

The Russian Way to Military Recruitment and the Spectre of Mobilisation

CHRISTIAN LABRIOLA

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, it has waged a war of attrition with human costs unmatched since the end of the Second World War, yet has avoided a general mobilisation because of the domestic political crisis triggered by the partial mobilisation decree of September 2022. Instead, the Kremlin has built a multi-layered recruitment system that ranges from more conventional levers, such as the permanent enlistment and its accompanying legislative reforms, to increasingly unconventional ones, culminating in the predatory exploitation of foreign citizens. This paper argues that, despite the effectiveness shown so far by this hybrid model, the persistent imbalance between frontline losses and new enlistments raises doubts about its medium-term sustainability. As a result, Moscow is confronted with a choice between mobilising directly (or indirectly) and accepting the current military stalemate, a decision the Kremlin has probably been postponing until the elections and will now likely have to address.

1. The attrition war and first mobilisation of reservists

The Russian invasion of 2022 has dramatically turned the reality of war of attrition within European borders, redesigning a model of warfare that was believed to be outdated at least in the post-Cold War period. The territorial stalemate, determined by a combination of technological dynamics, ineffective Russian strategic planning and Ukrainian resilience, imposed on both armies a change in doctrinal and logistical terms. The change is necessary to sustain a long-term conflict, structurally marked by high personnel casualties and armaments' consumption. While the depletion of materials has been mitigated by Russia and Ukraine via multifaceted industrial plans and thanks to external assistance, the realistic replenishment of the human resources during and after such a conflict emerges as the most complex junction for both nations.

Despite the predictions made in Western Europe at the beginning of the war, alongside with the Russia propagandistic rhetoric amplified by hybrid warfare, Ukraine has demonstrated a strong national cohesion in response to the invasion, albeit with some exceptions. One may question the efficacy of the coercive recruitment model adopted

Christian Labriola has been an intern in the 'Defence, Security and Space' programme at IAI.



by Kyiv, as marked by desertion's phenomena, but at the same time such enlistment system proved to be effective as it reconfigured the army through the integration of paramilitary units and the construction of a solid chain of command. Conversely, Russia's case is structurally more complex and tied from the outset to the question of how losses get replaced. Where Kyiv relies on a single coercive mechanism, Moscow layers formal conscription, informal mobilisation and the recruitment of foreign nationals; a combination that reflects the Kremlin's reluctance to order a politically costly general mobilisation. While the Ukrainian population experiences the war directly, the conflict is perceived far more indirectly within the Russian Federation. Although systematically stoked by patriotic and nationalist rhetoric, the reality of combat had, until quite recently, rarely touched Russian soil. Even the waves of drone attacks against energy infrastructures since Spring 2026, albeit highly symbolic and rather effective, are far less impactful in terms of widespread casualties and destruction compared with more than four years of massive, indiscriminated and daily bombing over Ukrainian cities.

Although estimates on casualties are difficult and subject to a significant margin of error, data from the CSIS suggests the existence of a warning signal that the Kremlin takes in consideration since the early phases of the conflict.¹ From the beginning of the invasion until December 2025, Russian casualties, encompassing both fatalities, injuries and missing in action personnel, have exceeded 1 million, with confirmed deaths fluctuating between 275,000 and 325,000.² These numbers demonstrate the cost of such war, counting the highest amount of losses for a major power in one single conflict since the end of World War II. The number of Russian military personnel fallen in Ukraine is over 17 times superior to the Soviet ones dead in Afghanistan in the 1980s. CSIS estimates a rate of attrition that sees Russia losing troops with a ratio between 2:1 and 2.5:1 compared to Ukraine.³ This suggests that Moscow accepted such a human cost in exchange for marginal territorial gains, precisely of about 4,700 square kilometres occupied since 2022 – corresponding to about two times the province of Moscow.

As the initial blitzkrieg against Kyiv failed, the conflict's stalemate has pushed Putin to order, on 21 September 2022, a partial mobilisation of 300,000 reservists.⁴ The reaction of many civilians was immediate: protests and mass flights occurred immediately after

¹ Jones, Seth G. and Riley McCabe, "Russia's Grinding War in Ukraine: Massive Losses and Tiny Gains for a Declining Power", in *CSIS Briefs*, January 2026, <https://www.csis.org/node/120430>.

² As of 2026, no improvement is visible: monthly casualties still average over 30,000 (last available data dating from June 2026).

³ Jones, Seth G. and Riley McCabe, "Russia's Grinding War in Ukraine", cit.

⁴ Russian Presidency, *Executive Order on Partial Mobilisation in the Russian Federation*, 21 September 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69391>; *Decree No. 647 of 21 September 2022* (in Russian), <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202209210001>.



the decree,⁵ forcing the authorities to impose restrictive and repressive measures. This exodus went well beyond the call-up just mentioned. As a matter of fact, it was a mass outflow spanning every segment of the population; roughly 800,000 Russians left the country between 24 February 2022 and early 2023. In 2022 alone, most of these people fled to Kazakhstan (146,000), Turkey (78,998), Georgia (60,000), Armenia (42,000), the European Union as a whole (36,282) and Israel (35,287).⁶

In broader terms, however, these losses as well as the shifting recruitment landscape have not caused a drastic change in the overall size of the Russian armed forces. During the pre-war period (February 2022), the latter numbered roughly 900,000 active-duty personnel and 2,000,000 reservists,⁷ while by February 2026 the overall strength stood at roughly 1,264,000 active-duty personnel and 1,500,000 reservists.⁸ To sustain the logic of attrition and the overall size of the armed forces, the Russian state has finally institutionalised a system that combines reforms on the draft, shadow mobilisation (as in irregular forms of recruitment) and the predatory exploitation of foreign citizens. This is driven by two main factors: the avoidance of drastic forms of mobilisation such as that of September 2022 and the commitment of substantial resources to defence, with military spending peaking at 7.5 per cent of GDP in 2025⁹ and then stabilised in the 2026 budget plan at 6.3 per cent.¹⁰

Given the losses Russia sustained, the number of troops recruited each month is colliding with a demographic bottleneck. The pool of men aged 20 to 29 numbers fewer than 8 million, followed by slightly larger younger generations¹¹ that remain nevertheless too low to sustain mass conscription without crippling the workforce. The key question, then, becomes how effective the current recruitment system truly is, and what countermeasures the Kremlin might adopt to contain the numerical gap necessary to sustain for more years a conflict with such a high rate of attrition.

⁵ Sauer, Pjotr, "‘I Will Cross the Border Tonight’: Russians Flee after News of Draft", in *The Guardian*, 22 September 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/madd8>.

⁶ Zavadskaya, Margarita, "The War-induced Exodus from Russia: A Security Problem or a Convenient Political Bogey?", in *FIIA Briefing Papers*, No. 358 (March 2023), <https://fia.fi/?p=115073>.

⁷ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), "Chapter Five: Russia and Eurasia", in *The Military Balance 2022*, London, Routledge for the IISS, 2022, p. 193.

⁸ IISS, "Chapter Four: Russia and Eurasia", in *The Military Balance 2026*, London, Routledge for the IISS, 2026, p. 188.

⁹ Cooper, Julian, "A Budget for a Fifth Year of War: Military Spending in Russia's Budget for 2026", in *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security*, No. 2026/01 (March 2026), p. 11-13, <https://doi.org/10.55163/BVBD7912>.

¹⁰ A 13 per cent reduction stemming from tighter Ministry of Defence fiscal discipline rather than a deliberate strategic de-escalation.

¹¹ Milov, Vladimir, "Putin's Fatal Blow to Russia's Demographics", in *Free Russia Foundation Analysis*, 16 March 2026, <https://thinktank.4freerussia.org/politics/putin-s-fatal-blow-to-russia-s-demographics>.



2. The permanent enlistment system

Since the beginning of 2026, the organisational structure of the draft offices has radically changed. As the decree of President Vladimir Putin of 29 December 2025¹² was issued, the recruitment centres' activity has become permanent, extending throughout the entire span of the year. The previous system, which limited conscription and enlistment from Autumn to Spring, was thus overcome. Through this new year-round cycle, eligible male citizens are constantly subjected to medical examinations and evaluations by the commissions; in a nutshell, what has changed is the preceding administrative cycle of registration, now continuous, while the rhythm of entry into active service itself remains unchanged. Accordingly, while some are exempted from service, others are immediately registered to be ready for operations. This reform has allowed the Russian army to bypass bureaucratic obstacles, neutralising expedients traditionally used by young people to buy time or evade the call.

Another crucial point is the implementation of a national electronic registry.¹³ The insertion of a draft notification into the State's information system triggers an immediate travel ban on the individual, effective from the day of registration. Simultaneously, the summons is deemed legally delivered seven days after being posted to the registry; a legal fiction that sets the clock for further sanctions in case of non-appearance. Should a conscript fail to report to the enlistment office within 20 days, additional restrictions follow: the suspension of the driving license, the denial of bank loans and a ban on registering as a business or self-employed.¹⁴

From a legal standpoint, article 2, paragraph 3, of presidential decree No. 1,237¹⁵ allows the deployment of recruits only following a four months' training included in the one-year service. Consequently, the draft troops are deployed *en masse* not in Ukraine but in the Russian frontier regions, such as Kursk and Belgorod, where

¹² Russian Presidency, *Decree No. 998 of 29 December 2025: On the Conscription of Citizens of the Russian Federation for Military Service in 2026 and the Discharge from Military Service of Citizens Serving under Conscription* (in Russian), <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202512290111>.

¹³ Under Federal Law No. 127-FZ of 14 April 2023, as amended by Federal Law No. 437-FZ of 4 August 2023, the travel ban takes effect from the day the summons is entered into the Register of Sent (Delivered) Summonses (Art. 15¹ of Federal Law No. 114-FZ), regardless of when the citizen is deemed to have received it. Failure to report within 20 calendar days of the date specified in the summons triggers further sanctions, including suspension of the driving license and denial of bank credit (Art. 7¹(4)(a)-(e) of Federal Law No. 53-FZ, as amended by Federal Law No. 437-FZ of 4 August 2023 and Federal Law No. 412-FZ of 4 November 2025).

¹⁴ Russian Presidency, *Federal Law No. 127-FZ: On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation* (in Russian), 14 April 2023, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202304140051>.

¹⁵ Russian Presidency, *Decree No. 1237 of 16 September 1999: Issues Concerning Military Service* (in Russian), <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&firstDoc=1&lastDoc=1&nd=102061768>.



they find themselves facing real incursions and drones' attacks. Furthermore, the base Commanders, bound to respect rigid regional recruitment quotas, often resort to psychological pressure and physical violence aimed at extorting young men's signature (also occasionally falsified) on contracts as long-term professional soldiers, as a way to evade the limitations of the aforementioned law.¹⁶ This mechanism ensures a constant pool of personnel, albeit scarcely qualified, indispensable to feed the rotation of troops in the front's hotspots.

It is imperative not to overlook the presence of volunteers attracted by both a hammering indoctrination and a pervasive internal propaganda. In many institutional videos analysed by the BBC, enlistment is no longer presented as a civic duty or a risk, but is rather promoted as an opportunity for emancipation and personal success; this kind of narrative paves the way for dissatisfied citizens to ultimately find "fulfilment". Furthermore, the manipulation of traditional gender roles has to be taken into consideration and is usually used in advertising slogans such as "You're a man. Be a man".¹⁷ The need to hide the hard reality of the front is evident: in fact, the war is not described as an extremely violent conflict with a high mortality rate, but reassuringly painted as a well-paid office job. This fictitious narrative responds to the dual necessity of the political leadership to guarantee the effectiveness of recruitment on one hand, and avert eventual social turmoil on the other.

The economic lever is another central aspect in this strategy. The commercials focus almost exclusively on financial incentives, promising salaries that are out of reach in the ordinary job market, which are strongly appealing to the lower-income classes of rural areas. The propaganda promises a minimum monthly compensation of 204,000 rubles (about 2,430 euros),¹⁸ emphasising that such an amount is equal to four times the national average salary. On top of this, the Kremlin has also inserted some economic benefits such as the total write-off of overdue credits up to a maximum of 10 million rubles, according to the law entered into force on 25 May 2026.¹⁹ For the first time, the Russian Federation is sustaining the war effort by heavily relying on recruitment driven by exorbitant economic promises; an extremely effective model for the mobilisation of the poorest segments of population within the country.

¹⁶ Vorobyov, Niko, "Russia's Largest Military Call-up Whips Up Fear among Young Men", in *Al Jazeera*, 16 April 2025, <https://aje.io/06ruh5>.

¹⁷ Shevchenko, Vitaly, "Russian Army Launches Campaign Encouraging Men to Join", in *BBC News*, 21 April 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65351271>.

¹⁸ Kent, Lauren, "Russia's Overwhelming Manpower Advantage against Ukraine Is Starting to Wane", in *CNN*, 14 June 2026, <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/06/14/europe/russia-manpower-problem-ukraine-war-intl>.

¹⁹ Institute for the Study of War (ISW), *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 27, 2026*, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-27-2026>.



3. The shadow army: Private companies and penal units

One of the most discussed topics throughout the first two years of the Russia-Ukraine war has been the participation of paramilitary forces operating in coordination with the two armies. While the integration of different Ukrainian forces into the national army occurred rather gradually and peacefully, the Russian case is very different. Only after the 2023 uprising and the subsequent death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the private military company (PMC) Wagner, most of its personnel signed contracts with the Ministry of Defence (MoD), and its recruitment centres reportedly came under the wing of the National Guard of the Russian Federation (*Rosgvardia*). The group is thought to have split into several operational clusters as operations in Ukraine are entrusted to Andrei Troshev, Africa and the Middle East region to figures such as Anton Elizarov, while remaining active mainly abroad.²⁰ That organisation, like other similar entities, was only partially and unevenly absorbed, leaving separate chains of command, informal ties to regional and oligarchic elites, and persistent fragmentation in place.

Another interesting case is the PMC Redut: despite being active since the outset of the conflict, it is not a single monolithic entity but rather an umbrella organisation serving as a logistics and manpower hub, supplying and supporting a range of affiliated groups. Redut works closely with at least twenty distinct outfits, including the Don brigade, the Listan battalion, the Skif battalion, the Wolves brigade, the Tigers volunteer formation, the Veter-117 formation, the Nevsky Group, the PMC Potok and related entities, though the real number may well be higher. While it formally operates under the cover of a private military company, it has effectively become the main platform run by the Russian intelligence system, with an operational capacity of roughly 25,000 troops.

A peculiar form of integration of irregular forces is that of the regional volunteer battalions. They are units of volunteers belonging to the single regions of the Federation (as Konvoy and Livadia), which have been forced to create and finance, through local budgets, fighting entities outside the framework of traditional army recruitment, although inserted within its organisational and hierarchical structure.²¹

Another strongly debated issue during the first half of the war was the direct recruitment from prisons. This phenomenon gained traction after the burst of news covering the authorisation by the Russian government for Wagner to recruit personnel

²⁰ Sukhankin, Sergey, "After Prigozhin: The Anatomy of Russia's Evolving Private Military and Mercenary Industry", in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 3 March 2024, <https://jamestown.org/after-prigozhin-the-anatomy-of-russias-evolving-private-military-and-mercenary-industry>.

²¹ Ibid.



from inmates. This system was then pursued directly by the Russian government system as well through contracts signed between the MoD and the inmates, allowing the decriminalisation or the complete revocation of the sentence for about 200,000 people. These forces, deployed in formations such as the well-known Storm-Z (as an alternative to Wagner), contribute to the creation of the very high-risk assault units that operate in the most lethal missions of the war. The combination of PMC, regional volunteer groups and former inmates, defined as shadow army, as of 2025 amounted to about 40 per cent of the troops at the front.²² This trend shows no sign of easing. In 2026, recruitment rates in Moscow have dropped by roughly a third compared with the same period in 2025, missing annual targets by about 5 per cent.²³ As a result, the Kremlin has turned its focus back to prisons; a law implemented since August 2026 narrows the list of offences that previously barred individuals from signing wartime military service contracts.²⁴ This pool is not, however, inexhaustible: as of May 2026, the prison population stood at 282,000, its lowest level since the early 2000s, down from 465,000 at the end of 2021.²⁵

4. Internal and external recruitment: The predatory search for personnel and strategic alliances

The search for personnel has gradually transformed into a real and proper predation of all those seen as vulnerable and “expendable”, in order not to draw from Russian establishment, middle-class and relevant civil society and thus avoid a destabilising discontent. This approach has put in the crosshairs non-Russian citizens both inside and outside Russia's borders, as highlighted in the International Federation for Human Rights' report.²⁶

Within Russia, migrants and international students have been the priority targets. Police searches concentrate on citizens of Central Asia states (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan) and in migration centres like that of Sakharovo in Moscow.

²² Omelicheva, Mariya Y., “Inside Russia's Shadow Military Sustaining the War”, in *War on the Rocks*, 22 August 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/?p=35573>.

²³ Safronov, Taras, “Russia Short on Contract Soldiers: Army Already 4.6% behind Its Recruitment Target”, in *Militarnyi*, 14 July 2026, <https://militarnyi.com/en/news/russia-army-4-6-behind-recruitment-target>.

²⁴ The law reduced the list of offences precluding a military service contract during mobilisation, martial law or wartime. See Russian Presidency, *Federal Law No. 308-FZ of 4 August 2026: On Amendments to Article 34 of the Federal Law ‘On Military Duty and Military Service’* (in Russian), <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202608040027>.

²⁵ Shumlianskyi, Dmytro, “Russia to Expand Its Recruitment of Prisoners for the War”, in *Militarnyi*, 19 July 2026, <https://militarnyi.com/en/news/russia-to-expand-its-recruitment-of-prisoners-for-the-war>.

²⁶ International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) et al., *Combatants, Mercenaries or Victims of Human Trafficking? Russia's Exploitation of Foreign Fighters in Its War against Ukraine*, April 2026, https://truth-hounds.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/20260424_fidh_rapport-ukraine_en_web.pdf.



Often immigrants are induced to sign multiple documents written in the Russian language containing, unbeknownst to them, military contracts. This practice transforms into a trap: anyone who refuses, undergoes the confiscation of personal documents, raids in mosques or in dormitories, arbitrary arrests and threats of expulsion or pretextual criminal convictions for drug consumption. The Duma passed a bill on July 2026 that expands the list of offences for which Russian authorities can deport migrants, including discredit of the Russian Armed Forces, participation in unauthorised protests, public calls for actions that violate Russian territorial integrity, violation of the state of emergency, counter-terrorist operation regime or martial law, and lastly disobedience of Russian law enforcement.²⁷

As far as international students are concerned, the economic lever previously mentioned is the most used weapon. The targeted individuals usually come from Middle East and North Africa region (e.g., Egypt, Morocco, Yemen) and, due to financial difficulties often caused by the blocking of monetary transfers, are induced to enlist in order to receive a compensation. In other cases, arrests are carried out for minor offences, forcing young people to sign under the threat of undergoing years of harsh prison.

However, recruitment within universities is no longer limited to international students. The academic system is now under pressure regarding Russian students as well, who report a marked shift since the start of 2026. Such pressure manifested itself through propaganda and recruitment structures designed to draw personnel from national university hubs into units specialising in unmanned systems. Enrolment is pitched as a chance to serve one's country away from the front for a year while acquiring advanced high-tech skills. Universities actively support this model, going so far as to sponsor enlistment through events organised with Russian military personnel. Around 269 universities, spanning both Russian territory and occupied Ukraine, are involved in this process, including prestigious institutions such as Saint Petersburg University and the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, which hosted the "Unmanned Systems Festival".²⁸ This points to an increasingly aggressive recruitment campaign. Reaching into university hubs in major cities such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg reflects a pressing need for new troops that the existing system can no longer easily meet.

As for recruitment beyond the Russian Federation, the strategy is often rooted in social media campaigns, orchestrated by private intermediary actors who promise

²⁷ ISW, *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 21, 2026*, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-21-2026>.

²⁸ Sebastian, Clare and Katharina Krebs, "'Colossal' Pressure: How Russia Is Targeting University Students for Military Recruitment", in *CNN*, 14 April 2026, <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/04/14/europe/russia-students-military-recruitment-campaign-intl-cmd>.



high-paying jobs in Russia for civil duties in the sectors of construction, agriculture, or corporate security. Once Russian territory is reached, thanks to an extremely fast tourist visa issuance process, passports are confiscated and people are sent automatically to the front in the areas at greatest risk, often after receiving less than two weeks of training. Providing a precise estimate of active troops and casualties is extremely difficult due to the scarce transparency of this irregular process of recruitment, but it is possible to confirm at least 3,388 deaths.

The most evident phenomenon is that of forced conscription in the occupied territories, which began in 2014 in Crimea and in the areas of Donbass and was consequently extended, after 2022, to the partially occupied regions of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. Following the declaration of annexation of such territories, young people of age between 18 and 30 years immediately received the draft obligation from the occupying army. As of January 2026, Russia forcibly conscripted at least 46,327 Ukrainian citizens residing in the occupied territories. According to Dmytro Usov, Secretary of Ukraine's Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, one out of six Russian prisoners of war currently held in Ukrainian camps is a Ukrainian citizen; a statistic that underscores the scale of forced conscription in the occupied territories.²⁹ Furthermore, this constitutes a clear violation of the Geneva Convention on civilians' protection in time of war and could be prosecuted as a real and proper war crime.

The involvement of non-Russian forces is not only coercive: in some cases, it can also be implemented through international agreements and become partially transparent. The most relevant case of direct participation in the conflict is that of North Korea: after the mutual defence agreement signed on 19 June 2024,³⁰ an initial contingent of an estimated 10,000-14,000 North Korean soldiers was deployed to Russia's Kursk region beginning in October 2024, the first foreign combat deployment on Russian soil since the Second World War, officially framed as repelling a Ukrainian incursion and placed under the direct command of the Russian Armed Forces. Pyongyang remained silent on such matter for months, until April 2025 when confirmed that those troops were in fact fighting against Ukraine. Soldiers lack both the legal and practical knowledge required to voice consent or refuse deployment abroad. They are typically assigned to reconnaissance, artillery support and Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) missile strikes in border zones. The initial contingent suffered significant losses: at first, Ukrainian military intelligence described North Korean infantry tactics as reliant on mass, high-casualty frontal assaults against Ukrainian positions. By mid-2026, South

²⁹ Trubachov, Veniamin, "Conscription in Occupied Lands: Russia's War Crime", in *IWPR Global Voices*, 20 January 2026, <https://iwpr.net/lyecf056>.

³⁰ Carlough, Molly and James Kennedy, "How North Korea Has Bolstered Russia's War in Ukraine", in *CFR Articles*, 25 November 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/how-north-korea-has-bolstered-russias-war-ukraine>.



Korean and UK intelligence assessed North Korean casualties in the Kursk theatre at over 6,000 killed or wounded, out of an estimated total of 25,000 troops deployed through rotation there. This willingness to sustain such losses reflects both the depth of Moscow's manpower shortage and the reach of Russia's alliance network. Pyongyang has since sought to institutionalise these battlefield lessons domestically, adapting Korean People's Army (KPA) combat manuals and training doctrine in light of the Kursk experience.³¹ In August 2026, Ukrainian military intelligence indicated that Russia may seek a further 30,000 to 50,000 North Korean troops, a publicly denied declaration by Kim Jong-un. Reports also indicate the deployment of a North Korean missile unit to Russia's Voronezh region, marking a potential expansion beyond the initial rear-support and reconnaissance role.³²

Conclusions

Despite the evident aversion of the Russian leadership toward a mass coercive recruitment, the current conditions do not offer certainties for the future. In line with expectations, the Russian Federation has for the first time since the end of the Cold War bypassed compulsory measures for citizens of draft age, favouring a contractual framework built around professional armed forces. The debate on the sustainability of Putin's regime is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it seems that the Kremlin's persistent efforts to avoid general mobilisation reveals the fear of a domestic backlash. If viewed through this lens, recent Ukraine's strategy of stretching Russia's resources, by robust targeting of energy infrastructures on Russian soil via drone strikes on refineries and industrial hubs, could severely impact both frontline operations and Moscow's ability to leverage economic incentives to attract new contract recruits. Eventual dissent caused by the negative effects of this new phase of a prolonged war would undoubtedly create some degree of problems and obstacles in the already opaque and ambiguous recruitment system.

Ultimately, personnel shortages remain a critical challenge for both armies. However, with a casualty ratio of 2:1 or 2.5:1 favouring Ukraine, combined with Kyiv's sustained effort to eliminate more troops than Russia can recruit (35,000 losses against 27,000 new enlistments in recent months according to latest estimates),³³ Moscow's current recruitment system may prove insufficient to achieve a military victory in Ukraine,

³¹ Hemmings, John, "How North Korea Is Modernising Its Defence", in *RUSI Commentaries*, 9 April 2026, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/how-north-korea-modernising-its-defence>.

³² Paton Walsh, Nick et al., "North Korea Boosts Support for Russia to Include Drone Operators, Ukraine Says", in *CNN*, 21 August 2026, <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/08/21/europe/russia-north-korea-ukraine-drones-intl>.

³³ ISW, *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 11, 2026*, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-11-2026>.



eventually forcing the Kremlin to launch a mandatory, large-scale mobilisation or to accept the current stalemate.

One plausible reading, put forward by Ukraine's GUR military intelligence, points to an impending mobilisation of 600,000 recruits in 2026-2027.³⁴ How such a structure would be organised has not been specified, but it is worth bearing in mind, before sounding the alarm over a mass call-up, that domestic dissent remains a real concern for the Kremlin despite the regime's non-democratic character. As discussed, coercive recruitment could be rather stepped up again through further changes to the electronic registry, tougher sanctions and tighter deadlines for desertion, fraudulent practices around military contracts, external predation (albeit on a limited scale). This effort could be broadened by amendments to the civil and criminal codes allowing sentences to be discharged through enlistment and reduced penalties for past offences, and a broader rollout of economic incentives including debt write-offs and subsidies for combatants. Such a model could effectively close the current manpower gap, if combined with a regular recruitment system that is already becoming more aggressive in propaganda terms (as seen in the university case examined above).

Speaking of the battlefield itself, Russia currently holds certain advantages, such as its demographic scale and the strategic edge afforded by its use of ballistic missiles.³⁵ Should Ukraine offset this latter advantage, whether through domestic production of Patriot missiles authorised by the US, or through an alternative developed unilaterally or with European partners, some Russian form of mobilisation, most plausibly an indirect one, could follow. Unlike in September 2022, such a measure would likely not be announced publicly, and the Kremlin would deploy different countermeasures to mitigate any resulting exodus. For instance, by leveraging agreements with neighbouring countries (the primary destinations of the previous exodus), Moscow could push for closed borders, framing the isolation as an externally imposed measure rather than an emergency dictated by the Kremlin. Russian officials and spokespeople may reject such accusations or play down the risk with vague statements, but the steady stream of legislative changes, the extension of recruitment to individuals with pending charges and this deliberate communication strategy all suggest that the government is keeping the door open to a new mass mobilisation.³⁶ Passed the Russian elections, which brought inherent destabilising risks, these measures are

³⁴ York, Chris, "Ukraine Reveals Latest Intelligence on Russia's Mobilization Plans", in *The Kyiv Independent*, 27 August 2026, <https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-reveals-new-russian-mobilization-claims>.

³⁵ Moscow is exploiting the global shortage of American Patriot systems by ramping up its use of ballistic missiles in strikes on Ukrainian cities (missiles that are hard to intercept with the current air-defence systems available to the Ukrainian army).

³⁶ Davis, Julia, "Russian Mass Mobilization? A Non-Denial Denial", in *CEPA Insights & Analysis*, 28 July 2026, <https://cepa.org/?p=52243>.



now likely to be assessed and potentially rolled out.³⁷

That being said, a diplomatic resolution or at least a ceasefire should not be ruled out. A potential agreement, to which the Ukrainian government has frequently signalled its openness,³⁸ could yield tangible results and, in a best-case and admittedly distant scenario, would pose a non-negligible problem for the Russian army. The recruitment apparatus now in place, the share of the industry converted to military production and the bloated war-economy structure built up over the past four years would all need to be wound down or repositioned within the Federation's governance framework. Internally, dismantling the shadow army, which today comprises around 200,000 former inmates recruited since the outbreak of the war³⁹ whose sentences have been pardoned or commuted, could fuel a spike in crime (a trend already observable in recent isolated cases) and spark fresh tensions should the paramilitary branches once co-opted by the State (as with Wagner) be re-privatised. Having said that, for the near future the major question for the Russian army remains whether its hybrid recruitment model can keep replacing frontline losses without reviving the domestic backlash that Moscow has so far sought to avoid. The Kremlin has shown that it can sustain the system through legal pressure, economic incentives and the exploitation of vulnerable groups, but each of these levers has its limits, and none of them is a lasting substitute for a decision on mobilisation. If enlistments continue to lag behind losses, Moscow will have to choose between the options outlined at the outset: mobilising, most likely through indirect and less visible means, or continuing the war with the current recruitment system, which may not suffice to break the stalemate.

³⁷ Russia's Supreme Court disqualified and banned the opposition party Yabloko in September 2026.

³⁸ "Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reportedly presented a joint Ukraine-US-Europe proposal on August 23 to end the war in Ukraine that offers significant Ukrainian concessions even as Putin and other Kremlin officials continue to refuse to compromise on any of their core demands". See ISW, *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 23, 2026*, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-23-2026>.

³⁹ Vorobiov, Mykyta, "Frontline Felons Have Changed the Way Putin Promotes His War", in *CEPA Insights & Analysis*, 16 June 2026, <https://cepa.org/?p=51636>.

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, space, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffarInternazionali*), two book series (*Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17
I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 6976831

www.iai.it



Latest Documenti IAI

Director: **Alessandro Marrone** (a.marrone@iai.it)

ISSN 2280-6164 | DOI 10.82088/IAIdoc2608

- | | |
|---------|--|
| 26 08 | Christian Labriola, <i>The Russian Way to Military Recruitment and the Spectre of Mobilisation</i> |
| 26 07 | Andrea Grillo, Alessandro Marrone e Michele Nones, <i>Intelligenza artificiale e Difesa italiana: sfide e opportunità</i> |
| 26 06 | Alessia Chiriatti and Ettore Greco, <i>Sustainable Transitions and Competitiveness: Policy Directions for the European Union and Italy</i> |
| 26 05 | Federico Castiglioni and Luca Cinciripini, <i>The Future of European Defence: Industrial Ambition, Operational Constraints and Flexible Partnerships</i> |
| 26 04 | Matteo Bursi, Federica Marconi and Alessio Sangiorgio, <i>The Reshaping of the European Economic Sovereignty</i> |
| 26 03 | Karolina Muti (ed.), <i>Lessons for Europe and Italy from Other Space Powers: The Civil-Military Interconnection</i> |
| 26 02 | Alessia Chiriatti, <i>Unlocking Strategic Potential Outside the EU: Italy-Turkey Bilateral Partnership in Defence</i> |
| 26 01 | Elio Calcagno (ed.), <i>Taking Multi-domain Operations from Theory to Practice</i> |
| 25 15 | Luca Barana, Matteo Bursi and Luca Cinciripini, <i>How to Fund European Ambitions? Opportunities and Challenges for the Next MFF</i> |
| 25 14 | Federico Castiglioni, <i>Italy, Germany and Europe in Times of Geoeconomic Disorder</i> |