

How Russia's Diamond Republic Finds Manpower for Putin's Army

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Russian conscripts board a bus to be sent to military units of the Eastern Military District in Yakutsk, Russia. **AP / TASS**

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When Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a “partial” military mobilization for the war in Ukraine in September 2022, more than 500 women gathered on the central square of Yakutsk, the capital of Russia’s Far East republic of Sakha (Yakutia), to protest the decision.

“My friend and I left our underage children at home and went to the protest,” one participant recalled in a conversation with Free Yakutia.

“We understood how dangerous it was and were scared, but all fears vanished as soon as we saw the crowd. Instead of fear, we felt proud of our female compatriots!”

Defying heavy police presence, women blocked off the vast Ordzhonikidze square by forming

a large circle and performed the *ohuokhai*, a traditional Sakha dance in which participants move in a circle and sing improvised choral songs.

“I was crying each time I heard a chant or a call to stop the war in the Sakha language,” another participant recalled, requesting anonymity for fear of persecution for her position.

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“I was very inspired by the bravery of our women — there were even elderly ladies [among us]!” she added.

Videos and images of Yakutian women dancing the *ohuokhai* would become one of the symbols of that autumn’s anti-mobilization protests in Russia.

But despite the womens’ best efforts, Russian authorities pressed on with fetching manpower for the frontlines from the region.

Russia’s Defense Ministry never released information on how many men from each region were drafted during the fall 2022 mobilization campaign, but Yakutsk’s ex-mayor and current State Duma Deputy Sardana Avksentyeva [said](#) 4,750 men, or 1.5% of Sakha’s able-bodied male population, were expected to be sent to the frontlines.

Avksentyeva, however, backtracked on the statement after it garnered widespread media attention.

Related article: [2 Years Into Ukraine War, Russia’s Ethnic Minorities Disproportionately Killed in Battle](#)

The majority of the mobilized did not come from Yakutsk, Sakha’s capital and the largest urban center, but instead hailed from small, remote Arctic villages where inhabitants rely heavily on hard labor for their livelihoods.

Despite being legally exempt from military service, members of Sakha’s small-numbered Indigenous peoples — including Evens, Evenks, Yukaghirs, Chukchis and Dolgans — were also among the mobilized.

Though Putin [declared](#) the mobilization “over” a month after its start, Russia’s Defense Ministry never ceased its search for recruits from the region.

Alongside other Russian regions and republics, Yakutia was allocated a yearly quota for military volunteer recruitment, according to video recordings of closed-door government meetings obtained by Free Yakutia.

The fulfillment of this quota became the sole responsibility of local officials who, in turn, were tasked with reporting on their progress to former president and current senior security official Dmitry Medvedev.

In 2023, the Kremlin asked Sakha authorities to send at least 3,458 military volunteers — or

0.34 percent of its entire population — to the frontlines, according to the recordings.

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This quota, in turn, was divided proportionate to the population of each of 38 *uluses* (districts) of the republic where local heads were tasked with administering on-the-ground recruitment.

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More than two years into Russia's invasion, at least 800 residents of Sakha have been killed on the front lines in Ukraine and another 118 were reported as missing in action, [according](#) to statistics provided by local volunteers and a tally of verified deaths maintained by BBC Russian and Mediazona.

This information alone means that more than 0.2% of Yakutia's able-bodied male population perished on Ukrainian frontlines, though the real number of casualties is believed to be much higher.

Despite the already significant war losses, Yakutian officials still manage to fulfill Kremlin-imposed quotas and find men willing to leave their Arctic republic to face death in faraway Ukraine.

To help you make sense of why and how Yakutian men join the Russian army, Free Yakutia and From the Republics have gathered everything known about government recruitment strategies and residents' motivations.

How Russia's Defense Ministry Lures In the Recruits

Advertising the war

News outlets and television stations across the republic of Sakha are full of commercials calling on men to join the Armed Forces.

"Protect your Motherland! Sign a military contract!" says an advertisement placed across [landing pages](#) of all of the republic's state-linked news agencies. The page-wide banner also features an address of an enlistment office in Yakutsk, while the link attached to it redirects a user to a local Defense Ministry website.

In addition to placing advertisements in the media, local officials also distribute promotional flyers in government buildings, hospitals, universities and even schools and kindergartens.

The Sakha government is estimated to be allocating at least 25 million rubles (\$287,612) of government funds per year for war advertising.

Targeting the workers

Each major industrial company in the republic of Sakha employs a so-called "mobilization

specialist” whose primary role is to convince newly on boarded employees to sign a military contract.

Potential recruits are promised to retain their salary in addition to payments from the Defense Ministry, as well as a one-time payment of 450,000 rubles (\$5,000) from the republic’s budget.

Among the companies facilitating war recruitment are mining giants Alrosa, Aldanzoloto and Seligdar, as well as oil and gas group Surgutneftegaz.

Targeting the unemployed

Public employment services in each *ulus* of the republic also employ “mobilization specialists” who are tasked with proactively identifying unemployed men eligible for military service and convincing them to sign a contract with Russia’s Defense Ministry.

Employment centers in Sakha vow to help potential recruits with collecting documents required for enlistment and to pay for them using state funds when necessary. They also purchase airline tickets and cover the cost of a taxi ride to the central enlistment office located at the Abyral sanatorium in Yakutsk.

Each recruit remains under the close supervision of employment center staff from the very start of the process. Government employees are obliged to escort future soldiers to the airport to prevent any last-minute escapes.

Employment centers across Yakutia operate almost around the clock and without days off.

Recruiting the convicts

At least one in 6 prison facilities in Sakha have been shut down since 2022, according to Free Yakutia’s source in Russia’s federal penitentiary system.

Free Yakutia’s analysts believe that this change was possible due to the large number of prisoners being sent to the war in Ukraine. More than 300 inmates from Sakha were recruited into the ranks of Wagner mercenary group in 2023 alone, according to the insider source familiar with the matter.

Among the cases of inmate recruitment known to Free Yakutia are that of a man sentenced to 10 years in prison for the murder of his father and two friends and another man sentenced to eight years in a maximum-security prison for the murder of his partner.

The victims' families confirmed to Free Yakutia that they were not notified of the offenders’ releases and only learned of the news through local WhatsApp chats, where former prisoners posted photos from the combat zone in Ukraine.

The ‘Change Your Life’ Campaign

At least 19 homeless residents of Yakutia went to fight on the frontlines in Ukraine last year, [according](#) to Sakha’s human rights ombudswoman Sardana Guryeva.

All of these residents, according to Guryeva, were recruited during the “Change Your Life socially-oriented charity campaign” and were offered the opportunity to “rehabilitate themselves” in the eyes of society and “bring back their good name.”

Recruiting foreigners

Sensing a potential shortage of local men willing to go to war, Sakha’s government introduced additional subsidies for men from other regions — and even other countries — willing to enlist in the army.

Out-of-republic volunteers who signed a military contract are paid an additional bonus of 400,000 rubles (\$4,400) from the republic’s budget and another 25,000 rubles (\$280) from the budget of a district where they signed a contract.

In June this year, Kyrgyz citizen Askar Kubanychbek uulu [became](#) one of the first foreign citizens to enlist in the army in Sakha.

Related article: [Russia Pressures Migrant Workers with Raids, Military Summons](#)

Kubanychbek uulu [first joined](#) the Russian army in June 2022, but was arrested upon returning to his home in Kyrgyzstan later that year.

In 2023, a Kyrgyz court sentenced him to 10 years in prison for mercenary enrollment. A year later, judges reduced the sentence to seven years and [allowed](#) Kubanychbek uulu to spend the first three years of his term outside prison on probation.

Kubanychbek uulu then managed to escape Kyrgyzstan for Russia and return to the battlefield in Ukraine via Sakha.

Why Yakutian Men Go to War

The republic of Sakha, the largest country subdivision in the world, is one of Russia’s most resource-rich regions. Twenty-five percent of the world’s diamonds are mined in the republic and the region also has large reserves of gold, silver, tungsten, coal and oil.

In 2023 Yakutia contributed 296 billion rubles (\$3 billion) to Russia’s federal budget.

Yet Sakha is also one of the poorest regions of Russia and is listed among the top three recipients of subsidies from Moscow.

With a population of less than 1 million, more than 16% of the republic’s residents live below the poverty line and the republic also has the highest level of household debt of all Russian regions.

For residents of Sakha, enlistment in the Russian army offers a rare opportunity to earn a salary several times higher than the republic average.

“My brother signed a military contract...to pay off all of his debts at once. He claimed he would be working on the homefront, but was sent to the assault [on the frontlines] just a few

weeks later,” a local woman wrote on one of Free Yakutia’s social media pages.

“I see that it is mostly people who have a mortgage or large household and business debts [who go to the frontlines],” said another social media follower from Sakha.

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The median salary in the republic amounts to less than 45,000 rubles (\$500), according to a study conducted by the Free Yakutia. Meanwhile, Russia’s Defense Ministry [promises](#) future soldiers a salary upwards of 204,000 rubles (\$2,300) and an additional one-time payment of 500,000 rubles (\$5,200).

Yet despite these promises, soldiers hailing from Sakha often publish video and audio appeals claiming that they have not been paid the promised salary nor additional payments for receiving an injury or destroying Ukrainian military equipment in combat.

Relatives of deceased soldiers also cannot obtain compensation for the deaths of their loved ones, most of whom have been listed as "missing in action" for many months or years.

“My cousin’s body still hasn’t been brought home. His comrades told [the family] that he died half a year ago, but his parents still got no money,” one woman told Free Yakutia, requesting anonymity due to safety concerns.

“When there is no body, there is no action required of the government.”

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