



Putin is Unlikely to Demobilize in the Event of a Ceasefire Because He is Afraid of His Veterans

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February 23, 2025

Executive Summary:

Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a coordinated campaign in late 2022 and early 2023 to prevent the emergence of an independent veterans-based civil society in Russia, likely out of fear that veteran groups could threaten the stability of his regime upon their return from Ukraine. The Kremlin launched several initiatives to co-opt loyalist veteran figures and form state-controlled veterans organizations in support of the permanent militarization of Russian society at the federal, regional, and local levels. The Kremlin seeks to silence voices capable of meaningfully objecting to the continuation of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine or questioning Russian government decisions. Putin is likely trying to avoid a modern analog to the veterans-based civil society born from the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Kremlin likely fears political instability such as what followed the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988-1989. It is falsely framing its current initiatives to co-opt veteran life as preventative measures against the reemergence of “Afghan syndrome” — a popular Russian term used to describe the aftermath of the Soviet government’s failure to reintegrate psychologically traumatized Soviet veterans into Russian society upon their return from Afghanistan.[1] It is thus using the cover of “preventing Afghan syndrome” as an excuse to prevent the emergence of civil society groups that could have credibility among the population as well as organizational ability but might not remain loyal to Putin himself or his decisions and actions.

The Kremlin’s decision to launch this campaign indicates that Putin fears the risks and challenges associated with reintegrating over 700,000 veterans into Russian society and thus remains unlikely to demobilize fully or rapidly — even in the event of a negotiated settlement to its war in Ukraine.[2] The United States and Ukraine’s allies must consider the Kremlin’s fear of emerging veteran civil society groups and demobilization when assessing Russia’s negotiating position and the requirements for enduring peace in Ukraine and Europe.

The Kremlin is intensifying a campaign launched in late 2022 and early 2023 to prevent the emergence of an independent veterans-based civil society and an influx of alienated veterans in Russia likely because it perceives the demobilization of Russian veterans as a potential threat to regime stability.

Putin officially declared 2025 the “Year of the Defender of the Fatherland,” signaling the Kremlin’s growing commitment to expanding state control over veterans’ lives and civil society.[3] The Kremlin launched four specific main initiatives as part of this centralization campaign: the Defenders of the Fatherland State Fund in April 2023; the

"Time of Heroes" Higher School of Public Administration in February 2024; the Association of "Special Military Operation" ("SVO" — a Kremlin term for its 2022 invasion of Ukraine) Veterans in November 2023; and the "SVOi" Military Brotherhood movement in October 2024.[4] All four initiatives, described in detail below, are part of the Kremlin's coordinated campaign to ensure that veterans of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine do not form independent veterans-based civil society organizations upon their return to Russia and do not destabilize Russian society by failing to reintegrate into the community due to their war trauma, crime, and addiction. These initiatives allow the Kremlin to coopt and empower veterans who are loyal to the regime, establish state-controlled veterans organizations, purge and replace the current Russian elite that may have been growing more skeptical of the Kremlin's war effort, and restrict state funding of and support for other veterans groups that the Kremlin perceives to be disloyal. The Kremlin simultaneously enforced stricter censorship laws and suppressed key actors who resonated with Russian veterans to facilitate the formation of a state-run veterans' "civil society."

The Kremlin likely fears that it will face even worse political instability than what the Soviet Union experienced after its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988-1989 because of Russia's failure to militarize and mobilize Russian society for a protracted war. Russian Presidential Administration First Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyyenko allegedly stated in a closed meeting in July 2024 that Russian war veterans "adapt poorly" to civilian life after returning from Ukraine and that many convict recruits commit violent crimes after returning home.[5] Kiriyyenko reportedly said that there will be "quite a lot" of veterans returning from the war in Ukraine and that increased crime committed by veterans could cause discontent, fear, or aggression towards veterans among Russian citizens. Kiriyyenko observed that the demobilization of Russian veterans in Ukraine would be very different from the return of Soviet veterans after the Afghan War or World War II because Soviet society was deeply mobilized and overall better conditioned to support if not to wage conflict. Kiriyyenko reportedly characterized contemporary Russian society as being unprepared to "understand and accept" veterans in the event of their demobilization. The Kremlin inadvertently created conditions in late February 2022 that ostracized Russian veterans by portraying Russia's full-scale invasion as a small war that only involved professional forces and did not impact most Russians.[6] This rhetoric aimed to shield broader Russian society from the implications of Russia's war against Ukraine, but in turn inadvertently created a divide between Russians impacted by the full-scale invasion and those who were not or had the privilege of ignoring the war.

The Kremlin is likely particularly concerned that veterans' return could trigger a new wave of "Afghan syndrome" and the rise of new veterans groups critical of the Russian war effort or military.[7] "Afghan syndrome" is a popular Russian term used to describe the disillusionment that affected Soviet Afghan War veterans in the aftermath of the Soviet government's failure to reintegrate psychologically traumatized Soviet veterans into Russian society upon their return from Afghanistan.[8] Many Soviet veterans felt alienated as the Soviet government did not provide them with adequate medical and psychological treatment and financial assistance, with many turning to substance abuse and crime.[9] "Afghan syndrome" also has a clinical definition equivalent to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but the Kremlin largely uses it in

the context of the need for the reintegration of veterans into the Russian society to avoid political movements that discredit Russian authorities.[10] Russian Federation Council Speaker Valentina Matviyenko warned in December 2022 against indifference towards Russian veterans, which she defined as one of the main causes of "Afghan syndrome," and her warning likely indicates that the Kremlin observed similar attitudes in Russia as of late 2022.[11]

The Soviet Union reintroduced some civil liberties in 1980s and early 1990s via its *perestroika* and *glasnost* initiatives, which enabled Soviet veterans experiencing "Afghan syndrome" to form their own civil societies on the basis of their collective trauma.[12] These veterans' groups became colloquially known as *Afghantsi* (Afghans).[13] The emergence of *Afghantsi* in conditions of relaxed information space controls and economic stagnation contributed to the weakening of the Communist Party, disillusionment with the Soviet military and conscription, and the emergence of a cleavage between the Soviet military establishment and political leadership.[14] *Afghantsi* and "Afghan syndrome" also contributed to the period of socioeconomic turmoil in Russia following the fall of the Soviet Union, also known as the "wild" 1990s.[15] Putin's domestic legitimacy relies on his promise that Russia will not experience a repeat of the "wild" 1990s, which were characterized by economic stagnation, crime, and political instability.[16]

The Kremlin likely observed warning signs of the emergence of new political cleavages among Russian veterans after declaring partial mobilization in September 2022.[17] The partial mobilization dramatically expanded the pool of Russian veterans and prompted Russian society to pose hard questions about demobilization and the implications of the war of Russia's future.[18] The partial mobilization also exposed growing inequality between different classes of Russian forces, especially those recruited since early 2022 via an improvised volunteer recruitment campaign.[19] The Kremlin empowered various patrons to recruit volunteers, prisoners, foreigners, and former veterans en masse, resulting in patrons offering diverging financial and social benefits to incentivize recruitment.[20] All these forces ultimately received different treatment, equipment, and frontline conditions, which triggered many recruits to accuse the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of neglect and question the equity and legality of these incentives.[21] The Wagner Group and mobilized personnel of the 1st and 2nd army corps[1] (Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples Republics [DNR and LNR]) notably expressed frustration that the Kremlin did not grant their veterans the same state benefits, compensation, and recognition as it did to newly mobilized personnel and other volunteers.[22]

The Kremlin faced the threat of an emerging veterans opposition movement against the Putin regime between late 2022 and mid-2023 when patrons tried to weaponize Russian servicemen and veterans to advance personal political objectives. The Kremlin did not firmly control the Russian online information space, which allowed certain patrons and ultranationalist figures to try to rile up active servicemen and veterans against the Russian MoD and the Kremlin.[23] Imprisoned former Russian officer Igor Girkin, deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov began amplifying Russian servicemen's complaints about the Russian MoD to blackmail the Kremlin into making political concessions.[24] Girkin, for example, formed the "Club of Angry Patriots" in Spring 2023 composed of anti-Putin veterans of the Russian invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014 — people

whom the Kremlin was increasingly sidelining by early 2023.[25] Prigozhin launched a mutiny in June 2023, which ultimately failed to rally Russian servicemen.[26] Russian military commanders such as Airborne (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky activated the VDV veterans communities in January and March 2023 to influence Putin into reappointing Teplinsky after the Kremlin reportedly relieved him of command and to advocate for the Wagner Group.[27] These instances demonstrate that veterans started to assemble into various groups by mid-2023, that these groups were bold enough to criticize the Russian MoD, and that social media platforms such as Telegram served as instrumental platforms conducive to the emergence of these groups.

The Kremlin launched various immediate force centralization, censorship, and repression efforts in late 2022 through mid-2023 to eliminate the immediate threat of an emerging anti-Putin veterans civil society. Putin passed two laws in November 2022 and June 2023 that aimed to strip patrons such as Prigozhin of the ability to independently expand and form paramilitary organizations.[28] The Russian government also deprived the Wagner Group of its privilege to recruit prisoners, and the Kremlin likely deliberately withheld offering Wagner forces state compensation and supplies in an effort to destroy the Wagner Group.[29] The Kremlin eventually assassinated Prigozhin, arrested Girkin, and launched a purge and anti-corruption effort within the Russian security apparatus starting in Summer 2023.[30] The Kremlin also punished officers who attempted to galvanize supporters among the veterans community to remain in command and briefly arrested former 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) Major General Ivan Popov in May 2024 after he attempted to resist his dismissal from command in July 2023.[31] Popov sent an audio message to servicemen and veterans of the 58th CAA in which he accused the Russian MoD of dismissing him because he complained about the mistreatment of Russian servicemen, possibly in an effort to have veterans and Russian ultranationalists directly appeal to Putin on Popov's behalf as Russian airborne servicemen did to defend Teplinsky. The Kremlin did not offer Popov the same leniency it showed Teplinsky, however.

The Kremlin began coopting many milbloggers starting in late 2022 in an effort to promote self-censorship and arrested managers of major Telegram channels that had previously leaked insider information in Summer 2023.[32] The Kremlin also expanded the scope of its deliberately vague censorship law in March 2023 to ban Russians from "discrediting" or "disseminating false information" about Russian volunteers fighting in Ukraine, making any complaints about Russia's mistreatment of irregular forces as a punishable offense.[33]

The Kremlin launched the Defenders of the Fatherland State Fund in April 2023 as a long-term initiative intended to coopt veterans by monopolizing all veterans support initiatives and funds. Putin signed an executive order on April 3, 2023 establishing the Defenders of the Fatherland State Fund to support veterans of Russia's war in Ukraine and their families.[34] The Kremlin opened Defenders of the Fatherland State Fund branches across all Russian federal subjects and in occupied Ukraine, reportedly to address problems with veterans compensation, rehabilitate wounded veterans, and provide mental health support.[35] The Kremlin's high-profile appointments to the Defenders of the Fatherland State Fund leadership suggest that the fund is of significant political importance to Putin. The fund officially opened in June 2023 under the supervision of Putin's "niece" (first cousin once removed) Anna Tsivileva,

who serves as the fund's chairperson and became deputy defense minister in August 2024.[36] Putin appointed also Kiriyenko as the head of the fund's supervisory council.[37]

The Kremlin is likely establishing the fund as the sole mechanism through which veterans can receive compensation, possibly making it harder for independent veterans civil society to seek funding outside the government framework. Putin reportedly allocated over 11.3 billion rubles (\$126.3 million) in state entitlements and compensation in January 2025, which the Defenders of the Fatherland State Fund will distribute to disabled veterans.[38] The Kremlin also entrusted the Defenders of the Fatherland State Fund with distributing additional compensation to disabled veterans in November 2024, and a Russian political commentator with insider sources claimed that such state allocations via the fund suggest that the Kremlin is directly leveraging non-governmental organizations to contribute to "large-scale state projects." [39] The fund, in other words, may become a filter that allows the Kremlin to withhold financial support from organizations it deems disloyal to the regime and encourage veterans to engage in self-censorship lest they disqualify themselves from receiving their benefits.

The fund also aids the Kremlin's efforts to continue volunteer recruitment under the state's supervision rather than via individual patrons. A Russian insider source claimed that the Kremlin de-facto legalized Wagner fighters via the Defenders of Fatherland State Fund in November 2023 by offering former Wagner fighters official veterans status and accompanying state compensations.[40] The insider source added that Wagner recruiters began recruiting personnel for military service via the Defenders of Fatherland State Fund.[41] Putin also tasked the Defenders of Fatherland State Fund to provide state support to irregular forces fighting as part of private military companies (PMCs) in June 2024, suggesting that the fund is a vehicle for the Kremlin to establish financial and administrative control over various irregular forces.[42]

The Kremlin established the "Time of Heroes" Higher School of Public Administration in February 2024 to form a new Russian elite composed of a limited number of loyal and ultranationalist veterans that will continue to militarize the Russian society over the long term. Putin announced the establishment of the "Time of Heroes" initiative on February 29, 2024, and stated that veterans of the Russian war in Ukraine should form the Russian elite because such people would not "retreat" and will not "betray" Russia.[43] Putin said out that the people who seized power via economic schemes in the 1990s do not represent the "real elite" and that "workers and warriors" who have "proven their loyalty to Russia in deeds" should form the elite class in Russia.[44] Putin described the "Time of Heroes" initiative as an opportunity for highly qualified Russian veterans, active servicemen, and officers to receive public administration training that will allow them to pursue leadership positions in Russian government and business.[45] The "Time of Heroes" program allows the Kremlin to satisfy veterans demands for recognition and purge the elite class, while building out the Russian bureaucratic machine with veterans directly indebted to Putin for their appointments.[46]

The Kremlin appears to be using the "Time of Heroes" program to elevate ardent ultranationalists and loyalists to positions of power on the local, regional, and federal levels under the guise of empowering veterans. The "Times of Heroes" program appears

more likely to elevate Kremlin loyalist Russian veterans without combat experience who served in rear-echelon posts than combat veterans. Russian opposition outlet in exile *Novaya Gazeta* identified that at least 18 of 83 participants of the first "Time of Heroes" cohort (more than 20 percent) had previously worked in government or the non-military state security apparatus.[47] *Novaya Gazeta* discovered that several participants had prior political experience, were not combat veterans, and instead served in the rear as part of the BARS "Kaskad" detachment or the Chechen "Akhmat" detachments alongside other deputies and their sons.[48] *Novaya Gazeta* added that experienced and state-awarded officers constituted the remaining 78 percent of the first "Time of Heroes" cohort but that the Kremlin failed to include officers or mobilized servicemen directly from the frontlines in Ukraine. The Kremlin is likely refraining from empowering actual combat veterans and mobilized personnel in an effort to prevent them from exposing the gruesome Russian experience on the frontlines in Ukraine.

The Kremlin is misreporting its efforts to establish a pro-war, loyalist elite class as a preventative measure against the reemergence of the "Afghan syndrome" in Russia. The de-facto face of the "Time of Heroes" program, Lieutenant Colonel Artyom Zhoga, explicitly claimed in November 2024 that the program will allow Russia to avoid "Afghan syndrome." [49] Zhoga served as the DNR "Sparta" Battalion Commander and Speaker of the DNR Parliament prior to his appointment as the Presidential Representative to the Ural Federal Okrug and member of the Russian Security Council in October 2024.[50] Zhoga previously served as a member of Putin's re-election campaign initiatives group, participating in a staged interaction in which he encouraged Putin to run for president in the 2024 presidential elections.[51] Zhoga's prominent role in the Russian information space is likely part of the Kremlin's effort to feign the veterans community's support for the regime and its war efforts.

The Kremlin uses the "Time of Heroes" program to set conditions for permanent recruitment and militarization of Russian society to continue its aggression against Ukraine and possibly against NATO. A source in the Russian Presidential Administration revealed to *Novaya Gazeta* that the main objective of the "Time of Heroes" program is to incentivize Russians to fight under the promise of eventually obtaining a political appointment.[52] The Kremlin has also been using the "Time of Heroes" program to appoint new leadership for its military-patriotic organizations that aim to prepare children in Russia and occupied Ukraine for military service.[53] Putin appointed Artur Orlov, a Russian veteran and "Time of Heroes" participant, as the chairperson of the Russian Children's Movement Board and "Movement of the First" youth movement in September 2024.[54] Orlov then announced the appointment of Captain Vladislav Golovin as the Young Army Cadets National Movement (Yunarmiya) Chief of the General Staff in December 2024 after Golovin completed the "Time of Heroes" program.[55] *Novaya Gazeta* found that at least 13 "Time of Heroes" participants, including Orlov and Golovin, are among those whom Ukrainian officials have accused of committing war crimes in Ukraine.[56]

The Kremlin created the Association of "SVO" Veterans in November 2023 and the "SVOi" Military Brotherhood in October 2024 to replace other existing veteran civil societies that have been critical of Russia's conduct of the war in Ukraine but essential for supporting Russian training and recruitment capabilities. The Association of "SVO" Veterans held its first major

conference on December 16, 2024, and gathered representatives of various veteran organizations such as the Union of Donbas Volunteers and the Airborne Union.[57] The Union of Donbas Volunteers was one of the main Russian recruitment and training pipelines for irregular forces and volunteers in 2022, while a regional branch of the Airborne Union was responsible for appealing to Putin on behalf of Teplinsky and the Wagner Group in 2023.[58] The Kremlin has since been rapidly expanding the Russian Association of "SVO" Veterans across Russian federal subjects in early 2025 and affiliating the association with the Defenders of Fatherland State Fund and other state institutions.[59] The Kremlin likely established the Association of "SVO" Veterans to centralize control over existing veterans organizations, although Putin claimed that the association is helping returning veterans to find jobs, reintegrate into the Russian society, and provide military patriotic education to the Russian youth.[60]

The Russian MoD announced that the "SVOi" Military Brotherhood — a play on Russia's use of the euphemism "SVO" to avoid calling the war in Ukraine a war and the Russian word "svoi" (which means "our own") — held its founding meeting in late October 2024.[61] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian military personnel and veterans of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine organized the meeting, likely in an attempt to falsely frame this organization as an organically emerging veterans' civil society organization. The Russian MoD added that members of *perestroika*-era public veterans organizations in Russia and the All-Russian Public Organization of Veterans[2] attended the founding meeting alongside other veteran organizations.[62] The Russian MoD added that Tsvilieva attended the meeting and that the Defenders of Fatherland State Fund will cooperate with the "SVOi" Military Brotherhood to support returning veterans. Chief of the Main Military Political Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces Colonel General Viktor Goremykin claimed that the "SVOi" organization is a veterans-led initiative that aims to unite Russian veterans of the current war, involve them in military-patriotic education for youth, and secure support for Russian veterans.[63] The Russian MoD announced that "SVOi" Military Brotherhood signed a cooperation agreement with the Russian Association of "SVO" Veterans during the association's conference on December 16, 2024, to "strengthen relations among veterans" who participated in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[64]

The establishment and rapid development of the Association of "SVO" Veterans and the "SVOi" Military Brotherhood demonstrate that the Kremlin is prioritizing establishing administrative, financial, and organizational control over Russian veterans' communities and organizations in 2025. The Kremlin is using the Defenders of Fatherland State Fund as the financial backbone to expand or establish new state-controlled veteran organizations to prevent veterans from criticizing or opposing the regime. These state-controlled veterans' organizations likely aim to dismantle, supplant, or incorporate independent veterans' civil societies such as the All-Russian Officers Assembly, which publicly criticized in Spring 2022 the Kremlin's failure to mobilize and prepare for a protracted war with Ukraine and NATO.[65]

Implications and Forecasts

The Kremlin has seemingly been successful in alleviating the immediate threat of the alienated veterans' civil society in mid-2023 and has been relatively successful in ensuring that the Putin regime does not face a similar

political threat in the short term. Russian veterans largely have not assembled into civil society organizations critical of Putin's regime or decisions, and the Kremlin effectively eliminated actors that it perceived to have the influence to unite veterans into such organizations. The Kremlin is successfully portraying itself as sensitive to Russian veterans' demands in the Russian information space and deflecting veterans' policy shortcomings onto the Russian MoD. The Kremlin has thus far succeeded in forming state-run veteran organizations that centralize Putin's control over previously semi-independent forces such as 13,000 former Wagner mercenaries via the Defenders of the Fatherland State Fund.[66] The Kremlin also successfully launched the "Time of Heroes" program and has already installed dozens of loyalists into various positions of power, incentivizing veterans to follow the example set by other platformed loyalists.

The Kremlin will likely intensify its coordinated campaign to establish control over veterans' organizations and civil society and recruitment pipelines during the "Year of the Defender of the Fatherland" in 2025. The Kremlin will likely try to solidify the Defenders of the Fatherland State Fund's monopoly on managing and sponsoring veterans' affairs and use this fund to centralize control over all classes of Russian regular and irregular recruits. The Kremlin will also continue to expand the new elite cadre of loyalist veterans via the "Time of Heroes" program and replace the Russian elite that refuses to sponsor and support Putin's war in Ukraine. The "Time of Heroes" program is also part of Putin's effort to protect his regime from a future coup or an armed mutiny. The "Time of Heroes," "SVOi" Military Brotherhood, and the Association of the "SVO" Veterans will expand the Kremlin's direct authority over different veteran organizations — while silencing, discrediting, and defunding other non-state aligned veteran organizations.

The Kremlin may also be expanding this campaign to recreate in part the temporary Soviet success in reintegrating veterans following World War II to condition Russian veterans and society for a greater confrontation with NATO in the future. The Soviet Union allocated state benefits such as education and employment opportunities to loyal World War II veterans and significantly expanded those benefits in the 1960s as the Soviet economy grew.[67] The Soviet Union wanted the veterans constituency to remain loyal to the regime likely because it needed their influence to unite and militarize the Soviet Union under the national myth of the Great Patriotic War.[68] The Kremlin likely realizes that the newly emerging Russian veterans community has the capacity to either destabilize the Putin regime or encourage Russian society to prepare for future wars.

The Kremlin's veterans' life and civil society initiatives are unlikely to meaningfully prepare Russia for mass reintegration of veterans into society and prevent the "Afghan syndrome" in the long run, however. Russia is already struggling to alleviate symptoms of "Afghan syndrome" among a limited number of returning veterans, and the scale of the problem will only expand if the Kremlin demobilizes mobilized personnel, contract servicemen (*kontraktniki*), and irregular forces rapidly or at scale. The number of violent crimes in Russia reportedly increased by almost 10 percent in Russia in 2023 after some Russian veterans returned home, and independent estimates suggest that Russian veterans have killed at least 242 Russian civilians upon their return from the frontlines.[69] The Kremlin's reliance on prisoner recruits and efforts to appease veterans will create a long-term societal problem for the

Kremlin as it increasingly enables veterans to escape punishment by enlisting.[70] The demographics of the Russian forces in Ukraine significantly differ from the conscripts the Soviet Union deployed to fight in Afghanistan as Russia is increasingly recruiting older men with histories of crime, addiction, and debt – which will further complicate any reintegration efforts.[71]

These initiatives likely lack the resources to accommodate tens or hundreds of thousands of returning Russian veterans and fulfill the Kremlin's enlistment promises. The Kremlin currently promises recruits a federal enlistment bonus of 400,000 rubles (\$4,334) in addition to regional financial incentives; a monthly salary of at least 200,000 rubles (\$2,172); compensation for death in combat of five million rubles (\$54,302); serious injury compensation of up to four million rubles (\$43,441); and various state benefits such as medical rehabilitation, debt relief, and education.[72] A Russian political commentator who often shares insider information implied that the Kremlin would need to establish additional structures such as the Defenders of the Fatherland State Fund to sponsor psychological and medical rehabilitation for veterans in addition to other benefits.[73] The political commentator implied that the Defenders of the Fatherland Fund is insufficient to meet these reintegration obligations at scale and that the expansion of such programs will strain the Russian budget. The political commentator added that the Kremlin will also struggle to find veterans employment that would offer the same high salaries offered to soldiers in combat operations, which can further destabilize the Russian economy.

The Kremlin's continued control over veterans' lives and civil society therefore remains vulnerable to pressures caused by military demobilization, failures to compensate veterans, and any future military failures in Ukraine. The Kremlin can prevent veterans from forming civil society groups such as those that comprised the *Afghantsi* in the 1980s because it can still sufficiently compensate and censor a limited number of veterans that return from Ukraine. The Kremlin's ability to finance these relatively small number of veterans in the short term gives credibility to state-run veterans' organizations and Kremlin appointees such as Tsvilieva and "Time of Heroes" participants. The Kremlin, however, is unlikely to maintain such societal trust in crisis conditions such as those that mass demobilization or military failures in Ukraine would cause because it does not fully control the Russian information space and cannot suppress all complaints within the Russian veterans' community about Russia's slow and bloody progress on the battlefield.

The Kremlin's efforts to establish a new elite may inadvertently further expose Russia's corruption and trigger new conflicts for power within the Russian government. The Russian bureaucratic apparatus is still largely driven by corruption and personal gain rather than ideology, and the Kremlin is already facing challenges properly executing the "Time of Heroes" program. For example, Russian regional officials ordered a veteran of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Nikita Gorelov, to return to the frontlines after he raised the issue of corruption from his new post as the Mayor of Sosnovka, Kirov Oblast in December 2024.[74]

The Kremlin is very likely preparing to retain a mobilized military even if there is a ceasefire in Ukraine at least in part in order to evade the problem of reintegrating Russian veterans into Russian society. Russian opposition

outlet *Verstka* reported that the Russian MoD began coercing men whom Russia mobilized in September 2022 to sign military service contracts starting November 2024.[75] *Verstka's* sources in the Central Federal Okrug and the Russian Presidential Administration stated that the Kremlin is preparing to avoid demobilization in case of a ceasefire by forcing mobilized men to become *kontraktniki*. One source stated that the mass transfer of mobilized personnel to the *kontraktniki* status will prevent mass demobilization and allow the Kremlin to retain personnel in the military.

The Kremlin's focus on co-opting and establishing a state-controlled veterans civil society indicates that the Kremlin assesses that societal effects from Russia's war in Ukraine can pose significant risks to Putin's regime's stability. The Kremlin therefore remains unlikely to demobilize unless it secures full political or military victory against Ukraine and after having taken measures to insulate Russian society from the destabilizing effects inherent in returning hundreds of thousands of veterans brutalized by the horrible conditions on the front lines back to civilian life. Putin's regime's stability relies on the social contract that he had made with the Russian people to avoid the socioeconomic turmoil Russia experienced following the fall of the Soviet Union, and this consideration will likely continue to dictate his policies and calculus in the long-term. Putin likely perceives anything short of total political or military victory in Ukraine as risking mobilizing Russian veterans against the Kremlin.

A near-constant state of military mobilization is therefore one of the least politically risky configurations for Putin. This dynamic will likely prompt Putin to maintain high levels of military readiness to simultaneously set conditions that would allow him to sustain protracted or future war against Ukraine and / or prepare for a confrontation with NATO, while minimizing the threat that Russian veterans may undermine his regime. US policymakers must take these Russian incentives into account when assessing Russia's negotiating position, and when evaluating what propositions the Kremlin is likely to reject.

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[1] The Kremlin reformed the 1st and 2nd army corps into 51st and 3rd combined arms armies (CAA) in August 2024, respectively.

[2] The All-Russian Public Organization of Veterans, Labor, Armed Forces, and Law Enforcement was established during the *perestroika* period in December 1986 to ensure that Soviet and Russian veterans had high standard of living. The organization claimed that it had over 28 million members across 84 federal subjects and occupied Crimea in 2017.

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