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Will Putin Announce Another Round of Mobilization?

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Putin visiting troops in Russia's Southern Military District. **kremlin.ru**

Talk of a second mobilization wave in Russia has been on everyone's lips in recent weeks. Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov claimed it would begin at the start of January. And, citing Western intelligence officials, CNN reported last week that Russian President Vladimir Putin was considering drafting a further 200,000 men.

Many were looking for a big announcement on Jan. 18 when the Russian president — known to be a fan of landmark dates — visited St. Petersburg for the anniversary of the lifting of the Siege of Leningrad. Would Putin launch a new mobilization drive? Make an official declaration of war on Ukraine? Close Russia's borders?

So far, none of this has happened.

With all the talk of a second draft, it's worth noting that Putin's initial mobilization decree

from September remains legally in force, meaning that the Russian authorities can ship men off to the front without any warning whenever they need.

Indeed, one should be wary of the Kremlin's claim last fall that it had enlisted its target of 300,000 men and subsequently halted all mobilization efforts. These words carry about as much weight as its promises not to invade Ukraine.

Amid the ongoing fighting and the ever-greater secrecy shrouding the Kremlin, getting an idea of Putin's plans is harder than ever. It's all too easy to turn to junior officials who are simply relaying rumors, rather than those who have direct access to officials in the loop.

It is well known that the Russian president likes to keep major decisions secret from even his most trusted colleagues until the very last moment. That was the case with the "partial" announced in September — and its implementation was the Defense Ministry's responsibility. But now things are different. Many other officials are involved — and they want to know about decisions in advance (at the very least so they can shield their families and friends from being called up).

We spoke to several government sources to try and get a sense of the Kremlin's plans. While our sources are not from the military, they were involved in organizing the September-October mobilization effort and would likely be involved in any new campaign.

And we have some evidence that our sources can be trusted. Despite the December rumors about a second mobilization, our sources told us that they were yet to see any sign that this was around the corner. And — as we now know — they were correct.

Our sources, hailing from four different Russian regions, still say they cannot see any sign of an imminent major mobilization push. No orders have come from Moscow.

While many of the men mobilized last year were immediately sent to Ukraine in an effort to halt further Ukrainian advances, tens of thousands are believed to have been kept back — possibly to allow rotation of units from the front, possibly as manpower for a spring offensive.

"Many of those drafted in autumn are only now being put to work. The Defense Ministry doesn't need an intake of new recruits quite yet," said one source.

"There hasn't been any discussions about it [a new mobilization effort]. What would we do with all of them [newly mobilized troops]?" said another.

According to a senior government source, there is an understanding that another round of call-ups would be "extremely unpopular" and that, if the government is asked to provide more troops, it will avoid making any formal mobilization announcement.

One top official who worked on the previous mobilization campaign said last month that the government is likely to seek to replenish forces gradually.

"The human capital gathered in the last wave has not yet been exhausted," said another government source. He added that, in terms of managing public opinion, it will be easier for the military to mobilize conscripts who have already spent a year in the military.

From what we are hearing, it appears to us that a new mobilization wave is unlikely in the near future. However, it's another question what "the near future" actually means! To be honest, we'd only be confident in making a prediction for the next few weeks.

Either way, the draft is definitely not over and the Kremlin has not stopped looking for new bodies to throw into battle in Ukraine. As we have already pointed out, Putin's "partial" mobilization decree is still in force. And the authorities are actively addressing some of the issues that emerged during last year's mobilization. For example, military recruitment offices are being digitized and syncing their data with other government agencies.

Several of our sources pointed out that preparatory work for Putin's annual state-of-the-nation address has resumed. This set-piece speech in front of Russia's ruling elite would be a suitable platform for a major announcement.

For the moment, no date has been set. But one of our sources quipped he would not be surprised if the speech is scheduled for Feb. 24, the one-year anniversary of the invasion.

All of our sources said there is an expectation that local authorities should be ready for orders about a new mobilization drive to come at any moment. But it's clear the timing will depend on events on the ground. Further advances by the Ukrainian army may prompt Putin to enlist hundreds of thousands more men. And the same could happen if Putin orders the Russian Armed Forces to launch a major new offensive.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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