

# Short-Term Necessities and Long-Term Implications of the Russian “Partial Mobilisation” Call

IRENE PATASSINI



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*By Irene Patassini*

## Introduction

After the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson in August, on the 21st of September Putin launched a call for “partial mobilisation” of Russian men between the ages of 18 and 50, with the aim of enlisting 300,000 soldiers amongst the reservists and former military personnel (Il Post, 2022). Three weeks later, the recruitment operation is said to have enlisted over 200,000 people, as stated by the Russian Defence Minister Shoigu (Cancian, 2022) (Il Post, 2022). Even if it is early to say, Russia is calculating whether the new recruits should be sent to the front without proper training as “cannon fodder” (Bathon, 2022), or whether to send them to the 80 camps and 6 training centres outlined by the Russian Defence Minister (Il Post, 2022). Currently the decision appears to be somewhere in between the two, with some of the recruits trained for fewer than three days before being sent to the front, while others completing the training phase.

However, the call disconcerted both national and international public opinions since it represented a U-turn from the abolition of forced conscription in 2008 and Putin's promises International Women's Day in 2022, when he denied any use of conscript soldiers (Reuters, 2022). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to comprehend the various reasons that led to this turnaround and to assess the efficacy of the forced conscription of Russians in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, both in terms of its short- and long-term effects. In the third paragraph the possible developments following the Russian mobilisation, including the threat of using nuclear weapons, will be analysed

## The Short-Term Necessities that Led to the “Partial Mobilisation” Call

The Russian Army is clearly facing a critical moment in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The Pentagon estimates that Russia has so far suffered around 80,000 in Ukraine, whilst the Russian government is reporting a maximum of 6,000 fatalities amongst its soldiers (Gershkovic & Youssef, 2022). Moreover, the Ukraine counteroffensive and Russian retreats from Kharkiv and the Northern front are continuing. At the beginning of October both Kyiv and Moscow confirmed the Russian's loss of Lyman, an important logistics hub north of the Donbass recently encircled by Ukrainian forces who are advancing along the Dnieper towards Kherson (Freyrie, 2022). Even the reprisal on Monday 10th of October targeting civilians could be seen as a desperate move in response to Ukrainian Forces crossing the so-called “red line”: the attack on Crimea's bridge, built after the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 (Mussetti, 2022).

Therefore, Putin is now squeezed between Ukraine's military advances and the tensions amongst the Kremlin elites, including some high-profile personalities like Chechnian President Kadyrov who is pushing for a more severe response to Ukraine's attacks, involving potential nuclear deployment (Toosi, 2022) (Freyrie, 2022). The mobilisation could be seen as a strategic step to stall and increase Russia's room for manoeuvre during these critical times. Between accepting Russian military failure or a dramatic nuclear scenario, waiting for the winter to come appears to be Putin's best military strategy to undertake.

As the colder season approaches, energy prices will increase and Europeans will lament higher bills and commodities' prices, as is already happening in France, Germany or Czech Republic (Global Times, 2022). If Putin's plan were to be analysed, it appears that he is waiting for the resulting protests to shake Western faith in Ukraine and therefore lead to a reduction in military and economic aid (Cancian, 2022).

Furthermore, behind the partial mobilisation there is a centralisation strategy that Putin is deploying to keep a tight grip on the most distant zones of Russia (Saveliev, 2022). It is no coincidence that the majority of the new recruits are from Asian ethnic minorities in the Russia (Saveliev, 2022). As a result of this move, Putin can maintain the support of the wealthiest families in Moscow and St. Petersburg who are not forced to send their sons to the front lines whilst at the same time proceeding with the nationalist "homogenization" of the Russian population, sending untrained Asian minorities to die in on the battlefield (Saveliev, 2022). Some scholars, such as Dr. Samuel Ramani, are already describing the mobilisation as an "ethnic cleansing" strategy (Saveliev, 2022). For instance, the number of recruits in the Kalmykia Buddhist community of South-Western Russia has been four times higher than the Slavic population, and since the start of the mobilisation the villages of those regions have been depopulated by up to 20% (Saveliev, 2022). Furthermore, according to the Sakha Pacifist Association, the call for mobilisation is another "colonial policy" to downsize indigenous peoples in order to exploit natural resources such as gas and oil (Saveliev, 2022).

### **The Long-Term Effects on Russia of the Mobilisation**

Predictably, solving the short-term needs without calculating long-term effects is dangerous and counterproductive. Putin has the possibility to prolong the war waiting for a breach in the Western front, but he may not envisage the potential internal breach within Russia's borders. Whilst Russians initially perceived the Russia-Ukraine war as an external conflict promoted by Russian imperialist supporters and tolerated by the rest of the Russian population, after Putin's call for mobilisation perceptions changed to view the regime as authoritarian, resulting in civilians protesting and fleeing the country (Kimmage & Lipman, 2022). Even though the official forced conscription order should have only concerned former military personnel, mobilisation affected many Russians who would have preferred to remain out of the conflict (Kimmage & Lipman, 2022). Putin's direct address to the population has broken the contract Putin had built with the Russian people (Kimmage & Lipman, 2022). Over the past twenty years, passive consent and political indifference allowed Putin to govern his personal authoritarian regime in exchange for stability and economic progress (Kimmage & Lipman, 2022). However, the forced conscription has already started to upset Russians who are beginning to protest against the war (Kimmage & Lipman, 2022). This will require Putin's regime to adopt even greater control over the population than before, potentially undermining his ability to govern (Kimmage & Lipman, 2022). Therefore, although many observers have judged the partial forced conscription as a further intimidating move by Putin to show his predisposition to do whatever it takes to win the war, it appears more as a hard pill to swallow for him with the risk of a second Afghanistan as it was for the Soviet Union.

Indeed, the USSR did not fall as a result of it alone but due to the realisation of the losses which fueled resentment damaging the government's legitimacy (Kimmage & Lipman, 2022). Nevertheless, Putin has the means to impose greater repression on the population controlling the media, the security service and having already destroyed the judiciary and all the potential non-governmental actors (Kimmage & Lipman, 2022). Therefore, following the decision to partially mobilise, it is now clear that he has lost the passive support of the Russian population (Kimmage & Lipman, 2022).

Furthermore, it is important to consider the economic side effects that mobilisation is having on the Russian economic sustainability. According to Kari Liuhto, a professor of the University of Turku specialised in the Russian economy, some of the most skilled workers in Russia have already left the country since the start of the war, and with the mobilisation another 261,000 men fled the country as stated by the independent Novaya Gazeta Europe (Braw, 2022). In doing so, it appears evident that Russia has not prepared a sustainable plan for its society of the future. It therefore appears that Russia is mobilising the poorest regions without considering the consequences of removing vital employees needed to the long-term survival of Russian civil society (Braw, 2022). In addition, there is no doubt around the catastrophic effects of the mobilisation on Russia's demographic crisis. This event shall be understood in the critical demographic context of current Russia which shows the Russian male mortality rate being extremely high working age group, with forecasts projecting a year-on-year decline of at least 1 million each year (Goble, 2022).

### **Is Nuclear Threat Russia's Next Move?**

It is clear that the so-called "partial mobilisation" has been deployed by Putin as a delay tactic to extend the time available to make the decision between pressing the nuclear button to appease the pro-war elites in Russia or admitting Russian military failure (Stanovaya, 2022). Therefore, on the one hand, there is a scenario of mutually assured destruction. On the other hand, Putin accepting to negotiate and to declare Russian defeat seems highly unlikely.

Although mobilisation will help Russia to extend its invasion of Ukraine, it is unlikely that the poor training conditions of the new recruits and the time that it will take to adequately prepare these new soldiers might counterbalance the Ukraine's advantages thanks to its Western backing (Stanovaya, 2022). Therefore, the chances of a Russian advance are very low, which increases the possibility of a nuclear strike in the near future (Stanovaya, 2022). In other words, even though Putin has so far succeeded in procrastinating a nuclear decision, one of the possible scenario is that if Putin will be cornered, there is the probability that the the most extreme fringes of Russian elites will expect him to demonstrate Russian power through a more aggressive response.

Therefore, the question is whether the nuclear option would actually be feasible for Russia. Realistically, the first country to launch a nuclear attack would be the one in the most dangerous position. It would bet that its adversary would not react in a manner that was either equally or more devastating but undertaking this decision, it is admitting a potential tit-for-tat dynamic possibly culminating in an apocalyptic war. However, Moscow's prudence should not be relied upon by NATO officials.

Putin has a greater interest in winning the conflict than other nations that possess nuclear weapons and he may calculate that Washington would be less inclined to deploy nuclear strikes (Stanovaya, 2022) (Borger, 2022). In doing so, Putin would have an advantage, as he could take the risk of a nuclear strike to end the conflict on Russian terms (Stanovaya, 2022). As a matter of fact, it is still unclear what the West's response to a potential nuclear detonation launched by Russia would be (Borger, 2022). The Russia's perception of NATO's unity in a deterrence context remains the most critical and important element to take into consideration. Therefore, planning a common Western response to various scenarios, particularly of a nuclear nature, should be a priority for the Atlantic Alliance.

However, China's position could represent a significant obstacle to the deployment of a nuclear detonation, as the Samarkand summit in Uzbekistan on 15th of September demonstrated (Gan, 2022). At the summit, Chinese President Xi Jinping appeared concerned and references made about Russia and China's strategic relationship were notable by their absence (Gan, 2022). In addition, even Russia's other Eastern partners, such as India who generally share Russia's opposition to the perceived American-led unipolar order, expressed their concerns around the nuclear threat threatened by Putin in the mobilisation discourse, implicitly criticizing the aggressive behaviour of Russia (Bender, 2022). As a result, the summit only reaffirmed the fact that that Russia would experience isolation as a result of a nuclear detonation (Bender, 2022).

## Conclusion

In summary, the interpretation of Putin's speech on the 21st September gives us some hints as to the strategic moves that Putin will undertake in the near future. The partial mobilisation call has been launched to prolong the war. Putin's hopes might lie in the faster training of new recruits to counter Ukrainian military advantages, as well as hoping for Western military aid to wane due to the challenges posed by the energy crisis of the coming winter. Russian mobilisation is therefore a temporary strategy and its success depends on whether European and American public opinion will support Ukraine in order to uphold Western democratic values, or instead perceive Ukraine as culpable for the higher energy prices. Therefore, Western Allies should work on strategic communication campaigns to remind both the European and U.S. populations of the disastrous consequences for democracy and human rights a Russian victory would imply. Furthermore, a long-term strategy to supply Ukraine with military support should be reinforced to sustain the Ukrainian successes. Lastly a precise response to a potential nuclear strike by Russia should be clearly defined. In conclusion, there is the possibility that if Putin's mobilisation call does not succeed as planned, the ensuing escalation could result in the Kremlin to carrying out a nuclear strike due to a lack of feasible alternatives. In that scenario, Putin's decision to sacrifice Russian lives would leave him in the same position as September 2022, but without the past legitimacy to govern and any hopes for a future recovery for Russian civil society.

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