

RUSSIA AT A GLANCE

October 2024: There's no military mobilisation in Russia; yet people are being mobilised

NEST's October Bulletin examines the manpower issues facing the Russian army as a result of the war in Ukraine. Putin's recent decree raising the size of the army from 1.3 to 1.5 million reflects the heavy losses suffered in Ukraine and is also a response to the Ukrainian incursion into Kursk Region.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 The invading army, mobilisation, losses and contract soldiers: an assessment

Since the invasion of Ukraine, Russian losses have ranged from 130,000 to 180,000 dead and 290,000 incapacitated, with no official data since 2022. British estimates suggest up to 540,000 total losses. The force now stands at 560,000-620,000 consisting of contract soldiers and mobilised reservists. Putin's claim of 700,000 troops and Shoigu's figure of 540,000 new recruits in 2023 raise doubts.

4 Mobilisation: Could there be a replay of 2022?

When Putin announced a partial mobilisation in September 2022, it led to nervousness in society and a fall in the popularity of the regime. In response to the negative reaction to the call-up, the authorities stressed that they were paying those who volunteered; and they encouraged the fear of mobilisation. A new mobilisation looks unlikely for a number of reasons: the infrastructure for such a move is not in place; it carries political risk; and it could lead to social discontent and economic problems, such as a labour shortage.

7 Contract soldiers as the Kremlin's main weapon

Putin's partial mobilisation in September 2022 caused public anxiety and a decline in regime popularity. In response, authorities promoted voluntary enlistment with pay and fuelled fears of mobilisation. A new mobilisation seems unlikely due to infrastructure issues, political risks, potential social unrest, and economic concerns like labour shortages.

13 Conscription as the back-up for the contract army

Putin plans to expand the army to 2.38 million, citing border threats and NATO's expansion. Although conscripts are not officially sent to the front, they face pressure to become contract soldiers after a few months. A military expert suggests declining contract soldier numbers have led authorities to use conscripts to bolster the army, avoiding further mobilisation.

The invading army, mobilisation, losses and contract soldiers: an assessment

Russian losses in Ukraine have reached 130,000-180,000 dead and 540,000 lost overall. No official figures have been issued since 2022.

EVENTS

According to the BBC, during two and a half years of full-scale war in Ukraine, between 130,000 and 180,000 Russian soldiers have been killed, and a further 290,000 wounded and permanently removed from battle. The BBC bases its figures on open source analysis. It has ascertained the names of 70,000 dead Russian soldiers, which serves as the basis for estimating the overall losses.

CONTEXT

In May 2024, the British Ministry of Defence estimated Russia's losses at 465,000 dead and wounded, with an extrapolated figure of 540,000 by October 2024. In February 2022, the invading force numbered 150,000-200,000. The September mobilisation added 300,000, while separatists from Donetsk and Luhansk contributed 110,000-120,000, and private military companies, primarily Wagner, totalled 50,000-70,000 – bringing the overall number to 560,000-620,000.

ANALYSIS

Putin claims 700,000 Russians are fighting in Ukraine, which would imply 500,000-550,000 contract soldiers. Former Defence Minister Shoigu stated that 540,000 contract soldiers signed up in 2023. The Russian Ministry of Defence reports 1,000 daily sign-ups in 2024, presumably adding 270,000 by late September, for a total exceeding 800,000.

The inconsistencies in the above figures suggest two possible explanations: either losses are far greater than the Russian authorities are admitting; or significantly fewer contract soldiers have signed up than the numbers given.

Mobilisation: Could there be a replay of 2022?

The partial mobilisation in 2022 led to a growth in anxiety and a decline in the popularity of the authorities. The focus was switched to contract soldiers.

EVENTS

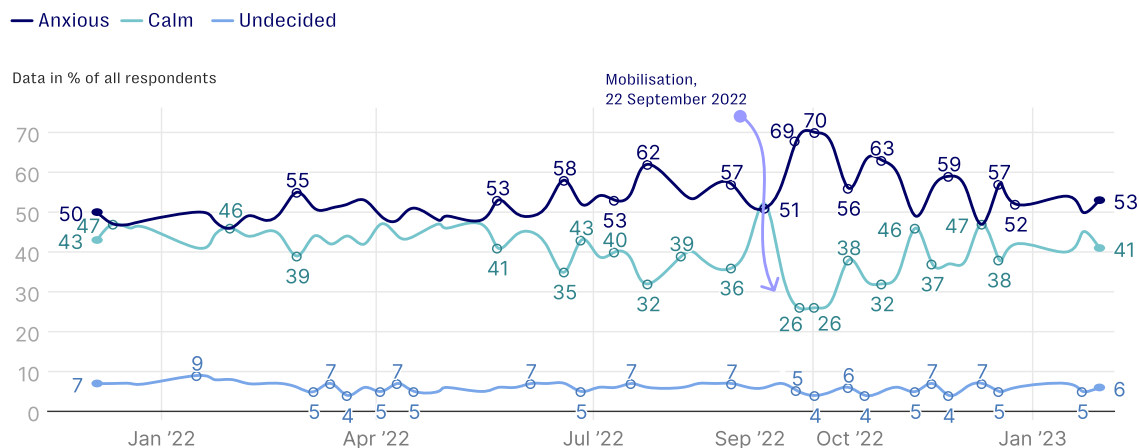
The word ‘mobilisation’ was first used on 21 September 2022 in the decree which Putin signed that day. Five weeks later, on 28 October, then Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu declared that the aim of the ‘partial mobilisation’ had been fulfilled, with 300,000 reservists sent to the frontline. But the decree on mobilisation remains in force; it has not been rescinded.

CONTEXT

Society reacted badly to the mobilisation. The graph below shows the mood shift, with an unprecedented rise in alarm according to the weekly public opinion survey issued by the pro-Kremlin ‘Public Opinion Foundation’. The number of respondents noticing this in their circle doubled after mobilisation was announced.

Fig. 1. Public Mood: Calm or Anxious

104 settlements; 53 federal subjects of the Russian Federation; 1,500 respondents.
Question: In your opinion, what mood currently predominates among your relatives, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances – calm or anxious?



Source: FOMnibus survey, January 2022 – January 2023

The Levada Centre's polls showed a less radical shift in opinion, but nonetheless a clear drop in the popularity of Putin's policies. This fell by seven percentage points to 60% in September 2022, compared to 67% in August and 72% in July. Putin's approval rating also dropped: from 87% in July, to 85% in August and 77% in September.

ANALYSIS

The main lesson that the authorities have learned from the mobilisation is that society is frightened by its indiscriminate and unpredictable nature.

They reached two conclusions in the Kremlin:

- 1. People need to be 'bought' to fight in the war.** For people to sign up to fight, the authorities need their family to agree, and there has to be a set sum of money given as compensation, paid up front. This cost goes unnoticed in the overall structure of the military budget. In 2024, 32 billion roubles has been spent on such compensation (the equivalent of \$332.7 million), which equates to approximately the cost of one day of the war.
- 2. People are afraid of mobilisation.** This fear has to be cultivated, so as to support Russians' sense that the regime is protecting them from everything to do with the war. In this way, the Russian people have no right to hold an opinion on any military topic.

As long as the current situation does not change radically, a fresh mobilisation is unlikely. Among the factors holding the Kremlin back are the following:

- **A shortage of infrastructure and logistics.** There is a lack of living quarters, training areas, and reserves of equipment and weaponry, as well as serious personnel issues, notably a shortage of junior officers.
- **High political risk.** People have already demonstrated that the threat of mobilisation leads to a lack of trust in the regime. Discontent in society just as taxes are about to rise (which is happening in 2025) is not the best outcome for the Kremlin.

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- **Disengagement of society from what is happening.** For over two and a half years, the Russian authorities have carefully worked on distracting the mass Russian consciousness from thinking about the war and have achieved some notable success in this area.
 - **Economic problems.** Over the course of the war the 19-40 year old age group – the most essential for work – has fallen by two million.

Contract soldiers as the Kremlin's main weapon

Putin is legitimising the expansion of the army by using the criminal element, thus undermining the legal system and encouraging the growth of crime.

EVENTS

At the end of September 2024, Vladimir Putin signed a law releasing defendants from criminal liability if they sign a contract with the Russian armed forces. In such a case, the court halts proceedings. The same goes for those who have already been convicted, but whose sentence has not yet been confirmed. A separate law releases from criminal liability people whose case has been recently sent to court if they sign a contract with the Ministry of Defence.

On 4 October, Dmitry Medvedev chaired the first meeting of the Security Council commission on the staffing of the armed forces. Its task is to provide the armed forces with contract soldiers. The commission was created by presidential decree, with Medvedev as its chairman and Defence Minister Andrey Belousov as his deputy.



Dmitry Medvedev

Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Chairman of the Security Council Commission on the Staffing of the Armed Forces.



Andrey Belousov

Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation, Deputy Chairman of the Security Council Commission on the Staffing of the Armed Forces.

CONTEXT

Putin's two laws offering amnesty to lawbreakers in exchange for fighting in the war have completed the recruitment system. Regional authorities will play a crucial role in the new initiatives, as they are responsible for recruiting local contract soldiers.

WHERE THE ADDITIONAL TROOPS WILL BE SOURCED

Families. The idea of ‘buying’ men from Russian families has proved successful. The authorities are managing to sign up 30,000-40,000 contract soldiers each month. Medvedev’s commission is tasked with resolving bureaucratic conflicts between federal and local authorities in the recruitment of contract soldiers, assessing the performance of officials involved, and, when necessary, allocating additional resources to support the soldiers and their families.

The highest sum given for signing the contract is 3.3 million roubles (\$34,500), in Belgorod Region; in Moscow, 2.2 million roubles (\$22,800) is paid; and the lowest payment is around 800,000 roubles (\$8,300).

Corrective institutions. The director of the Federal Penitentiary Service is also a member of Medvedev’s commission. The prison population is dropping rapidly: last year, 58,000 convicts were conscripted. At the start of 2024, 250,000 people remained in prison in Russia.

Those awaiting or undergoing trial. To rectify the situation in the army, Putin ordered that not only convicted felons could be sent to the frontline, but also suspects, the accused and defendants. There are some 110,000 people currently in pre-trial detention facilities, of whom around 21,000-24,000 are potential recruits.

Immigrants. According to human rights’ activists, there are between three and five million immigrants in the Russian Federation, with varying status. Of these, at least five percent – 150,000 immigrants – are eligible to sign a contract. The authorities believe that enlisting an excessively large number of Muslims from the Central Asian republics to fight could be risky; however, tens of thousands may still serve the purpose.

Private military companies. This is the least visible source of fighters, comprising a few thousand, not tens of thousands. Recruitment to private military companies is now being handled by the Ministry of Defence.

As well as increasing the number of soldiers, Russia is also faced with the task of improving its military infrastructure. This is being handled by businesses closely allied to the state.

For example, business played a part in constructing the ‘Surovikin line’ (defences established by then commander of Russian forces in Ukraine, General Sergey Surovikin), which stopped Ukraine’s counter-offensive in the summer of 2023. The ‘volunteer’ builders were paid by private companies. State companies Rostech and Rosatom were contracted to do this, along with other major developers.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

CHECHNYA, DECEMBER 1994 – AUGUST 1996

Moscow conducted the first Chechen War using a primarily conscripted army, with virtually no contract soldiers. However, the conscripts neither wanted to fight nor were capable of doing so, and on the whole could not understand why they were taking part in this war.

Russian society also hindered the course of the war. In the first place, there were the soldiers’ mothers, who came together in committees and also protested individually. Secondly, human rights’ advocates and the media bitterly criticised the idea that the problem of Chechnya should be solved by military means. It took a number of terrorist acts before society approved the war in Chechnya.

When preparing for the second Chechen War, which lasted from August 1999 until April 2009, both the military leadership and Vladimir Putin had learned from the mistakes made in the first war. This time, the vast majority of those fighting were contract soldiers.

At the peak of fighting, Russia had between 80,000 and 100,000 soldiers. This figure steadily decreased during the second phase of the war. According to official figures, Russia suffered 6,000 dead and 15,000 wounded over the whole course of the war, although human rights’ advocates put the numbers at 15,000 dead and 25,000 wounded.

GEORGIA AND THE SUBSEQUENT MILITARY REFORM

According to official sources, the 2008 war in Georgia was conducted solely by contract forces. Nevertheless, at least three conscripts were named among the dead and wounded. Around 20,000 troops were sent to fight. Official reports state that 67 soldiers were killed, while unofficial sources suggest the number of Russian casualties exceeds 150.

The war in Georgia revealed how poorly prepared the Russian army was to fight. This led to the start of military reform. Minister for Taxation Anatoly Serdyukov was made Defence Minister and brought about a series of reforms including: a large downsizing in personnel; the establishment of more efficient structures; appointment of more professionally trained personnel; and massive expenditure on armaments – 20 trillion roubles (\$208.7 billion at the rate of October 2024), both in Serdyukov's time and since. As a result, the Russian army became more or less an effective fighting force. The army still hates Serdyukov, seeing him as a completely alien and non-military figure but grudgingly admits there would have been no reform without him.



Anatoly Serdyukov

Head of the Federal Tax Service (2004–2007), Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation (2007–2012).

According to the plans set out in 2014, there were to be 500,000 contract service people in the Russian armed forces by 2020. In March 2022, Shoigu reported that there were over 400,000 service people on contracts.

ANALYSIS

Russia's recent mobilisation policy will have wide social consequences.

The growth of crime. The freeing of those accused of crimes, defendants and convicted felons, in return for their contract service in the army, will have the most negative impact on Russian society. Political scientist and lawyer Vladimir Pastukhov believes that this decision undermines the Russian legal system: criminals know in advance that, if they sign a contract and go off to fight, they will not face any punishment.

Two hundred Russian citizens have already died directly due to crimes committed by prisoners returning from the war in Ukraine. Overall, considering the total number of offences by soldiers coming back from the 'special military operation', approximately 600 individuals have lost their lives as a result.

The downgrading of the elites. The second most important consequence is Putin's idea to create elites from those who have taken part in the 'special military operation' (SMO). Around three hundred newly assigned deputies with SMO experience have emerged at various administrative levels, some have been appointed to senior positions in regional governments. The latest such appointee is deeply symbolic: Artyom Zhoga from the Donbas, a fighter who has no higher education and no ties to the Urals, has been named the presidential representative in the Urals Federal District. Clearly, the competence and bureaucratic capabilities of these individuals need not align with the positions they are being assigned.

By the same token, the presidential administration is preparing to take on at least two veterans of 'the operation'. They will oversee questions of how other veterans are adapting to life post-war.

The strain on the budget. This 'secret mobilisation' needs enormous resources. The financial side of it alone is costing the Russian treasury two trillion roubles a year (over \$20.5 billion).

Currently, oil and gas revenues and the export of other raw materials make it possible to increase this expenditure.

But the draft budget for 2025 sees Russian military spending increase from 10.4 trillion roubles (\$107 billion) to 13.2 trillion roubles (\$136 billion). This already exceeds the 10.9 trillion roubles (\$112.3 billion) which is the expected budget revenue from oil and gas sales next year.

What will the state do if the budget income does not cover outgoings? It will either devalue the rouble, or resort to domestic borrowing using financial coercion, modelled on Soviet-era war loans.

Actual military reform. For many years, there has been talk about the need for a professional Russian army. In the mid-90s, it was even suggested that conscription should be done away with, but it has remained in place. It took a war to convince the authorities that it was essential to have armed forces based on a paid contract. No one should be fooled by the continuing existence of conscription.

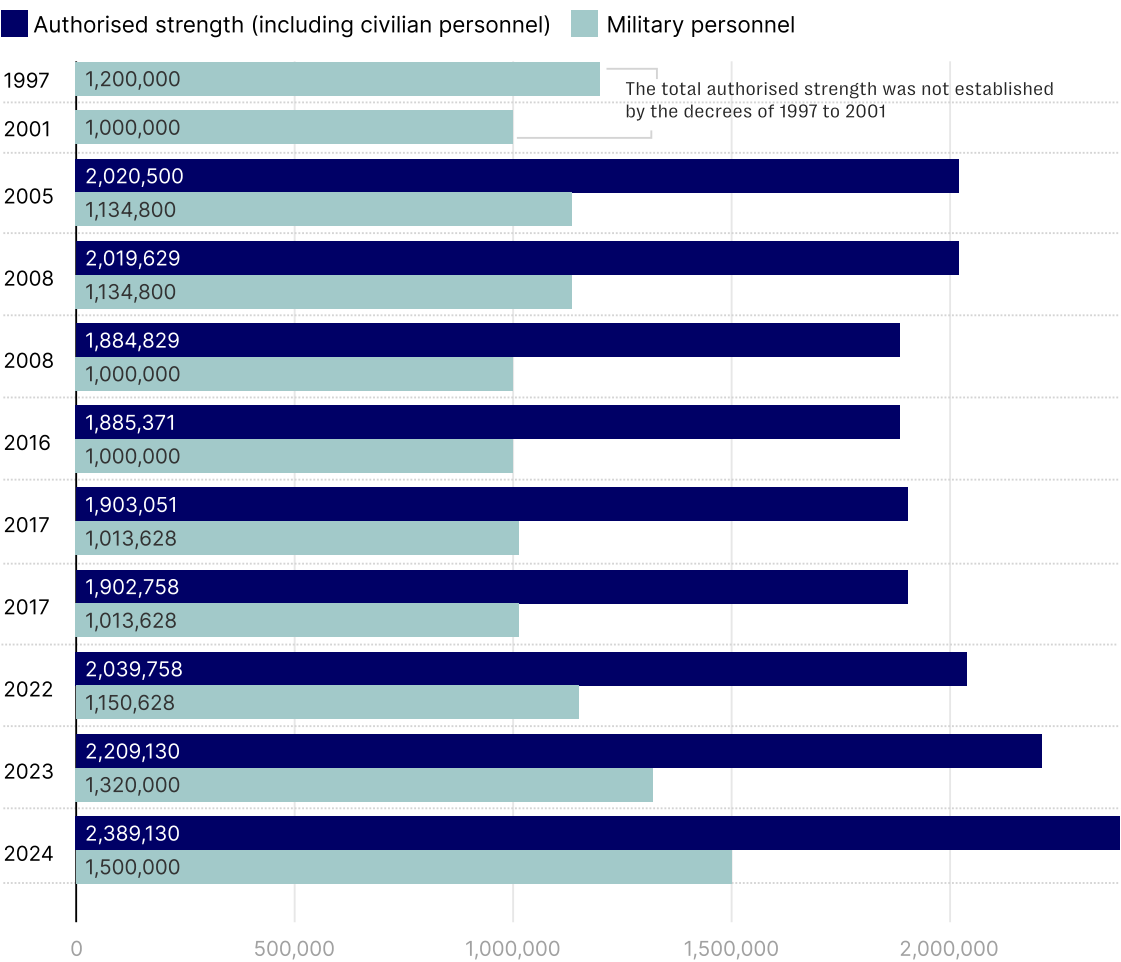
Conscription as the back-up for the contract army

Putin is increasing the army to 2.38 million people, using conscripts instead of ordering another official mobilisation.

EVENTS

For the third time since the war began, Vladimir Putin has increased the size of the army, this time by a further 180,000 people. This brings the total number of people in the Russian armed forces to 2.38 million, of whom 1.5 million are personnel in uniform.

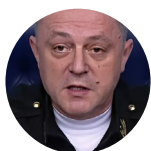
FIG. 2. STRENGTH OF THE ARMED FORCES OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION OVER TIME (IN PERSONS)



Source: Decrees of the president of the Russian Federation

CONTEXT

Vice Admiral Vladimir Tsymlyansky, deputy head of the main mobilisation directorate of the Russian armed forces made the following comment relating to the new type of conscription which started on 1 October: ‘Service personnel who have been conscripted will not be told to carry out tasks that are part of the special military operation in the new regions of Russia – the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, or the Kherson or Zaporizhia Regions.’



Vladimir Tsymlyansky

Vice Admiral, Deputy Chief of the Main Mobilisation Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

Despite this, deputies and high-ranking officers, as well as military specialists, have long been saying that using conscripts in Kursk Region, which has been partially occupied by Ukrainian forces, is both legal and justified. We note that, according to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, Kursk Region is no different to Donetsk Region.)

Conscripts are becoming an ever more important source of troops for the contract army. After serving three to four months, conscripts are being put under pressure by their commanders to sign a contract.

ANALYSIS

A military specialist (who lives in Russia) reckons that soon there will be insufficient numbers of people who could potentially sign a contract with the Ministry of Defence. This is why the ‘price’ is increasing to buy a contract soldier.

Ukraine’s incursion into Kursk Region has given the Russian authorities the justification to bring conscript soldiers into battle. On the one hand, conscripts are being forced to sign contracts; on the other hand, the authorities now have an excuse for increasing the number of conscripts. Russia has far from exhausted its reserve of those who can be called up. With every six-month period that passes, turning conscripts into contract soldiers can take the place of an official mobilisation.

About NEST Centre

Based in London, the New Eurasian Strategies Centre brings together the best expertise on Russia and the surrounding region. Its mission is to identify the forces shaping Russia's long-term future, to analyse their impact and to develop strategies to bring about peaceful and positive development of the country.

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