

Russia Forced to Turn to Foreigners and Criminals as Moscow Military Recruitment Plunges Fivefold

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A recruitment point for contract military service in Moscow. **Sergei Kiselev / Moskva News Agency**

Military recruitment in Moscow has dropped fivefold since its peak in mid-2024, forcing Russian authorities to rely increasingly on foreign mercenaries, criminals and debtors to bolster troop numbers, the independent news outlet Vyorstka [has reported](#).

Despite hiked financial incentives which initially drove a boost in enlistment, Moscow residents have shown declining interest in signing up to fight in Ukraine, shifting the composition of recruits.

According to Vyorstka's sources in Moscow's municipal administration, the number of individuals signing contracts with the Defense Ministry has fallen to approximately 40 per day — down from 200-250 daily in mid-2024.

The earlier surge was driven by a 1.9 million ruble (\$19,000) signing bonus introduced by

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin in July 2024 and Ukraine's incursion into Russia's Kursk region soon after.

However, enthusiasm has since waned, prompting the Russian military to expand recruitment efforts to non-traditional groups.

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With fewer Russians volunteering, foreign nationals from China, Ghana and South Africa have begun enlisting in noticeable numbers. Many have been seen arriving in groups at Moscow's central enlistment office.

Officials speaking to Vyorstka described a pattern in which small clusters of foreigners — sometimes up to 10 at a time — are seemingly transported to recruitment centers, though no clear evidence of a systematic foreign recruitment program has emerged.

While some foreign recruits cite ideological reasons for joining, such as admiration for Russia or its culture, most point to financial necessity. A recruit from China told Vyorstka that he needed money to care for his sick parents but admitted uncertainty over the legality of his enlistment. Another recruit from Bangladesh said he was following a friend who had joined weeks earlier.

Beyond foreign fighters, another growing category of enlistees includes Russian citizens facing legal trouble. In October 2024, President Vladimir Putin signed a law allowing criminal defendants to avoid prosecution if they enlist during wartime or periods of mobilization. The measure is expected to bring up to 25,000 individuals with ongoing criminal or administrative cases into military service.

Some of these recruits have been accused of financial crimes, while others are debtors struggling with unpaid loans or alimony.

The sharp decline in voluntary enlistment suggests that the Russian government is struggling to maintain recruitment levels despite continued financial incentives. While officials initially attributed high enlistment rates to patriotism and economic rewards, the growing reliance on foreigners and legal offenders points to a worsening manpower crisis.

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