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As Fears of Post-Election Mobilization Swirl, Russian Activists Prepare for the Worst

By Leyla Latypova and Moscow Times Reporter

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A man boards a bus in Moscow during Russia's "partial" mobilization in September 2022. **Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency**

Rumors that the Kremlin could order another mobilization to sustain its invasion of Ukraine after this month's parliamentary elections have circulated in Russian media for months.

Now that the ruling, pro-Kremlin United Russia party has secured a record majority, anti-war activists and lawyers told The Moscow Times that anxiety is rising, even though helping Russians avoid military service has long been a routine part of their work.

When the Kremlin called up 300,000 reservists in September 2022 in Russia's first mobilization since World War II, the announcement sparked an exodus of tens of thousands of Russians and protests in dozens of cities. At least 20,468 of the men who were mobilized in

2022 were confirmed killed as of this month, according to an independent tally.

Activists told The Moscow Times that the renewed speculation about another mobilization "echoes with pain" — and that a new call-up could be faster and harder to evade than the one in 2022.

"Almost everyone here has friends or relatives who have already been affected by [the draft]," said an activist for New Tuva, an exiled anti-war and Indigenous rights movement from Tyva, a southern Siberian republic bordering Mongolia. The activist spoke on condition of anonymity for safety reasons.

A region the size of Tunisia with a predominantly Indigenous population of less than 350,000 people, Tyva has suffered the highest per capita losses of any Russian region in the war. More than 2,100 men and women from the republic have been killed, according to figures compiled by activists.

During the 2022 mobilization, men in the region were taken from their workplaces, detained on the street or collected from their homes at night to be sent to the front, said Sholbaana Kuular of New Tuva.

"We have been living with anxiety and fear since June because we have not yet recovered from the so-called 'first wave'," she said.

President Vladimir Putin directly linked the Sept. 18-20 elections to public support for the war, urging Russians to vote and "demonstrate that millions of people stand behind our soldiers."

Yet Russian officials, including Putin himself, have repeatedly sought to dispel speculation over a new draft. Over the past three months, they have denied planning a new mobilization 18 times.

After the 2022 mobilization triggered widespread discontent, the Kremlin has relied on contract soldiers lured to sign up through payments of up to 5.5 million rubles ($70,000) for a year of service — or simply forced to sign military contracts.

Because military contracts cannot be annulled while the 2022 mobilization decree remains in force, lawyers say that contract soldiers and mobilized servicemen remain bound to serve until the war ends or the authorities release them.

Activists have documented cases in at least 17 regions in which security forces and military enlistment officers detained men and pressured them to sign contracts following coordinated street raids. Some were reportedly threatened with having drugs planted on them.

Idite Lesom ("Get Lost"), a group that helps Russian men avoid military service, said pressure on potential recruits and conscripts performing their mandatory military service has risen sharply in recent months.

"The authorities are making extremely effective use of the fear of mobilization," Idite Lesom spokesman Ivan Chuviliayev told The Moscow Times.

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Recruiters tell men that they can still choose some of the terms of their service if they sign a contract voluntarily while warning that they would have no such choice during a mobilization, he said.

"They are building this very effective narrative: 'Sign a contract now, before mobilization begins. Once mobilization starts, it will be too late'," Chuviliayev said.

In 2024, Russia introduced an electronic military register containing records on citizens liable for military service, which could make a new mobilization easier to carry out.

The register allows authorities to use electronic summonses to prevent conscripts from leaving the country. Russians subject to mandatory military service are barred from leaving Russia from the date a summons is deemed served. An electronic summons is considered served seven days after it appears in the register, regardless of whether the recipient has seen it.

New Tuva volunteers help fellow Tyvans by connecting them with military lawyers or translating guidance on avoiding military service into Tyvan, the republic's widely spoken Indigenous Turkic language.

"Covert mobilization in Tyva has not stopped for a single day, and so our work has continued uninterrupted," Kuular said.

Tyva is one of many regions and ethnic republics where fears of a second mobilization are particularly acute, as these places are still grappling with the effects of the first wave.

Maria Vyushkova, a leading expert on regional and ethnic disparities in Russia's war casualties, has attributed this disparity to the disproportionate mobilization of ethnic minorities and Indigenous peoples in 2022.

"It cannot be ruled out that the same will happen in the event of a second mobilization," Vyushkova warned in an interview with The Moscow Times in January.

Related article: 'Extermination of Entire Nations': Scientist Maria Vyushkova Counts Russia's Indigenous War Dead

The election results could also help indicate which regions might face the heaviest recruitment pressure in the event of another mobilization, exiled political commentator Ekaterina Schulmann said.

"Every Russian citizen has a vital interest in ensuring that, in their own region, United Russia gets as small a number of votes as possible," Schulmann said.

"Because if United Russia performs particularly well, that will be seen as evidence that the local administration is working well and effectively and that the population is disciplined and compliant," she added, suggesting that the authorities see such regions as easier places to draft men.

Sargylana Kondakova, co-founder of the Free Yakutia Foundation, an anti-war and Indigenous rights group from the republic of Sakha (Yakutia), likewise said that if a second mobilization happens, it would be "nothing like the first," especially because of the introduction of digital summonses.

"We are seeing a large wave of emigration from the republic. People often ask us what documents to prepare before leaving the country," said Kondakova. "And those people who can't leave are preparing to hide locally."

In Tyva, men who could afford to leave the country did so over the summer, while those who lacked the financial means to go abroad relocated to nearby regions in hopes of evading a call-up, according to the anonymous New Tuva volunteer based in the republic.

Estimates of the number of people who have left Russia since February 2022 range from 500,000 to 1.3 million. Yet it is hard to measure how many more are considering leaving this year.

Despite widespread fatigue with the war, activist Kondakova ruled out a return of the street protests seen in 2022 — even in Sakha, where Russia's largest women-led anti-mobilization protest took place.

"Most of those who were willing to protest left and the remaining people are apathetic and depressed. It would be wrong to say that they came to terms with their fate," said Kondakova. "They will resist, but in their own quiet way."

For now, experts say the Kremlin is still recruiting enough soldiers to cover its battlefield losses.

Military analyst Dmitry Kuznets told The Moscow Times that Russia is recruiting around 30,000 people a month, allowing it to offset the number of troops killed, seriously wounded, captured or missing. He said the recruitment rate had remained unchanged since July.

"There is no need for an urgent mobilization" in Russia, he said. "Whether [Putin] is assessing the situation rationally remains an open question."

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