The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Central Asians in Russia Pressured to Join Moscow's Fight in Ukraine

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March 17, 2022



The migration center in Sakharovo near Moscow. **Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency**

Central Asian nationals residing in Russia are being pressured to fight in Ukraine as Moscow's military incurs heavier-than-expected losses, evidence suggests and migrants' rights activists say.

Russia's three-week war in Ukraine has had a shockingly high death toll, although Russian and Ukrainian authorities dispute the number of troops killed on both sides. The fog of war makes it difficult to discern not only how many soldiers have died, but also who those soldiers are and where they came from.

On March 1, the Ukrainska Pravda newspaper leaked what appears to be the personal data of 120,000 Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine. While coming from a reputable outlet, the independently unverified 6,616-page list of military personnel names, registration numbers and places of service contains multiple ethnically Central Asian names.

Valentina Chupik, a civil rights advocate famous for her work defending migrant's rights in Russia, confirmed that more than a dozen Central Asians have sought her legal advice following pressure to sign up for contract service in the Russian army since Feb. 26.

In a conversation over the Telegram messaging app, she told The Moscow Times that she noticed two patterns by which migrants are being targeted.

Chupik said she received calls from 10 Tajikistan and Uzbekistan citizens who reside in Russia, saying they had received phone calls from people who claimed to represent immigration law firms and could expedite the process of receiving Russian citizenship if they signed up for contract service.

"This is a complete lie, the law does not allow this," Chupik said. "I told these guys that [the callers] are scammers."

Another tactic involves army tents in several Moscow metro stations, where Chupik says recruiters try to get commuters to enlist with the "Volunteer Army of the Donetsk People's Republic." They target migrants, Chupik said, promising that they can obtain Russian citizenship in just six months.

"I think the Russian government is using labor migrants as cannon fodder in Ukraine," Chupik alleged in a recent interview. "These migrants are probably being signed up by the Defense Ministry and by private military companies."

In a comment on Facebook, Chupik — who in September 2021 was stripped of her asylum status by Russian authorities for her staunch work protecting migrants — urged male Central Asians between the ages of 18 and 60 to leave Russia as soon as possible.

Social media posts and media reports appear to corroborate Chupik's assertions that Central Asians are being pressured to fight for Russian forces in Ukraine.

A video of an Uzbek man allegedly driving a Russian military truck into Ukraine was widely shared via the Telegram messaging app. The man, who appeared to be in his 50s and was dressed in camouflage fatigues, said on camera that he was recruited because of his experience serving in Afghanistan and that he was given no choice but to sign up.

"There are many Uzbeks here who have come to take part in the war. There are people from Tajikistan too. We have a contract," said the man.

After an RFE/RL investigation tracked him down, the man confirmed that he had been offered a three-month contract earning a monthly salary of 50,000 rubles ($475) and a promise of Russian citizenship.

The job offer came from an employment listing website called UzMigrant.

Bakhrom Ismailov, the director of the company behind UzMigrant, bragged in a Feb. 20 Uzbek-language video that "contract service in the Russian army will allow one to obtain Russian citizenship in three months."

In a TikTok video uploaded in early March by the account @kyrgyznation, a man warns of the

possibility that Kyrgyz migrants could be called up to fight.

"If you have a Russian passport and get a summons [to the military enlistment station], try to come back to Kyrgyzstan," he says.

Before @kyrgyznation turned off comments, the post was flooded with biting criticism of Kyrgyz men with Russian citizenship who would flee the draft.

"If your passport is from the Russian Federation, then you'll give your life to the Russian Federation," one commenter wrote.

"Shame on those who write such comments," Chupik told The Moscow Times. "[These naturalized Central Asians] are intimidated with possible deprivation of [Russian] citizenship and forced to sign a contract. They must refuse. It is better to lose citizenship than to die in an unjust war or become a mercenary assassin."

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Russian citizenship is a prized possession for migrants from economically stagnant Central Asia. Unable to make their ends meet at home, Central Asians go to Russia in search of work and income. Remittances from work abroad, mostly from Russia, account for 30% of Tajikistan's gross domestic product and 28% of Kyrgyzstan's.

According to Russian government statistics, 4.5 million workers from Uzbekistan, 2.4 million from Tajikistan, and 920,000 from Kyrgyzstan were working in Russia in 2021. These migrants face daily abuse, discrimination, and even death threats from law enforcement and deal with wage theft and ruthless bureaucracy.

Russian citizenship offers some protection against these daily frictions. In 2020 alone, 63,389 Tajiks, 43,404 Kazakhs, 23,131 Uzbeks, and 11,865 Kyrgyz acquired citizenship, often through third parties who forge documents and bribe officials on behalf of the applicants without their knowledge, making the applicants vulnerable to denaturalization threats.

Whether pressured or enticed, this is not the first instance of Central Asians enlisting in the Russian army.

Russia in 2003 codified the right of foreigners aged 18 to 30 to serve under a contract in the Russian army. Between 2008-2014, the number of foreigners serving under a contract — mostly Uzbeks and Tajiks — hovered between 200 and 350.

In 2015 — the year that Russia responded to the Syrian government's request for military aid against rebel groups — Putin signed a decree specifying that foreign contractors can be involved in the Russian army's combat operations.

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Even if it is legal for foreign contractors to participate in Russia's combat operations, Central Asian governments look down on their citizens serving abroad. In Tajikistan, citizens found

guilty of mercenary activity are punished with up to 20 years in prison.

In response to proliferating reports about Uzbeks serving in the Russian army in Ukraine, the Uzbek Justice Ministry said in a statement that any Uzbek national found to have enlisted in the service of a foreign army or police service could face up to five years in prison.

Again, the way around these legal complications is for Central Asians to pursue Russian citizenship. In late December 2021 — less than two months before the invasion of Ukraine — Putin proposed to amend the law again to shorten the process of obtaining Russian citizenship for contract soldiers from former Soviet countries.

At least three Tajikistan-born contractors in the Russian army have reportedly been killed in Ukraine so far.

While it is difficult to get an accurate sense of public opinion across Central Asia on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, reports of young men from Bishkek or Badakhshan fighting in Ukraine could further complicate Russia's image in a region already wary of Putin's ambitions for it.

Despite their close economic ties with Russia, Central Asian leaders have avoided outright endorsement or criticism of Moscow's war against Ukraine.

During the March 2 special emergency session of the United Nations General Assembly, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan abstained from condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan did not vote at all.

On Thursday, however, Uzbekistan took a stronger stance, with Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov telling parliament that although Tashkent wanted to keep good relations with both Moscow and Kyiv, it opposed the war.

"First, Uzbekistan is seriously concerned by the situation around Ukraine," he said. "Second, we are the proponents of finding a peaceful solution to this situation and resolving the conflict through political and diplomatic means. But in order to do that, first of all, hostilities and violence must stop immediately."

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