

RUSSIA AT A GLANCE

# November 2024: Are those returning from the war in Ukraine a threat to Putin's 'old' elite?

This month's NEST Bulletin explores the career prospects of Russians involved in the war on Ukraine, who view unchecked violence as a means to achieve results. The Kremlin aims to reintegrate these individuals into daily life, effectively creating a new elite based on favouritism rather than merit, reminiscent of China's Cultural Revolution. Understanding Putin's personnel changes is crucial in this context.

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8 November 2024

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### 5 The changing of the 'elite' guard

In his 29 February address, Putin outlined a plan to replace Russia's elite with participants in the 'special military operation', assigning them leadership roles in various sectors. He emphasised that the true elite now consists of soldiers dedicated to Russia. The 'Time of Heroes' programme was launched to elevate these frontline soldiers into prominent positions.

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Public sentiment regards Ukraine war veterans as mercenaries, leading to poor electoral results, with veterans winning only 331 of over 30,000 seats. Efforts by the Kremlin and United Russia to promote veterans often encounter negative perceptions and low support.

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Veterans' roles are largely ceremonial and lack real authority, with many serving to boost their status rather than exert genuine power. Zhoga's position as presidential representative is symbolic, as actual influence remains with established governors.

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Putin's assertions about former fighters not threatening the elite overlook potential risks of future demobilisation. The Kremlin's initiatives aim to mitigate public backlash and facilitate connections between military and civilian spheres, reflecting a need to prepare for veterans' reintegration into society.

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# From frontline soldiers to authorised representatives

Artyom Zhoga has been named presidential representative in the Urals; 20 other 'special military operation' appointments followed

The most striking appointment among those who are taking part in Putin's programme, 'Time of Heroes', happened in October, when a battalion commander who fought on the frontline, Artyom Zhoga, was appointed as presidential representative in the Urals Federal District. At the same time, he was also made a member of the Security Council of the Russian Federation.

As well as inviting Zhoga to be his representative in the Urals, Putin also named 20 other members of 'the programme' who are being appointed to important positions. Some gained seats in the elections which took place in September; others have been employed in government posts; four have been placed in the presidential administration. Among these 'heroes' there are leaders of 'social organisations'. For example, tankman and Hero of Russia, Artur Orlov, is now in charge of Putin's Jugend, the youth organisation 'Movement of the First' [Russian: Dvizhenie pervykh].

It is worth noting that it was Artyom Zhoga who 'requested' in December 2023 that Putin stand again for Russian president, for the first time since the Constitution was rewritten, and for what is his fifth term in total. As expected, Putin accepted Zhoga's request and symbolically became 'the war president'.

Zhoga himself was accepted into the first wave of participants of the 'Time of Heroes' programme, and with virtually no training was formally appointed to the highest position of any of those taking part.

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# The changing of the ‘elite’ guard

Putin announced a leadership shift, replacing old elites with devoted soldiers

Putin’s address to the Federal Assembly on 29 February 2024 effectively outlined his ‘presidential’ programme. An important part of this programme was the changing of the elite, indicating that those who had taken part in the so-called ‘special military operation’ would be invited to take up leadership posts.

Citations from the address to the Federal Assembly:

‘They [participants in the war in Ukraine] should take up leading positions in the education system; in the upbringing of our young people; in social organisations; in state companies; in business; and in social and municipal government. They should be regional leaders, and leaders of industry. Ultimately, they should take charge of the most significant national projects.’

Putin contrasted these frontline soldiers with people in the 1990s:

‘You know, the word ‘elite’ has become greatly discredited. There are those who have done nothing for society who consider themselves to be a race apart, with special rights and privileges. I’m referring particularly to those who in years past filled their pockets thanks to all sorts of shenanigans which were happening in the economy in the 1990s. These people certainly do not represent any kind of elite. The genuine elite today are all those who serve Russia: workers and warriors, reliable people who have been tested and by their labour have shown their dedication to Russia. These are worthy people!’

The cameras captured the sour expressions on the faces of the ‘no kind of elite’ at the very moment Putin pronounced these words. The programme ‘Time of Heroes’ was announced in the same address, and it was this programme which proved to be the springboard into the country’s elite for these frontline soldiers. The very next day, 1 March, it was possible to submit an application to take part in the programme.

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# The programme 'Time of Heroes'

Putin's 'Time of Heroes' programme rapidly trains military veterans for leadership – with minimal qualifications

Unlike the majority of Putin's directives, this particular initiative did not need much time to pass through the bureaucratic mill. It was announced that 1 March would be the day of the launch of the special educational project, 'Time of Heroes', based at the Higher School of State Management of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration.

The academy is the same place where they have put into practice the new approach to personnel policy which was proposed by the first deputy head of the presidential administration, Sergei Kiriyenko. It is where the professional and ideological training takes place for candidates specially chosen by the Kremlin for leading positions in public policy. Within this higher educational establishment there is also the 'Leaders of Russia' programme, the 'School for Governors' (opened in 2017), and the recently formed 'School for Mayors' (opened in 2023).

According to the website of 'Time of Heroes', they received 44,327 applications before the closing date of 8 April. The first 83 participants to be chosen were announced on 16 May. Of these, three were private soldiers; 24 were junior officers; there were 53 senior officers and two generals; four women were chosen; and there were 20 Heroes of Russia.

## **Applicants had to satisfy the following categories:**

- Russian citizenship
- Higher education (Artyom Zhoga was an exception to this rule)
- Management experience
- No criminal record

The vast number of applications submitted in such a short period of time indicates that this was an initiative pushed from above. It is somewhat difficult to believe that there were more than 44,000 applications submitted, but in any case the mass appeal of this process is striking, whether it was genuine or fabricated.

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The organisers set out to give it maximum publicity, aiming to reach every potential candidate (and this in wartime conditions!).

The budget for the ‘Time of Heroes’ programme was set at 562 million roubles [\$5.8 million] for 2024. The target audience for the ‘educational programmes for extra professional training’ is around 6,000 people who have participated in, or are veterans of, the ‘special military operation’.

The programme of study began at the end of May. It lasts two years, and includes four in-person modules, each of which lasts one month. Some important officials and managers gave presentations to the ‘heroes’ in the first module, including the director of the programme, Sergei Kiriyeenko; the Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev; the Deputy Prime Minister, Marat Khusnullin; the Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov; and the Director-General of Rosatom, Alexei Likhachov. Also, as part of the first module, the participants sailed to the North Pole on board the icebreaker ‘50 Years of Victory’.

The educational programme continued throughout the voyage.

The programme participants also underwent individual practical lessons with mentors who were senior managers from the presidential administration, various ministries, the State Duma and the Federation Council, regional administrations and the largest state corporations.

Those taking part in the programme are also enrolled in the General Staff Academy. Once they have finished the programme they can choose either military or state service.

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# Don't repeat the mistakes of the past

The Kremlin aims to prevent a unified military brotherhood among Ukraine veterans

The Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan in the 1980s produced a military brotherhood. Its influence can still be felt today, but it was particularly strong in the first few years following the collapse of the USSR. Veterans of the war in Afghanistan, known as 'Afgantsy', got together, and became effective in defending their interests. This was frequently done using illegal methods; they became a significant factor in organised crime in post-Soviet Russia.

The number of people taking part in today's war in Ukraine is of a far greater magnitude than fought in Afghanistan, and it is essential for the Kremlin that it minimises the possibility of any kind of post-war unification of 'the participants of the special military operation'. Skillful commanders or people who have excelled on the field of battle or in military logistics are not being given positions in official bodies. Such social progression is not happening.



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## **‘Heroes’ are not chosen, but appointed**

Public support for Ukraine war veterans is low, reflected in their poor electoral performance

Among the Russian population, neither the war in Ukraine nor its ‘heroes’ are popular. September’s elections illustrated this clearly. Out of more than 30,000 mandates, the veterans of the ‘special military operation’ supported by the Kremlin won only 331 – and 313 of those were on the United Russia party ticket.

There are now 34 veterans in the regional parliaments (just five per cent of the 659 deputies elected in this year’s elections); 46 in the city councils of the regional capitals (7.5 per cent of 610 deputies); and a further 233 in the lower municipal bodies (less than one per cent of the total).

In Krasnodar Region, one in four deputies is a veteran of the war in Ukraine; 63 of them became deputies here. This reflects the traditional pro-military stance of the local authorities, and the area’s status as a holiday destination. It is much more pleasant to be a deputy in the region’s relatively warm climate than in Siberia.

The ‘special military operation’ is not widely supported by the public, partly because the Kremlin itself has turned the war in Ukraine into something distant which barely affects ordinary citizens, and the government is afraid of drawing attention to the war at elections.

On the one hand, the commercial approach of ‘buying’ people as cannon fodder for the war allows the Kremlin to avoid noticeable public disquiet over military losses. On the other hand, the public views veterans as soldiers of fortune who have been lucky enough to earn money and survive. They are not seen as heroes who have saved the Fatherland.

As well as the ‘cannon fodder’, there are two other categories of ‘participants in the special military operation’. There are the bureaucrats who go off to fight to help their careers or cover up their misdeeds and who, as a rule, face minimal risks to their lives. Then there are the crooks, real criminals, who were brought out of prison to fight, either by the Wagner group or the Defence Ministry.

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Understandably, society does not look well on either of these categories. Attempts by the Kremlin to push such people forward fell flat on their face. This, for example, is what happened to ‘special military operation’ veteran and State Duma deputy Sergei Sokol. In 2023, the authorities tried to promote his candidature in the election for the head of the Republic of Khakassia. But they had to remove him from the list when they saw how little support he received from the local population.

Participants of the ‘special military operation’ have had problems even on United Russia’s party lists, despite the government’s decision to give them a 25 per cent boost at the preliminary voting (a peculiar form of Russian ‘primaries’).

In a separate case, local officials of United Russia refused to accept as a candidate a participant of the ‘special military operation’, because the would-be candidate was late in submitting their certificate of a clean criminal record. The Secretary of the General Council of the party, Andrei Turchak, made a point of publicly punishing those responsible at the national level. As a result, the veteran who had ‘suffered’ was given the place on the party list for the city council elections which would have gone to the head of the executive committee of the regional branch of the party. The latter was given the opportunity to ‘redeem’ himself by organising an effective election campaign.

But this public punishment which Turchak inflicted on his subordinate (if you do not provide a position for a veteran, give him your own) literally caught up with him a couple of days later: Putin sent Turchak off to be governor of a distant Siberian region. The presidential representative in the Urals Federal District, Vladimir Yakushev, was brought in to fill the now vacant post of Secretary of the General Council of the party – and the post which Yakushev had now vacated was handed to the most prominent veteran, Artyom Zhoga.

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# The first harvest

The Kremlin swiftly appointed the programme's 'graduates' to government and business roles across Russia

Even before the study programme finished, in September and October the Kremlin appointed 20 participants in the programme to high-level positions.

As well as Artyom Zhoga taking up his post as presidential representative in the Urals, three others who took part in the 'special military operation' are worth noting as they gained seats in the Federation Council: Alexei Kondratyev (from Kursk Region); Yury Nimchenko (Crimea); and Amyr Argamakov (the Altai Republic). Argamakov has taken the Federation Council seat previously held by Andrei Turchak, who failed to understand the need to turn more participants in the war into deputies.

Some of the former fighters have been given posts in state companies: the deputy head of the department for social development of Russian Railways; adviser to the leader of the Federal Agency for Air Transportation; head of 'Samara', the scientific research centre for pilotless aviation systems; and adviser to the deputy director-general of Rosatom.

Many veterans of the war in Ukraine have been given regional posts: minister for youth affairs and social communications in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia); deputy chairman of the committee on legality, social order and security in St Petersburg; chairman of the city council of Nizhny Novgorod; first deputy mayor of Stavropol; deputy minister for investment, industry and science of the Moscow Region; and deputy minister for digital and technological development in Sakhalin Region.

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# Ornamental appointments

Veterans of the 'special military operation' lack real authority and responsibility in their new positions

The list of posts to which these veterans of the 'special military operation' have been appointed is, in reality, a guide to pointless positions and sinecures. Ornamental members have been appointed to the Federation Council, simply to boost the status of the veterans; there are advisers with no defined purpose; and others who are responsible for sport and patriotic education in regional administrations, certain ministries and state companies.

Given the overall 'robotisation' of the management structures, the bureaucrats are not required to show any independence – any fool can pass a message from the top downwards, which is their function. It would be absurd to think that the levers of power are being put in the untrained hands of the participants of the 'special military operation', even if they are graduates of the notorious 'Time of Heroes' programme. At best, those working alongside them will have to tolerate them; more likely, they will have to cover for their shortcomings and their mistakes.

Even the highest appointment given to these 'heroes', that of presidential representative in the Urals Federal District, is more symbolic than genuine. There is only one genuine manager who is a presidential representative, and that is Yury Trutnev, who as well as being the representative for the Far East is also deputy government chairman for the Far East and the Arctic. This effectively makes him the viceroy of this enormous but underdeveloped half of the Russian territory. The remaining presidential representatives are really honorary pensioners who used to occupy significant positions.

Nevertheless, the Urals District does stand out among these districts. It is no coincidence that Igor Kholmanskikh – yet another figurehead, a former worker turned chairman of the board at Uralvagonzavod (Russia's main tank producer) – has held the position of authorised representative in the Urals for six years.

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## Conclusion

The Kremlin elevates the 'veterans' to prepare for a mass demobilisation and manage potential unrest

Despite what Putin said in his address to the Federal Assembly, these former fighters will not present a genuine threat to the current management elite. They are more likely to pose a threat to the Kremlin in the future in the case of mass demobilisation. What kind of programme will be in place to deal with hundreds of thousands of armed people, who are used to living according to the rules of a bloody war and being paid large sums of money for fighting?

Behind the present veteran fuss lies an attempt by the Kremlin to take preventive measures with these 'military heroes' to soothe their egos and put them on a pedestal. This is akin to what happened in the USSR, when bureaucrats openly ingratiated themselves with workers and farm labourers, calling them 'leaders' and acting as if everything that happened in the country was dictated by them. On the other hand, the authorities are trying to counter the negative attitude in society to these 'heroes', which manifested itself in the recent elections.

The effusive respect being lavished on the 'heroes' of the war is a troubling sign. The regime is prepared for a long military conflict with Ukraine; it is building bridges between military and civilian life and creating marvellous decorations to obscure the real situation. This is a relatively new task for the Kremlin; previously, the authorities tried to build an insurmountable wall between civilian and military life. For now, there are too few bridges between these areas of society and the decorations are unconvincing, which is why there is an absolute storm of PR around the 'veterans'.

It is the preparation for mobilised people to return home which explains a whole raft of extraordinary moves: the amazing speed (for Russian bureaucracy) of the implementation of the 'Time of Heroes' programme (the day after it was put forward by Putin); the huge one-off competition to join, with roughly 45,000 applications for just 83 places, with massive publicity among soldiers; the speed with which the competition for places was carried out; and finally, the appointment of 'heroes of the special military operation' to various positions, even before the express education programme was over.

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As Sergei Kiriyenko announced at a special meeting of deputy governors for internal policy at the beginning of July, the aim of the 'Time of Heroes' programme was to create 'a buffer' between the civilian population and 'the new Afgantsy', when the latter return home. For some reason, the Kremlin has seen the need to create this buffer as a matter of urgency, and much sooner than it expected.

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## Who is Who



### **Artyom Zhoga**

Putin's representative in the Urals and a member of the Russian Security Council, Zhoga is the most prominent participant in the 'Time of Heroes' programme



### **Alexei Kondratyev**

A notable participant in the 'Time of Heroes' programme, Kondratyev has secured a seat in the Federation Council representing Kursk Region



### **Artur Orlov**

A decorated tankman and Hero of Russia, Orlov now leads Putin's youth organisation, 'Movement of the First', fostering engagement among younger generations



### **Yury Nimchenko**

A participant in the 'Time of Heroes' programme, Nimchenko represents Crimea in the Federation Council, highlighting the integration of military service members into legislative roles



### **Amyr Argamakov**

Also a participant in the 'Time of Heroes' programme, Argamakov has assumed a Federation Council seat from the Altai Republic



### **Marat Khusnullin**

Deputy Prime Minister Khusnullin has contributed to the first module of the 'Time of Heroes' educational programme, facilitating the transition of military personnel into civilian roles



### **Yury Trutnev**

As the presidential representative for the Far East and Deputy Chairman of the government, Trutnev exemplifies a real managerial role among Putin's appointees



### **Alexei Likhachov**

The Director-General of Rosatom, Likhachov interacts with 'Time of Heroes' participants, underlining the connection between military experience and leadership in various sectors.



### **Andrei Turchak**

Secretary of the General Council of the United Russia party, Turchak has transitioned from his Federation Council seat to become governor of the Altai Republic



## About NEST Centre

Based in London, the New Eurasian Strategies Centre brings together the best expertise on Russia and the surrounding region. Its mission is to identify the forces shaping Russia's long-term future, to analyse their impact and to develop strategies to bring about peaceful and positive development of the country.

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