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How Russian Officials Plan to Recruit 400K New Contract Soldiers in 2024

The Kremlin and the Defense Ministry are avoiding a second round of mobilization at all costs. But the pool of potential contract recruits is drying up.

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Sending contractors to units of the Russian Armed Forces. **Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency**

The Kremlin and the Defense Ministry plan to continue their campaign to recruit contract servicemen for the Russian army next year, our sources have said.

Russia's regions have already received the 2024 contract soldier recruitment plan from Moscow, and its quota is approximately the same as in 2023, a high-ranking source familiar with the military leadership's plans said.

Nationwide, authorities expect to find approximately 400,000 people to agree to go to the

front next year, the source said.

Another person taking part in Kremlin meetings confirmed that the regions will be responsible for finding and recruiting new contract servicemen next year.

He did not give an exact quota for the coming year, merely saying it "will be similar to what it was this year, or slightly less."

"But definitely not more," he stressed.

Since the spring of 2023, authorities have carried out a mass campaign to promote contract service in the army across Russia's regions.

The main thing that lures people to war is money. While the average salary in Russia is about 70,000 rubles ($760), the monthly salary of a contract serviceman starts at 204,000 rubles ($2,200). Bonuses may also be awarded for taking part in offensive actions and capturing Ukrainian equipment, for example.

In addition, one is entitled to a one-time payment from the federal budget in the amount of 195,000 when their contract is concluded. Wealthier regions such as Moscow and the Moscow regions pay contract soldiers significantly more.

The Russian authorities' intention to recruit 400,000 contract servicemen in 2023 was first reported in March. Officials' statements suggest that this goal has already been exceeded.

For example, at the Defense Ministry board meeting on Dec. 19, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said that 490,000 contract servicemen and volunteers have been enlisted since the beginning of the year.

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The latter do not formally have the status of servicemen and can leave the front at the end of their term of service, while contract soldiers are obliged to fight until the formal end of the war.

Shoigu did not disclose how many contract servicemen were recruited this year, but according to Deputy Security Council Chairman Dmitry Medvedev, volunteers account for about 21% of those enlisted. By that estimate, about 387,000 people have signed contracts with the Defense Ministry since the beginning of the year.

If we study the Defense Ministry's statements in recent years about the number of contractors in the Russian army and plans to recruit them, we can see that the official figures do not add up.

- In March 2020, Shoigu claimed that there were 405,000 contractors in the Russian army. Let's remember this number.
- A year ago, already in the midst of the war, Shoigu said the number of contractors should be increased to 521,000 by the end of 2023 and ultimately to 695,000.
- It is not known how many contractors were in the army at the time of this statement.

But it is unlikely to be fewer than in March 2020, because increasing their number was one of the Defense Ministry's priorities before the war.

- If we rely on the official numbers mentioned above, the Defense Ministry needed to recruit 116,000 more people to fulfill the plan that Shoigu announced at the end of 2022. However, the target for contract soldiers for 2023 was 400,000 fighters. Moreover, this figure was recently confirmed by Putin himself.
- The Russian authorities claim to have exceeded the plan this year. As we calculated above, about 387,000 people signed a contract with the Defense Ministry. Based on official statements, there should already be more than 750,000 contractors in the Russian army. That is, even the plan that Shoigu announced the day before for 2024 has been fulfilled: to increase the number of contractors to 745,000.

Our sources in the government were unanimous in their belief that it will be much more difficult for the authorities to fulfill the plan to recruit contractors next year, although the situation will differ from region to region.

They voiced skepticism toward the Defense Ministry's latest reports on recruitment successes.

"The people who went to war for patriotic reasons have run out," said a high-ranking source familiar with how the regions are recruiting contract soldiers. "At the same time, salaries at civilian and military enterprises have risen significantly. Plus in some regions, there are rotational workers, and their salaries are even higher. If you are paid 150,000 rubles at a civilian job, why do you need the 200,000 rubles that the Defense Ministry pays to a contract soldier?"

According to the source who attends meetings in the Kremlin, the Defense Ministry has exhausted its pool of potential recruits.

"Today, there are no longer the same number of people who drank beer and husked sunflower seeds [and went into contract service]," he said, adding that the prison population willing to sign contracts is also drying up.

"Now there is a race between regions. They are trying, but it is unrealistic to find so many people," said a source close to the Kremlin. "These are concrete people. If you attract one of them to the army, this person drops out of somewhere. And nowadays, he tends to drop out of a particular occupation — an ambulance doctor, a bus driver. And where can you get a new bus driver?"

The 200,000-300,000 ruble salary for contract servicemen also disturbs the balance in the labor market, the source continued.

"There is a specific story with Russian Railways, where there is a huge shortage of personnel at construction sites. And this deficit has become even stronger this year, as workers are finding less physically demanding jobs with salaries 1.5-2 times higher. For example, the same bus driver."

As of October, Russia's unemployment in Russia is at a record low of 2.9%.

While President Vladimir Putin boasts of this figure, the financial and economic bloc is not happy about it, as the shortage of workers is holding back economic development and accelerating rising prices.

"There are practically no working hands left in the economy, the situation with workers is really very acute," Central Bank Chairwoman Elvira Nabiullina said recently.

Economic Development Minister Maxim Reshetnikov called the labor shortage the main source of internal risk to the economy.

Despite the labor shortage, the plan for contract servicemen will be fulfilled through more targeted campaigning, a source with knowledge of the regions' plans to find contract workers said.

He pointed to the example of citizens who do not pay alimony as a potential reserve.

"There are tens of thousands of them, and they are not officially employed anywhere. We have not had time to mobilize them. It is clear what kind of moral character these citizens have. But this way they will be able to pay their debt to the country and pay alimony," he said.

However, alimony payments from servicemen still need to be secured. Some defaulters took advantage of the authorities' relaxations for those who went to the front and avoided responsibility.

According to the Federal Bailiff Service, as of Jan. 1, 2023, there were 771,000 enforcement proceedings for the recovery of alimony, and 153,800 cases of non-payers being wanted or fined. Next year, a law creating a registry of alimony debtors could be passed.

The reliance on contract service allows the authorities not to mobilize citizens in large waves.

However, according to sources in the regions, local authorities would prefer mobilization because it's an easier system for them.

And the work done since last fall to organize lists of military commissions and other information on citizens could help authorities mobilize men "without harming the economy."

"But when one of the governors tries to convey upstairs: 'Let's maybe have another mobilization,' there is a firm refusal. Contracts only," a source in the leadership of one region complained.

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