours by car east of Moscow. Speaking rapidly, he asks that his real name not be used out of concern for his safety. Ten years ago, Krechetov completed his mandatory military service with a special unit belonging to the military intelligence agency GRU, and he is now a private first class in the reserves. He was initially contacted several weeks before the summons letter landed in his mailbox – in the form of a message sent via the messaging service Viber: Kirill Ivanovich, we are waiting for you, Krasnodarski Krai, 10th Brigade of the GRU Special Forces." Krechetov deleted the message. "I know how many of our boys are dying in Ukraine." He has learned of the casualty numbers, he says, from Telegram. "They only lie on the television."

The envelope with the heading "Military Correspondence," on the other hand, seemed far more binding than the Viber message. Krechetov headed for the draft office, where he was brought to the boss. What took you so long, the commander wanted to know. "We need you." They presented Krechetov with a contract, according to which he would be paid 300,000 rubles per month, the equivalent of around 4,500 euros, a sum that is more than seven times as high as the average salary in the region.



Above: One of the military letters that have been sent to reservists in Nizhny Novgorod

"Fill this out," the military official told him. "You can choose three, six or 12 months and then sign here." Krechetov just shook his head. "Who is going to take care of my family if I return home in a coffin?" he asked. His parents are over 70 years old, and his mother is ill. When the official realized that he wouldn't be able to convince Krechetov, he laid a blank sheet of paper on the table and told the reservist to write down the reasons why he refused to fight for Russia. Only then was he allowed to leave.

At first, Krechetov thought that only former special forces like himself would be summoned. Now, though, he knows that many men from Nizhny Novgorod received summons in the mail. "They are writing to everybody who has ever performed military service before."

Krechetov's story shows just how badly the Russian army needs soldiers. The war against Ukraine, which must be referred to in Russia as a "special military operation for the protection of the Donbas," has been underway for almost four months now.

Nationwide Recruitment Effort

Russian President Vladimir Putin's troops have suffered heavy losses, with a significant share of the country's military involved in the offensive, including ground troops, paratroopers, the air force, the navy and the national guard. The military badly needs fresh fighters. The army was forced to withdraw from the regions surrounding Kyiv and Kharkiv, but in the Donbas, the Russian military is relying on brute force to achieve its aims. Dozens of soldiers on both sides are being killed each day in this war of attrition.

And new soldiers for the war effort aren't just being recruited from Nizhny Novgorod in central Russia. Across the country, from Kaliningrad in the west to the eastern region of Amur, men of fighting age are being summoned. At least 2 million Russians are part of the country's reserve force, though the precise number is classified.

The Russian army is using all means at its disposal to find reinforcements. They are luring them with attractive offers, issuing threats and even simulating a general mobilization by sending out huge numbers of summons to reservists – which some, either out of ignorance or fear, interpret as a call up order.

But an official call up can only take place once Putin declares a general mobilization. That, though, would be an indirect admission of his army's weakness, a military force that had been considered vastly superior to Ukraine's army prior to the invasion. More importantly, a general mobilization would have a more direct impact on the daily lives of Russians, which the Kremlin wants to avoid at all costs. The result has been a kind of veiled mobilization.

Russia's leaders would like life to continue as normally as possible for the country's citizens despite 15 weeks of war. And thus far, that effort has been largely successful, with the majority of Russians continuing to support the "special military operation." Many aren't particularly interested in learning what exactly their military is doing in Ukraine. The death and destruction is being denied and obscured while Russia is honoring its own casualties as heroes, awarding them posthumous medals and even naming streets after them in some places. Huge posters celebrate them as "heroes of victory."

Despite all that, no widespread enthusiasm for the war in Ukraine has developed in the country. And that has become a problem for the recruitment offices, since they must apparently fill a quota, as an official document that was made public in the far-eastern region of Transbaikal seems to indicate. Human rights lawyers have also come to believe that Moscow has issued recruitment offices with requirements for how many people they must enlist for the war.



Above: Russian President Vladimir Putin with injured soldiers in a Moscow hospital: The Kremlin is promising high wages to those who sign up to fight.

In order to accelerate that recruitment effort, the Russian parliament abolished the age limit for contract soldiers in expedited proceedings. Now, people up to the age of 65 can sign their first deal with the military, instead of the age limit of 40 that had previously applied.

The terms of the deals being offered are striking, with recruits receiving offers of at least 200,000 rubles – around 3,000 euros – a month for their troubles, a sum that used to be reserved solely for mercenaries, such as those fighting for the Wagner Group. Depending on specialization, rank and experience, offers can even be much higher than that, such as the one made to Kirill Krechetov in Nizhny Novgorod. Furthermore, Putin has decreed that the families of fallen soldiers are to receive more than 12 million rubles, the equivalent of 190,000 euros.

It is a strategy that appears to be finding success primarily in the regions, as Sergei Krivenko, head of the human rights group Citizen Army Law, confirms. There are enough people ready to fight, he says, and lines have even developed in front of recruitment offices like the one in the northern city of Cherepovets. Some callers, he says, have even complained to him and his staff that the army only wants to place them under contract in August instead of signing them immediately.

"The cannon fodder is coming into the recruitment offices on their own," says Mikhail Danilov, a reserve sergeant. Danilov works as a freight forwarder in the Nizhny Novgorod region and has thus far not responded to his summons, accepting the fact that he might be fined up to 40 euros.

Coming Back in a Zinc Coffin

The recruitment offices in the region are primarily being visited by men "who want to make money quickly," says Danilov, who also asked us not to use his real name. He says he is still in touch with a number of former comrades from his tank brigade, which is based in the Nizhny Novgorod region, where a new battalion of contract soldiers has been formed. "The men are sent to Ukraine and come back in a zinc coffin. They are losing around 40 percent of the people they send into battle," he says. Western military experts believe that the severe losses can be blamed on the poor training of Russian reservists, who usually do not receive regular instruction.

In Bashkortostan, a Russian republic in the Ural Mountains, the army pledged a one-time payment of almost 3,800 euros on top of the already generous wages to new enlistees. Several hundred men reported for duty in the capital of Ufa in response to the offer. Meanwhile, the military is also contacting other potential recruits by telephone in an effort to encourage them to join the fight. People like Nikita Yuferev from St. Petersburg.

Yuferev found himself speaking to an unfamiliar woman's voice when he answered a call from an unknown number in late May. The woman told him she was from the recruitment office. "We are offering you a contract for service in Ukraine." Yuferev is 34 years old and is a local political operative for the liberal Yabloko Party. He was so surprised by the call that he simply hung up. When he called back later, he learned that all men of fighting age in his

district were receiving similar calls. Yuferev referred to them as "cold calls," of the kind mobile phone companies sometimes use to sell new contracts.

On top of that are the appeals and advertisements that can be seen in buses and the entrances to residences. "The country needs defenders," they read. Army mobile recruitment offices have also been deployed recently in greater numbers. The white trucks, printed with the Russian flag, were recently seen in St. Petersburg, with the army also seeking to recruit new contract soldiers in the northern naval city of Severomorsk and in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk.



Above: Young men in an enlistment office in Novosibirsk

Those subject to conscription have the hardest time of it. More than 250,000 recruits between the ages of 18 and 27 are called up each year by the military on two specific days. Basic training to become a "srochnik" takes a year. Weapons training is generally completed within just a few months, after which the young men are distributed to their units. Even though Putin pledged right at the beginning of the war that new conscripts would not be sent to the warzone, many of them were deployed to Ukraine, nonetheless. Some officers have

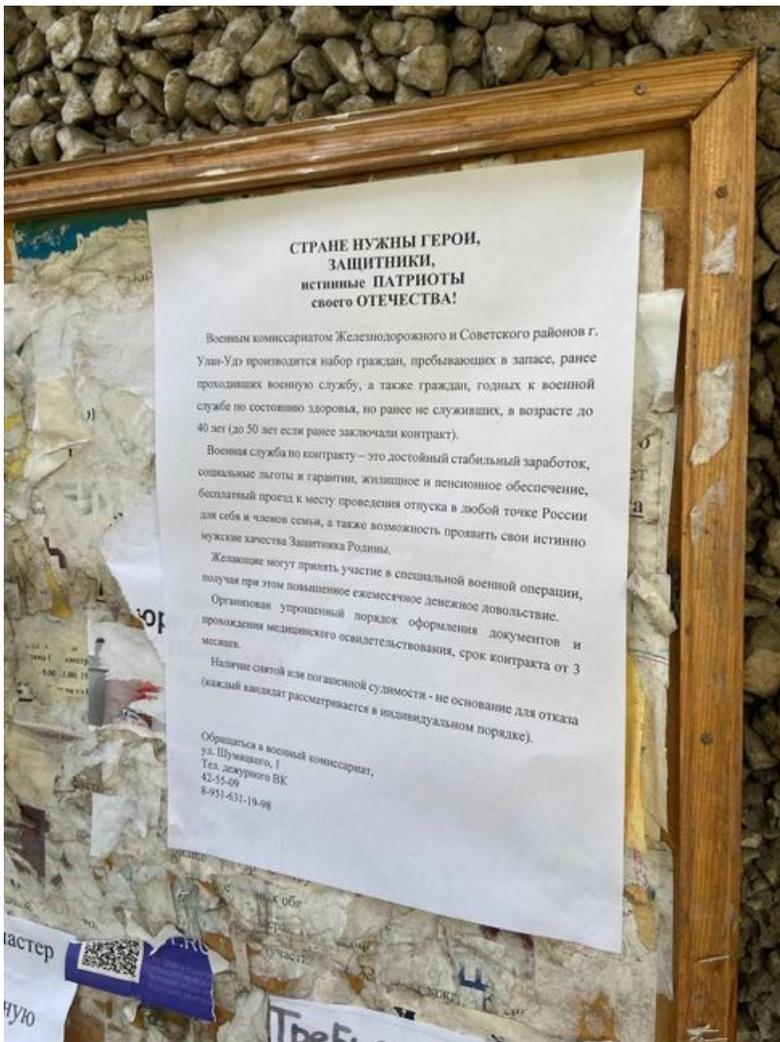
already been disciplined as a result. It is an extremely sensitive issue for Putin, who wants to avoid upsetting the families of the recruits.

But, as always in Russia, the rules are easily bent, particularly when it comes to young, inexperienced conscripts who generally don't dare to contradict their commanders. There has been an increasing number of cases of recruits being forced by their commanders to sign as contract soldiers after just a few months. According to applicable law, doing so is allowed after just three months. "The moral and psychological pressure being exerted on the conscripts is enormous," says the human rights activist Krivenko, who has been focusing on the circumstances of soldiers in Russia for 20 years. "They are completely at the mercy of their commanders."

There is also significant pressure in Buryatia, a constituent republic on Lake Baikal just north of Mongolia. The region, which is almost as large as Germany by land area, now has the largest number of fallen troops in the country. Citing publicly available sources, the independent online portal People of the Baikal has reported 179 deaths, with funerals taking place in Buryatia on an almost daily basis.

Widespread Fear

Among the first deaths was the 19-year-old soldier Alexei Martynov, who fell near Kyiv on March 15. Most recently, two young men aged 22 and 24 were buried in their home villages: Anatoliy Shvezov and Alexander Batoshapov. They had only signed their military contracts in April. In early May, they died at the front.



Above: A sign posted at a building entrance in Ulan-Ude, Buryatia: "Your country needs heroes, defenders and true patriots."

The hidden mobilization has been particularly intense in Buryatia. The army has been using the messenger service Viber to send attractive offers, which include generous salaries, social benefits and a healthy pension – the complete package. "They have called everyone I know: Don't you want to participate in the special operation?" reports one woman from the region who asked to remain anonymous. "As if it was nothing more than an invitation to the café." There are also reports of army members going door-to-door.

The fear in Buryatia is widespread. Everyone knows about the recruitment effort, but few dare to talk about it openly, and certainly not with journalists. Men from Buryatia tend to avoid complaining, and they certainly don't do so in public. "Because of their upbringing, they find complaining to be embarrassing," says Andrei Rintshino, a lawyer for the Free Buryatia Foundation. The organization is opposed to the war and supports the rights of ethnic Buryats. They make up roughly 30 percent of the constituent republic's population

and belong to the Mongol peoples. Rintshino says he has primarily been receiving calls from the mothers, wives and sisters of soldiers in their search for advice.

Army officials in the region have thus far had an easy time of it. The republic is one of the poorest areas in Russia and there are hardly any jobs to be had, but it is home to more than two dozen military bases. Both ethnic Buryats and ethnic Russians see the military as a reliable employer.

Rintshino says that military officials use both the carrot and the stick approach in their search for new recruits, using all the tricks at their disposal. They also send out summons, allegedly to confirm the accuracy of personal data on file. "Once the men are in the recruitment offices, they are promised wonderful lives and a mountain of money to convince them to join the patriotic fight," says Rintshino. Some of those who sign up, he says, do so in the hopes of avenging family members who were killed in Ukraine.



Above: The burial of a soldier in the village of Ust-Kiran in Buryatia: Funerals are taking place almost daily in the region.

Men who have already served as conscripts or contract soldiers and are not interested in going to Ukraine face coercion, says the lawyer. The military threatens them with red "traitor" stamps in their IDs or are even told they will be dragged before a war tribunal. "It's an absurd threat," but it happens, nonetheless.

A call to the regional recruitment office results in several invitations for an interview and a medical examination the very next day. An official says that the office is currently looking for men to join a tank brigade. When asked whether it is possible to prematurely back out of a contract and pull out of Ukraine, she says: "Of course, it's no problem at all."

In reality, though, it's not quite that simple. Rintshino knows of around 250 men who wanted to leave the warzone prematurely. According to the rules, they must submit their request to their commanding officer along with a written explanation. Commanders generally exhibit little understanding. One young soldier in his early 20s, says Rintshino, faced discussions with six officers and FSB officials as a result of his request. Now, he no longer wants to talk of returning home.

Slowly, though, says Rintshino, the high casualty numbers are leading to a shift in attitudes. Many in the region are saying that the leadership in Moscow is wasting the lives of Buryat soldiers on the front lines. Monks in some Buddhist monasteries have begun urging Buryat families to "bring their sons home."

In Nizhny Novgorod, Kirill Krechetov has recently received additional messages, including from a former comrade from his time as a conscript. "Come over. Where are you?" he wrote. Krechetov responded by asking where he should come to. "To Mariupol," was the answer.

Krechetov says he was part of a group of 11 conscripts in the special forces brigade. And all of them, except for him, are now fighting in Ukraine. They don't have much to lose, says Krechetov – they have no families and they need the money. "They are all still alive. For now."

[Source](#)