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Putin's foreign legion. Foreigners fighting in the war with Ukraine

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Since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian authorities have faced the growing problem of replenishing the human losses on the front which have been suffered by both the regular armed forces and the 'volunteer' units. In an attempt to identify additional mobilisation potential to minimise the participation of Russians in the bloody fighting in Ukraine, the Kremlin and its top military officials have considered several solutions, including a plan to conscript citizens of other countries into the Russian army. These include economic migrants hailing from the former Soviet republics who reside in the Russian Federation, as well as residents of other countries who would agree to come to Russia for this purpose.

The need to recruit foreigners to serve in the Russian army became so urgent that a series of legislative acts to regulate the enlistment of these individuals has been enacted over the last two years. In addition to higher/relatively high pay, the authorities intend to attract them by facilitating the procedure for obtaining Russian citizenship. Although the number of soldiers recruited in this way is difficult to estimate, the launch of this process indicates that the military will continue to recruit 'cannon fodder' not only at home, but also abroad.

Facilitated legal procedures for recruiting foreigners

A series of legal amendments adopted suggest that the Russian authorities are very interested in attracting foreigners to the Russian armed forces. As the conflict with Ukraine has continued, restrictions on replenishing the army with citizens of other countries have gradually been lifted and incentives for potential conscripts introduced.

Provisions allowing for the enlistment of foreigners into the Russian Armed Forces were already present in the law of 28 March 1998 'On Military Obligation and Military Service' and in the Military Service Regulations approved by the presidential decree of 16 September 1999. These documents envisaged that foreigners between the ages of 18 and 30 are allowed to sign a five-year contract for service in the army and navy as privates and non-commissioned officers. However, knowledge of the Russian language was a precondition for them being allowed to sign such a contract. Following the invasion of Ukraine, these regulations were 'liberalised' to expand the age limit. In addition, the duration of the contract was reduced and a simplified procedure for applying for Russian citizenship was introduced. At the end of May 2022, Vladimir Putin lifted the upper age limit for contract soldiers (previously only healthy and fit Russians up to the age of 40 and foreigners up to the age of 30 were allowed to sign an enlistment contract). On 30 September 2022, a law

came into force regarding a simplified procedure for the acquisition of Russian citizenship by foreigners and stateless persons who have signed a contract of at least one year with the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (as well as unspecified other military structures and units) and took part in hostilities for six months (previously, individuals who had served for at least three years were allowed to apply for Russian citizenship) and their families.

Foreigners serving in the army have been granted the right to apply for Russian citizenship without the need to hold a residence permit and to reside in Russia for the past five years. On 14 November 2022, Putin signed a decree according to which conscription should also cover Russians who also hold the citizenship of another country (previously, such individuals had not been called up for compulsory military service). However, on 27 February 2023, he reduced the duration of the one-time military service contract for foreigners to one year (from five years). He also prohibited these individuals from signing another contract. This was intended to attract individuals who are interested in earning a quick income. In May 2023, the provision according to which individuals applying for Russian citizenship were required to have spent six months taking part in the hostilities was revoked. On 4 January 2024, another decree to further simplify the criteria for foreigners fighting on Russia's side and their family members obtaining Russian citizenship came into force. In mid-January, a draft amendment to enable foreigners serving a prison sentence in Russia to volunteer for military service was submitted to the State Duma; if adopted, this will effectively formalise a practice which is already in place.

Alongside this, the government simplified the procedure for residents of selected countries to obtain Russian citizenship. Following the launch of the full-scale invasion, a facilitated procedure was introduced for citizens of Ukraine (those holding a residence permit valid in the Russian Federation, as well as those who were born in Crimea and Sevastopol but had left these locations before the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and their children), Belarus (the requirement to demonstrate command of the Russian language and basic knowledge of Russian history and legislation has been revoked; Belarusian citizens have also been exempted from the five-year residency requirement), Kazakhstan and Moldova (the previous residency requirement has been revoked), Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Yemen (those who were born on the territory of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and previously held citizenship of the USSR, and their children). The facilitated procedure also covered stateless persons (for example those who had illegally been deported from the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, as well as their relatives).

Foreigners fighting on the front

The BBC Russian Service has established that by the end of December 2023 at least 254 foreigners who served in the ranks of the Russian army had been killed (see '*«Год мясорубок»: что нам известно о потерях России в Украине за 2023 год*'). At the same time, however, it is impossible to determine even an approximate number of foreigners fighting for the Kremlin. Foreign nationals have served both in mercenary groups (mainly in the Wagner Group before its dissolution) and in regular units of the Russian Armed Forces.

Many foreign conscripts are economic migrants, most of whom come from Central Asia (primarily from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). In 2023, at least 3.5 million such individuals came to Russia to work (in 2022 the figure was more than 3 mn, in 2021 more

than 2 mn). Recruitment of these individuals was launched shortly before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It intensified in 2023, when the law enforcement bodies carried out a large-scale campaign involving raids on workplaces, marketplaces, mosques, hostels etc. At least several hundred detainees holding Russian citizenship were handed summonses to military draft centres to register their personal details for the needs of military service, or were transported directly to the relevant offices. Instances of a *de facto* forcible enlistment of new immigrants who did not hold Russian citizenship and those awaiting deportation were recorded. The law enforcement officers suggested to them that military service could save them from imprisonment or deportation.

In addition, Russia is sending Ukrainian migrants to work in the occupied territories and forcing them to work on the front lines and in the rear of the combatant troops, and conscripting them into the Russian army. The governments of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have not protested against Moscow's enlistment of their nationals, and have limited themselves to reminding these individuals of the criminal responsibility they face for taking part in hostilities abroad. According to independent media reports, at least 100 citizens of Central Asian states have been killed since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine.

It should be noted that since the beginning of the invasion the Kremlin has also been recruiting individuals from outside the post-Soviet area, offering them a monthly salary of $2000–3000 and a simplified procedure for obtaining Russian citizenship. In doing so, it sometimes resorts to illegal practices bearing the hallmarks of human trafficking, which has already caused diplomatic incidents (although so far these have been relatively minor).

Foreigners fighting for Russia include citizens of Cuba, Nepal, Syria, Serbia, Afghanistan, Somalia and Malaysia. Their total number is probably in the thousands. Russia uses various methods for recruiting foreign soldiers. In Cuba and Nepal (Moscow has recruited several hundred individuals in both these two states), groups involved in enlisting foreigners (including by using deceit) and transporting them to Russia have been broken up. The Cuban government has adopted an ambiguous approach which suggests its tacit approval of this practice. The foreign ministry has distanced itself from involvement in these activities and condemned the enlistment of mercenaries, while the Cuban ambassador to Moscow stated that Havana did not object to the participation of Cuban nationals in the war in Ukraine as long as it is "legal". The government of Nepal, for its part, has prohibited its citizens from seeking employment in Russia and Ukraine, and requested Moscow to send the conscripted Nepalese nationals and the bodies of those killed back to Nepal.

In Syria Russia has most likely conscripted just a few hundred new soldiers, contrary to reports suggesting that several thousand individuals volunteered for military service in the Russian army. The Ukrainian war enlistment campaign was likely carried out with the backing of the Kremlin-friendly Bashar al-Assad regime. The fighters enlisted mainly came from the government's troops; these may include the elite 25th Special Mission Forces Division and the Liwa al-Quds brigade made up of Syrian Palestinians, whom the Russians had previously trained to fight against the internal opposition and Islamic State.

Around a hundred Serbian nationals are also fighting on Russia's side, including at least some who have justified their involvement in ideological reasons (a group of such individuals took part in the war in Ukraine back in 2014). Despite Belgrade's pro-Russian

sentiments and its restrained stance on the invasion, President Aleksandar Vučić has announced that Serbian mercenaries will face legal consequences, and has indirectly criticised Moscow.

The Kremlin has also attempted to enlist former soldiers of Afghan security forces who left Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover.

The Somali citizens who have been forcibly enlisted into the Russian army (there are at least eight such individuals) are an element of a bigger group which was arrested for violating passport regulations (these people attempted to enter the European Union from Belarus and Russia, the countries which have been putting migration pressure on the EU borders). Moscow has also conscripted foreigners who were serving sentences in Russian prisons; this is how individual citizens of Tanzania, the Ivory Coast and Zambia were incorporated into the Wagner Group.

Outlook

Should the enlistment campaign continue or intensify, both abroad and at home among economic migrants, this will generate a political risk for Moscow. Although the individuals whom Russia has recruited to fight in the war in Ukraine are citizens of friendly or neutral countries whose reactions to the Kremlin's moves have so far been restrained, it cannot be ruled out that this issue will become a source of tension in bilateral relations in the future. In addition, Moscow's enlistment initiatives may undermine its image in societies of the Global South.

The legislative solutions regulating the recruitment of 'volunteers' among citizens of various countries across the world have enabled the Russian Armed Forces to replenish the units which have suffered the greatest losses on the front in an *ad hoc* manner. However, the revealed numbers of individuals conscripted in this way indicate that at present their involvement in the war is providing only a slight replenishment to the combatant units. Despite this, the Russians will continue to recruit soldiers abroad, especially in countries with high poverty rates.