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Kremlin Uneasy About Return of Ukraine War Veterans – Reuters

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Sergei Bobylev / POOL / AFP

Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin, are increasingly worried about how large numbers of soldiers returning from the war in Ukraine could disrupt society, Reuters reported Tuesday, citing Kremlin sources.

Authorities in Moscow hope to avoid unrest like after the Soviet war in Afghanistan, when returning veterans helped fuel organized crime in the 1990s, one source told Reuters. Another source insisted that Russia's political system and law enforcement agencies are "stronger" today than they were in 1989, when the Afghan war ended shortly before the Soviet collapse.

However, once back in civilian life, many veterans will unlikely be able to match the high salaries they earned at the front, raising the risk of discontent, one of the Kremlin sources said.

Since 2022, recruiters have boosted sign-on bonuses and drawn heavily from Russia's prisons.

Between 120,000 and 180,000 convicts have been sent to fight, according to prison service data. Most of those now returning are convicts, severely wounded soldiers or men unfit for combat.

Putin has said around 700,000 Russian troops remain in Ukraine.

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In 2023, Russia's Defense Ministry changed rules that had allowed convicts to return from the war after six months of service, arguing they should not get better terms than volunteers. Still, a chief concern for the future is that prisoners turned soldiers, once they return to civilian life, will go on to commit crimes.

The exiled news outlet Vyorstka reported earlier this year that Russian soldiers had killed nearly 400 people after coming home since the war began.

Amid those reports, lawmakers are urging the government to expand training for therapists to treat combat-related PTSD.

Russia's Defense Ministry estimates that one in five war veterans suffers from PTSD, according to Sardana Avksentyeva, the deputy leader of the center-right New People party. Meanwhile, estimates suggest that Russia has fewer than one therapist for every 7,000 adults, and even fewer with experience treating combat trauma.

In an apparent attempt to manage potential risks for Russia's tightly controlled political system, the Kremlin created the "Time of Heroes" elite training program, which fast-tracks Ukraine war veterans into government roles.

While it remains to be seen whether the program can deliver the sweeping opportunities it promises, four veterans have been appointed to the presidential administration, three have seats in Russia's upper-house Federation Council and a number of others were appointed to various branches of regional administrations since the 2022 invasion.

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