


The mechanisms of forced military enlistment amid the intersections of ethnicity, rurality and spatial mobility in Russia

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ABSTRACT

This paper is focused on the forced mechanisms of military enlistment for participation in Russia's war in Ukraine. It argues that the structures of spatial mobility determine the greater vulnerability of rural dwellers and other lower strata of the population to coercive military enlistment by the state. It also argues that multi-dimensional barriers to spatial mobility contribute to the intersectional vulnerability when, for example, being an ethnic minority also often overlaps with being a rural resident, which in turn results in fewer opportunities to avoid military conscription. The author's attention to broader social forces shows that the decision to sign a military contract during wartime is often a forced measure. Combining digital ethnography, expert interviews, regression analysis and autoethnography she explains how the intersections of several forms of inequalities contribute to vulnerability to the forced military enlistment.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 September 2024
Revised 22 April 2025
Accepted 12 May 2025

KEYWORDS

War; rurality; ethnic minorities; military conscription; spatial mobility; Russia

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has drawn scholarly attention to previously overlooked realities: Russia's diversity and the way that social inequality is spatially embedded within the country. The colonial nature of this war brings attention to the paradox of various ethnic minorities dying in great numbers for the Slavic Brotherhood (Bessudnov 2023). Most observers explain the willingness of the Russian citizens, including minorities, to participate in the war primarily because of economic incentives. Is this simple explanation comprehensive enough? My extensive ethnographic experience in Russia's ethnic capitals and small villages as well as upbringing as a rural resident of minority origin during the Russo-Chechen wars compels me to seek more nuanced explanations for why some groups might end up enlisted to participate in military conflicts by force rather than by choice. This paper aims to describe the more complex picture of conscription to the war and highlights the significance of hidden mechanisms of forced state mobilization. It also shows how Russia's social, ethnic and territorial diversity is interconnected in the repressive context of the war.

This paper presents a non-orthodox approach to understanding the mechanisms of forced military mobilization among the two most vulnerable groups – ethnic minorities and rural

citizens. It also establishes the high potential for overlap between these two groups in the Russian context. It argues that this overlap, combined with the structures of spatial mobility, can partly explain why ethnic minorities die in greater proportions than ethnic Russians in the first year of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Scholars have identified three ways to recruit citizens for military service: recruitment by ideology, recruitment by contract, and conscription by force, acknowledging that these methods often intersect (Peled 1994). While not dismissing the idea that many Russian citizens volunteer for the war in Ukraine due to ideological reasons or monetary rewards, this paper focuses on coercive conscription. By coercive conscription, I mean the broad mechanisms of military enlistment through various forms of force, including physical, administrative, social control, and psychological pressure.

This paper aims to contribute to several research strands. First, it contributes to the literature on social structure in military and reasons for conscription to army. This strand of literature has argued that military hierarchies reflect the socioeconomic inequalities present in society at large, and the extent to which military experience can be converted into upward social mobility (Levy, 1998; Talbot and Oplinger 2014). Indeed, it is family income that matters the most for willingness to enlist to regular military: those with lower family income are more likely to join the military than those from wealthier backgrounds (Lutz 2008). However, conscription during wartime differs from peacetime conscription. While there is a widespread assumption that most disadvantaged groups are more willing to volunteer for armed conflict, this was refuted by Jeanette Keith, who, in her study of World War I conscription, argues that U.S. rural inhabitants were often silenced, and their supposed willingness to join the Army should be questioned (Keith 2001, see also Baranova 2024). This paper extends this argument by focusing on the specific mechanisms of state-society power relations that limit vulnerable groups (such as rural citizens) from resisting forced military conscription during wartime.

Another research strand focuses on the conscription of ethnic minorities and the ethnic composition of armies (Alley-Young 2023, Sabar et al. 2024, Walker 1989). One direction of this strand examines ethnic minorities' participation in colonial and imperial armies (Barkawi 2017; Kiernan 1998). While the category of 'ethnic minority' may hold different meanings in different contexts, it is useful for distinguishing dominant ethnic groups in multinational states from non-dominant ones. Some researchers argue that the participation of ethnic minorities in the military of multinational states can create opportunities for national unity and minority inclusion (Poutvaara and Wagener 2009). However, this is not always the case. For example, in wars on behalf of the Russian Empire, minorities such as Caucasians, North Caucasians, Western Ukrainians, and Central Asians were often excluded on the grounds of being potentially disloyal until there was an urgent need for manpower (Rousseau and Blauvelt 1998, 7). This suspicion continued in the USSR (Rousseau and Blauvelt 1998, 8). There is still lack of research from the bottom-up perspective, however, explaining the forces behind the ethnic minorities' participation in colonial wars. This paper provides some evidence of how ethnic minorities might end up participating in colonial wars involuntarily.

Finally, this paper may help explain the higher proportion of ethnic minorities among the fatalities in Russia's war in Ukraine (Bessudnov 2023, The Economist 2024). The fact that ethnic minorities are more vulnerable during wartime is not unique to the Russo-Ukrainian War. For example, Black casualties were overrepresented during the victory phase of the Vietnam War, and American soldiers of Hispanic origin died in disproportionately high numbers during the withdrawal phase (Talbot and Oplinger 2014). The study by Vyushkova and Sherkhonov (2023) shows that ethnic minorities, especially those who live in areas with military bases, suffer disproportionate casualties in this war. For instance, the percentage of ethnic Buryats among Russian casualties is 2.3%, while Buryats make up only 0.34% of Russia's population. Additionally, ethnic Russians born in Buryatia are also overrepresented among the casualties (2.2% of casualties and 0.46% of population). Other ethnic groups such as Chechens, Dagestanis, and Kalmyks were also dying in greater proportions, though to a lesser extent than Buryats, Tuvans, and

Kazakhs. Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples from the North, Siberia, and the Far East – such as Chukchi, Evenks, Evens, Nanai, and Ulchi – are also disproportionately affected, despite being exempted from mandatory conscription by the Russian legislation. Researchers point out that although the majority of Russian casualties are ethnic Russians, this group makes up 80.9% of Russia's population but only 70.6% of its casualties. Interestingly, about 10% of the casualties have Ukrainian surnames. Vyushkova and Sherkhonov conclude that both regional economic inequality and the geographical distribution of military bases contribute to the ethnic disproportions in war fatalities. Most recently, Vyushkova (2024) found that in Khabarovsk Krai, mostly the local indigenous population is conscripted to fight in the war.

Alexey Bessudnov reaches similar conclusions about ethnic disproportions in war casualties, though he is more cautious in his findings (Bessudnov 2023). By 21 October 2022, the five regions with the highest death tolls were Krasnodarsky Krai, Dagestan, Buryatia, and Bashkortostan, while regions with fewer deaths included Yamal-Nenets and Nenets Autonomous Districts, Magadan, and Chukotka. Bessudnov notes that this distribution suggests that ethnicity may not be the main factor driving higher mortality rates, since ethnic minorities in some regions (such as the Northern territories) are exempt from conscription. However, experts indicate that this exemption is often violated, with even endangered ethnic minorities being conscripted (Balzer 2023).

According to several independent estimates, the two regions with the highest death tolls in 2022 were Buryatia, with a mortality rate of 28.4 deaths per 10,000 young men, and Tyva, which shows a similarly high rate. They are followed by the Pskov region, North Ossetia, and the Republic of Altai. The lowest mortality rates are found in the Moscow region (1.7 deaths per 10,000 young men), Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (1.7 deaths per 10,000 young men), Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug (1.7 deaths per 10,000 young men), St. Petersburg (1.4 deaths per 10,000 young men), and Moscow itself (0.3 deaths per 10,000 young men). As Bessudnov notes, the risk of dying in the war in Ukraine for a young man from Buryatia and Tuva is about 100 times higher than for a young Muscovite (Bessudnov 2023). At the same time, evidence from the northern regions demonstrates that ethnic minority origin per se is not a predictor of the higher proportion of casualties. Both studies identify poverty and, as a result, the economic incentives for contract-based conscription as central explanations for the disproportions in war casualties.

My argument that spatial mobility structures explain why ethnic minorities might be exposed to coercive mechanisms of military enlistment to a greater extent than others – contributes to broader debates about the ethnic composition of war casualties (Bessudnov 2023; Kriner and Shen 2010). There is evidence from the US war in Vietnam that deaths among ethnic minority draftees increase as the focus of the war shifts from an emphasis on victory to an emphasis on withdrawal (Talbot and Oplinger 2014). Moreover, the study by Talbot and Oplinger shows that non-dominant ethnic origins and economic class also overlap in the Vietnam War: Black and Hispanic servicemen came from less affluent communities than white servicemen (Talbot and Oplinger 2014). While the current paper does not focus on the dynamics of death rates, it explains the logic behind the uneven conscription of different social groups, which may lead to ethnic disproportions in war casualties.

Overall, this paper advances the argument that intersections of ethnic minority origin, rural residence, and limitations on spatial mobility result in greater vulnerability to state-forced military conscription in the Russo-Ukrainian war. The mechanisms through which these intersections play out are often hidden and rarely publicly discussed.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I will elaborate on the theoretical framework and the methodology that was used to answer it. After that I focus on disproportions in military conscription, forced conscription of immigrants or recently naturalized citizens, and various manifests of spatial inequalities that can explain why rural citizens are more likely to participate in the war voluntary or against their will. I conclude by overviewing the mechanisms that explain the overlap between ethnic minority origin, spatial mobility structures and greater vulnerability to military conscription in Russo-Ukrainian war.

Theoretical framework

In modern Russia, it is difficult to prove the existence of an overlap between ethnic minority origin and social class due to the complex nature of center-region relations, which benefit some ethnic territories while disadvantaging others, as well as the contradictory history of ethnic politics, territorial conquest, and immigration policies. However, the prism of mobility offers a useful perspective to help explain this intersection (Gieryn 2000). Space plays an increasingly important role in the manifestation and reproduction of social inequalities (Manderscheid 2009; Yusupova and Matveev 2024). Therefore, spatial mobility is key to identifying the often-hidden restrictions that structural inequality imposes on individuals. By unpacking the space-dependent state-led practices of targeting citizens for enlistment, highlighting the territorial importance of recruitment quotas, and presenting evidence of a positive relationship between distance from large cities and the proportion of ethnic minorities in other settlements, this paper supports the argument that space is highly relevant for understanding multi-modal inequalities and reveals non-trivial ways in which this plays out. Therefore, this paper contributes to the debates around the mobility turn in social sciences (Faist 2013) by critically assessing political assumptions about the nexus between spatial and social mobility and by accounting for the mechanisms underlying forced military conscription in the context of war.

The focus on mobilities helps to show how ethnicity, poverty, and territory intersect in military conscription to the Russian Army during the Russo-Ukrainian War. The ability to move one's position in space has become a crucial force of stratification (Manderscheid 2009, 8). Defining space as the product of power relations and negotiations enables us to understand the process of drawing multiple borders, including the corresponding inclusions and exclusions, thus unveiling these borders as socio-politically defined (Manderscheid 2009, 8). The construction of these spaces of inequality can only be understood through empirical research (Manderscheid 2009, 12). Furthermore, as advocates of the mobility paradigm point out, the power relations constituting social spaces depend significantly on the ability to be mobile, which is determined by available resources. The re-structuring of inequalities along the dimension of geographic space – a dimension not frequently examined in classical studies of inequality – requires further empirical research (Savage 2013). Rural sociology pays special attention to how people respond to the constraints inherent in the places where they live (Lobao and Saenz 2002). This research often focuses on labor market ecology, which describes the opportunity structure of a given area and its association with employment and poverty. Studies indicate that non-metropolitan residence is a significant predictor of poverty due to the lack of job opportunities (Cotter 2002). Thus, the mobility perspective provides important insights into the intersection of poverty and rurality, which work in both implicit and explicit ways. This paper highlights non-obvious mechanisms through which rurality makes individuals more vulnerable to forced military enlistment beyond economic incentives.

The important theoretical point underlying my analysis is the notion of 'uneven mobilities,' promoted by Mimi Sheller (2017) and based on a Foucauldian approach to territory and biopolitics. Her first dimension of uneven mobilities is particularly relevant for this paper (2016, 16), referring to a sovereign terrain for movement in which spatial designs, physical infrastructures, and symbolic impediments create divergent pathways for people. I argue that inequalities in forced military mobilization play out through spatial variations in surveillance and state power enforcement. In other words, I show how 'governmobility' (a term introduced by Bærenholdt 2013) orchestrates uneven mobility across class, ethnic origin, and territoriality. My argument aligns with work that emphasizes multiple socio-spatial scales (local, sub-national, district level) beyond the national dimension (Schiller and Çağlar 2011), some of which have been shaped by the intersection of colonial rationalities in the social production of migration (Amelina 2022). Thus, I ground this research in the sociology of spatial mobility and social stratification, with particular attention to the role of ethnicity in both.

Mix-method research informed by decolonial approach to knowledge production

In this paper, the decolonial approach guides the research methodology. I understand the decolonial approach as a means of amplifying the voices of marginalized groups, incorporating non-mainstream data collection techniques, and promoting reflexivity about a researcher's own standpoint and identity. My positionality within the study, along with the positionalities of other researchers who have shared their experiences and perspectives with me, is similar in that we all belong to both ethnic minorities and are Russian citizens of rural origin. This undoubtedly impacted the research questions I pose and the methodology I chose. I ask: What are the hidden mechanisms that make rural dwellers and ethnic minorities more vulnerable to state-enforced military mobilization in the Russo-Ukrainian war?

Hidden from whom, a reader may ask. Hidden from mainstream academic and media discourses that explain who participated in the Russo-Ukrainian war on behalf of Russia and why. Many of these discourses highlight economic incentives and the higher levels of indoctrination among rural populations, often implicitly portraying rural dwellers as desperate and lacking in intelligence. Based on my professional expertise and personal experience, I anticipated a more nuanced picture, which led to the decision to conduct this research.

Moreover, this paper is an important act of rural agency for me. My past experience as a rural inhabitant during the military draft for the First Russo-Chechen War compels me to question the simplicity of economic or ideological explanations for participation in the current Russo-Ukrainian war.

The answer to the question of 'why?' ethnic minorities die in greater proportions in this war than the ethnic Russians (Bessudnov 2023) seems to be obvious: there is an overlap of poverty, territory, and ethnic minority origin in the Russian Federation. However, due to the inequality in academic knowledge production in Russia which has a significant territorial dimension as well, there is no strong evidence of this overlap (Yusupova 2023). Common sense tells that poor people live mostly in villages and therefore have more incentives to participate in the war, but only for the two reasons. First of all, conscription by contract pays off. Second, villagers are less educated therefore they are more vulnerable to propaganda, in other words, conscription by ideology proves itself effective. Is conscription by force play any role in rural citizens' military enlistment? In other words, how this overlap between poverty, space, and ethnicity is organized and manifests itself in the context of military mobilization in autocratic settings beyond economic and ideological explanations? By posing the research question in this perspective I assume that various mechanisms force disadvantaged citizens to participate in the war, apart from economic incentives. The aim of this study therefore to reveal these mechanisms. This assumption comes from my personal experience of witnessing military mobilization in rural settings at times of the Russo-Chechen wars. The question 'Why do people go kill other people in the name of the nation?' was never obvious to me exactly because of this experience, this very question has led me to choose a career of a researcher interested in ethnic politics and nationalism studies.

In my choice of methodology, I follow Gurinder Bhambra's (2014) call for establishing a new geopolitics of knowledge, which implies the decolonization of knowledge production. As Anna Amelina (2022) rightly points out, scholars must be sensitive to academic knowledge production, and disclosing a researcher's standpoint is essential for conducting decolonial research. In this paper, I offer the views and voices of ethnic minorities and rural inhabitants, including my own voice as a former rural inhabitant of minority origin. I do this by combining several data-gathering techniques.

First, I conducted expert interviews with four Russian social scientists of ethnic minority origin, all of whom are originally from rural areas. These experts are well informed about the specific mechanisms of power relations in small rural communities and, due to their kinship

ties and professional reflexivity, have an understanding of how military mobilization occurs in the rural settings of contemporary Russia. One of them has experience working in village administration at the beginning of Russia's full invasion of Ukraine.

The primary data, however, comes from local stories about military conscription and experiences of participation in the war since 24 February 2022. These stories were shared by villagers from various rural areas of the Volga region with whom I maintain continuous interaction as a kin, friend, or neighbour. The stories, as well as the storytelling practices of marginalized people of colour, form part of the indigenous methodology recently promoted in Western scholarship (Dunbar 2006). This paper follows that approach, considering rural inhabitants and ethnic minorities of Russia as marginalized groups whose voices are rarely represented in academic discussions about Russia.

I also employed digital ethnography and secondary data analysis. My digital dataset consists of ten Telegram channels, each representing a regional capital or region in Russia, created in autumn 2022 to inform subscribers about local urban locations where military subpoenas were being handed out. These cities included Samara, Ufa, Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, Saratov, Volgograd, Udmurtia, Novosibirsk, Ekaterinburg, and Kazan. All these channels have similar names: 'Gde razdayut povestki: [The name of the city or region]' [where military subpoenas are handed out: the name of the city]. They are dedicated to the same goal: notifying subscribers about locations where police are currently distributing military subpoenas to residents of these cities. The aim was to help people avoid those locations.

I analysed posts from 20 September 2022 to 1 December 2022, during which the military mobilization campaign was especially widespread. I mapped the locations and sought to understand the logic behind the seemingly random enforcement of mobilization in these areas. The qualitative text analysis of online media publications in Russian, focused on military enlistment and participation in Russia's war in Ukraine from Russia's side, was also part of the digital ethnography. This analysis allowed me to include immigrant ethnic minorities in the study, focusing on the multi-level spatial dimension. Additionally, I analysed population surveys from several regions of Russia, focusing on ethnic composition by district and their distance from regional centres and other large cities, which will be discussed in the chapter on the overlap of ethnicity and rurality.

Decolonial knowledge production must be considered in data collection, analysis, representation, and in the limitations of the study. While I greatly appreciate Marina Yusupova's (2021, 2023a) call for sensitivity to race, racialization practices, and performances in sociological research on Russia (see also Rutland 2022, Osipov 2012), I acknowledge that this study also falls into the trap of neglecting racialization practices in conscription. This is one of limitations of the study, due to the impossibility of conducting participant observations and in-depth interviews that would reveal specifically racialized mechanisms (as well as due to the lack of sensitivity to distinctive racial issues by the author in her conversations with interlocutors). Therefore, in this paper, I focus on the explanations for engagement in military service by representatives of vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities and rural dwellers. While doing so, I distinguish between ethnic minority origin and racial minority origin, acknowledging that further research is needed to include racialized groups in the analysis of vulnerability to state-forced military enlistment.

There was no formal ethical approval obtained from a research committee for this study because the author had no affiliation at the time of data collection (autumn 2022, during the most intensive wave of military mobilization in Russia). However, I must note the significant ethical reservations when producing research on wartime Russia, as this raises important questions about the high risks faced by all research participants. Social scientists must be sensitive to issues of trust, security, self-censorship, and other challenges that already exist in researching authoritarian contexts, even before the war (Yusupova 2019). This sensitivity must be even more pronounced in a highly repressive wartime environment. However, in my view, it is equally

important to provide an opportunity to voice the perspectives of those who are blamed for killing people voluntarily.

The methodological approach in this research both simplifies and complicates the ethical concerns that arise when conducting research in a highly repressive society. In the case of my expert interlocutors, all of them are qualitative social scientists who are well aware of the repressions that might result from this research. Formal oral consent was obtained from colleagues to use their shared knowledge and opinions. I also asked whether I should include their names in the paper, and the collective decision was to remain anonymous.

For the other interlocutors who shared local stories, they did so not within the context of a formal interview, but during daily conversations with family, friends, and neighbours. During those conversations, I was primarily a kin, friend, or neighbour, and only retrospectively did I assume the role of a social scholar. As a result, the stories were collected from friends and relatives of the author without the initial intent of conducting research on the topic. Cutting off friendships and kin relationships during a time of crisis (the war) and interrupting the natural flow of conversation during friendly phone calls would have been unnatural and disruptive. This is why discussions about the consequences of the war on Russian society were part of my daily conversations, with autoethnography serving as one of the research methods. Nevertheless, permission to use mentioned stories for publication was obtained from everyone whose stories were shared in the paper. Furthermore, all interlocutors were explicitly informed about the risks that could result from interacting with a social researcher who has professional connections in Western countries and plans to publish research in Western journals. Nonetheless, they all accepted this risk due to the very nature of their social relationships with me. Oral informed consent to use the stories they shared was confirmed again before submitting this publication.

Mainstream Western social sciences may regard autoethnography combined with local stories as anecdotal evidence. However, this is not the same as the stories many scholars gather from random taxi drivers when they visit a 'field site' and later cite in their papers. Autoethnography instead, is a reflexive, embodied knowledge. For example, the author herself has experienced social control in a village, thus deeply understands its logic. Moreover, the collected local stories are not a random knowledge; conclusions can be drawn from recurring patterns in the mechanisms described by different interlocutors. This is not the only reason why autoethnography and local stories deserve respect and should be legitimized, particularly in the production of academic knowledge in authoritarian states. Decolonizing academic knowledge production – including, but not limited to, accepting reflexive autoethnography as a legitimate method in social science – provides an opportunity for co-creating possibilities for a more socially just world by amplifying the voices of those who are underrepresented (Dutta 2018).

Overlap of ethnic minority origin and rurality

It is important to distinguish between territorially labelled ethnic regions and ethnic minorities as population groups in order to understand how poverty is related to the disproportionately high number of deaths among ethnic minorities in Russia's war with Ukraine. While territorial and social inequalities can overlap with ethnic hierarchies, they do so in complex and varied ways (Yusupova and Matveev 2024). Evidence from local stories, later supported by expert interviews, suggests that state-imposed military enlistment quotas play a significant role in the ethnic disproportionality of war casualties. It appears that the smaller and more remote a town is from the regional centre, the larger the quota it receives for military enlistment. When linked to the ethnic composition of these settlements, this can help explain the greater participation of ethnic minorities in the war – largely as a result of imposed quotas.

To explore this further, I conducted a linear regression analysis on the territorial distribution of ethnic minorities and their distance from major cities in four regions where the biggest cities

are located roughly at the geographical centres of those regions. These regions included Khabarovsk Krai, Perm Krai, Samara Oblast, and Buryatia.

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of districts across four regions based on their distance from major cities and the percentage of ethnic minorities within those districts. In other words, it demonstrates that the farther a district is from a major city, the higher the proportion of ethnic minorities it tends to have.

The y-axis represents the percentage of ethnic minorities in each district. This figure was calculated using statistical tables from Rosstat's census data. The percentage was determined by dividing the number of individuals who identified with ethnicities other than Russian by the total number of individuals who reported their ethnicity.

The x-axis shows the distance of district centres from regional capitals or major cities. In the case of Samara Region, two major cities were considered: Samara and Tolyatti. For districts adjacent to Samara, distances were measured from district centres to the capital city. For districts near Tolyatti, distances were measured from their district centres to Tolyatti. For the other regions, distances reflect the distance between the regional capital and each district centre.

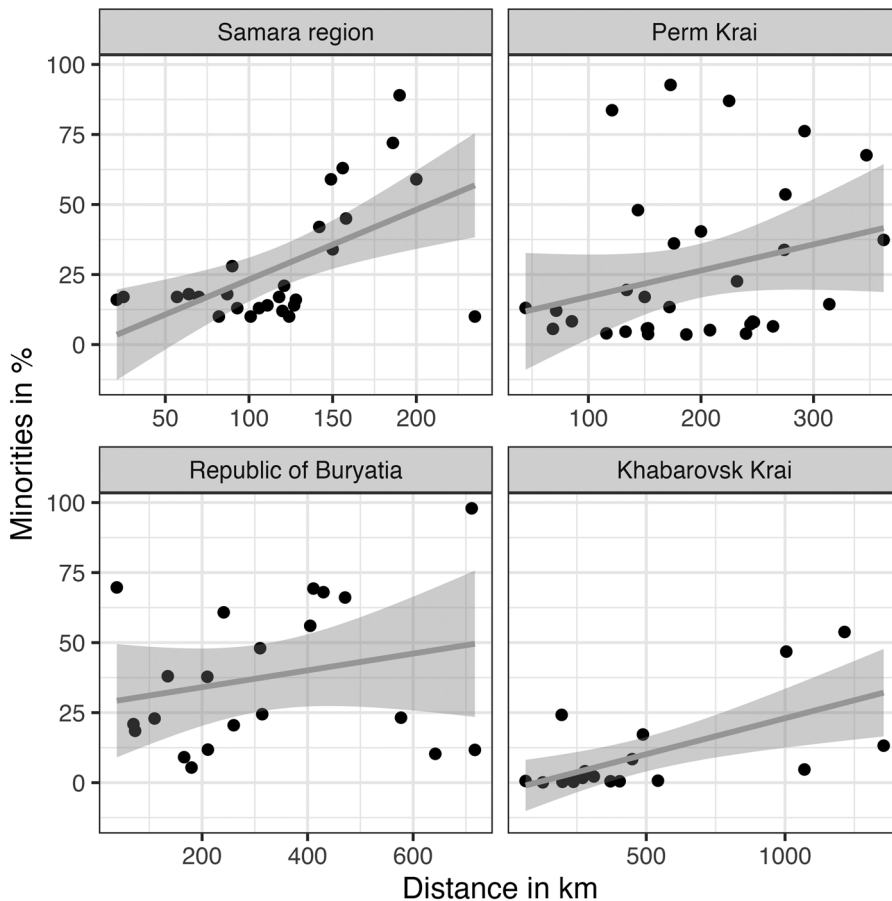


Figure 1. The territorial distribution of ethnic minorities by distance from large cities.

- Samara region (top-left): shows a positive trend; minority percentage increases with distance.
- Perm Krai (top-right): a general upward trend, though more scattered.
- Republic of Buryatia (bottom-left): slight positive trend with a wide spread of data.
- Khabarovsk Krai (bottom-right): positive trend with distances extending up to around 1000 km.

The graph suggests a general trend of increasing minority percentages with increasing distance from the big cities across all regions, though the strength and clarity of this relationship vary by region.

Khabarovsk Krai and Buryatia were selected based on reports of a higher proportion of ethnic minorities among those enlisted. Samara was chosen as a non-ethnically labelled region with a high proportion of diverse ethnic minority groups. Perm Krai was selected as a representative case of a large region formed by merging ethnically designated and non-ethnic territories.

The charts for these four regions illustrate the relationship between distance from major cities and the proportion of ethnic minorities. This relationship is not universal across all regions of Russia, as it is significantly shaped by factors such as settlement history, economic structure, and links to major cities in neighbouring regions. Therefore, a more sophisticated approach is needed to trace the complex interdependence between the proportion of ethnic minorities and remoteness. However, in certain regions – such as those presented here – this relationship is apparent. In these regions, there is a clear overlap between rurality and ethnic minority status. Areas farther from regional centres tend to offer fewer employment opportunities, which results in both higher quotas for mobilization and greater reliance on military service contracts due to a lack of alternative livelihoods.

Thus, the overrepresentation of ethnic minorities in both mobilization and recruitment for contract military service in the war against Ukraine may not be directly attributable to ethnicity as part of a state-led genocidal intent. Rather, it is mediated by the settlement patterns of ethnic minorities and prevailing poverty levels in remote rural areas.

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that ethnic minorities are indeed more vulnerable to both voluntary and forced military conscription due to higher quotas imposed in more remote locations. According to my interlocutors, who had access to military enlistment commissioners in two different regions, the smaller the settlement, the higher the proportional quota for conscription. For example, in a settlement of 1,400 people, 70 individuals were mobilized within the first three days of the autumn 2022 draft. In a nearby town with a population of 40,000, the quota was set at 2,000 conscripts. By contrast, another town in Bashkortostan, with a similar or even smaller population (36,000), but located close to the regional capital, had a quota of only 160.

There is another key difference between these two towns beyond their proximity to Ufa: in the remote town, only 26% of the population identified as ethnic Russians, while in the town closer to the regional capital, the figure was 62%. While this example highlights the relationship between ethnic minority settlement patterns and distance from major cities, it underscores the need for further investigation into spatially defined inequalities linked to military enlistment, particularly with a focus on diversity and ethnicity.

After all, social mobility in Russia is strongly tied to fluency in the Russian language, and not all rural residents of ethnic minority communities possess equal confidence or competence in Russian. This, along with other structural factors, may help explain the observed patterns. Advancing this line of inquiry requires critical perspectives and an interdisciplinary approach to understanding contemporary Russian realities.

This remoteness also results in greater vulnerability to another, more hidden mechanism of forced conscription – when military subpoenas are handed out not in the central streets of big cities, but rather in specific locations such as railway and bus stations, dormitories, and the outskirts of cities. These are places where people from outside the city are more likely to be found.

Evidence from the monitoring of Telegram channels across ten regions, covering the period from late September to early November 2022, suggests that rural residents are particularly vulnerable to forced conscription due to their geographic distance from regional centers. Data from conversations with military commissioners in two small towns further supports this, indicating that residents of more remote areas are more likely to be forcibly mobilized. While this trend may not apply uniformly across the entire Russian Federation, the scarcity of available data prevents statistical confirmation.

Nevertheless, the data gathered from Telegram channels – created to inform subscribers about possible locations in large cities where military subpoenas might be issued – reveals another mechanism by which young men from small towns and villages have been forcefully mobilized in greater numbers than others. Subpoenas were almost never distributed in the central streets of regional capitals. For example, in the Samara region, military subpoenas were regularly handed out on Sunday afternoons and early Monday mornings at the railway and central bus stations. This timing was deliberate: trains from provincial towns, often carrying students returning to Samara for their studies, typically arrive at this time. Police officers would wait at the station, detaining students from rural areas who had visited their families over the weekend and were now returning. A similar pattern was observed in Ufa, where the central bus station served as the main site for such activities.

In the autumn 2022, during the most extensive mobilization period, subpoenas were mainly distributed in suburban areas and near dormitories of large factories and universities. This indicates that spatial mobility was a crucial factor in exposure to state-enforced conscription. In essence, the pursuit of social mobility – such as obtaining education in a regional city – and the necessity of traveling by train or bus at specific times made individuals more vulnerable to forced conscription. Oksana Paramonova, director of Soldiers' Mothers, a St. Petersburg-based nonprofit, notes that young Russian men from rural areas are often less informed about the legal means of avoiding conscription (The Economist 2021), making them more susceptible to being served with subpoenas.

In Chechnya and some other regions of Russia, a different mechanism operated – one combining conscription by contract with conscription by force. Forced conscription is typically seen in states where a powerful central government coexists with highly vulnerable ethnic minorities (Peled 1994). In the case of the Chechens, a 'business deal' between Ramzan Kadyrov, the regional leader, and the central government exemplifies a common arrangement (Laruelle 2017). As Peled (1994, 69) describes, 'The government empowers ethnic leaders... the negotiations and eventual contract concern the recruitment, training, and use of ethnic soldiers in the military. Such deals often specify who and how many ethnic soldiers will be drafted, in what units they will serve, and how they will be deployed'. However, ethnic military units are not unique to Russia's war in Ukraine. Subnational loyalty – demonstrated through the disproportionate recruitment of soldiers from ethnic or peripheral regions for imperial wars – is a recurring phenomenon.

Naturalised-citizens, immigrants and forced military conscription

This chapter draws on secondary literature and media sources to examine the experiences of ethnic minorities of immigrant origin in the context of forced military conscription, with particular attention to the role of spatial mobility. The participation of immigrants in wars on behalf of a host nation – either in exchange for citizenship or as a form of symbolic recognition of their contributions – is not unique to Russia's war in Ukraine (Burk 1995; Ware 2010; Blauvelt 2003). In many cases globally, immigrants have served in the military to secure easier access to citizenship and reduce their social vulnerability in host societies.

In Russia, President Vladimir Putin capitalized on the precarious status of Central Asian labor migrants by offering a fast-track path to citizenship for foreigners who signed contracts with the Russian military. This policy was introduced in September 2022, shortly after the announcement of a partial mobilization aimed at drafting 300,000 reservists for the war in Ukraine. Under this program, foreigners who signed at least a 1-year contract and participated in active combat for a minimum of 6 months could apply for citizenship without meeting the usual requirements – such as demonstrating Russian language proficiency or maintaining continuous residence for 5 years. Their spouses and children also became eligible for expedited citizenship. Authorities were required to process these applications within 3 months, significantly shortening the typically lengthy naturalization process (Litvinova 2024).

However, this offer of opportunity came against the backdrop of widespread anti-immigrant sentiment in Russian society, making Central Asian migrants one of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups (Alexseev 2011). These communities frequently experience ethnoracial harassment, which extends to the legal sphere and limits their protection from the state (Agadjanian, Menjívar, and Zotova 2017; Malakhov 2014). During the military mobilization, these legal vulnerabilities were further exposed. In August 2023, police conducted coordinated raids in numerous Russian cities, targeting primarily newly naturalized citizens of Central Asian origin who were accused of failing to complete military registration. According to the Meduza news agency (2023), hundreds of migrant workers from Central Asia were subsequently detained across the country.

This trend has been reinforced at the highest levels of government. Valery Fadeyev, head of Russia's Human Rights Council, proposed linking the issuance of passports to military registration, stating that his team was ready to help design a process to 'synchronize those two acts'. Lawmaker Alexey Zhuravlev, a member of the parliament's defense committee, went even further, arguing that instead of persuading newly naturalized citizens to enlist, the state should simply 'take them by force' (Khashimov 2023).

Spatial mobility played a critical role in shaping immigrant vulnerability to military conscription in two ways. First, immigrant status made individuals more subject to state surveillance and control. Second, police raids were often concentrated in specific urban areas where immigrant communities are known to live, including city districts and dormitories. Russian media and government propaganda have also highlighted the recruitment of so-called 'volunteers' from African nations perceived as 'friendly' or 'neutral'. According to Michail Kalinin (2024), some of these recruits are approached through Russian universities, while others are coerced – sometimes under threat of deportation – in locations that are commonly targeted by police operations.

Additionally, some non-citizen labour migrants are pressured to sign contracts for 'voluntary' military service when applying for essential documents such as work permits or residence registration. As Valentina Chupik, a well-known human rights lawyer and director of the migrant rights organization Tong Jahoni, explains, access to various forms of legal status has become contingent on conscription (Khashimov 2023). Moreover, the police raids of checking the documents were also mainly in particular city districts and dormitories where usually only immigrants live.

Thus, access to and patterns of mobility – both cross-border mobility into Russia and internal mobility within the cities and different settlements – have become one of the key determinants of vulnerability to forced military enlistment. The enforcement of military conscription was spatially selective, at least during the most aggressive mobilization wave in 2022, with police raids disproportionately targeting the marginalized. The spatial logic of handing out subpoenas mirrored also the experiences of rural students, who are similarly exposed to conscription due to their frequent travel between home and regional cities. In both cases, vulnerability is shaped not only by legal status or social origin, but also by the geography of movement and the degree of access to privileged urban spaces.

Micro-solidarity and administrative power in military enlistment in rural areas

Rurality as a lack of alternatives

Analysts suggest Mr Putin is relying on poor and remote areas of the country, often places with large ethnic-minority populations, to feed his faltering war machine (The Economist 2022). The investigation by iStories, an independent Russian media outlet, and the Conflict Intelligence Team cited by the Economist seem to confirm that the mobilization has affected Russia's poorer regions disproportionately. Of the 26 areas with the highest known rates of conscription, 23 had income levels below the national average. For example, in Krasnoyarsk Krai, a region in Siberia with an average monthly income of 40,425 roubles (\$656), estimated 5.5% of its reservists were mobilized in the draft's first fortnight. In Moscow, where monthly incomes are an average

of 93,025 roubles (\$1,509), the figure was just 0.93% (The Economist 2022). In impoverished regions, the army is often regarded as a rare avenue for upward mobility (The Economist 2021). As Gerber and Gimpelson argue, income inequality has waned substantially in Russia during the last 20 years but geographic differences in earnings are still very pronounced. Zubarevich describes that rural villages and small towns are economically depressed and have low living standards as well as poorly educated people (2013). This evidence suggests high appeal of economic incentives for the conscription. Additionally, while Marina Yusupova's research of on the interrelations between masculinity and militarism shows that Russian urbanites 'can support militarism on the abstract-symbolic level but refuse to engage in any militarist practices on the discrete-personal level' (2018, 207), an ethnographic study by the Public Sociology Lab suggests that rural residents are more willing to build military careers because of the lack of other opportunities and the associated prestige of military masculinity (PSL 2024). This line of thought suggests the importance of the conscription by ideology in rural settings. However, as Talbot and Oplinger (2014, 209) rightly noticed, 'when life outside the military is neither easy nor filled with economic opportunity, the concept of 'choosing' a military life is disingenuous'. I argue that decisions to participate in the war shaped in a more complicated ways than simple economic rationale supported by ideology. This part of the paper focuses on the mechanisms indicating involuntary nature of many signed contracts by rural inhabitants. Scholars from Public Sociology Lab (2024) briefly touch upon the attitudes of citizens from small towns in Russia towards the military mobilization. They distinguish the following reasons for positive attitudes toward regular military conscription (note, not for participation in the Russo-Ukrainian war): less possibilities to escape the conscription and less available options of alternative employment as well as less varieties of socially acceptable lifestyles (PSL 2024, 86). They highlight that for rural dwellers the army is one of the few possibilities of social mobility and the rural social environment considers a career in the army as a privilege, therefore the avoidance is treated negatively, and conscription is socially welcomed. However, evidence presented in this paper adds important nuances to these findings in relation to conscription to an active war.

Rural inequality in Russia is especially prominent and is enacted in many ways (Wegren 2013). However, for some villagers, the economic need to support the family is only part of the reason to sign a military contract. There are mechanisms that create greater vulnerability to forced conscription: state quotas for the number of conscripts that are reportedly higher in rural areas, higher level of social control in the villages, and social ostracism of the most disadvantaged members of community.

First, my expert interviews confirm that spatial dimension plays an important role for filling the top-down quotas for the number of conscripts depending on the district and its remoteness from the regional big cities. In addition, Russian authorities differentiate monetary incentives depending on the region. This leads to enlistment of the residents of less affluent regions in those regions, where the state promises more money for a military contract. People coming from the regions of origin to military commissariats of another region results in filling quotas for the number of conscripts faster for some regions than others. Thus, prominent Russian journalist Olesya Gerasimenko reports that many voluntary conscripts in Moscow come to the capital from other regions of Russia due to the highest monetary reward Moscow promises for the enlisted to 'Special Military Operation' (Gerasimenko 2024). This does not make the contract conscription a forced conscription, but it indicates the importance of territorial inequality which is often overlooked in studies of Russia and once again shows the manipulative nature of the conscription by contract.

Social control in rural areas is omnipresent

The expert interviews and interlocutors' stories confirm that participation in the war is normalized in those areas where the conscript-by-contract opportunity is the only opportunity to

improve the living conditions. Participants in the Russo-Ukrainian war are often celebrated in community events organized by the state representatives. The 'War heroes' are invited to local schools to talk with pupils. This is considered an important event in rural society where few public events are happening. The village schools' websites present these meetings with the participants of the war as with local celebrities. According to some websites, the 'heroes' highlight that participation in the 'special military operation' is a chance for social mobility, a lifetime opportunity to improve your living conditions. During the days of the 2024 Presidential elections in Russia in some villages, the former soldiers were present in the election polling stations as celebrities with whom people could take a photo because they were wearing military uniforms – a unique outfit in a rural environment that gains popular attention. These photographs may be a sign of support for the war, or they may also be an effect of the sexualization of the military, which is common in any society when the militarized body and outfit serve as an object of desire (Crane-Seeber 2016). There are very limited dress codes in rural settings and any new outfit is an object of interest indeed. This idea of heroism and the appealing image of a warrior was also instigated by Russian media: the defence ministry released a video ad focusing on the two key motivations for conscription: machismo and money (Troianovski 2023; Yusupova 2023b). It defines military service as more meaningful – and masculine – than what's portrayed as the typical humdrum existence of a Russian man. The publicly displayed support of the war and glorification of its participants goes under strict social control in rural communities which makes the open opposition to it highly unlikely because of high probability of social sanctions.

Social control also results in affirmation of participation in the war, creates psychological pressure on those who might need a job but do not want to go to war and makes some ways of conscription avoidance available in bigger settlements unrealistic. In their research on the determinants of participation in civil wars, Humphreys and Weinstein found out that poverty, a lack of access to education, and political alienation predict participation in both rebellion and counter-rebellion, explained as susceptibility to engage in violent action in the context of frustration or greater vulnerability of uneducated people to political manipulation by elites (2008). Moreover, they highlight that abduction is the main tool of recruitment strategies to engage vulnerable groups in violence. They also emphasize the role of social sanctions and social control, especially in rural areas. Their results suggest that material offers make participation in rebellion more likely; but surprisingly the marginal effects of social control are just as strong (indeed, stronger) for abductees as compared to voluntary recruits (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008, 448). They have found that social solidarity plays also important role: when individuals have community ties that link them to members of a fighting group, they are more likely to join. Indeed, this was the strongest factor that determined the voluntary participation of Sierra Leone's civil war recruits (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008, 448). Therefore, this creates a vicious circle: the more co-inhabitants having the experience of fighting in the war, the stronger social pressure to do the same for the rest, both because of social ties with those who are already fighting and social control from rural community (or, rather, community administration). This logic is confirmed by research done by Public Sociology Laboratory. However, my evidence shows that social sanctions on avoidance of military recruitment in rural areas in the case of Russia's full invasion of Ukraine are not as strong as this logic suggests. The evidence that I have gathered suggests that rural citizens fear participating in the war as any other people, despite popular ideas of militarized masculinity in Russia (Yusupova 2018, 2023b).

The death is also omnipresent

Another shared story shows that while the villagers are indeed afraid of social control and ostracism, their attitudes to participation in the war are not homogenous and they instead can

find solidarity and community support in avoiding the military conscription. Thus, one of my interlocutors from rural areas told me proudly the following story about her brother supporting another community member in his decision to avoid conscription: 'Our neighbour who has just come back from the war had a conversation with my brother: 'I was there, and I will never come back. I do not care what you or anybody else will think of me. Maybe I am a coward, I do not care. I consulted with the lawyer and he told me I could get a maximum of 2 years in prison if I refused to come back to the battlefield. And I better be incarcerated than dead'. And my brother told him: Hey, no one here will judge you! Of course, no one wants to go there and die, that's the right decision. Normal people think you were a fool to be enlisted in the first place!'. In areas where there are still some other possibilities to earn money, conscription is not welcomed among rural dwellers. As I will show below, village administration tries to cover the quotas for conscripts sent from above by enlisting the most vulnerable members of the community or forcing them to sign a voluntary contract by threatening with detainment. More often than an urban resident might assume, participation in violent war is not considered as a lifetime opportunity to make a career in rural settings – even if it is stated that way on the posters around the settlement. For example, another interlocutor told me that rural women make threats to their husbands that they can report them to military commissariat if the husbands will engage in domestic violence. And these threats work in favour of peaceful meals and not becoming a meat on the battlefield.

Indeed, as Jeremy Morris (2025) writes that observers have talked about Russia as a necro space, but it is truer to say that 'death-price' has become a key biopolitical criteria for incorporating surplus populations. Nonetheless, military volunteering and contract service are uncommon choices and frequently stigmatized – a far cry from the picture some paint of a pro-war consensus, he says. Most people seek lines of flight away from mobilization or actively make use of the incoherence of the state and corporatist offerings of 'care' to protect themselves. Morris mentions that big corporations offer immunity for military enlistment if they can prove that their personnel is considered crucial to the Russian economy. There is no big corporate business in rural areas of Russia, therefore this opportunity to escape the war is also unavailable for rural citizens. Does this make the military enlistment forced then? This is a rhetoric question.

Other observations and shared stories also suggest that the top-down effort from village officials (including the school administration) to make participation in the war an honoured experience is not always successful and has its limits. Inhabitants of small towns and rural areas are well aware that they pay a high price for a 'lifetime opportunity to make money' and many try to avoid paying this price by choosing still possible other fly-in-fly-out options. The reminder of this high price – dead bodies coming from the war front – is more visible and more frequent in rural areas than elsewhere else. Therefore, in rural settings there is a variety of attitudes to participation in the war, as it is in urban settings.

Community forced vicious circle of solidarity

Solidarity to fight both for their lost friends or relatives or to feel the sense of brotherhood is important incentive to sign voluntary contracts. As Siniša Malešević (2025) brilliantly argues, it is rather bonds of micro-solidarity, not nationalistic sentiments force people to fight in wars. This research confirms his argument. Thus, one interlocutor told me the following: 'Some men want to come back to the battlefield because they find there what they cannot find here – a sense of brotherhood. Especially if they serve in Caucasian troops where the brotherhood is especially valued. They say they do not want to leave their brothers alone in the face of death and therefore they must come back'. In an atomized society with a lack of horizontal ties and solidarities, the possibility to build them at least on the battlefield is appealing to people. They sign military contracts but not in solidarity with the state politics, rather with friends or relatives

who died or still fighting in the war. One expert research participant shared that he observes the mistrust in the state among the male population of small towns, who support the conscripts but do not support the state waging the war. She highlights that this is important delineation: 'A father of a friend who works at a factory in a small town never expressed grievances towards the state and never openly condemned the ongoing war. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, he spends all his free time creating long-lasting candles and sends the parcels filled with them to the front. Everyone assumed he supports the war. One day, however, he became drunk, and only then did he reveal why he was enthusiastically sending these parcels to the front: because he once was a conscript himself and knows that this damn state does not care about ordinary soldiers, 'they are left to their fate, often to die'. The expert explains, he wanted to fix this neglect with his own efforts and the reason was the sense of solidarity and compassion which is based on a shared vulnerable position – when one is left in tough conditions alone, with neglect and there are no other ways to fix it but small deeds by those who were in the same position before. Due to the frequency of experience of serving in the army is higher among rural inhabitants than urban dwellers, this sense of solidarity is also most likely to emerge in this social stratum and not the other (Gresh 2011). Paradoxically, the war creates the opportunities to build solidarities which can be seen as nationalistic ones, but the core impulse could also be rather different – not pride in the nation but compassion for those who was let alone by the state in difficult conditions. These stories suggest that there are various explanations for the support of the soldiers and participation in the war by rural inhabitants beyond simplistic explanations of their nationalistic sentiments fueled by propaganda or economic incentives to sign military contracts (Simmons 2022; Sokolova 2023). As Natalia Forrat (2024) notes, social solidarity is actually an important factor not just for voting in Russia but also other political behaviour. I argue that these solidarities should be considered as forced (although not by the state but by rural communities) behavior for the two reasons: first, initial military experience is much more widespread in rural settings due to lack of opportunities for upward social mobility, which starts the vicious circle of micro-solidarities, second, there is lack of opportunity structures also to express solidarity or provide help, while this expression is demanded in smaller societies due to the higher importance of social control and social pressure. Most rural dwellers do not have expertise or finances or social capital to support their co-inhabitants to avoid the military, while the social pressure to engage with the situation of them visibly dying in great numbers is growing with the numbers of funerals they attend.

Administrative power and the targeting of the vulnerable

Importantly, small communities often determine internally who will serve and who will get an exemption, and this can be cruel to their weakest members. Thus, for example, during the eighteenth century, village oligarchies ('mir') in the Russian Empire used conscription-by-contract as a tool to sustain the status quo. In theory, the 'mir' had to divide the burden proportionally among its households according to impartial criteria such as the number of males within each household, the medical eligibility, and the family status of potential draftees. In reality, however, the poorest households were often targeted for conscription by their community members (Peled 1994, 73). The same logic guides the conscription-by-contract in Russian villages nowadays, according to my collected data: rural administration forces alcoholics who live alone without family support to sign voluntary contracts to be enlisted in the army: to fill the quota rural officials get from the top administration. Another mechanism for forced enlisting the poorest villagers is a provocation and administrative pressure. Thus, one of my interlocutors has shared his understanding that those with large debts are called from the villages to administrative bodies in regional centers to check their documents, and then they are offered to serve to be able to pay their debts. Thus, this is an indicator that their decisions are not always

voluntary but forced, although the reason – the depths – the same. Another interlocutor has sent me a screenshot of the villages chat where rural inhabitants warn each other not to be provoked during these ‘checks on the debts’: ‘Warning! During the invitation to the administration, they can start a fight and call the police to detain you, and then they may force you to conscript to participate in the war in order to avoid detention. Do not let yourself be provoked’ stated the message on the screenshot. Thus, debtors, addicts and lonely are most vulnerable to be forced to sign a ‘voluntary’ contract.

Overall, differentiative quotas for both enlistment and the number of voluntary contracts, effects of social control in rural settings and high power of administrative forces as well as micro-solidarity play important but often overlooked role in forced military enlistment to participate in Russia’s war against Ukraine.

Conclusion

While Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has affected every citizen in different ways, certain social strata have been impacted more profoundly than others. In times of war, some social groups are more likely to sacrifice their lives in the name of the nation – or empire. Indeed, previous research has shown that members of certain ethnic minorities die in disproportionately higher numbers than ethnic Russians (Bessudnov 2023). Is this the result of deliberate genocide, as claimed by much of the Western media, or is it rather a consequence of the intersection between rurality, poverty, and ethnicity?

This paper argues for the latter interpretation and demonstrates how these overlapping factors contribute to the conscription of individuals into the Russo-Ukrainian war. It also emphasizes the critical role of spatial mobility for vulnerability to the forced conscription. Moreover, the research uncovers less obvious mechanisms of military mobilization in rural settings, which help explain why some social groups are more vulnerable to conscription beyond simple economic explanations.

Focusing on forced conscription, this paper provides evidence that ethnic minorities may be more susceptible to it, depending on their settlement and restrictions on spatial mobility. First, the greater the distance from large urban centres, the higher the likelihood that residents of rural settlements will be conscripted, not just because of lack of available job opportunities but also due to proportionally larger state-imposed quotas for ‘voluntary’ contracts allocated to remote settlements. As the evidence from some regions shows, ethnic minorities are sometimes concentrated in the most remote rural areas, which is, arguably, a historical settlement pattern shaped by imperial conquest.

Second, social control is more intense and pervasive in smaller communities, where the local representatives of state authorities have greater capacity to monitor and influence residents. Additionally, the evidence suggests that police considered the typical routes of educational and job mobility for rural populations when deciding where to distribute conscription notices in large cities, thus, increasing rural populations’ vulnerability to conscription further.

Third, prior experiences of conscription and military service contribute to the normalization of enlistment within rural communities. This normalization fosters conscription motivated by solidarity with fallen or currently serving relatives, friends, and neighbours and, sometimes literal brothers. However, this solidarity is not necessarily a solidarity with the state or its policies, but with those who are considered in a vulnerable position due to the very neglect by the state. At the same time, the data also reveal that this normalization is not universal. In some rural settings, conscription is stigmatized, used as a form of punishment, or targeted toward the most vulnerable community members.

This research has several important implications. First, it broadens our understanding of forced military enlistment by uncovering hidden mechanisms behind it. Second, it underscores

the spatial dimension in the intersection of ethnicity and class in contemporary Russia. Third, it highlights the value of critical, nuanced approaches in portraying Russian society, where power relations are complex and extend beyond the state apparatus. Finally, this research shows how spatial mobility patterns can influence vulnerability to forced conscription in multiple, often overlooked, ways.

Acknowledgments

I am tremendously grateful to all expert research participants of this study and would like to thank Sophia Ernst who has helped to collect data for ethnic settlement patterns analysis as well as Iurii Agafonov (Scrapalyze Lab) who has helped to conduct regression analysis of this dataset.

Disclosure statement

No potential competing interest was reported by the author(s).

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