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Putin's Warrior Middle Class: How Sustainable Is Russia's Cash-for-Recruitment Tactic?

Russia's war economy has created opportunities for those serving in the military to earn many times the country's average wage. Whether they can form the core of a new Russian "middle class" remains to be seen.

By Moscow Times Reporter

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A military recruitment billboard in Moscow. **Vlad Karkov/SOPA Images via ZUMA Press Wire / TASS**

With the Russian army in ever greater need of manpower — and with President Vladimir Putin wary of fueling discontent with another wave of forced mobilization — the government has increased payments to men willing to take part in the invasion of Ukraine.

By all financial standards, these volunteers now make up a rising “middle class” seeking to

use the war as a ladder to prosperity.

Russia's Center for Macroeconomic Analysis, headed by Dmitry Belousov, the defense minister's brother, noted the rise of this new warrior middle class in its August report, saying their wages at the time were twice the national average.

"I used to spend money on holidays, equipment for work and my car, and now I am saving up to buy property," one serviceman told The Moscow Times, speaking on condition of anonymity for safety reasons.

He added that he now earns more than his friends, has free money at his disposal and feels like part of the new middle class.

With Russia short of manpower, authorities are offering volunteers sums many times the country's median wage, which was 61,602 rubles ($628) as of September 2024.

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Ulyanovsk, a provincial region with a median monthly income of 28,904 rubles (about $268), recently increased the lump sum it pays to those who sign a contract to fight in Ukraine by 150% to 2.5 million rubles (about $23,150).

Ulyanovsk region Governor Alexei Russkikh said Russia needed more troops "to compensate for the losses" suffered in Ukraine.

Including the lump sum, a volunteer can now expect to earn over 5 million rubles (about $46,296) a year, or 415,000 rubles ($3,843) a month in the first year and then over 200,000 rubles ($1,852) a month in the subsequent years.

For context, the state rating agency RIA Ratings defines the middle class as earning more than 100,000 rubles ($926) per month for a single person and 150,000 rubles ($1,389) for a household without children.

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Also important are the additional perks provided to servicemen. The Kremlin has announced that military veterans will be able to take out mortgages at a discounted rate of 2% in several regions, which mostly include occupied territories of Ukraine. Servicemen are also exempt from paying income tax.

Experts say this should be enough for Russia to stave off a second round of forced mobilization, at least for the time being.

Analyst Ruslan Leviyev, citing available data on federal payments to volunteers, suggested

that Russia was recruiting about 30,000 people a month between April and June.

"This is even more than we estimated because we expected 20,000-21,000 people [to be recruited every month]... Under these conditions, I don't expect a second wave of mobilization," Leviyev said in an interview with Deutsche Welle.

In a recent episode of the Carnegie Politika podcast, analyst Michael Kofman said Russia needs to keep recruitment at about 30,000 soldiers per month to maintain its current level of operations, adding that he sees no immediate need for a second wave of mobilization.

Good pay, uncertain prospects

While certainly a good way to improve one's financial situation, albeit at a huge risk, the army is still not widely regarded as a prestigious career path, let alone a future-proof one.

In the public eye, military service is simultaneously painted as an honor reserved for the bravest and as the ultimate punishment.

On one hand, the Kremlin showers awards and perks on professional soldiers, as state TV trumpets the exploits of ordinary people who stood up for the Motherland.

On the other, Russian authorities have put few filters on who can join the military, promoting the invasion of Ukraine as a way for tainted criminals or corrupt officials to redeem themselves.

For example, the government has amended Russian laws to make it easier for those accused or convicted of crimes to sign up to fight in Ukraine.

One Russian lawmaker, Alexei Borodai, described the volunteers as an unproductive "section of the population" who, when drafted, were often ill-equipped and could be used as "meat" to overwhelm the enemy's defenses.

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The exact socio-economic profile of the volunteers is unknown, but 80% of them have no higher education, and a significant proportion of the recently recruited fighters are underemployed or blue-collar workers over 40.

Given the often urgent need to replenish forces, many of the volunteers do not receive proper training and are sent to the front lines, on average, within weeks of being recruited, according to analyst Kofman.

The lack of prestige is evident in some polling data.

Most tellingly, only 40% of Russian respondents said they would approve of their relative enlisting to fight Ukraine, according to a poll by the independent Levada Center conducted on Oct. 24-30.

"I doubt that jobs associated with the military are becoming more prestigious," the soldier told the Moscow Times.

"The army is the army: Yes, the pay is good, but they recruit everyone, which has a negative effect on prestige."

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Another soldier said he did not plan to continue his military career when he was demobilized, but would rather use the money he had earned to start his own business as a civilian.

Some people will stay in the army even after the war is over, military analyst Alexei Alshansky told The Moscow Times.

"These are people who lost their socialization during the war and want to stay in a familiar environment," he said.

But the majority are likely to decide to leave as soon as the formal or informal restrictions on their discharge from the army are lifted, Alshansky said.

"I expect this to be the largest wave of dismissals from contracts in history," he added.

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The Russian government should be able to create a parachute for those leaving the army to ease their transition into the civilian economy, economist Natalya Zubarevich said in an interview with the RTVI channel.

Fighters will be "gradually" released from the army and will return to an economy with an "incredibly tight labor market," so it won't be particularly difficult for them to find jobs, albeit with more modest pay, Zubarevich said.

Moreover, the government is likely to offer ex-soldiers additional allowances and benefits, such as subsidized housing and utilities as well as higher pensions, she added.

"This is cheaper than paying the full amount of the allowance, and it will definitely ease the transition," Zubarevich noted, citing the psychological adaptation of "veterans" to civilian reality as the greater challenge.

Shadow mobilization continues

In all likelihood, as the war progresses, Russia may need different quality and quantity of manpower in the war against Ukraine.

Although Putin has long pondered the advantages of a contract army, there are limits to how far the voluntary system can go to meet the Kremlin's invasion goals.

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There are also signs that the current "voluntary" recruitment system may not be sustainable.

The multiple rounds of increases in benefits to fighters show that public appetite for joining the army, especially among the youth, is stubbornly insufficient — even in the face of big cash incentives.

Second, several Russian NGOs have reported an increase in cases of Russian officers pressuring regular conscripts, who are not supposed to fight in Ukraine, to sign professional contracts with the Defense Ministry to take part in the invasion.

This indicates a growing coercive element in the Russian recruitment process.

According to Kofman, the shortage of personnel may become a more pressing factor constraining Russia's offensive operations in the second half of 2025.

Military analyst Valery Shiryaev said that expanding the persons liable for compulsory service, from which a proportion of soldiers will be sent to the frontline, may be a way for Russia to avoid a second wave of mobilization.

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