

# Explainer on Russian Conscription, Reserve, and Mobilization

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- *The early announcement of the 2022 spring draft is unlikely to increase Russian combat power in Ukraine in the near term.*
- *Recent Russian efforts to create a Western-style reserve force are unlikely to materially impact combat operations in Ukraine.*
- *As Russia exhausts its high-readiness units staffed with contract soldiers, the quality of reinforcements is likely to be much lower than the units first committed to the invasion.*

The Russian military is a hybrid format combining a traditional cadre-and-reserve conscript system and a contract-professional system. While the Russian Army has made efforts to professionalize its ranks, particularly in the last 15 years, it remains reliant on conscripts, both for its active-duty force and for its reserve forces in the event of general mobilization.<sup>1</sup> Most combat units must be filled out by conscripts or mobilized reservists in order to be combat-capable. Contract soldiers are concentrated in the cadre and elite units, especially the airborne units.

The cadre-and-reserve units of the Russian Armed Forces are maintained at a low readiness with a limited number of professional staff and conscripts, with the expectation that they would be staffed with reservists in the event of mobilization.<sup>2</sup> The Russians have already used many cadre-and-reserve units in Ukraine, and they have not performed well against the Ukrainians, with some units suffering heavy losses. Russia does not likely have a large reserve of highly skilled contract units remaining, although there are probably some uncommitted forces.

## Conscription

The Russian Armed Forces conscript men semi-annually, with the fall draft lasting from October 1 until December 31 and the spring draft running from April 1 until July 15.<sup>3</sup> In 2022, the Kremlin announced the spring draft early on February 18.<sup>4</sup> The draft affects all men aged 18 to 27 years old, though some conscripts can be as young as 16 years old.<sup>5</sup> Russian conscripts typically serve one year.<sup>6</sup> The annual conscription pool of all Russian military-aged men is approximately 1.2 million people, though only about half are compelled to present themselves at their local military commissariat (voenkomat). The Russian General Staff reported conscripting 127,000 people for the fall 2021 draft and 134,000 people in spring 2021 out of 672,000 summoned men.<sup>7</sup> The number of conscripts is relatively consistent year on year, with 263,000 in 2020 and 267,000 in 2019.<sup>8</sup> Approximately 261,000 conscripts from 2021 are currently serving across Russian units, with the fall 2021 conscripts entering their third month of training.

New conscripts undergo a one- to two-month basic training, followed by three-to-six months of advanced training before arriving at their assigned units.<sup>9</sup> Current law precludes conscripts from deploying to combat with less than four months of training; however, martial law or general mobilization could supersede the current policy, allowing for the immediate employment of new conscripts or mobilized reservists.<sup>10</sup> Some of the fall 2021 conscripts are likely already serving in units

fighting in Ukraine. The rapid employment of relatively untrained reservists is unlikely to materially increase Russia's combat power in Ukraine.

## Russian Reserve

**The Russian reserve has over two million former conscripts and contract servicemen on paper, but few are actively trained or prepared for war.**<sup>11</sup> Historically, only 10 percent of reservists receive refresher training after completing their initial term of service.<sup>12</sup> Russia lacks the administrative and financial capacity to train reservists on an ongoing basis. According to a 2019 RAND analysis, Russia only had 4,000 to 5,000 troops in what would be considered an active reserve in the Western sense, meaning soldiers attending regular monthly and annual training.<sup>13</sup> Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu has repeatedly stated that the Russian Armed Forces hoped to have 80,000-100,000 active reserve members.<sup>14</sup>

In 2021, the Russian military started a new initiative to remedy its lack of a ready reserve, the **Russian Combat Army Reserve (BARS-2021)**. BARS-2021 aimed to establish an active reserve by recruiting volunteer reservists for three-year contract service.<sup>15</sup> BARS-2021 operated on the same principle as US and NATO reserves, where reservists actively train and are compensated. The concept of BARS-2021 was that volunteer Russian reservists would regularly participate in monthly exercises and maintain their mobilization readiness while maintaining their civilian jobs.<sup>16</sup>

Local administrations began distributing information about enlisting into the Russian reserves throughout late August and early September 2021, offering significant financial incentives.<sup>17</sup> Eligible reservists included soldiers younger than 42, junior officers younger than 47, colonels younger than 57, and other senior officials younger than 52.<sup>18</sup> Reservists would continue training two or three times a month throughout peacetime and form their own military units. The Southern Military District (SMD) announced a goal of having a 38,000-person reserve corps of service veterans, up from 400 people.<sup>19</sup> There is limited information on how many reservists returned to military service; Novokuznetsk data shows that the city planned to gain 220 reservists, but reported only recruiting 20.<sup>20</sup> The Central Military District (CMD) reported conducting a BARS-2022 program from January 24-26, 2022, during which the CMD gained 9,000 reservists.

The Russian Armed Forces sought to create exclusively reservist units but likely did not accomplish its goals due to low engagement.<sup>21</sup> **The Russian Defense Ministry hoped to recruit more than 100,000 reservists starting in August 2021, but it is unlikely the Kremlin was able to achieve its goals on such a short timeline.**

## Mobilization

Current law limits mobilization of reserves to soldiers and sailors younger than 45 and officers younger than 55. Men who transferred to the reserve less than two years ago, fathers of three or more children, and those with criminal records are also exempt from mobilization under current law.<sup>22</sup> The Russian State Duma adopted a bill on February 22 to strengthen general mobilization, making it mandatory for men to appear at a military commissar's office without receiving a conscription notice from regional authorities.<sup>23</sup> This law will reduce the administrative time needed to enlist conscripts if the Kremlin announces martial law. Russian independent media source *Vazhnye Istorii* explained that the Russian military can activate both reservists and new conscripts during general mobilization, including those previously exempted from conscription.<sup>24</sup>

In the event of a general mobilization, the Russian Army will likely attempt to fill the ranks of nascent reserve units and backfill combat casualties from units already serving in Ukraine.

The Russian cadre-and-reserve units concentrated around Ukraine before the invasion almost certainly required a significant reserve call-up to fill out. As the ground offensive in Ukraine stalls, the Russian military likely faces a requirement for a new reserve call up to fill out additional units and replace individual losses in these units. There is reporting as of March 5 that 3,000 individual replacements are being mobilized across the Russian border from Kharkiv to replace combat losses in Russian units.<sup>25</sup>

As early as December 2021, the Russian Committee for Soldier's Mothers claimed that newly signed reservists and contractors started deploying to units near the Ukrainian border.<sup>26</sup> The Committee claimed that the new reservists arrived in Belgorod Oblast to the following units: Training Military unit in Kovrov (unit number 306616), 752nd Motorized Rifle Regiment (Valuyki), 3rd Motorized Rifle Division (Boguchar, Valuyki), 4th Guards Tank Division, and 2nd Guards Motor Rifle Division.<sup>27</sup> US officials also note that Russian reservists will be integrated across all 120-125 battalion tactical groups following the initial invasion.<sup>28</sup>

## ***Conclusion***

Russia is likely rapidly exhausting the manpower it can readily use to generate additional effective combat power even as its forces lose combat effectiveness in Ukraine amid high losses. Russian efforts to mobilize more manpower can bring more people into Russian combat units, but those people are unlikely to be well-enough trained or motivated to generate large amounts of new combat power.

Mobilization efforts are likely to start producing diminishing returns as Russia moves through the categories of fully-trained and recently-released reservists into categories of people further removed from their initial military experiences and/or those who will undergo hasty training before deployment to the front lines. Individual replacements for battlefield losses are unlikely to have the same training as their predecessors, and new units or those reinforced by these augmentees will not have undergone unit-level training prior to employment. More units and reservist replacements will likely appear in Ukraine, therefore, but the net effect on Russia's actual combat capability will likely be small and diminishing.

A declaration of martial law and general mobilization would not overcome the structural challenges of Russia's hybrid cadre-and-reserves and contract-soldier system. Creating cohesive fighting units cannot be accomplished overnight. Replacing individual combat casualties in Ukraine with recalled reservists who have gone years without military training is unlikely to dramatically increase Russian combat power.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3099.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3099.html)

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.kp.ru/putevoditel/obrazovanie/vesennij-prizyv/>; <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/794657>

<sup>4</sup> <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202202180067>; <https://nv.ua/world/geopolitics/rossiya-prodolzhaet-styagivat-voyska-k-granice-s-ukrainoy-analitik-cit-na-radio-nv-50205189.html>; <https://vk.com/tatarstan.ru/index.htm/news/2000133.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.kp.ru/putevoditel/obrazovanie/vesennij-prizyv/>; [http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_18260/673dfb400c48363d58052a3dd0e762af36f38979/](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_18260/673dfb400c48363d58052a3dd0e762af36f38979/)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_18260/](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_18260/)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/794657>; <https://ria.ru/20210930/trebovaniya-1752464085.html>

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