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## **RETURN OF RUSSIAN WAR VETERANS WILL INCREASE RISK OF ORGANIZED CRIME, WARNS NEW REPORT**

A new report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) warns that the return of Russian soldiers from the Russian-Ukraine war could increase the risks of violent and organized crime in Russia. It highlights that one of the characteristics of Moscow's military recruitment strategy has been to draw heavily on convicted criminals to reduce the need to mobilize the general public. Estimates suggest that up to 180,000 convicts have joined Russia's armed forces since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The practice was pioneered by the Wagner mercenary army and then adopted by the regular armed forces in their Storm-Z and Storm-V penal units. To put that figure in perspective, the army of the United Kingdom numbers a regular force of just over 75,000.

At the same time, the ability of the Russian state to cope with the problem posed by returning veterans is hampered by deficits in law enforcement and other state services. The report points out that the police are currently understaffed by more than 150,000 personnel, as many officers joined the armed forces lured by more attractive salaries.

In *Trouble at Home – Russia's Looming Demobilization Challenge*, author Mark Galeotti – who is an internationally recognized expert on Russia and organized crime – recalls past challenges of Russian demobilization after its conflicts in Afghanistan and Chechnya. This has included problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder, drug abuse, physical ailments and disabilities, as well as challenges of reintegrating into civilian and family life. The report makes a strong appeal for Russia to prepare for the criminogenic and social challenges of a large number of veterans coming home after the war.

The report warns that failing to prepare effectively for Russian demobilization could lead to increased levels of crime, including serious, violent and organized crime. Data suggests that this is already occurring. The number of violent crimes is increasing in Russia, in many cases carried out by veterans who were ex-convicts.

The scale of the violence is magnified by the veterans' easy access to weapons. This is already evident from higher crime rates in regions closer to the war zone.

There is also a danger of an increase in the cycle of violence if rival gangs recruit veterans as hitmen and enforcers. The destabilizing implications of an increase in criminality will be felt not only by Russia, but also its neighbours, the European Union and countries farther afield, which will face risks from the proliferation of illegal weapons to the violent spill-over of criminal conflicts and displacement of criminal actors abroad.

The report calls for urgent action—domestically and through international cooperation—to disarm, demobilize and properly reintegrate returning veterans before organized crime capitalizes on the crisis.

The full report is available [here](#)

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## ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

The Global Initiative is an independent civil-society organization, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, with a globally dispersed Secretariat and a high-level advisory board. Its network members include prominent law enforcement, governance, and development practitioners dedicated to seeking new and innovative strategies and responses to organized crime.

