

Partial mobilisation in Russia. War after 209 days

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On 21 September, President Vladimir Putin signed the decree 'On the announcement of partial mobilisation in the Russian Federation'. The document provides for the recruitment into the Russian Armed Forces of citizens obliged to serve in the military and to put them on an equal footing with contract service soldiers. According to Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, classified item 7 of the decree specifies the number of those subject to mobilisation. Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, on the other hand, said that 300,000 reservists of selected specialties are involved. The recruitment is to exclude regular service soldiers and students.

A day earlier, the authorities of the puppet so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DPR and LPR) and the occupying administrations of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts announced their intention to hold 'referendums' on 23–27 September on the subject of joining Russia. In response, the Ukrainian authorities stated that the pseudo-referendums were an 'asymmetrical' response to the successful counter-offensive and that holding them would not stop the Ukrainian army from continuing to oust the occupying forces. President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Kyiv would not be intimidated and would continue to strive to retake the lost territories. Head of the President's Office Andriy Yermak called the Kremlin's decision 'naïve blackmail' and manipulation, betraying a fear of failure.

The main arena of fighting remains the Donbas. Defender forces continue to repel the enemy's assault on Bakhmut from the south, south-east, and north-east, and on localities west of Donetsk. An attempted Russian assault on Bilohirka along the Inhulets River, which forms the border of the Kherson and Mykolaiv oblasts, was said to have failed. According to unconfirmed reports, Ukrainian troops were to enter the village of Yarova in the Donetsk Oblast, adjacent to Sviatohirsk, and Bilohorivka in the Luhansk Oblast.

Russian artillery and aviation continue to strike at the positions and hinterland of Ukrainian forces along the contact line and in the border areas of Sumy and Chernihiv oblasts. The number of attacks on Kryvyi Rih, Ochakiv, and Zaporizhzhia increased. The aggressor was also to carry out an unsuccessful attack on the Pechenihy Reservoir dam on the Donets River. Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Nikopol, and Sloviansk, as well as numerous smaller towns in their vicinity and south-east of Zaporizhzhia, remain constant targets. The Ukrainians once again shelled and bombed Nova Kakhovka in the Kherson Oblast and Svatove in the Luhansk Oblast.

The Ukrainian General Staff has announced new units being formed and prepared by the Russians for participation in the operation. As many as four new battalions will be formed

as part of the 36th Mechanised Brigade from the 29th Combined Arms Army of the Eastern Military District, staffed by military academy lecturers. Subdivisions of the 217th Airborne Regiment of the 98th Airborne Division are to be withdrawn from Syria to be redeployed to operations in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian Interior Ministry notified on 19 September that it was continuing to take control of the liberated areas of the Kharkiv Oblast. So far, it has succeeded in 118 villages with a population of around 50,000. New mass graves are being revealed, and law enforcement officials have found another 168 bodies (they bore traces of brutal torture). The ministry has collected evidence of 292 Russian crimes within the Kharkiv Oblast.

According to the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the command of the 58th Army of the Russian Federation instructed commanders of units operating in the Zaporizhzhia direction to hold their positions at all costs. A training camp for Russian-recruited prisoners to feed the units of the so-called DPR militia has been organised at a training ground near the town of Chystiakove (formerly Torez) in the Donetsk Oblast. According to Ukrainian intelligence, the enemy is actively preparing for defensive operations – expanding three defence lines in the Kherson Oblast for this purpose. It was stressed that replenishing reserves does not mean the Russians will take the initiative on the battlefield.

On 20 September, the State Duma adopted a package of amendments to the Criminal Code. The amendment introduces an additional aggravating circumstance when committing an offence against property ‘during mobilisation or martial law and in wartime’. A soldier’s arbitrary departure from a unit for up to 10 days will be punishable by up to five years’ imprisonment, up to 30 days’ imprisonment will be punishable by seven years’ imprisonment, and more than 30 days’ imprisonment will be punishable by 10 years’ imprisonment. There will also be a penalty of up to 3 years’ imprisonment for refusal to participate in hostilities and up to 10 years if this has caused severe consequences for combat operations. There is a penalty of up to 10 years’ imprisonment for violating the terms of state contracts in the defence sphere and failing to execute them.

Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin announced that the city government was organising the ‘infrastructure’ to recruit foreigners into the Russian armed forces at the Sakharov Migration Centre. In doing so, he assured that migrants who apply for contractual service would be able to obtain citizenship.

At a meeting on the issue of the development of the defence-industrial complex on 20 September, President Putin called for the army to be provided with ‘means of destruction’, and for Western weapons captured in Ukraine to be examined. He also demanded that a plan for 100 per cent import substitution in the defence sector and a reduction in arms production time be implemented.

Commentary

- The decree on partial mobilisation allows for the recruitment of de facto all Russian citizens committed to military service. In the case of junior officers, non-commissioned officers and privates, this applies to men between the ages of 19 and 50, and senior officers and generals/admirals – up to the ages of 55 and 60, respectively (the regulations allow for the possibility of extending military service under the contract

system up to the age of 65, and generals/admirals – up to the age of 70). One can therefore assume that Minister Shoigu's information about the planned recruitment of 300,000 soldiers with military training is only a current interpretation of the decree and that mobilisation can be extended practically freely, depending on the army's needs.

- Russia has far more trained reserves than 300,000 people. For nearly a decade, around 200,000 soldiers have been completing their basic military service annually in the ranks of the Russian Armed Forces, and another 50,000 in the ranks of the so-called other forces subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior and the Federal Security Service. In addition, in recent years, around 60,000 people have been called up each year for reserve training (lasting from two weeks to two months). Moscow, therefore, has no problem with a shortage of trained cadres, but their motivation remains an open question. One can assume that 300,000 is the number of people who can be prepared for combat and adequately equipped in a relatively short time. It is also worth noting that Russia still has the stockpiles of heavy weaponry and military equipment that make this possible.
- The first units with newly mobilised soldiers should reach the front within two months. However, it must be assumed that their level of preparedness will be relatively low, comparable to that observed in volunteers with no military experience and in soldiers serving on short-term contracts (up to six months; often signed while still in basic military service).
- Implementing the announced mobilisation plan may contribute to a significant change in the situation on the frontline in favour of the aggressor. The action taken by the Kremlin should also be read as a challenge to the West. In a similar timeframe as the Russians intend to throw new units into battle, the states supporting Kyiv will face the need not only to maintain but, above all, to increase military support for the Ukrainian Armed Forces significantly.
- The announcement of mobilisation and changes to the penal code confirms that the Kremlin is placing Russia under a state of undeclared martial law. It also signals that there are serious discipline problems in the army. The penalties are intended to deter soldiers from attempting to evade duty or refusing to take part in combat. The proposed criminalisation of offences related to the execution of contracts in the defence industry is an attempt to counter existing corruption practices. The tightening of criminal laws is a typical response by the Russian authorities, who consider increased repressiveness as an effective means of managing society.
- In response to the announcement of the annexation referendums, Kyiv has taken a firm yet calm stance: they will be invalid, and presenting the occupied territories as new subjects of the Russian Federation will have no legal consequences for the Ukrainian state. The Ukrainian side also rejects Kremlin's blackmail that the continuation of fighting in the annexed oblasts will be considered a direct attack on Russia and will escalate the conflict. In social terms, annexation will only radicalise anti-Russian attitudes in Ukraine and will not affect the motivation for further fighting. Moreover, the annexed areas will be the site of increased diversionary activity designed to disrupt not so much the 'referendum' process itself, but the functioning of the occupation administration as a whole. Internationally, annexation will make it easier for the Ukrainian authorities to intensify their efforts to sustain accusations against Moscow of waging an 'aggression

war' and to lobby for the recognition of Russia as a terrorist state.