

Russian Spring 2022 Recruitment Cycle

Putin's Camouflaged Referendum?

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In May 2022, we published our Egmont Paper 116 entitled *The Russian Soldiers' Question Revisited*, in which we suggested, "The current spring recruitment cycle (1 April-15 July 2022) may be considered a more accurate indication of popular support for Putin's war in Ukraine than the results of public opinion research as we know it. Therefore, the 2022 spring recruitment cycle may be regarded as a referendum on Russia's war in Ukraine with the voenkombats as its voting stations."¹ Near the end of this recruitment period, it is time to return to this statement. How did the spring recruitment cycle go, and which conclusion can we draw from it? A critical review.

THE KREMLIN IN CONTROL

In Russia, all communication concerning military affairs is subject to strict censorship. What is left is a message of normalcy, control, and trust. On 5 July, for example, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu gave a press conference stating that 89,000 new conscripts – approximately 66% of the decreed recruitment quota - were already sent to their military units and that, as such, the spring recruitment cycle was going according to plan.² This would mean another 45,500 soldiers will still be enlisted by the end of July. Moreover, Shoigu seized the opportunity to re-emphasized that the enlisted conscripts would not be sent to 'the zone of the special military operation' and that those who have served their duty time of 12 months would be discharged into the reserve and return to their places of residence without delay.

Communications concerning the spring recruitment seem to follow a prescribed format. For example, the Sakhalin State Television and Radio Broadcasting posted on 22 June, "On Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands, the plan for the spring conscription has already been half fulfilled. Compared to last year, twice as many recruits will serve in formations and units of the Eastern Military District [...]. Most remain to serve in the Sakhalin region. Not a single conscript of the island army corps is sent to the places of the special military operation."³ Thus, with about 50 percent of the quota fulfilled and about 80 percent of the recruitment period gone, all is going according to plan.

In the meantime, the Russian Ministry of Defense website publishes a steady stream of promising and confidence-inspiring recruitment messages. Typically, they go as follows:⁴

- On 1 July, the Eastern Military District Press Service reports, "To date, the military commissariats of the Eastern Military District have called up more than 6,600 citizens for military service. In addition, more than 3,100 young recruits have already been sent to the troops. Most citizens have secondary and higher education. Conscripted servicemen will not be sent to the zone of the special military operation in Ukraine."
- On 1 July, the Central Military District Press Service reports, "The second group with conscripts was sent today from Bashkiria to the Far East. More than 200 people left for the places of service [...] In total, in the spring of 2022, about 53,000 conscripts

will be sent from the Urals, Siberia, and the Volga region to serve in the military formations and units. [...] It should be noted that the events of the spring conscription of 2022 are in no way related to the conduct of a special military operation since only contract servicemen are involved in it.”

- On 4 July, the Press Service of the Central Military District reports again, “The last group with more than 160 conscripts who will serve in formations and military units of the Far East left the Sverdlovsk region. In total, the military commissariats of the region during the spring conscription of 2022 will send almost 4,000 people to the troops.[...] It should be noted that the events of the spring conscription of 2022 are in no way related to the conduct of a special military operation since only contract servicemen are involved in it.”

A good liar sporadically tells the truth. This may explain why the local Russian press sporadically reports on some incidents related to conscription. They primarily concern incidents related to draft-dodging, bribing, and skeptical mothers worried about the faith of their sons. Nothing unusual or spectacular within the Russian context. Obviously, it always concern ‘corrupt’ individuals or exceptional cases, never a flawed system.

The following incident merits mentioning as it shows the absurdity of Russian life and the crooked imitation of normalcy. On 10 June, the principled pacifist Saveliy Morozov, a resident of Stavropol, was found guilty of ‘discretizing the army’ when, on 12 May, he stated in front of the eleven board members of the *voenkomat* that he condemned all wars. He straightforwardly qualified war as a “disgusting and criminal phenomenon.” The only exception he made was the Great Patriotic War which could be justified as “a war to defend your home.” Because he specifically mentioned “the special operation of Russian troops on the territory of Ukraine” as an example of an unjustified war, Morozov was reported by the draft commission and condemned in court to a fine of 40,000 rubles (Approx. 650 EURO). Incidentally, the draft board accepted his status of ‘conscious objector’ as

they granted him his application for alternative civilian service.⁵ Absurdity aside, nothing seems to be wrong because the authorities apply the rules according to the letter of the law. The discerning reader, however, may discover a hidden anti-war statement.

The constantly repeated message that conscripts will not be sent to the war in Ukraine is remarkable in the current recruitment period. On this note, the authorities are still dealing with the scandal of using conscripts in Ukraine at the beginning of the campaign, where facts on the ground flagrantly contradicted the official version of the Kremlin. Indeed, Putin’s promise to prosecute those responsible for the scandal has provided some results. On 7 June, the prosecutor of the Western District conveyed that 600 conscripts had been sent to Ukraine at the beginning of the offensive and that twelve officers were brought to justice. Simultaneously, the Russian MoD assured that these conscripts had been brought home, no other conscripts had been sent to Ukraine, and the mothers of the conscripts taken prisoners in Ukraine were contacted.⁶ The use of conscripts in Ukraine was more pervasive than suggested by this court ruling. Therefore, the order had little to do with the truth or the root of the problem. It just confirmed Russia’s illusion of lawfulness and the myth of the good tsar who has to react against the bad boys.

Based on Russian media and official reporting, not much can be concluded with certainty about the 2022 spring recruitment cycle except that, officially, with 15 percent of the recruitment period left, military authorities claim to have 50 to 70 percent of the quota fulfilled.

One may logically ask what the purpose is of conscription if soldiers may not be used for what they are supposedly trained for. We might consider two main reasons :

1. In the current practice of conscription, the pool of conscripts is used as the primary source to recruit professional (*kontraktni*) soldiers. Indeed, after three months of basic training, *prezivniki* are given a choice to become contract soldiers. Apart from the financial incentive and other

social benefits, it may be clear that the (social) pressure to accept a professional contract while isolated in the barracks is higher than in regular recruitment offices. Those who opt to remain conscripted soldiers are mainly joining the units' maintenance, drivers, security, and kitchen staff in what is called 'general services.' They must ensure the functioning of the garrisons in their day-to-day routine. This procedure is not exceptional as it is also practiced in Western countries applying mandatory military service. Yet, these western countries are not conducting a massive offensive campaign against a neighboring sovereign country.

2. Conscription also ensures that the reserve forces are permanently reinforced with newly 'trained' soldiers. Although the effectiveness of such a force might be considered an illusion, the retention of mandatory military keeps the thought of total warfare alive and justifies the militarization of society. In Russia, the trauma of the Great Patriotic War is still present, if not cultivated. In other words, conscription also has an important political goal as it allows the authorities to maintain the myth of the sieged state.

Because its impact on the war in Ukraine is primarily indirect, the effects of conscription on the war in Ukraine are limited. Its political and psychological role, however, is all the more critical. From this perspective, our opponent is Russia's military culture more than its armed forces.

INSTITUTIONS UNDER PRESSURE

Given the heaviness of state and social control, the official story on conscription is not the whole story. Beyond the approved version, life in Russia develops differently. In fact, in the discrepancy between the Russian myth and reality, one may find the regime's true nature and, eventually, the war's outcome.

The following indications reveal that Russia's war in Ukraine has set the country in a crisis.

While there are no indications that Russia is still (massively) deploying conscripts on Ukraine soil, Russia's russification strategy of occupied territories in Ukraine implies, among other things, the (enforced) recruitment of soldiers. On 19 February, a couple of days before the Russian offensive, the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic authorities imposed general mobilization calling all men between 18 and 55 under arms. Since then, explicit and covert mobilization to the army was imposed in the DNR and LNR, the annexed Crimea, and the occupied territories of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Kharkiv regions. Russian-imposed citizenship goes with a high price.⁷ There are no accurate figures about the effectiveness of these mobilization campaigns, yet, stories reveal the brutality of these efforts and the resistance against them. Hiding and bribing, so it seems, are the main coping strategies against this enforced recruitment.⁸

In desperate need of more soldiers in Ukraine, covert and parallel recruitment also occurs in Russia. For example, human resource departments of major companies are asked to share the details of their employees on which military recruiters contact them.⁹ The third wave of recruitment among prisoners and inmates of penal colonies is said to be underway.¹⁰ Moreover, on 28 May, Russia formally abolished the age limit for contract soldiers to widen the potential recruitment cohort.¹¹ In parallel, private companies mobilizing soldiers to employ on Ukraine territory work extra hours to provide as many soldiers as possible.

Russia's search for soldiers without exploiting the regular conscription method at its maximum potential results in a fragmented composition of the armed forces on the Ukrainian front. As a result, PMC units (Wagner-type soldiers and ethnically composed volunteer units) are fighting alongside units of the regular Russian army and the Rosgvardia, as well as locally recruited soldiers which Ukraine considers Ukrainian citizens. Based on this observation, a 'taxonomy of Russian soldiers' may be composed where each category of soldiers has a

different recruitment method, pay schedule, command & control channel, and mission resulting in a kaleidoscope of varying warfighting cultures. This 'taxonomy' and what it possibly means for Russia's military effort in Ukraine will be the subject of our following scheduled publication.

More focused on the spring recruitment period, informed Western sources provide a different narrative than is held in the Russian public debate. For instance, Dara Massicot, an authority on Russian military affairs from RAND Corporation, suggested an overall trend of sluggish conscript intake. While admitting that her preliminary thoughts were based on a (very) limited set of data, she reported that in eight regions, only 30% or less of their conscript quota has been reached as of mid-June.¹² More outspoken, on 19 and 22 June, Petro Burkovskyy, executive director of the Ukrainian Democratic Initiatives Foundation, stated that the recruitment cycle has failed and that the Russian authorities are hiding the truth about the meager conscript campaign in the regions. This is especially the case, so the author argues, in Ingushetia and Dagestan in the Caucasus and Vladivostok in the Far East. As such, by 9 June, only 10 to 20% of conscripts were enrolled in the Central Federal Region; only 25% of the conscription plan was completed in Priamurye, located in the Far East region; only 26% of conscripts were sent to armed forces in the Novosibirsk region; and only 3.5% of conscripts were enrolled in the Voronezh region, bordering Ukraine.¹³

The sources on which these indications are based are not made public, which makes it difficult to verify them. Yet, they confirm an observation that has been made before, namely that the most deprived regions of the Russian Federation are paying the highest price for the Russian war in Ukraine. Moreover, these indications suggest a severe discrepancy between the official version and reality. It is too soon to give a final qualification for the 2022 recruitment. Our task is to determine the size of this discrepancy with more precision in the coming months.

There are also acts of sabotage related to the draft and Russia's war against Ukraine. As such, incidents were reported showing voenkomati destroyed by Molotov

cocktails attacks. Russia's war effort has also been sabotaged by several incidents where train rails were interrupted, ammunition and oil depots, and military plants and infrastructure were destroyed to thwart the military logistical chain.¹⁴ Although these violent protest actions indicate a different level of opposition against the Kremlin's policy, the impact of these sabotage acts on the military effort may not be overestimated. For instance, about 25 attacks against the recruitment offices have been registered.¹⁵ Compared with the approximately 4,000 active voenkomati in the country, the effect of these actions on the military effort is negligible.

Notwithstanding, the sabotage acts against the railway tracks have forced the railway troops of the Russian armed forces in collaboration with police and FSB to enhance their efforts to secure the railway system. Russia's anti-war partisans must be found in the "Militant Anarcho-Communist Organization," an organization of which little is known, which is a good sign.¹⁶ Thus, the relevance of these sabotage acts is political rather than military.

REGAINED CONFIDENCE: BETWEEN SUCCESS AND FAILURE

At this moment of writing, two main conclusions may be drawn concerning the spring 2022 conscription period:

1. There is a (severe) discrepancy between what is officially stated and what is achieved in the *voenkomati*.
2. The military significance of conscription, as practiced in Russia, is primarily indirect. The political signal, however, is all the more critical.

What can we say about this practice that surpasses the mere confirmation of clichés? When can we say that the spring 2022 recruitment period is a success or a failure?

On a political level, we consider the results of public opinion concerning the approval rate of the war in Ukraine among the Russian population as a benchmark. If the number of soldiers enlisted in the Russian armed forces exceeds 113,000 (or 83% of the decreed quota),

we will qualify the recruitment campaign as 'successful.' Conversely, any number lower we consider a failure. There are many methodological objections to make against this reasoning. Public opinion research in Russia is tricky, and the draft is not necessarily public opinion expressing itself on its feet. Yet, the suggested benchmark avoids an all too loose judgement on success or failure. Ultimately, it is our task to approach Russian reality as objectively as possible, if only to avoid surprises. Concretely, providing a definite answer to the posed question is too soon. Nevertheless, on a political level, we assess the current recruitment period as moderately successful. Perhaps this may confirm Putin's regained confidence that we have witnessed since the end of June.¹⁷

On a military level, the more relevant question concerning the spring 2022 conscription period is how many enlisted soldiers will opt for a contract-based service. This question may only be answered in October/November (or three months after basic training). This is an utterly tricky question to answer objectively, confirming Friedrich Hayek's knowledge problem: we must stay humble before complexity. This is all the more true if this complexity is contaminated with propaganda and clichés. What is left is an enduring focus on the most relevant indicators that may reveal Russia's intentions and capabilities. If one is focused on Russia's war effort, this is not military conscription. However, if one focuses on the regime's viability, military conscription remains an indicator of significant importance.

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Endnotes

- 1 [The Russian Soldiers' Question Revisited - Egmont Institute](#)
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