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Putin's cannon fodder

Russia’s mobilisation represents a major rupture for its own people and is extremely unpopular. The EU must open its doors to conscientious objectors

Russia’s mobilisation represents a major rupture for its own people. The war in Ukraine, which the Kremlin has unleashed with its invasion, is thus moving a whole lot closer to the population. Everyone in the country has friends or relatives who are reservists and could now be called up for a real war - and most of them fear it. Anyone who really wanted to fight in this war has had every opportunity – the various volunteer units are quite well paid for Russian standards.

Mobilisation is extremely unpopular. According to a sociological survey conducted by the Anti-Corruption Foundation FBK at the end of August, only 29 per cent of Russians support the idea of providing more Russian troops for the campaign in the neighbouring country. The head of the foundation's sociological service, Anna Biryukova, says that in her seven years of work she cannot recall such survey results. Usually, the Kremlin would drop such an unpopular idea, but it urgently needs soldiers, despite the two-thirds of the population who do not support the mobilisation.

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All this notwithstanding the government-controlled media exerts enormous influence among the older population and in the provinces and has been beating the drum for mobilisation as a ‘duty to the Fatherland’. We shouldn’t forget that pro-government TV, radio stations and newspapers have a monopoly in Russia. Pro-opposition media are accessible only online and also only by using a special software. This practice is common among younger urban dwellers, but it’s often beyond the ken of other Russians.

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deployments occurred sporadically at the beginning of the war, but the Russian government ended them in consideration of morale 'on the home front'. Of course, the regime did not end repressive measures to force conscripts to sign a 'contract', as the obligation to be a regular or professional soldier is called in Russia. Mobilisation now gives officials yet another way of obliging conscripts to go to war. The mobilisation, which is legal, must follow directly after the end of military service. That way, new cannon fodder can be obtained without Putin having to break his personal promise that conscripts would not be used in Ukraine.

A growing Russian resistance

Also shaken by recent events are the around 30 per cent of Russians who have opposed the war from the start, according to a survey the Kremlin commissioned from state institute VCIOM. Many younger urban Russians were considering emigration when the war broke out, as the repressive regime offers progressive Russians no future. Only a small portion has actually gone abroad, however. Banal sounding but pretty important factors hold most of them back from permanent exile. Lack of money, especially foreign currency, qualifications that aren't transferrable abroad, the prospect of separation from family and friends, or Visa red tape. But now thoughts of emigration are being revived.

Fully booked flights to visa-free destinations show that mobilisation has galvanised opponents of the war under imminent threat of being called up. Things developed so quickly that Russian airlines, according to trade journal Airlive, were banned from selling plane tickets to military age men. As a result, most departures involve the few foreign airlines that still fly to Russian destinations, such as Turkish Airlines.

But many opponents of mobilisation remain in the country – most people simply can't raise enough money to go abroad. But the strength of opposition among these Russians is evident not only in the anti-war demonstrations that have flared up, even in the provinces, resulting in 1328 arrests in only one day.

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Russia's 'free press in-exile' Meduza reports, based on high-level official sources, that the government has shifted the fraught task of forced conscription to local government. They started to post letters to reservists on the very day Putin made his speech. The first response was not long in coming. On the evening of the first day of mobilisation protesters set fire to the state administrative building in Togliatti on the

> Volga, while in the western Russian city of Nizhny Novgorod a Molotov cocktail was hurled through the window of an army recruiting office. US Russia expert Pavel Luzin told Mediazona, another Russian publication in exile, that he expects more violent resistance to conscription. Potential conscripts 'will set fire to military offices, their personal records and military IDs, and beat up army officials who try to deliver their call-up papers. I think that resistance will follow the usual Russian pattern: sabotage and a punch in the mouth'.

But the West isn't making it easy for Russians who don't want to be drawn into the war and would like to leave the country. Latvia announced on the day of mobilisation that even Russians threatened by conscription would not be allowed into the country. Finland has now taken similar steps in response to the 'partial' mobilisation, even for those with a Schengen visa. This behaviour is astonishing given that every Russian who manages to flee mobilisation is no longer available to wreak further destruction on Ukraine in a bloody invasion and does not want to be. The underlying logic seems to be that Russian resistors should overthrow the dictatorship instead of fleeing it. This is misguided in the face of Russia's overpowering apparatus of repression. By the same logic Syrian refugees should have been sent back into Assad's arms in 2015. On the contrary a successful escape into better circumstances is the best way of reaching those still immersed in Kremlin propaganda.

Supporting the Russian anti-war fraction

Thus, the mobilisation - for all the patheticism used by Putin in announcing it - is a dangerous thing for the Russian establishment. For it can cost them the support of the less ideologically convinced supporters of the war and thus also that of the majority of the population. The establishment reacts with the same means that have become the Russian panacea for social problems: repressive pressure, tougher laws and police violence.

It would of course be wrong to give the impression that all Russians oppose mobilisation. A provincial member of the Russian opposition told me that roughly a third of the population support the Ukraine campaign ideologically, even fanatically. He probably wasn't far off given that 29 per cent in the FBK survey welcomed mobilisation in principle.

In fact, staunch advocates of the war regard this mobilisation as necessary to offset Ukraine's numerical superiority on the ground. Various 'patriotic' experts and propagandists were already calling for it after Ukraine's successful Kharkiv offensive. In a sense it's a response to Ukrainian success and Western support.

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But what about the other Russians who were neither in favour of nor against the attack on the neighbouring country? Who have so far more or less supported the war superficially as hangers-on without much conviction and partly also without much interest? According to the motto 'It will be all right', partly also in trust in the long-term president in the Kremlin, who enjoys very high personal approval ratings. Mobilisation is a game-changer because now these rather unenthusiastic supporters are directly affected. And it's about to get worse when they start hearing about their own friends, relatives and acquaintances dying in Ukraine. Even the Defence Ministry's official, doctored statistics cannot cover up fatalities among people you actually know.

The West must not stand on the side-lines, but support the anti-war faction in Russia. On one hand with attention, media coverage and understanding, because Russian opponents of the war still read foreign media and social networks. But also, for example, by accepting refugees from military service instead of shutting them out. Putin is still able to rely on a latent stereotype of the 'evil West', which can best be combatted by helping those fleeing his repression.



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