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Inside Russia's Shadow Battalions: Coercion, Violence, And Ethnic Targeting

By [RFE/RL's Siberia.Realities](#) and

- [Current Time](#)

The Russian government, facing mounting losses in Ukraine, appears to be intensifying its coercive recruitment tactics targeting prisoners, conscripts, and ethnic minorities from remote regions and Central Asian migrant communities to bolster its depleted forces.

According to testimonies collected by RFE/RL's Siberia.Realities, male inmates across prisons in the Volga region, including Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, as well as parts of Siberia, describe routine beatings, psychological torture, and threats aimed at forcing them into military service.

Such prisoners are being funneled into the military's notorious Storm-Z assault units, often deployed on suicide missions at the front, according to Olga Romanova, head of the Russia Behind Bars foundation.

The once-overcrowded penal system is now being hollowed out. Transfers from pretrial detention centers have plummeted.

According to prison rights activist Romanova, "many suspects never make it to court or prison."

"Police are now authorized -- and incentivized -- to offer military contracts to people accused of even petty crimes," she [told](#) Current Time.

Since it launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has sent tens of thousands of soldiers to the front lines.

Heavy fighting into its fourth year has taken a grim toll on both sides.

Moscow has kept its casualty count a closely guarded secret since the start of the war, though several groups have used public sources to try and estimate the number.

The British Defense Ministry in June said its estimate had reached 1 million dead or injured, similar to a report by the US-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) that put the number at around 950,000.

If the estimates prove close to true, the war will have cost Russia in manpower terms about 15 times more than its war in Afghanistan, which lasted a decade.

Such a toll has put pressure on authorities to come up with ways to replace soldiers on the front line -- from taking in thousands of North Korean soldiers to trawling the country's prisons.

Romanova said that part of the scheme sees police officers paid bonuses for each recruit.

In 2023, it was 10,000 rubles. Now it's 100,000 rubles (\$1,125). "For context, the average monthly salary for a provincial police officer is about 40,000 rubles," she said, "So you can imagine the pressure."

She added that since 2023, 90 prisons across Russia have shut down as convicts were sent to war en masse.

In October 2024, President Vladimir Putin signed a law allowing individuals to sign military contracts before their trials, formally legalizing forced recruitment from detention cells.

'They Beat The Entire Prison'

One woman, who identified herself as Svetlana, told RFE/RL that her boyfriend, currently held in a Volga-region prison, was among those brutally beaten.

"They brought in over 100 riot police who beat every inmate indiscriminately until they signed. My boyfriend saw people dragged out with broken ribs and fractured limbs. Some were taken to the front with those injuries."

She added: "Those who refused were threatened with mutilation during transfer to another facility."

Officials have not commented on the allegations.

The inmates who resist face horrifying consequences. Phones are confiscated, visits are denied.

In the Siberian region of Kemerovo, Natalya, the mother of an inmate serving time for a drug offense, said her son held out for years before finally agreeing under duress.

"He told me, 'They twisted my arms until I cracked.' Then he vanished. He was due for release in two years," she said. "Now he's gone."

Between 2022 and 2023, Russia's Federal Penitentiary Service reported a record 58,000 prisoners who were unaccounted for. Initially recruited by the once-notorious Wagner Group, they are now absorbed by the Defense Ministry's own shadow battalions.

Romanova said this includes women. In one case, a state TV journalist from Channel One visited a women's prison in Siberia to film a propaganda piece, while also recruiting. Dozens of women reportedly signed up and were sent to the front as part of the military unit Esmeralda after talking to the reporter.

From Barracks To Body Bags

Following Russia's legal reform in 2023, conscripts can now be forced to sign military contracts on the first day of service. Despite Putin's 2022 assurances that draftees wouldn't be sent to the war, thousands have been deployed -- and many never return.

On July 23, three Russian conscripts, Daniyar Kereibaev, Yury Vitsinets, and Denis Mozhaitsev, aged 18–19, **recorded** a video on YouTube stating they were tricked into signing indefinite military contracts.

After arriving at the 37th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade, military unit 69647, in the city of Kyakhta, they said their platoon commander began threatening conscripts with deployment to the front -- describing a destroyed transport full of recruits and claiming a 30 percent casualty rate in the Kursk region -- implying they were unlikely to survive unless they signed military contracts.

During Ukraine's counteroffensive into Kursk in August 2024, conscripts, many aged 18 to 20, suffered heavy casualties. Journalists identified over 100 conscripts killed, captured, or listed as missing.

One chilling case is that of Artyom Antonov, a 19-year-old conscript from Tatarstan, who was **shot** in the head at a base in the Far Eastern city of Ussuriisk after refusing to sign a contract.

"Artyom didn't want to fight," said his friend Igor. "They made a concentration camp out of the army."

His death was no anomaly. Dozens of conscripts from rural, impoverished ethnic republics -- including Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Daghestan, Tuva, Kalmykia, Udmurtia, and Buryatia -- have been reported dead after similar coercion.

Some conscripts say they were unaware they had even signed contracts. Others, like 10 soldiers who rioted in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk in November, resisted deployment and were immediately branded deserters.

Ethnic Targeting: First In Line

Multiple reports confirm that ethnic minorities are among the first to be coerced. Relatives of an inmate in the Tula region told RFE/RL that 15 non-Russian prisoners were forced to sign contracts under threat of additional extremism charges.

Some imprisoned migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus are also recruited with promises of clemency, Russian citizenship, and money. Often, they receive nothing.

"Ethnicity plays a role," one prison insider said. "The authorities view these groups as expendable."

Written by Merhat Sharipzhanov based on reporting on Current Time and RFE/RL's Siberia.Realities

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