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The Kremlin At A Crossroads: Army Recruitment, Roundups Of Men, And The Risks Of A New Mobilization

Russia’s recruitment crisis is pushing the Kremlin toward covert mobilization, as raids in Penza expose growing military shortages and political risks.

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Recent roundups of men in the Penza region, acknowledged by regional authorities but ignored by national propaganda and most Z-bloggers, demonstrate that the security bloc is testing both the mobilization infrastructure and the possible public reaction. At the same time, even within the pro-war Z-community, mobilization is increasingly seen not as a path to victory but as a threat of "the country's collapse from within."

Key topics:

1. Recruitment rates in the Russian Armed Forces and roundups in Penza

2. Responses from the authorities, propaganda, and the Z-community

3. Mobilization prospects: leaks, officials, and Z-bloggers

Executive Summary

The crisis in the commercial recruitment model is forcing the Kremlin to expand covert mechanisms for replenishing the army's ranks rather than resorting to open mobilization, which is politically toxic ahead of the parliamentary elections in September. Recent roundups of men in the Penza region, acknowledged by regional authorities but ignored by national propaganda and most Z-bloggers, demonstrate that **the security bloc is testing both the mobilization infrastructure and the possible public reaction. At the same time**, even within the pro-war Z-community, mobilization is increasingly seen not as a path to victory but as a threat of "the country's collapse from within."

The deteriorating tactical situation for Russian forces along the line of contact, the drone advantage held by the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), and worsening logistics in the occupied territories due to constant strikes are all unfolding against a backdrop of intensifying recruitment problems for the Russian military.

According to expert estimates[1], the intake of new recruits has fallen to its lowest level of the entire war, dropping 20-25 percent at the start of the year despite major financial incentives: at least 40 Russian regions raised contract-signing bonuses in the first half of the year[2] to roughly $55,000[3].

Moscow is trying to compensate for the shortfall through covert, targeted recruitment campaigns: recruiting students into drone units, assigning enterprises quotas for the number of new recruits they must supply, and disguising military contracts as job postings for work "'in the Special Military Operation rear' in Belarus or China"[4].

The 2022 partial mobilization decree remains in force, but the political risks of invoking it ahead of the parliamentary elections in September 2026 are so high that the Kremlin is trying to avoid even discussing mobilization as a topic[5]. Officials,

as illustrated by Senator Andrei Klishas' recent remarks, continue to insist that "a new wave of mobilization is not currently under discussion,"[6] even as the Kremlin keeps refining its mobilization infrastructure: on June 18, the Volgograd region hosted a training session for officials who run mobilization structures in several regions[7]. The Telegram channel Nezygar, which is close to the Presidential Administration (PA), states outright that "the organizational mechanisms for carrying out mobilization measures exist, but there are as yet no signs that the corresponding political decision has been made."[8]

Against this backdrop, a series of roundups targeting men and a campaign to coerce men into signing contracts with the Ministry of Defense began in Penza on June 16[9]. According to rumors circulating in regional chats, Moscow set a target of 6,000 new contract soldiers from the region, with local police required to deliver the recruits with the help of military investigators and traffic police.

The public stir caused by the wave of raids triggered local self-organization: residents of Penza and the surrounding region warned each other about roundups in chats on Telegram, which is banned in Russia, and actively shared photos and videos of the raids.

On June 19, regional authorities acknowledged the roundups, describing their purpose as "searching for citizens evading conscription or failing to register for military service,"[10] and later threatened legal consequences for "spreading unverified information […] about the alleged mass detention of men by police officers for dispatch to the SMO zone,"[11] which led to the deletion of the relevant chats and channels[12].

News of the raids was almost entirely ignored both by national propaganda outlets, with the Ministry of Defense reposting[13] a post from the official channel War on Fakes claiming that a "false narrative about 'forced mobilization' in the Penza region is being spread," and by nearly all pro-war Z-bloggers: military blogger Dmitry Steshin called[14] the roundups "an information-warfare operation by the enemy" and "destabilizing provocations,"

disregarding the fact that they had been directly acknowledged by the authorities.

Taken together, these factors suggest that the security bloc is testing both the mobilization infrastructure and the possible public reaction to it: within Russia's system of governance, security agencies are formally accountable and subordinate to Moscow rather than to regional authorities.

The approaching State Duma election campaign in September, along with the concurrent gubernatorial election in the Penza region, points to federal-level responsibility for the raid campaign rather than regional initiative: during the run-up to elections, the Presidential Administration, working through regional curators who typically hold the post of deputy governor for domestic policy, along with the teams of governors seeking re-election, generally tries to smooth over public discontent rather than give it additional fuel, particularly during the summer, which is normally a "quiet" period for events.

According to sources cited by the independent outlet Meduza[15], members of the security bloc, FSB director Alexander Bortnikov and National Guard chief Viktor Zolotov, are trying to persuade Putin to cancel the upcoming State Duma elections, but for now this scenario remains purely theoretical, as it carries serious risks: an admission of destabilization within Russia, the loss of the narrative that "Ukraine doesn't hold elections, but we do," and other narratives that legitimize the authorities' current course.

At the same time, calls for mobilization are growing fainter within the pro-war Z-community: aware of the real situation at the front and of public sentiment, Z-bloggers increasingly view a possible post-election mobilization as a threat to the country rather than as a path to victory.

As Z-author Yuri Kotenok puts it, "Something tells me mobilization can't be avoided. […] this mobilization will hit domestic politics and affect attitudes toward the authorities,"[16] while military blogger Roman Alekhin, designated a "foreign agent" for his criticism of the authorities, writes outright

that "mobilization will tear the country apart from within,"[17] even as the enemy understands that "Russia's current military leadership will choose mobilization precisely in order to preserve itself."[18]

Military volunteer Alexei Zhivov, for his part, argues[19] that mobilization should have been carried out much earlier, "in annual waves of a million people," and that the moment for this has effectively been missed because "the authorities feared a rise in self-awareness among mobilized men," with the result that "we have ended up with a maximally toxic society, from children to the elderly."

Recruitment Rates In The Russian Armed Forces And Roundups In Penza

The commercial contract model the Kremlin relies on for recruitment **is in crisis**: according to expert estimates[20], the intake of contract soldiers fell by 20-25 percent in late 2025 and early 2026, reaching its lowest level of the entire war.

To address this problem, Russian authorities have been expanding the range of substantial financial incentives: depending on the region, a new recruit can receive up to 4.1 million rubles (~$55,000) upon signing an initial contract[21], up to 17.5 million rubles (~$236,000) for the first year of service[22], and, as of May 25, 2026, may have up to 10 million rubles (~$135,000) in loan debt written off[23] – a measure particularly relevant for poorer regions with high levels of consumer debt.

However, according to sources cited by the Telegram channel Nezygar, which is close to the Presidential Administration, "the scope for further payment increases has been practically exhausted in many regions,"[24] with roughly 40 regions having raised payments in the first half of 2026 alone.

Authorities are also running a targeted recruitment campaign: recruiting students, including female students[25], into drone units (as of early April, agitation had been documented at a minimum of 269 universities and colleges[26]); regional authorities pressuring local employers, who are required to send staff into contract service under regional quotas (documented in at least the Ryazan region[27]); and even disguising military contracts as job postings for work "'in the SMO rear' in Belarus or China"[28] on Russia's largest civilian online recruitment platforms.

The authorities are using covert, targeted recruitment to make up for the shortfall in the main recruitment drive and to bring in personnel with more specialized skills: the focus on students, for instance, reflects their fast reaction times, familiarity

with shooter-game mechanics, trainability, and comfort with digital interfaces, all of which are critical for piloting first-person-view (FPV) drones.

However, the authorities have other levers of recruitment at their disposal as well: the partial mobilization decree announced in September 2022 remains in force despite public statements by officials, and the mobilization infrastructure has been substantially upgraded since 2022, meaning the Kremlin already has ready-made tools for launching a new wave of mobilization within the existing legal framework.

Against this backdrop, on June 16 a campaign of roundups targeting men in the Penza region became public knowledge, with detainees being forced to sign contracts for deployment to the conflict zone. According to rumors circulating in regional chats, Moscow handed down a quota requiring the traffic police to apprehend and deliver at least 1,600 recruits, with an overall target of 6,000 new recruits for the Penza region as a whole.

There are documented cases of detainees ending up in the conflict zone literally the next day[29], with reports that "'police together with the military enlistment office' drive around towns in minibuses, 'stopping and taking away everyone'": they cancel the men's old passports and issue new ones right at the military enlistment office, where contracts are signed on the spot and the men are held by force.

According to some reports, the roundups in the Penza region have been going on for at least six months, but they had not previously attracted the level of attention seen over the past week: on social media, particularly the messenger Telegram, which is banned in Russia, users have been actively warning each other about specific raid locations and posting photos and videos, including footage of wives trying to stop the minibuses used to transport forcibly recruited men[30]. In one documented incident, a disabled veteran in a wheelchair threatened military police with a knife in an attempt to stop a raid, shouting,

> "Mothers don't have any children left, you idiots… I don't want to see you here."[31]

Responses From The Authorities, Propaganda, And The Z-Community

Regional authorities effectively acknowledged the roundups in Penza: on June 19, Andrei Surkov, head of the Penza regional military enlistment office, described the purpose of the raids as "searching for citizens evading conscription or failing to register for military service,"[32] in which military investigators are assisted by traffic police[33] and regular police officers; the regional Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that "the raid operations were aimed at identifying individuals who had obtained Russian citizenship and had not registered for military service in a timely manner,"[34] and later, on June 21, threatened legal consequences for "spreading unverified information [...] about the alleged mass detention of men by police officers for dispatch to the SMO zone."[35] On June 23, the Telegram channel and chat "News of What's Happening," where residents of the region had been sharing information about patrols, were deleted.[36]

National-level official propaganda ignored the Penza roundups almost entirely: the one exception was the official channel War on Fakes, which issued no fewer than three posts[373839] about the "spread of a false narrative about 'forced mobilization' in the Penza region," describing the social media footage as "videos of routine law enforcement work that has nothing to do with 'busification."

The narrative of "lawlessness on the part of Ukraine's Territorial Recruitment Centers (TCCs) and forced mobilization in Ukraine" serves as an important propaganda backdrop against which Russian roundups are presented as normal, unremarkable occurrences. One of these posts was reposted by the official channel of the Russian Ministry of Defense.[40]

The channels of nearly all pro-war Z-bloggers likewise ignored the events in Penza. The exceptions were the largest Z-channel,

run by Yuri Podolyaka (2.7 million subscribers), which reposted War on Fakes' material[41] and thereby took part in the effort to stabilize public opinion, and Alex Parker Returns, a channel critical of the authorities, which wrote sarcastically, "The raids are routine and are carried out periodically across the region. Everything's fine,"[42] underscoring the gap between official claims that the situation is normal and the reality on the ground.

Dmitry Steshin, military blogger for the national newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda, **called**[43] **the roundups "an information-warfare operation by the enemy"** and **"destabilizing provocations",** disregarding the fact that the raids had been directly acknowledged by the authorities.

Mobilization Prospects: Leaks, Officials, And Z-Bloggers

A large number of Kremlin-controlled leaks systematically push the line that no political decision on mobilization has yet been made[4445], and that its prospects are deferred at least until the fall, when State Duma elections will be held on September 18–20.[46]

Officials periodically echo this line: the most recent to do so was Senator Andrei Klishas, who stated on June 11 that "a new wave of mobilization is not currently under discussion."[47] The Telegram channel Nezygar, close to the PA, reports the same official approach: "waves of mobilization discussion will keep arising throughout the summer, which the Kremlin would like to avoid,"[48] and "the military leadership favors additional measures to bring the army up to strength, but the final decision rests with Putin […] The likelihood of mobilization will be determined by the results of the summer campaign and the overall level of escalation."[49]

At the same time, a number of indirect signs suggest that the authorities have not ruled out the possibility of a new mobilization: on June 18, the Volgograd region hosted a training session, described as being "for the exchange of information and experience," for officials who run mobilization structures in several regions, including Kalmykia, Rostov, Astrakhan, and the occupied territories of Crimea, Sevastopol, Donetsk, and Luhansk.

The post about the session was quickly deleted within a few hours from the administration's page where it had originally been published, a fact noted even by Readovka, a major Z-aligned

outlet with ties to the Ministry of Defense[50]. Ilya Grashchenkov, a political analyst close to the Kremlin, states outright:

> "Mobilization is not being discussed politically, but the legal framework created by the 2022 decree has not been fully dismantled. Which means the instrument itself remains in the system as an option."[51]

At the same time, the mood within the Z-community itself has been more pessimistic in recent months: persistent calls for "retributive" escalation, demands to overhaul the management of the Russian armed forces, and hopes for a national mobilization are running up against public war fatigue and indifference on the part of the authorities, even as the situation at the front grows more difficult and drone strike campaigns against Russian regions intensify.

Against this backdrop, voices calling for a new wave of mobilization have become noticeably fainter; instead, a possible mobilization is presented as a factor of "the country's collapse from within,"[52] and some Z-bloggers criticize the Kremlin for failing to order mobilization "in annual waves of a million people"[53] earlier, arguing that the window of opportunity for doing so has already closed.

Pro-war Z-analyst Yuri Kotenok writes[54] that there are three ways to avoid a further deterioration of the military situation: **1)** "go to peace talks right now, demonstrating that we are ready for anything, including concessions"; **2)** start fighting effectively; or **3)** declare mobilization.

> "Something tells me mobilization can't be avoided. This is clear even without factoring in disinformation and the 'priming' of public opinion. And even here the enemy is counting on this mobilization hitting domestic politics hard and affecting attitudes toward the authorities,"

Military blogger Roman Alekhin, designated a "foreign agent" for his criticism of the authorities, issues a similar warning:

> "A second mobilization wouldn't just undercut the economy and could lead to defeat on the domestic political front; it also wouldn't help win the war, because without technological superiority at the tactical and operational levels, unmotivated soldiers lacking communications, electronic warfare support, or drone cover will die rather than win, whether there are a million of them or two,"[55] while the enemy understands that "Russia's current military leadership will choose mobilization precisely in order to preserve itself."[56]

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