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Russian Soldiers' Mothers Accuse Putin of Avoiding Them

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A mother sees off her mobilized son. **Sergei Kiselev / Moskva News Agency**

The relatives of Russian servicemen fighting in Ukraine have accused President Vladimir Putin of avoiding them after they were not invited to a meeting between the Kremlin chief and soldiers' families reportedly set to take place on Friday.

Instead, family members, who also claim to have been tailed by Russian security services in recent days, have accused Putin of ignoring their concerns, claiming that Friday's meeting would likely be attended by handpicked representatives and Kremlin plants.

"Vladimir Vladimirovich, are you a man or what? Do you have the courage to look us in the eye, not with hand-picked women and mothers in your pocket, but with real women, who have traveled from various cities here to meet with you?" Olga Tsukanova, the president of Russia's Council of Wives and Mothers, asked in a video message posted on Telegram.

Groups advocating for soldiers and their families have grown increasingly vocal since the Kremlin's September announcement of a "partial" mobilization drive that saw thousands of

men drafted into the Russian army.

“This is a very difficult time,” said Valentina Melnikova, the secretary of Russia’s Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers. “We’ve never had thousands of requests for help in a week before.”

But rather than having their calls answered, soldiers' rights groups claim to have been shut out as well as harassed by the Russian authorities.

“Today, from morning until late in the evening, we were followed. They just put on masks to hide their faces. And, seeing the camera in our hands, they turned their backs and left,” wrote another group, the Council of Mothers and Wives, in a social media post.

“This can only be the work of the secret services. Is that what they get paid for?” the post added.

Related article: Mothers of Russian Soldiers Killed in Ukraine Blame Pro-Kremlin Reporters

Russia’s Council of Mothers and Wives has over 500 active members, according to Tsukanova, and has been demanding transparency from the Defense Ministry over soldiers' whereabouts as well as permission to speak openly about the problems of conscription and mobilization without criminal consequences.

It had invited Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to its roundtable discussion in Moscow on Sunday, but he did not attend.

Putin’s apparent determination to avoid the activists may be related to his ill-fated meeting with relatives of the victims of the Kursk submarine disaster just months into his presidency. The event, which was widely seen as a PR catastrophe for the new leader, saw him publicly heckled by attendees.

The Russian president has increasingly distanced himself from the ongoing war in Ukraine, making only a handful of public appearances at military facilities since the invasion began — once at a military hospital as well as a visit to a training ground for reservists in Ryazan.

Despite not being invited to Friday’s meeting, the Council of Mothers and Wives has continued to make public overtures to the Russian president, calling on him to engage with real grieving mothers and anxious family members.

“We are here in Moscow, ready to meet with you. We are waiting for your reply! Or will you hide again?” Tsukanova asked.

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