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Russia Fast-Tracks Ukraine War Veterans Into Paralympic Sport – Investigation

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The “Oka” training base in the Tula region. **vk.com/sportvsemparalymp**

Russia is spending tens of millions of dollars to recruit Ukraine war veterans into Paralympic sport, fast-tracking wounded soldiers from hospital wards into regional and national teams, an investigation by the Poland-based news outlet Vot Tak has found.

The Russian Paralympic Committee (RPC) says at least 70 veterans of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine are now members of national teams across para-sports disciplines, while around 700 compete in regional squads.

The expansion reflects Russia’s efforts to build a new athletic elite from the ranks of its disabled war veterans amid controversy over the RPC’s reinstatement at the upcoming Milano Cortina Winter Paralympics.

From hospital wards to training camps

The recruitment drive is led by the RPC, whose President Pavel Rozhkov has described work with war veterans as one of the body's top priorities.

According to figures cited by Rozhkov, the number of war veterans in regional para-sport teams has risen from 300 in 2024 to 700 by the start of this year. The number on national teams doubled over the past year to about 70. Hundreds more veterans are expected to join in 2025-2026, Rozhkov has said.

Recruitment often begins in military hospitals and rehabilitation centers, where servicemen are recruited "straight from their hospital beds," Vot Tak reported.

The main vehicle for the effort is "We Are Together. Sport," a project launched in 2023 with federal funding and presidential grants totalling more than 26 million rubles ($340,000) over two cycles.

The program organizes training camps and competitions for veterans with amputations and other severe injuries, regardless of prior sporting experience.

According to Vot Tak, eligibility is not limited to career soldiers but extends to anyone who took part in the invasion regardless of formal status or role — including Wagner Group mercenaries and members of armed groups operating in Russian-occupied territories.

The RPC did not respond to Vot Tak's request for comment on the overall size of its athlete pool or how former soldiers move so quickly from rehabilitation into elite athletic training.

Rapid rise

Among those recruited is 38-year-old Ruslan Ustyuzhin, a former airborne warrant officer who lost his left leg above the knee in fighting in Ukraine in May 2022, Vot Tak reported.

Ustyuzhin, who said he took part in Russia's initial assault on Kyiv and later fought in eastern Ukraine, now plays sitting volleyball for Moscow and is part of Russia's national adaptive sports team. He also captains a Moscow-based team composed entirely of Ukraine war veterans.

After a few months in a military hospital, Ustyuzhin said he was invited to a rehabilitation camp at a Sports Ministry facility specializing in Paralympic preparation, where he attended RPC master classes and began training seriously in 2024.

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He now splits his time between training and a job at a local military enlistment office. His goal, he told a Vot Tak journalist, is to reach the national sitting volleyball squad and eventually compete in the Paralympic Games.

Another veteran, 29-year-old Tsyden Geninov from the republic of Buryatia in eastern

Siberia, lost his lower right leg during fighting in 2022.

Within months of taking up archery in late 2023, he traveled to Bangladesh for a world championship organized by the International Military Sports Council (CISM), which has not imposed sanctions on Russia. Geninov won bronze in a mixed event there and later took gold at a CISM championship in Tehran.

Though these results do not count toward qualification under the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) system, he said he is now training to compete for a place on Russia's Paralympic team.

The IPC allows athletes with military backgrounds to compete if they meet classification and eligibility rules. However, athletes with active ties to the Russian military or who have publicly supported the war have been barred from competing under neutral status at recent Games.

Billions in funding

The recruitment drive is backed by significant state and quasi-state funding.

A key partner is the Defenders of the Fatherland Foundation, which President Vladimir Putin launched in 2023 to support Ukraine war veterans and their families.

The foundation allocated 1.7 billion rubles (over $20 million) in 2023-2024 for programs supporting war amputees, including sports rehabilitation initiatives developed with the RPC. It does not disclose how much goes specifically to elite para-sport.

Regional governments also fund tournaments for veterans. One edition of the "Defenders of the Fatherland Cup" in the west-central Siberian city of Khanty-Mansiysk in February 2025 cost more than 60 million rubles (around $800,000), Vot Tak reported.

Additional money comes from public organizations and charities as well as from the Unified Gambling Regulator, a state body that channels mandatory bookmaker contributions into sport. Its CEO has said more than 3 billion rubles ($38 million) have gone to Paralympic sport over the past four years, though the share benefiting war veterans is unclear.

Private betting company Fonbet has also sponsored competitions exclusively for veterans, including sitting volleyball tournaments.

Not all para-athletes welcome the emphasis on war veterans.

"They should not be a separate caste," an anonymous reserve member of Russia's national para-snowboard team told Vot Tak.

"It doesn't matter how a person acquired health limitations. If the state wants disabled [war] veterans to engage in sport, let it develop sport as a whole, rather than creating separate training sessions and competitions," he said.

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War Veterans

International scrutiny

The IPC barred Russian athletes from the Beijing Winter Paralympics in March 2022 following the invasion of Ukraine, although they were allowed to compete as neutral athletes in the Paris Summer Paralympics two years later.

Russian athletes are set to compete under their national flag at the Milano Cortina Winter Paralympics after the IPC reinstated the RPC's membership, the first time they have done so since 2014.

Six athletes were selected in Nordic skiing, para-snowboard and alpine skiing from a larger pool proposed by Russia.

While the decision has drawn outrage from Ukraine and several of its allies, the IPC has said it will not reverse the move.

Russia does not publish comprehensive data on the number of soldiers disabled in the war. However, officials have forecast that 60,000 to 70,000 new amputees could emerge every year.

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