# Russia's Regional Recruitment Economy will Force Putin to Get Creative

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Image credit: Klaus Wright

Much has been said in recent weeks about the possibility of a second full-scale mobilisation effort in Russia. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Ukrainian intelligence have claimed that a forced recruitment campaign of colossal proportions is imminent. Supposedly, this will arrive soon after the Russian State Duma elections, set to take place from the 18th to the 20th of September. A mass of 300,000 troops could be forcefully mobilised by the end of 2026, Zelenskyy says (CNN and Reuters, 2026). Of course, it is very much in the President's interest to put forth an image of a Russia which is gearing up to become a radically expanded and more threatening fighting force. The chances of stronger international support —and concomitant materiel—are raised if it appears that Russia may soon break Ukrainian defences along the Fortress Belt and push further west.

Ukrainian fears of 300,000 Russian men mobilised publicly are unlikely to manifest. However, a number of developments within Russia make it highly likely that the Kremlin will soon attempt a renewed mobilisation initiative —but covertly, and probably not on the same scale. Prominent among these pressures is Moscow's devolution of recruitment responsibility to regional governors, which has resulted in a number of regions engaging in fiscally damaging bidding wars over contract recruits. The budgetary damage this has caused, combined with federal fiscal strain and the unrelenting pressure for new bodies at the front, makes it highly likely that the Kremlin will attempt some form of military personnel expansion in the coming months. However, lessons have been learned from the politically damaging call-up of September 2022, and so any augmentation in ranks is most likely to be conducted covertly and coercively. Moscow now appears to be probing possibilities for expansion in this manner. This report aims at elucidating the connection between ongoing poaching and bidding-war strategies, regional fiscal strain, and a future shift towards a coercion-dependent recruitment economy.

## The Kremlin needs men

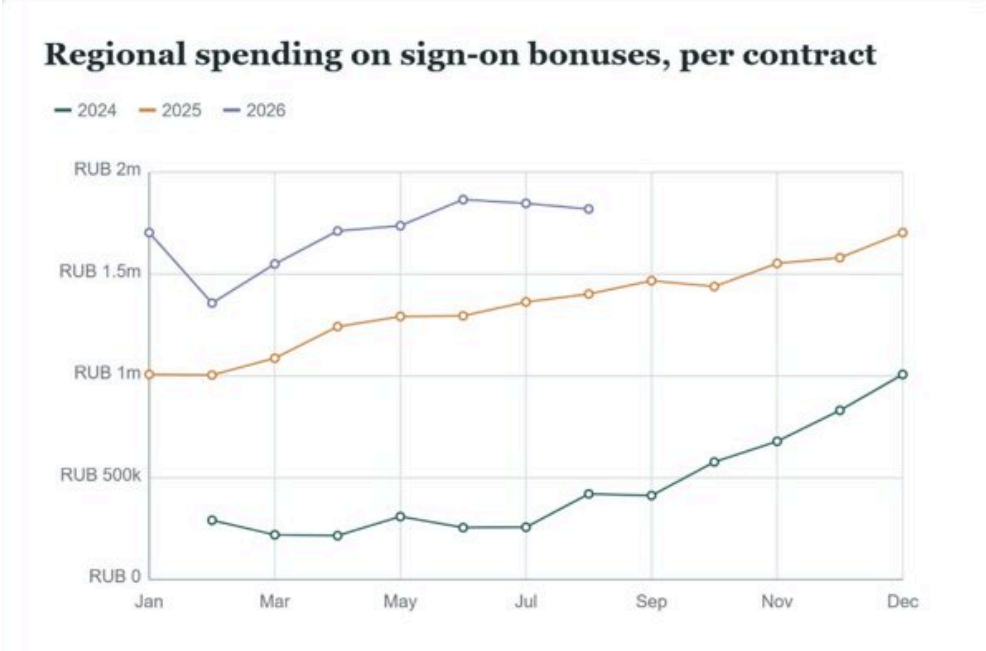
Each one of Russia's 89 recognised and unrecognised regional governors is more than aware of the Kremlin's need for men. Vladimir Putin's body-hungry war machine looms large over their post's security. The performance of a governor is, of course, assessed on a case-by-case basis and in a multitude of ways known only to Putin himself; but, at the present moment, Moscow's recruitment dictates weigh heavily into that performance review. If Putin wishes to achieve his aims of capturing and holding the Fortress Belt and the remaining 20% of the Donbas at large, he must first increase manpower. Estimates of the required force vary widely from 300,000 (Moscow Times, 2026) to 500,000 (Saradzhyan, 2026). What is certain is that Russian forces at the front currently hold no clear advantage over Ukrainian forces. Military analyst Franz-Stefan Gady argues that the Russian advance is progressing at its slowest pace since the winter; that, at the current rate, Donetsk region would not be fully captured until the early 2030s (Naber, 2026). Clearly, manpower is a primary constraining factor for the Russian campaign.

This much was as true in 2022 as it is now. On the 21st of September of that year, Putin signed Decree No. 647, ordering 'partial mobilisation'. This came just two weeks after the Kharkiv counteroffensive, in which Ukrainian forces retook roughly 6,000 square kilometres in under a week. The mobilisation of around 300,000 reservists worked to make the porous Russian line—which had permitted the Ukrainian breakthrough—continuous; after November 2022, Ukraine achieved no further operational-level breakthroughs, inaugurating static, positional warfare. However, for all its strategic value, the Decree broke the implicit social contract which dictated

that the war be fought by professionals and would not impede everyday life. According to a report by OVD-Info, more than 2050 people were detained by Russian authorities in cities across the country in the four days following the Decree. A wave of arson attacks against military commissariats followed, but by far the most damaging repercussion for the Kremlin was a mass exodus of Russians, reaching 500-800,000 people by the end of 2022 (OVD-Info, 2023). Mass-mobilisation was militarily highly desirable, but domestically costly.

## The regional solution

Subsequently, Moscow discovered a sufficiently effective and politically safe recruitment method. This has come in the form of largely offloading the burden of recruitment onto Russia's Federal Subjects—the regions. Should a quota not be met, or local backlash arise, Putin is able to lay the blame squarely with a governor. They are assigned recruitment quotas by the Defence Ministry and must fulfil these, for fear of potential replacement. Regions cannot forcefully mobilise their residents, as mobilisation is a federal prerogative—rather, they rely on a contract-based system. Recruits —known as *Kontraktniki*—sign on at a regional or municipal recruitment office; they are paid a federal lump sum of 400,000 roubles, a federal salary, compensation for injury or death, and a regional sign-on bonus. In order to keep their region within the bounds of acceptable quota performance, and outperform other regions, governors have taken to providing lucrative bonus incentives. In the first seven months of 2026, sign-on bonuses grew to an all-time high of 1.65 million roubles on average, a 30% increase from mid-2025 (Kluge, 2026a). The contracts on offer in Smolensk Oblast are particularly attractive, currently standing at 2.1 million roubles—a 500,000 rouble jump since January (Moscow Times, 2026). Bonuses function as prices in the competitive market for a finite yet mobile supply of recruits. The Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT) reported in August 2024 that men were deliberately travelling to sign on in whichever region offered the highest lump sum (IStories, 2024). Given the continual uptrend in bonus value, it is apparent that an effective bidding war between regions has been occurring, with upward-spiralling average costs representing a substantial drain on regional budgets.

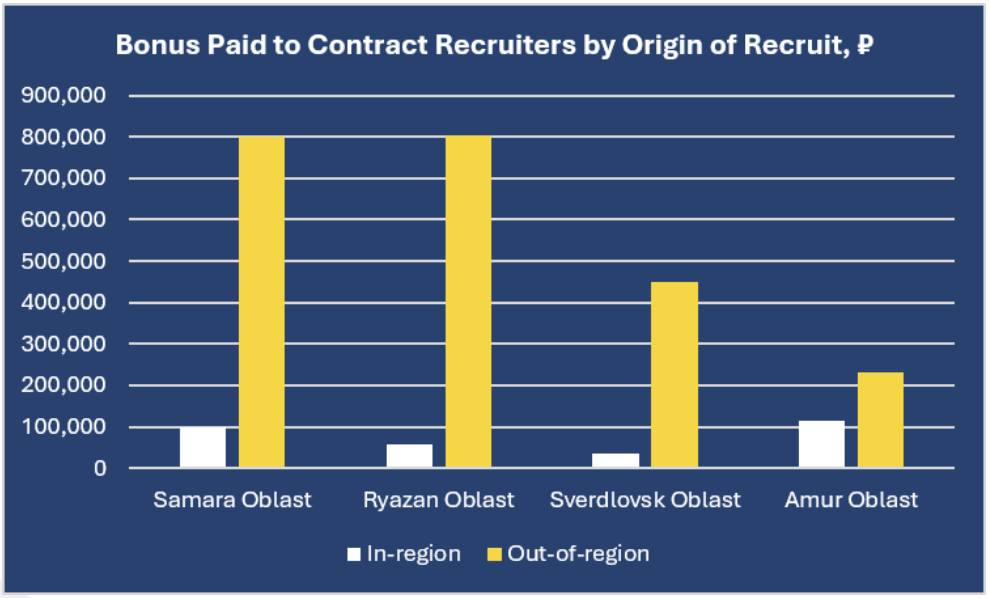



Credit: Janis Kluge, 2026a.

However, sign-on bonuses do not constitute the only layer of regional expenditure on the recruitment process. In August 2025, 31 regions were paying bonuses to recruiters of *Kontraktniki* by August 2026, this had grown to 56 (Kyiv Post, 2026). Since January 2026, eight regions have increased recruiter pay, with the salary of recruiters in Smolensk Oblast soaring from 115,000 to 1 million roubles. The Altai Republic too has boosted contract-hunter pay, along with the Ryazan, Saratov, Irkutsk, Kaliningrad, Kemerovo, and Samara Oblasts (Moscow Times, 2026).

As with lump sums paid to *Kontraktniki*, regional recruiter bonuses are also being deployed for competitive purposes. The value of remuneration paid out to recruiters per contract signed now often depends on the place of residence of the recruit. Samara Oblast represents the second-largest known gap between payment for a resident and for a non-resident, and indicates a noteworthy broader strategy: from February to May 2026, the region's sign-on bonus for recruits was an enormous 2.2 million roubles. In August, this was cut to 1.4 million roubles (Телеканал «Самара-ГИС», 2026), concurrent with Governor Vyacheslav Fedorishchev's announcement of an out-of-region commission boost, now at 800,000 roubles (KTV-Luch, 2026). This behaviour is indicative of an exhausted local pool of recruits —Samara is economising on payments to men signing contracts, while providing greater incentive for contract-hunters to recruit from other regions. For Samara at least, the high sign-on lump sums brought about by inter-regional competition have been unsustainable, and the region is now pivoting to what is almost certainly a less incentive-based and more coercion-based system. The regions shown in the graph below likely constitute only a selection of oblasts where out-of-region bonuses far outstrip local ones— for more than half of Russia's regions, there are no separate recruitment

spending lines to speak of, as bonuses are subsumed into broader budget categories (Kluge, 2025).




Own chart. Data credit Moscow Times, 2026

## The regional cost

Raising lump sums for both recruiters and *Kontraktniki* to such astronomical levels has left a substantial hole in regional budgets. Russian Federal Subjects have thus far faced an economically perilous 2026, preceded by an unfavourable 2025, in which regional deficits reached record highs. Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov reported in April 2026 that "last year, the deficit rose significantly, from the usual 200 billion to 300 billion roubles for consolidated regional budget deficits to 1.5 trillion roubles" (Stezhensky, 2026b). For the first time, 74 of 89 regions were running simultaneous budget deficits in February of this year, compared with 50 in 2024. In 2025, regional authorities grew their debt to the highest level seen in 15 years, with 3.5 trillion roubles outstanding (Stezhensky, 2026b). Nor is the state of finances likely to improve in the coming months: Siluanov estimated that the combined budget gap across Russia's regions will grow by another 400 billion roubles in 2026. He ordered regions to tighten budgets and reduce spending in order to bring the combined deficit down to 1 trillion roubles.

Recruitment spending represents one of a few constituent causes of these enormous deficits. Siluanov himself attributed deficit growth in part to falling profit tax revenue, which in numerous regions has plummeted since 2024. The Komi Republic has seen the largest drop, with 50% less revenue. The decline is partially due to an economic slowdown: by the end of 2025, industrial and construction output had fallen in half of the regions, and a third saw declining agricultural output. Consumer demand slowed in 80 regions. Behind these outcomes are labour shortages and the high cost of borrowed capital, which have led to poor corporate financial outcomes

(Stezhensky, 2026b). Yet military recruitment remains extraordinarily costly for regional budgets, accounting for approximately 1 trillion roubles of spending in 2025, according to Russian credit-rating agency Expert RA (Тирских, 2025). The centrality of military spending in the consolidated regional budget deficit is all the more apparent when one considers that the deficit was not a result of lower-than-planned revenue—regions brought in an estimated 25.87 trillion against a target of 25.76 trillion roubles—but rather of higher-than-anticipated expenditure. This was estimated at 26.07 trillion roubles, but came out to a much greater 27.4 trillion (Тирских, 2025). If the Kremlin wishes regions to continue their manpower contribution to the war effort, it must increase federal-to-regional transfers; currently, Russia's Federal Subjects simply do not have the fiscal bandwidth.

This may be more difficult for Moscow than it appears at first glance. In theory, it is no great task for the Kremlin to federalise the recruitment-derived component of a regional deficit; it could do so simply by raising the federal sign-on bonus floor—400,000 roubles—enabling regions to reduce their spending on the top-ups which have raised total contract bonuses to such astronomical proportions. Yet in reality, the federal budget is under substantial strain of its own; the federal deficit reached 5.64 trillion roubles in 2025, approximately 2.6% of GDP—five times greater than the 0.5% initially planned (Stezhensky, 2026b). Regardless, as has been said, the delegation of recruitment to regions means that Putin retains a gubernatorial scapegoat if quotas are not met. There is neither sufficient reason nor sufficient capacity for Moscow to further intervene financially in order to support regional contract-based recruitment.

## A relaxation of demand?

However, demand for new bodies at the front persists. As established, any real attempt at furthering Putin's war aims of holding the Donbas has the precondition of greater manpower. Around 1,000 contract soldiers were recruited each day in July according to regional spending figures (Kluge, 2026a), an apparently adequate number. Upon further inspection, however, the picture of sufficient replenishment becomes less defined. There are likely tens of thousands of mobilised soldiers who are being coerced into signing contracts with regions, most probably sans bonus (Kluge, 2026a). This implies that the true pace of recruitment—new men joining the armed forces—is even lower than budget data and official statements suggest. Soldiers already at the front are declared by financial records and officials to be brand new, when they are in fact only changing their contractual status. Moreover, the question of replenishment hinges not only on raw recruitment pace, but also on the volume of battlefield losses, and on the fitness and capability of recruits. According to estimates by the Institute for the Study of War, Russian casualties reached 238,650 in the first seven months of 2026; the same estimates put the number of contract soldiers recruited

over the same period at 221,000 (Institute for the Study of War, 2026). When contract soldiers make up approximately 77% of Russian forces in Ukraine (Kluge, 2026c), this ratio of casualties to new *Kontraktniki* suggests that current rates may in fact be less sustainable than the raw figures suggest.

Desertion, too, constitutes an issue for Russian forces; what good are 221,000 new *kontraktniki* if a large proportion cannot be retained? One commander at the front estimated that, in his area, around half of surviving new recruits immediately flee the front. He cites 19 SOCH forms—unit-level reports filed to record a serviceman's absence—as evidence, and stresses that "these are just the ones we've been told about this week. And we've got one tiny village near LBS [front line]. I reckon there are a great many across the whole of LBS every week–hundreds." Those who remain are by no means guaranteed to be in fighting shape either. The same commander claims that most new contract recruits are unfit to fight, and said this of them:

> "Some are taken from prison, others from the streets. Literally homeless. ... They can't even wear uniforms; they can barely carry 20 kilograms. They're disposable."

(Вёрстки, 2026). This represents an issue for the Russians inherent in the contract recruitment system. For the most part, those who sign on are those who are desperate and have few prospects left. In August of 2024, the Conflict Intelligence Team reported that recruitment desperation "had reached such extreme levels that people on crutches and with Ilizarov devices are being sent to the front. We see this in all regions, from the Far East to the border areas" (Savina and Bonch-Osmolovskaya, 2024). Seemingly, the general state of contract recruits has not improved since then. A change in the Kremlin's strategy appears inevitable.

## The capacity for expansion

Putin will surely recognise that any substantial growth in the ranks of the armed forces cannot be enacted without economic repercussions. The state of federal finances, as has been discussed, remains "difficult," to quote Finance Minister Siluanov. Since August 2025, the federal budget has paid upwards of 4 trillion roubles (47.3 billion US Dollars) to occupation troops in the form of bonuses, salaries, and death benefits. The last of these alone constitutes half of the 4 trillion in spending (Stezhensky, 2026a). It is near-impossible for the national budget to accommodate 500,000 more people on the same terms. Mobilising soldiers without paying them at comparable rates would drive a wedge between *Kontraktniki*, receiving 200,000 roubles per month, and those forced to the occupied zones without equivalent compensation, surely triggering a wave of discontent both within the armed forces and among the civilian population. In the Russian economy at large, mass mobilisation has had proven detrimental effects. The 2022

Decree triggered a wage race, as businesses competed for scarce labour. Consequently, inflation accelerated, and interest rates hit 21%, constraining investment. This cycle of downturn has persisted, according to the Russian Central Bank, as a result of labour shortages (Stezhensky, 2026a). If there is one thing mass mobilisation is guaranteed not to solve, it is labour shortages. The Kremlin may, therefore, choose not to mobilise hundreds of thousands of troops. Yet it is still very possible that it will take on a somewhat smaller number.

## Mobilisation overt and covert

Moscow might choose from a number of methods in order to undertake such a task. What is unlikely to be on the cards is a public announcement of mobilisation akin to that of September 2022, given the exceptional political cost it inflicted on Putin's regime and the multitude of alternative options available. It would also be entirely redundant: the September 2022 Decree remains legally active. As such, Russian authorities could simply issue a separate, secret presidential order instructing the Defence Ministry to call up a certain number of recruits. In recent months, changes have been made to military registration procedures and legal frameworks which now enable potential selective, subtle mobilisation of men from certain regions or economic sectors. Russian opposition politician and economist Vladimir Milov believes that the latter is a highly probable scenario, in which companies would receive quotas and decide internally whom from their staff they will send to Ukraine (Saradzhyan, 2026).

Other methods are currently being tested by the Kremlin and regional authorities. According to director of the human rights group "Citizen. Army. Law." Sergei Krivenko, some regions are now resorting to force in order to fulfil quotas. In July, the Penza region witnessed "raids" conducted on men who were forced to sign armed forces contracts. Human rights activists have documented similar cases in the Rostov, Amur, Khabarovsk, Primorsky, and Novosibirsk regions. Sources inside Siberian and Lipetsk recruitment offices noted that recruitment flow is now being sustained mainly by the police, who offer suspects a contract in exchange for dropping charges against them (Moscow Times, 2026). The coercive tactics of Moscow and the governors must continue to be monitored.

## Conclusion

Making sense of Putin's policy moves is a challenge in itself, let alone predicting them. Yet severe fiscal strain, both on the federal budget and on the budgets of the regions, can have only one implication for military recruitment strategies. Current rates of regional expenditure on sky-high sign-on bonuses and payments to recruiters, driven by inter-governor competition over quota fulfilment, have sent regional deficits soaring to record highs. Greater recruitment volume is required by the current rate

of Russian casualties, and the federal budget is already under tremendous pressure; there appear to be no remaining options for Putin to grow the size of his military aside from a transition away from contract-based methods and toward mobilisation-adjacent tactics. Zelenskyy's projected scenario of a 300,000-man call-up may not manifest, but movement towards the latter is already apparent. If mobilisation returns to Russia, it will come quietly. Secrecy and coercion are, after all, among the most frequently used weapons in the Kremlin's arsenal.

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