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Russia Steps Up Recruitment of Women for Ukraine War – Vot Tak

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Yelizaveta Tsybina, a woman who signed a volunteer contract to serve in the Russian military. **Video grab / enisey.tv**

Russia is increasingly recruiting women for the war against Ukraine amid signs that its pool of potential male recruits is shrinking, according to an investigation by the Poland-based news outlet Vot Tak.

At least 50 Russian women serving in the war have been killed, with the annual death toll rising the longer the war has gone on, the outlet found.

Vot Tak identified each of the 50 women and examined how Russia recruits women, what motivates them to enlist and how their roles have expanded from medical and support work to operating drones, firing sniper rifles and taking part in assaults.

Women have traditionally served mainly in civilian and support positions in the Russian military. In early 2022, 310,000 women worked in the armed forces, but only about 40,000 were service members. By March 2023, 1,100 women were deployed in Ukraine, according to

then-Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, the only official figure released during the war.

Vot Tak found that women are now being recruited for a wider range of combat duties, including as drone operators, snipers, machine gunners and assault troops.

One of the women interviewed by Vot Tak was Yelizaveta Tsybina, a 24-year-old drone operator with the call sign "Bayana" who signed her fourth volunteer contract this summer. She is now based at a barracks in the southwestern Kursk region.

"They present it all beautifully and patriotically," Tsybina told Vot Tak. "But when you arrive, the situation, the way you are treated and the work itself are completely different."

She said that although she did not initially want to enlist after Russia invaded Ukraine, many of her friends did, and her boyfriend signed a contract in June 2024. A military enlistment office rejected Tsybina because she lacked medical training. Her boyfriend was killed that August.

She then trained as a drone operator and joined the St. George volunteer assault brigade, formed largely from former Wagner mercenaries and Russians who had fought in eastern Ukraine since 2014. A week after signing a six-month contract, she was sent on her first combat mission.

"I didn't think I would survive my first contract," she said.

In late 2024, Tsybina was deployed near Soledar in Ukraine's Donetsk region, where she used drones for reconnaissance and later helped direct artillery fire. Her unit was subsequently sent to Chasiv Yar, where she said she dropped munitions on a dugout after seeing Ukrainian soldiers enter it.

Tsybina returned to her home region of Krasnoyarsk in May 2025 with a minor wound and concussion. Four months later, she was back in the military.

"It draws you in. Unfortunately, I can't get out of it anymore," she told Vot Tak. "When I return to civilian life, everything feels wrong — the environment, the routine, the people, the relationships. It feels as if I'm not where I belong."

Tsybina has since signed three more fixed-term contracts with volunteer formations. She said she avoided signing with the Defense Ministry because its contracts are effectively impossible to terminate while the war continues.

"If I had the choice, I would choose not to start down this path," she said. "I am afraid to say this openly, but disappointment with the Russian Armed Forces is the view of most Russian soldiers."

Short-lived recruitment drives

Women can sign military contracts in any Russian region and are offered the same bonuses, salaries and benefits as men, according to Vot Tak. Advertisements generally seek Russian citizens aged 18 to 45 with at least a secondary education and no criminal record, though the criteria vary.

Like men's contracts, women's agreements with the Defense Ministry are automatically extended until the war ends.

Related article: As Manpower Shortages Deepen, Russia Recruits Foreign Women for War

Since late 2025, students have been targeted at universities in at least five cities, as well as the Ulyanovsk region, Vot Tak found. A college in Krasnoyarsk held a closed recruitment meeting attended only by women.

The recruitment drives are often short-lived. One in the Tomsk region lasted 10 days. A Telegram channel reopened recruitment in March 2026 and expanded it in June to drone, communications, logistics and supply roles. Two weeks after Vot Tak contacted the channel, a recruiter said applications had closed because of an "extremely large influx" of candidates.

Recruiters also made misleading promises, the outlet reported, including telling prospective recruits that contracts could be terminated after one year and that women would not be transferred to assault units or sent to the front. In practice, Defense Ministry contracts are extended indefinitely and women have served in frontline and assault roles.

Russia had initially tried to recruit women as medics and cooks early in the war. By 2023, volunteer formations were advertising for female snipers, drone operators, electronic warfare specialists and assault troops.

The Defense Ministry has also reportedly recruited female prisoners in exchange for expunging their convictions. More than 80 may have left Siberian prisons to work as medics in late 2024, Vot Tak reported, though the practice appears to have since been phased out.

Rising death toll

Vot Tak said it identified 50 female service members killed since February 2022. The annual toll rose from five in 2022 to 15 in 2025. Twelve were killed in the first half of 2026 alone.

Most were between the ages of 31 and 49. The oldest, Irina Anisimova from the Saratov region, was 57 when her death was reported in October 2024. The youngest was 23-year-old Yana Koshkina, who volunteered in 2023 and was killed in a drone strike near Bakhmut while commanding a casualty evacuation team.

One of the first was Valentina Galatova, 27, who was killed during a combat mission in Mariupol on April 14, 2022.

Galatova first traveled to Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine with humanitarian aid in 2014 and later settled in Donetsk with a commander from a Russia-backed formation. After he was killed in 2020, she joined his regiment.

Officially listed as a paramedic, Galatova worked as a political officer and therapist, her mother told Vot Tak. During the full-scale invasion, she joined assaults and died in mortar fire in Mariupol.

Women have also been implicated in abuses. Vot Tak previously reported that an assault platoon commander with the call sign "Witch" allegedly ordered subordinates to shoot five Ukrainian prisoners of war in May 2024. A female sniper called "Ripley" told a pro-Kremlin correspondent that she would be willing to shoot foreign fighters who try to surrender.

Some women now enlist as soon as they turn 18, while others try to flee after encountering withheld pay, violence by commanders or indefinite contracts, Vot Tak said.

Sofya, who asked that her name be changed, signed a Defense Ministry contract at 19 after graduating from medical college in 2023. Now 22, she trains soldiers in first aid and wants to leave.

She told Vot Tak that recruiters had promised her about 80,000 rubles ($967) a month but did not pay the agreed salary. She dismissed recruitment into drone units as another lure to send young people into Ukraine.

"I am disappointed in today's army and want to leave as soon as possible," she said. "Everyone is waiting for the war to end so they can get out — young people and older people alike."

"At 22, I have no desire to die because of politicians' wars."

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