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Rebuilding the Russian army: challenges and constraints

Sergey Aleksashenko, John Foreman, Alexander Golts, Ella Paneyakh

Executive summary

- The Russian armed forces face a long period of rebuilding to incorporate lessons identified once the war in Ukraine finishes. The direction of this reform is still under discussion in Moscow although is being shaped now by decisions taken to sustain the army in the field, continued attrition of men and materiel, and the precise situation the army finds itself upon a cessation of hostilities.
- The experience which the Russian army has gained from its war in Ukraine has led it to do no more than 'modify'; it has not 'modernised'; and it has certainly not carried out any 'military reform'. As a result of this 'modification' the Kremlin appears to have turned away from all of the achievements brought about by the military reform of 2008-2012 and reverted to a modified Soviet model for running the armed forces.
- Assuming Western technological sanctions remain in place, and China will not provide Russia with access to its advanced machine tools and AI-related technologies, Russia's role in the latest 'revolution in military affairs' will be limited. However, this does not mean that the Kremlin will be unable to maintain the current level of military spending.
- If the war ends suddenly, there will be a cruel and vicious competition for diminishing resources at every level of society. This will involve administrative resources, manipulation of the powers of the law enforcement authorities, and the direct use of criminal violence; there will be a large grey zone overlapping these three areas. And all this will be taking place against a background of collapsing infrastructure, an under-financed social sphere and a dangerously low birth-rate.

Rebuilding the Russian army: challenges and constraints

About NEST Centre

Based in London and Washington, D.C., NEST 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, analyse their impact and develop strategies to bring about peaceful and positive development of the country.

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Cover image: Rehearsals held For Victory Day parade in Moscow. Russian officers ride a Kamaz Typhoon K armoured vehicle during the Red Square Military Parade's rehearsal, 7 May 2025.

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Russia is investing in long-term confrontation with what it describes as the 'collective West'. Its invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 have shown its flagrant disregard for international norms and, since 2022, its readiness to use a very high level of violence against a neighbour. Backed by its Western allies, Ukraine has fought at great cost to resist Russia's invasion and inflicted significant damage on the Russian war machine.

Up to now, the Russian army has been unable to exploit its superior economic base and numerical superiority in troops and equipment to defeat its enemy. It has relied heavily on China to sustain its military industry and on North Korea and Iran for the supply of specific weapons systems. At the same time, Russian strategy and tactics are evolving amid the digitalisation of the battlefield and the rapid evolution and deployment of high-tech weaponry.

Once the intensity of the war in Ukraine diminishes, Russia is expected to embark on a comprehensive programme to rebuild its army and to prepare for what it sees as inevitable conflict with Western countries. What sort of army will emerge? Will Russia continue to be able to devote such a large share of GDP to military spending? Will Russian society continue to support the Kremlin's policy of confrontation with western countries? And what are the implications for NATO allies and their national security planning?

This set of short articles was specially compiled for a NEST Centre panel discussion held jointly with Foreign Policy on the margins of the NATO Summit in The Hague on 23 June 2025 that brought together military experts, policymakers, and academics to talk about the future defence challenges posed by Russia.

John Lough
Head of Foreign Policy, NEST Centre

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John Foreman

Introduction

Russia and its Armed Forces have had a very difficult three years. Strategic goals established in 2022 by President Putin for Ukraine to be 'de-nazified', de-militarised, to accept partition and adopt permanent neutrality have not been achieved. After failing to decisively defeat Ukraine in the initial period of the war, the army has ended up fighting a long war of attrition for which it was wholly unprepared.

Putin's strategic blunder has come at enormous political, economic, societal, and military cost. Russian defence spending has increased to around 6.5 per cent of GDP in 2025, up from around 4 per cent in 2022. The US Defence Intelligence Agency has reported that, since invading Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Russia has lost at least 10,000 ground combat vehicles, including more than 3,000 tanks, as well as nearly 250 aircraft and helicopters, and more than 10 naval vessels.[1] The UK Ministry of Defence said on 8 May that Russians had likely (55-75 per cent probability) experienced over 950,000 casualties to date, including 200-250,000 soldiers killed. It is anticipated that this figure will cross one million shortly.[2]

Putin shows no sign of changing course. He appears ready to tolerate the glacial pace and huge cost of Russian military advance, continuing a strategy of attrition[3] to degrade 'Ukraine's ability and will to resist through 2025'[4] and to allow him to impose peace terms.

However the war ends, it is clear Russia faces a lengthy, difficult and expensive period of national military reform, the third of Putin's misrule. This is already being shaped by measures taken to address significant tactical and operational shortcomings in Ukraine.

This analysis sets out key Russian military shortcomings, reviews actions taken to date, sets out strategic lessons identified by Russia, and explores obstacles to their implementation. It focuses on the Russian ground forces and is not a comparative analysis with NATO.

The Russian military in Ukraine

Putin was confident of swift success. Over a decade he had lavished billions of dollars on the Russian military to implement a strategy of 'active defence[5] to deter outside attack and pre-emptively neutralise threats to the state's security. Under Defence Minister Shoigu, steps were taken to improve service conditions, increase pay, and address readiness, recruitment, and rearmament.

Emphasis was placed on professionalism, long-range precision strike and other indirect capabilities, while slowly upgrading Russia's nuclear (both strategic and non-strategic) and general-purpose forces. Shoigu improved the management capability of the Russian armed forces, streamlined command-and-control arrangements, revised and enlarged the exercise programme, including 'snap' exercises to test force readiness, and ran large, annual, strategic-operational exercises. Modernisation was deemed 'complete' in 2021, albeit without clear metrics against which this was measured.

In practice, Putin's new-look army, designed for quick, defensive and low-intensity wars of necessity rapidly turned to dust in a slow, offensive and complex war of choice. Hubris prevented Russia from anticipating either Ukrainian readiness to fight or the reaction of the West.[6] The allegedly 'modernised' force of February 2022 was neither a NATO-style permanent readiness army nor a Soviet-style one based on mass, conscription and mobilisation.

The army struggled with the consequences of its high-risk and botched invasion, its systemic shortcomings, and a lack of manpower due to a pre-occupation with achieving a swift victory. It rapidly disintegrated into a disparate, uncoordinated and squabbling force of regular soldiers, volunteers, mercenaries and Chechen irregulars. In early 2023 the Russian Armed Forces re-grouped, switched to the defensive, shifted to a more methodical approach rooted in its military past, and began to adapt. This allowed it to successfully defend against the Ukrainian offensive of 2023 and regain and then retain the tactical initiative in 2024 and 2025.

Yet, despite this limited progress and considerable tactical and operational adaptation, it has not yet been able to turn tactical success into that at the operational and strategic levels. As the army has shifted to improvising and then forming a follow-on-force through partial mobilisation of older, inexperienced and less trained volunteers, overall quality has also reduced.

Key Russian shortcomings

The most important tangible and less measurable shortcomings observed within the Russian military over the last three years are summarised as follows:[7]

Moral

Morale. Shaky morale within the Russian army, due to senior secrecy, disregard for high casualty levels, indifference by officers for the well-being of their subordinates, endemic corruption, inadequate medical care, poor pay and conditions, arbitrary violence, inter-ethnic conflict, insufficient or poor equipment, and harsh discipline, has impacted overall combat effectiveness. Poor morale has been xacerbated by high-casualty tactics and 'stop-loss' programmes 'to prohibit soldiers from resigning and bolster the number of soldiers available, including by forcing wounded soldiers back to the front lines'.

Leadership. Loss of experienced personnel has been particularly detrimental.[9] Many of the casualties 'have been among elite and professional soldiers, as well as in junior officer corps'. Their replacements are of generally lower quality or drawn from the ranks, have less training in understanding and implementing higher orders, and display weaker leadership, further eroding unit cohesion and effectiveness.

Poor discipline is evidenced by war crimes, murder and abuse of Ukrainian Prisoners of War and civilians, drug and alcohol abuse, refusal to fight, and use of anti-retreat troops and Russian military police to harshly enforce order.

Conceptual

Ends not aligned with ways and means. As predicted in 2004 by a former deputy chief of the Soviet General Staff, 'there was again a mismatch between the desired political ends and military means made available in the early period of the war, forcing the Russian military into a painful period of adaptation, restructuring, and reconstitution'.[10] This mismatch has been an enduring military problem since the Crimean War.

Failure of strategic intelligence and assessment. The decision to invade was based on a faulty assessment about Ukraine's willingness and readiness to fight. Disputes between the various intelligence services and reluctance to communicate accurate information led them to feed Putin with the information he wanted to hear. This pattern has been repeated since, not least when the Russian intelligence services failed to anticipate Ukraine's attacks in Kharkiv and Kherson Oblasts in 2022 and its incursion into Kursk Region in 2024.

The role of theory. The Russian military pursued a flawed strategy of seeking to re-create their 2014 'blitzkrieg' of Crimea, relying on indirect and non-military tools to 'deter' Ukrainian resistance, supported by 'minimum armed strikes, ostensibly freeing Russia's military from the need to create local overmatch'.[11]

Insufficient troops to task. Russia's strategic overreliance on indirect and non-military tools led it to adopt a lean, loose force structure suitable to rapid intervention operations and unsuited for protracted conventional operations.

Inadequate preparation. The flawed Concept of Operations of a 'coup de main' played a deleterious role in preparing Russian troops psychologically, materially and organisationally for the reality of what awaited them in Ukraine. It also encouraged the invading force to deviate from the Russian army's established principles of war, in particular high readiness, concentration of force, unity of command, and understanding.

Over-centralisation. Despite attempted reforms to increase lower-level leadership and encourage initiative, 'the Russian military continues to operate with a Soviet-style centralised command. This centralised command style at the tactical level has contributed to the types of inflexible operations that led to previous failures and casualties'.[12]

Excessive centralisation is the result of a lack of trust between various leaders, echelons and services, leading to the slowing of operational tempo, a lack of unity of effort, and competition for resources.

Lack of responsiveness. The military higher education system is outdated, lacks intellectual rigour and student assessment, is narrowly single-service, and favours memory of facts over independent thought.[13] This compromises joint force integration, continued employment of poor officers, and leads to an inability to adapt and a reluctance to delegate. The army in Ukraine remains prone to sticking to a chosen course of action, even if this proves unsuccessful, and is highly fratricidal.

Physical

Inadequate military skills. The effectiveness of tactical and operational command and individual use of equipment is compromised by the Russian military training system. Training problems have persisted for a 'variety of reasons, including procedural rigidity, inadequate equipment and ammunition, and lack of standardisation because of an emphasis on in-house training within units'.[14] This relies on the willingness and ability of commanding officers to organise training and to certify it honestly. There is no independent assessment. Training lacks realism and is heavily scripted.

Lack of military digitisation. Much of the Russian military remains analogue without an 'unified information network'.[15] This, combined with a widespread lack of digital communications, has further slowed decision making within a hierarchical system, compromised situational awareness, degraded kill chains, and further hampered force cohesion.

Logistics, equipment and supply chain issues. The Russian military invaded with formations that lacked self-sufficiency and were unprepared for prolonged combat operations. Logistical support could not keep up with, or scale to, the operation being conducted in the early days of the war. Russian efforts at recovery, repair, and replacement have appeared overwhelmed at times. Russia's military-industrial capacity was likewise ill prepared for mobilisation in support of a prolonged war of this type, with little done to prepare it in advance.[16] In many areas, Russian equipment proved inferior to western analogues and remains dependent on foreign imports.

Russian adaptation

Many of these key shortcomings have been recognised by Russia. Its inability to achieve a swift victory in 2022 and a pivot towards a prolonged campaign have driven a process of adaptation. These changes have, however, been in reaction to events on the battlefield, rather than being anticipated and driven proactively by the General Staff.

In the field, Russia has re-filled its ranks, adapted structures, adjusted its tactics including those to reduce the rate of casualties, improved its own defences while targeting those of the Ukrainians with glide bombs, and streamlined its logistics despite Ukrainian attempts to interdict them. It has also sought to implement improvements in military health care, albeit from a very low baseline.[17]

The Russian military-industrial complex has increased production and proven resilient to sanctions. It however continues to have capacity issues, problems with access to technology, skills, tools and components, and suffers a shortage of skilled labour which limits output and leads to a focus on quantity rather than quality. Production of newer generation equipment has been sidelined at the expense of modernising or repairing older, trusted equipment. Capacity will be switched to production of new equipment when reserves for refurbishment have been exhausted, albeit at a lower output.

The Russian army has reduced the time between finding and striking short- and long-range targets through upgrading of its C2 (Command and Control) and communication systems, improving processes and rapidly adopting unmanned air systems. These have proven to be cost-effective tools to detect enemy movements, and provide artillery targeting assistance. FPV (first-person view) drone lethality has also increased as Russian operators become more efficient at their use. On the ground, unmanned vehicles have been deployed to assist troops, for example with logistics and evacuation under fire. The targeting process for attacking Ukrainian critical national infrastructure has improved, with this much more focused on higher impact targets than at the start of the war.

The need to adapt and the rapid expansion of the Russian defence budget has driven new leadership. As the new Defence Minister, Andrei Belousov, has led efforts to rationalise military spending, streamline Ministry of Defence (MoD) management processes, and focus on innovation and new technical solutions. This included support for a 'national' (government and private) military-industrial complex and formation of the new unmanned systems troops to focus further development of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV). A recently appointed Commander of Russian Land Forces signals the intention, as one US expert put it, to 'integrate experience from the war…[in] force posture/employment, training, readiness and other areas critical for reconstitution [of] the army'. A new Navy commander is charged with doing much the same.[18]

Putin's priorities

At the end of 2024, in line with key lessons identified, Putin established objectives for further development of the Russian Armed Forces to 'enhance army and navy capabilities [note: not air force], to achieve the objectives of the special military operation, and to be prepared to provide a prompt and effective response to potential challenges to our country's security'.[19] His stated priorities for this were:

1. Maintenance of strategic nuclear forces and development of new deterrent systems;

2. Detection and interception of medium-range missiles in Europe and Asia-Pacific, and production of Russian analogues;
3. Combat training of troops and officers in higher military training institutions. Tactics, individual skills, and effectiveness of troop command and control at the tactical and operational levels;
4. Development of domestic weapons and equipment, and tactics for their use. Improvement of equipment repair and modernisation;
5. A unified information network that integrates reconnaissance and engagement capabilities at the strategic, operational and tactical levels, through the introduction of advanced developments;
6. Robotic and unmanned systems;[20]
7. Military and military-technical cooperation with allies and partners.

Putin's three objectives show Russia's dilemma: continuing to prosecute the war in Ukraine while reforming the military for a potential war with NATO. As fighting continues, focus on sustaining the war is unlikely to allow for adequate MoD and General Staff focus on rebuilding and reconstituting the army. Continuing attrition also doesn't allow military planners to quantify the baseline and scope for necessary future reform.

In line with his previous equipment-centric pronouncements, Putin's priorities largely address the physical component, not the conceptual or moral ones, although he also discussed improved social guarantees for troops. His first two priorities reflect the renewed emphasis on Russia's strategic nuclear, non-strategic nuclear and non-nuclear forces to ensure deterrence, given the damage suffered by its conventional forces and the lengthy rebuilding task ahead.

Putin has signalled a cautious approach to defence reform, saying that consideration of 'additional measures to ensure the security of Russia and its allies' will be done 'carefully and thoughtfully, without becoming drawn into a full-scale arms race that would damage the socioeconomic development of the country'.[21] In his annual address in 2024 he acknowledged the severe strain on Russia of his war in Ukraine citing 'social, demographic, infrastructural' problems, resource constraints, and the 'imperative... to bolster our defence industry'.[22] For this reason, full national mobilisation remains unlikely.

Accordingly, Russia's political and military leadership will take its time to digest lessons from Ukraine before substantial change is implemented. While a precise vision of the future has still to emerge, it is almost certain that the Russian leadership will seek to enlarge the force and re-establish a structure suited for fighting large land wars. This will capitalise on extensive experience from Ukraine especially unmanned systems, higher military education, and public management improvements in the MoD and headquarters. The goal will be to bring the military sphere closer to the civilian one, in terms of education standards, public procurements, controlling costs, and quality of production. Despite official statements, the centrepiece will not be widespread innovation and modernisation.

The timescale, shape of and equipment for a reformed Russian military may start to become clearer this year with the promised publication of a revised 10-year Strategic Armaments Plan. This timescale is aligned with a statement by Belousov in December 2024 that the Russian military must achieve 'full readiness for any development of the situation in the medium term, including a possible military conflict with NATO in Europe in the next decade'. A ten-year timeline was taken for the previous round of modernisation and can be assumed to be the baseline scenario for the MoD and General Staff. A revised Military Doctrine is also long overdue. This will also incorporate lessons from the war which has outpaced the current 2014 version.

Obstacles to reform

Russia faces several obstacles that constrain how and how far it can rebuild its armed forces. These are summarised as follows:

Political and cultural

Any army is a reflection of the society from which it is drawn; Russia is no different. The national mood is defensive and towards further conservatism, insularity, traditionalism, and nostalgia about past military glories. This mood will influence future force design and hinder Russia's ability to adapt to modern warfare. Fear of exposing and discussing in public the realities of the road to war and its conduct discourages analysis and will skew objective decision making. No one outside the presidential administration is empowered to decide or even propose the inevitable trade-offs between quality and quantity to rebuild the force.[24]

Bureaucratic infighting between rival political, economic and security groups have stymied past military reform attempts. The Russian military itself remains 'quantity-orientated and commander-centric'. This mitigates against radical change, such as de-centralisation, delegation of decision making, and the use of initiative absent orders. As seen in Ukraine, there are positive disincentives including death to challenging authority in a system which rewards loyalty over competence.

Russia's strategic culture makes it difficult for the military to 'make a clean break with the past' and embrace new approaches, even when operational experience clearly demonstrates the need for such a change.[25]

Economic and demographic

Although continued partial economic mobilisation is sustainable, economic pressures and uncertainty about future macro-economic health will constrain reform ambitions. Russia is also facing stark challenges in its national labour force today, a situation which will, according to the UN, worsen over the medium-term. Generating a larger military force will only exacerbate these tendencies.

The Armed Forces alone will require at least half a million additional personnel – mostly men – above its pre-war level to reach a force of 1.3 to 1.5 million. Given the high numbers of killed and wounded in Ukraine, this figure is probably an underestimate.[26]

Industrial

The Russian military-industrial complex has proven able to date of supplying the army with the equipment and weapons it requires to sustain the war in Ukraine. These investments will aid rearmament. However, the sector remains plagued with capacity issues, high costs, limited access to technology, poor management, and corruption. There is little to suggest that it will be able to produce advanced weapon systems or increase production substantially over the longer-term to fully re-equip the army. Military industry is also likely to require access to external technologies, especially from China or via sanctions avoidance.

Personnel

Impacts of the war on future military retention are currently masked due to wartime policies that prohibit servicemen from resigning. Russia resorts to providing higher wages and social benefits to attract wartime recruits, but maintaining this high spending in the post-war period will add additional pressure on an already high defence budget.[27]

Conclusion

The Russian armed forces face a long period of rebuilding to incorporate lessons identified once the war in Ukraine finishes. The direction of this reform is still under discussion in Moscow although it is being shaped now by decisions taken to sustain the army in the field, continued attrition of men and materiel, and the precise situation the army finds itself upon a cessation of hostilities.

There will likely be a continued shift towards mass and firepower and an increased reliance on nuclear and precision weapons, mixed with certain value-added force multipliers, conscription, and maintenance of the national infrastructure necessary to mobilise people and resources in a time of crisis and war.

Putin has signalled a cautious approach to reconstitution and a desire to avoid adverse socio-economic consequences through further uncontrolled growth in defence expenditures. His caution – combined with financial, political, cultural, and personnel factors – will shape the pace of rebuilding the Russian armed forces, a process which will take at least a decade.

Modifying but not modernising: why the Kremlin has reverted to the Soviet concept of the Armed Forces

Alexander Golts

Until recently it was taken as a given that the experience of actual combat inevitably helps a country's armed forces to develop and modernise in order to become more efficient. Paradoxically, however, the experience which the Russian army has gained from its war in Ukraine has led it to do no more than 'modify'; it has not 'modernised'; and it has certainly not carried out any 'military reform'. Indeed, as a result of this 'modification' the Kremlin appears to have turned away from all of the achievements brought about by the military reform of 2008-2012 and reverted to what is clearly a Soviet model for running the armed forces (albeit in a modified form). In the long term this could lead to the reshaping of the economy and society, too.

An unpredictable war

It is worth pointing out that there are two interrelated reasons which have led to fundamental changes in the way the Russian armed forces are organised and how military operations have been conducted. The first of these is that combat operations which have been carried out in Ukraine over the past three years are significantly different from the 'future war' scenario which was envisaged in the wake of the American wars against Iraq and in Afghanistan.

Those wars were a triumph for the revolution in military affairs, and from the start showed the advantage that high quality military technology gave one side over the other. Decisive operations led to the defeat of the enemy in rapid time. The US's total technological dominance meant that the size of the opposing forces and the amount of equipment they held was a secondary factor. In the case of the war against Iraq in 2003, US forces were a quarter of the size of the Iraqi forces, yet this had no influence on the outcome of the operation.

The war in Ukraine, though, is between two armies which are roughly on the same technological level. The achievements of the revolution in military affairs – the mass use of pilotless drones (air and sea drones), the means for carrying out electronic warfare, and also the limited use of precision-guided weapons – have led to a strategic stalemate. Neither side has the ability secretly to build up any kind of sizeable force to carry out a major operation. Units designated for specific military operations find themselves under attack from unmanned drones and enemy artillery when moving up to the front line and are unable even to reach the line of deployment. The whole rear service infrastructure, especially weapon and fuel depots, is exceedingly vulnerable.

Such depots now have to be situated up to 100 km behind the lines of troop deployment. All of this has made it very difficult to carry out operations involving large numbers of troops.

It is worth adding, too, that because of the peculiarities of the internal political situation and the state of military industry on both sides, neither is capable at the moment (or, indeed, in the near future) of building up the kind of strategic reserve which would be essential to achieve a decisive victory. As a result, territorially the fighting has become protracted, similar to military operations in the First World War or the second stage of the Korean War. For such intensive military operations, this means that it is not the level of preparedness of the troops or the quality of the weaponry which is of primary importance, but simply the amount of personnel and military equipment.

Quantity versus quality

Achieving success on the battlefield with greater numbers has become the second reason why the Russian army has had to modify its practices. At the start of its military operation against Ukraine, the Russian army had insufficient manpower. This was a result of the armed forces' reform of 2008 to 2012, which was carried out by the then Minister of Defence, Anatoly Serdyukov. The essence of the reform was the rejection of the idea of mass mobilisation.

Over the course of more than 300 years since Russia created its first regular army, the ability to carry out mass mobilisation of the population became the basis on which the country could win any war in which it was involved. (This was done in various ways. Up until 1874 it was through recruitment; in 1874, compulsory military service was brought in.) This mass mobilisation would give Russia numerical superiority over any enemy. Accordingly, the concept of mass mobilisation became the foundation for the planning and organisation of the way the armed forces were run.

This reached its height in the USSR, when a five-million-strong peacetime army was a huge military school in which millions of reservists were prepared who could then be called up in an emergency. Military units were comprised of conscript soldiers, with hardly any professional sergeants. The combat readiness of these units depended less on their level of training than on their level of staffing. The majority of these units and sub-units were not at full strength. As a result, it would have been impossible to carry out any strategic operation without a prior 'mobilisation': this would involve a call-up of reservists; deploying them to bring incomplete units up to strength; and readying weaponry and equipment which was in store.

Even in peacetime, all of the country's industry, civilian or military, either had to produce or be ready to produce equipment for the military. Such an army could be effective only if the whole economy worked for it, and if the entire male population were regarded as 'a resource to be mobilised' and, in theory, able to be called up at a moment's notice. It goes without saying that such a system could operate only in a totalitarian state.

In the 1990s and at the start of the 2000s, Russia had a market economy (albeit a very unusual one); and certain rights and freedoms had been introduced, as well as the idea of the rule of law. Yet the General Staff's attempts to maintain the Soviet military system resulted in decay and a structural crisis, which affected all the basic principles underlying the formation of the Russian army. The combat readiness of the Russian armed forces was horrifyingly low, as two wars in Chechnya demonstrated.

Vladimir Putin understood this very well. Recalling that time in a speech to the Federal Assembly in 2006, the president stated, 'In order to give an effective response to the terrorists, we would have had to put together a force at least 65,000 strong. Yet in the whole of the ground forces there were only 55,000 soldiers in combat ready units, and they were spread across the whole country. There were 1.4 million soldiers in the army, but no one had been trained to fight. That's why inexperienced lads were sent into a hail of bullets.'[28]

Serdyukov's reforms

It was only after the war with Georgia in 2008 that the Russian military-political leadership acknowledged that despite the constant increase in funding for the armed forces since Putin had become president, they remained ineffective. The idea of ordering a mobilisation was unrealistic in post-Soviet Russia. A significant number of tanks and armoured personnel carriers which had been put into storage were faulty. Officers who had spent their whole careers serving in under-staffed 'skeleton' units to which reservists were sent refused to take charge of fighting units. The Kremlin got the message: if they were to come up against an enemy which was even just a little stronger, this could end in defeat.

Anatoly Serdyukov was appointed Minister of Defence in 2007 and put in motion a radical military reform. The reformers' aim was to create a different type of army, with fully staffed units. Bearing in mind the demographic situation, this could be accomplished only by significantly reducing the number of units in the armed forces. The ground forces alone became eleven times smaller.

As a result of Serdyukov's reforms, the Kremlin now had at its disposal a few dozen fully equipped units, which meant that a military command could be carried out within a few hours of it being issued. Putin had long been concerned at his inability to deploy a military force and immediately used these units to achieve his geopolitical goals. In February 2014, Russian forces sealed off the local parliament in Crimea, cut all transport links which joined the peninsula to Ukraine, and surrounded the Ukrainian military bases there; all of which allowed them to seize Crimea with no loss of life and unite it with Russia.

Even more impressive was the rapid deployment of Russian troops to the Russo-Ukrainian border at the end of February 2014. In 1999 it had taken the General Staff more than two weeks to put together two battalions of paratroopers and dispatch them to Dagestan, where Chechen fighters had broken through. Fifteen years later, in just a day and a half 40,000 soldiers could be stationed on the border with Ukraine.[29]

The switch to mobilisation

However, the Kremlin misinterpreted these successes. They decided that this reformed army, which had been created to ensure victory in a brief, local conflict, was capable of fulfilling any task, including an attack on Ukraine. This error became clear in February 2022, when Putin set the army the impossible task of seizing this large European country. He simply did not have sufficient forces. What was more, the reforms, which had been interrupted when they had been only half-completed, had not been thought through and carried out at the strategic level. In military colleges and academies, they were continuing to teach a doctrine based on a mass mobilised army which no longer existed. Russian officers were incapable of conducting a war in the way that they had been taught. In the first instance, this accounts for the defeats suffered by the Russian army in 2022.

It is likely that after the painful defeats near Kharkiv and in Kherson Region, Putin turned to his generals for advice. And they recommended a return to the only model they knew for running the armed forces and carrying out military operations. All they could recommend to Putin was to adopt mass mobilisation once again. This was what happened in the autumn of 2022, when a so-called 'limited mobilisation' was declared, which resulted in 300,000 recruits being sent to the armed forces.[30] At the same time, Yevgeny Prigozhin, an entrepreneur with a criminal background, was given permission to recruit prisoners, which produced a further 50,000 soldiers.[31] These measures allowed the high command to stabilise the situation on the frontline at the start of 2023. But the Kremlin was shaken by the strongly negative reaction to this mobilisation throughout society, which led to hundreds of thousands of young people fleeing the country.

But with the military operation bogged down and reinforcements being constantly needed because of the huge losses of personnel, the Kremlin had to create a type of mobilisation which would not lead to protests in society. They turned to 'market forces' to solve the recruitment issue. The Kremlin was going back to something that imperial Russia had done during the First World War. It began to pay those who took part in military actions sums of money which were enormous by Russian standards. At over $2,000 per month, this is much higher than normal wages.

In addition, significant responsibility for carrying out the mobilisation was put on the shoulders of local authorities, which also started to pay out large amounts of money – over $40,000 – for signing an initial contract with the armed forces. This led to a steady increase in personnel for the army, of around 30,000 per month. According to official figures, 540,000 people signed a contract with the Ministry of Defence in 2023,[32] and a further 427,000 in 2024. [34]The Kremlin is managing to maintain some 700,000 soldiers engaged in the fighting, which gives the Russian military command more than twice the advantage in numbers on the ground. Thanks to this advantage the Russian army has seized the strategic initiative, and is continuing to attack, even though it is making very slow progress.

The return to the concept of mass mobilisation, combined with the altered character of military operations led to the rebirth of Soviet methods of military training, albeit in a somewhat different format. The constant flow of personnel allowed for dead or wounded soldiers to be replaced by new recruits, without withdrawing whole units from the frontline for rest and reorganisation. Nine reserve regiments have been formed to support the fighting units, and some 300,000 soldiers have been trained in them.[35] In this context, it is worth noting the words of Colonel-General Ivan Buvaltsev, Head of the Main Training Directorate of the Armed Forces, who said, 'Combat training has now mainly moved to the level of "squad to platoon to company"'.[36] The training of recruits is limited now to individual training and acting in small tactical groups: pairs, trios or groups of five. After two to three weeks of such basic training, these units are being sent into action.

As far as we can tell, the Russian high command has managed to solve the problem of replacing junior officers. The closest estimates suggest that over the course of the three years of the war, losses of officers amount to around 40-50,000.[37] About 13,000 lieutenants graduate from Russian military colleges each year.[38] The gap that this has left means that lieutenants are being replaced by privates and sergeants who have excelled on the battlefield being put through short, intensive courses to become officers. This practice was followed in the Second World War. Not surprisingly, this leaves something to be desired. But in a situation where combat involves small units, such lieutenants probably have sufficient skills and knowledge.

Tanks brought out of storage

The most important problem now is providing troops with weaponry and military technology. This, too, is being tackled by employing the Soviet method of mobilisation. When preparing for a protracted conventional war against NATO, the leadership of the USSR understood that Western industry was much more efficient than its Soviet counterpart and could produce significantly more equipment in a time of war. The answer was to produce as much weaponry as possible in peacetime. This was why in the 1980s the Soviet Union had 63,900 tanks, 66,880 artillery pieces and mortars, 76,520 infantry fighting vehicles (BMPs) and armoured vehicles (BTRs), 12,200 military aircraft and helicopters, and 435 naval vessels.[39] The USSR had as many tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and armoured vehicles as the rest of the world put together; and three times as many as in the USA's arsenal.

Thirty years after the collapse of the USSR, some of these vast quantities of weaponry were still held in reserve. At the start of 2022, more than 5,000 tanks, 4,000 BMPs, 6,000 BTRs and over 11,000 artillery pieces were still in storage.[40] According to British intelligence, in the course of the first two years of the war the Russian army lost 2,600 tanks and 4,900 other pieces of military equipment.[41] Russian military industry nowadays has neither the capacity nor the speed of production to cover these losses. Instead, they have begun to bring up to operational capacity tanks and weapons which were produced 40 to 50 years ago.

It is indicative that at the start of 2025 there were 2,900 tanks, 2,700 BTRs and 3,000 BMPs left in storage.[42] In other words, losses of equipment on the battlefield are basically being covered by what is left in storage.

The future of the Russian army

Turning back to Soviet concepts and models of mobilisation has allowed Putin to create a relatively sustainable system for running the armed forces and conducting military operations. At the current level of intensity, the Kremlin should be able to continue the war for a further two years until the reserves of Soviet weaponry are exhausted. However, the fighting may cease before this for political, rather than military reasons.

In this case, the most important question becomes, what kind of concept will the Russian leadership choose for the future development of the armed forces? The leadership's representatives have on more than one occasion spoken of the need to make wide-ranging preparations for a military conflict against NATO forces; a conflict which could happen even in the current decade.[43]

Looked at rationally, Russian military planning has no choice but to take account of the fact that the army can no longer rely on the two points which gave it an advantage in the war in Ukraine: the greater numbers of personnel, and the old military equipment Russia had in store. However military planners look at it, the production of new types of weapons, particularly drones, demands an advanced combat control system.

In the same way, the demographic chasm into which Russia is unavoidably falling means that the 40-year old soldiers who are serving on contracts and who today form the backbone of the armed forces will retire, and there are significantly fewer people in the next generation. In these circumstances it is clear that, just as in 2008, the military leadership will once again be faced with the problem of how to improve the quality of training of personnel.

It will be virtually impossible to solve this problem if the current political regime remains in place. Switching to a Western model of running the armed forces, with relatively small numbers of personnel and high levels of technology would inevitably mean going back to Serdyukov's method for running the armed forces. Specifically, this would mean a return to a brigade structure for the army, turning away from the divisional structure, and also not having understaffed units. The demand to create an effective combat control system would mean considering the idea of network-centric warfare. In its turn, this raises a question which is impossible for the current regime to solve: that of allowing junior commanders to take independent decisions depending on the situation on the battlefield, rather than being afraid of being punished if they do not adhere strictly to orders given earlier.

From this point of view, integrating 'drone troops'[44] into the combat control system presents a huge problem, even though such an arm of the armed forces is supposed to be introduced in 2025.

At any given moment, the situation on the battlefield is bound to differ from what it was at the time that the higher command gave their orders. A return to such a system will inevitably lead to a contradiction between the armed forces' principal task of being able to carry out a lengthy conventional war in order to seize a particular piece of territory, and the fundamental ideological principles of the regime, which are based on the militarisation of the state and which take over every aspect of the life of the country.

It is likely that the General Staff will not choose such a rational approach just to protect itself, as it did at the start of 2022, when it was considered better to agree to the very risky move made by the Kremlin and the FSB, which maintained that Ukrainians would not resist an invasion. In such a scenario, the military leadership will try to convince Putin that a future conflict with NATO would be similar to the war in Ukraine. The main argument which they would put forward would be to repeat the Soviet concept of a lengthy conventional war, fundamentally because they would reckon that the West would not be able to tolerate massive casualties. And as in Soviet times, the generals would try to convince the man in the Kremlin that pressure from their own people would force the leaders of NATO countries to sue for a swift peace, on terms which would be favourable to the Kremlin.

A return to the USSR

If it is decided that the Russo-Ukrainian war serves as a model for future wars, this will lead to a further return to the Soviet way of organising the armed forces; namely, maintaining as large an army as possible in peacetime. According to the proposals put forward in December 2022 by the then Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, this would mean the creation of the following new units: three new motorised-rifle divisions and two airborne assault divisions, and an army corps. Seven motorised-rifle brigades and five brigades of naval infantry should be reorganised into a division. It is proposed that a mixed aviation division and also a brigade of army aviation amounting to 80 to 100 helicopters be created for each of the nine combined-arms armies and one tank army. On top of this, eight bomber aviation regiments would be formed, as well as one fighter aviation regiment and six brigades of army aviation. Finally, an artillery division should be created in each military district, each with an artillery brigade 'of massive force'.[45]

In accordance with Putin's decree, the General Staff will try to bring the actual manpower up to 1.5 million.[46] If this is the case, then the majority of those currently fighting in Ukraine will not be demobilised. They will be tasked with creating and guarding the new border in the captured territories. Another priority will be to provide a full component of troops for the Leningrad Military District, which was created in 2024.[47]

It is likely that the requirements will be tightened for those who wish to sign a contract with the Ministry of Defence, taking into account age, health, education and essential skills; and that the financial reward will be somewhat reduced. In order to widen the resources for a mobilisation, the General Staff will attempt to increase the number of conscript soldiers.

To achieve this, the rules for conscription have been made stricter, and a unified digital register has been created of all those eligible to be called up.[48] The authorities have openly stated that this has been done first and foremost so there will be effective mobilisation in the event of any future wide-ranging war.[49]

Preparation for such a war will have to be accompanied by an overhaul of military industry, which as things stand would be incapable of fulfilling the demands of a mass-mobilised army. With the exception of a few high-tech areas, such as drones, electronic warfare means, long-distance precision weapons, military satellites and nuclear weapons, military industry will focus on the mass production of simple, cheap weaponry. Given the industry's low productivity, an increase in production can be achieved by increasing the number of factories making military equipment. Bearing in mind the huge costs involved in building new factories, it can be assumed that – following Soviet practice – 'mobilisation tasks' will be given in the main to enterprises that are currently producing goods for the civilian market. This is in direct contradiction to the laws of the market economy and, as a result, will lead to the return of the planned economy. Ultimately, this will mean renationalisation, which in practice has already begun. What is not clear, though, is how sustainable this model of USSR 2.0 will prove to be.

When a conflict might happen

If the Soviet mobilisation model is followed, the country would be ready to conduct a new military conflict only after the losses of military equipment had been replaced and essential reserves of such equipment had been put in place. There would also need to be a significant replacement of personnel and the creation of a reliable reserve which could be called up. As mentioned above, military industry is limited in its capabilities. For example, it can produce around 300 new tanks each year.[50] It would take four to five years to create sufficient reserves to wage a war lasting a year. Roughly the same amount of time would be needed in order to build up the essential reserve of manpower, if 300-350,000 conscripts were to receive military training over the course of a year.

It should also be borne in mind that while in the 1970s and 1980s the Soviet leadership wanted to avoid a direct military confrontation with NATO, the same cannot be said about Putin's regime. Some sort of risky move cannot be excluded, such as a local operation to seize Narva (in Estonia, on the border with Russia), or the Suwałki Gap (the 65km long stretch of land on the border between Poland and Lithuania, which represents the shortest distance between Belarus and the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad). This could successfully push NATO into an internal conflict and help Russian domination over Eastern Europe. Two factors could encourage the Kremlin to make such a move.

Firstly, Russia now has around 700,000 soldiers under arms who have combat experience. A significant number of these soldiers who are already over 45 years of age will be demobilised over the course of the next five years. Putin may be tempted to make use of these experienced soldiers in the near future.

Secondly, NATO's European members have nothing like this number of military personnel. All of NATO's plans have been built on US forces being sent across the Atlantic Ocean in case of a crisis. With the political changes that have taken place in the United States, it is by no means certain that this would happen. The Kremlin has reason to believe that any aggressive actions on Russia's part would cause political discussions within NATO. And while such discussions were taking place, the military operation could be over and the world would be presented with a fait accompli.

Political recommendations

1. It is imperative that NATO's European members recognise that a militaristic regime has long been established in Russia, and its continued existence relies on either preparation for war or conducting a war. This new Cold War is going to last a long time.
2. As well as the increase in military production that is already underway, specifically European structures must be created either within NATO or in some other format, which will be capable of conducting military operations should the United States refuse to take part.
3. Should this be the case, it is inevitable that the exceedingly difficult decision must be taken for European armies once again to be organised on the basis of conscription.

Appendix. A note on Russian military terminology

Organisation

At the lowest level of military organisation, the Russian army has the platoon *(vzvod)* and then the company *(rota)*. However, higher up the chain the situation is not as clear-cut as in the British or American armies (where companies are grouped together into regiments), despite the use of similar terminology. Russian battalions *(batal'on)* are grouped together into regiments *(polk)*; the number and type of battalions depends on whether it is a tank regiment or a motorised-rifle (i.e. motorised infantry) regiment. The regiment will have support from other arms, such as artillery, air defence, signals, engineers etc.

Regiments can be grouped into divisions *(diviziya)*, or upgraded to brigade *(brigada)* status, with the addition of other components. The next level up is army *(armiya)*. 'Corps' *(korpus)* is another high level formation, though less common in the post-Soviet army. All forces based in one area are included in the military district; these are based on geography. There are currently five military districts: Leningrad,[51] Moscow, Central, Eastern, and Southern.

Ranks

The basic rank in the Russian army, especially for conscripts, is the private *(ryadovoy)*. Those regarded as more capable, or many of those who have signed a contract, may have longer basic training and become sergeants *(serzhant)*.[52] The equivalent of the British non-commissioned officer is the *starshina or praporshchik* (two levels).

Russian officers graduate from military college as lieutenants (*leytenant*; there are three levels). Above this, ranks virtually reflect British ranks: captain *(kapitan)*; major *(maiyor)*; lieutenant-colonel *(podpolkovnik)*; colonel *(polkovnik)*. There are then four ranks of general, which are not quite equivalent to British ranks. A *general-maiyor* equates to a brigadier; *general-leytenant* to a major-general; general-polkovnik to a lieutenant-general; and *general-armii* to a general.

Vehicles

For many years, the principle armoured infantry fighting vehicles have been the BMP *(bronyevaya mashina pekhoty)* and the BTR *(bronyetransportyor)*. Soviet-built models of these (as well as tanks) were principally what were in the stores. There is also the BMD *(bronyevaya mashina desanta)*, smaller than the BMP and used on the ground by airborne forces.

Economic constraints of the Russian war machine

Sergey Aleksashenko

Many experts believe that the war in Ukraine has necessitated a substantial increase in Russian military spending, which increases the instability of the economy and is about to lead Putin to end the war for economic reasons. This analysis shows that these concerns are greatly exaggerated.

Limited war, limited expenditures

For the Russian economy, the war in Ukraine is of a limited nature. Although the line of contact is more than 1,200 kilometers, starting from the summer of 2022, at any given moment, the military actions are concentrated in narrow areas and barely touch Russian territory. The troops deployed in Ukraine number 700,000-750,000, 0.5 per cent of the country's population. Of course, even a limited war has required a significant concentration of financial resources; however, Russian spending on the war is not excessively high.

Russian budget expenditures, identified in the budget as 'National Defence' increased from three per cent of GDP in the pre-war years to 6.1 per cent of GDP under the budget law for 2025.[53] At the same time, the increase in military expenditures did not lead in 2023-2024 to a decrease in spending on social items of the federal budget,[54] because it was financed by increasing the direct and indirect tax burden on the economy. On the one hand, the Kremlin raised various taxes annually, which brought 0.5-0.7 per cent of GDP per year to the Treasury. On the other hand, the government used previously accumulated fiscal reserves[55] and received significant inflationary revenues,[56] including revenues from the revaluation of the government's foreign currency assets due to rouble devaluation.

The favourable situation on the world oil market allowed the Kremlin to keep the budget deficit at less than two per cent of GDP in 2023-2024. Although the Russian government (directly or through state-owned companies) controls banks that accumulate almost 80 per cent of the banking system's assets, which makes it possible, if necessary, to channel national savings to finance the budget deficit over the past three years, this possibility has been used in insignificant amounts. In other words, this represents the Kremlin's reserve.

The significant redistribution of financial resources in favour of unproductive expenditures expectedly led to a loss of equilibrium, which resulted in higher inflation rates – cumulative price growth since the start of the war has exceeded 35 per cent. However, this is not unusual for Russia: the accumulated inflation rate in 2011-2020 amounted to 84 per cent (6.3 per cent on average per year). The slowdown in inflation at the end of spring 2025 is not sustainable, as it results from deflation in the non-food product segment caused by the strengthening of the rouble.

What do the statistics see?

About 40 per cent of Russia's increase in military expenditures above the pre-war level (1.25-1.3 per cent of GDP) was spent on payments to servicemen and their families. Although these expenditures do not create long-term economic potential and human capital, from the point of view of macroeconomics, they are similar to any social payments from the budget to the population, i.e. they maintain aggregate demand.

The Kremlin's total expenditures on warfare, not related to payments to households (purchase of arms, ammunition, medicines, fuel, food, etc.), do not exceed 2 per cent of GDP, which confirms the limited nature of the use of the economy's potential for warfare. This may have two explanations. Perhaps the Kremlin consciously limits spending on war to the level of minimum sufficiency or the production potential of the Russian military-industrial complex (MIC) is used to its full capacity, but this capacity is minimal. The second hypothesis is more likely.

The Kremlin's original war plan envisioned a blitzkrieg with no more than a month's lead time, which did not require the preemptive increase of current production to build up weapons and ammunition stocks. This task arose in mid-2022 when Putin decided to move to a war of attrition. Within nine months, Russian MIC companies that produced weapons and ammunition for the war in Ukraine[57] switched to working three shifts, sometimes seven days a week. By mid-2024, the number of people employed in the MIC had grown to 3.8 million,[58] up from two million before the war.[59]

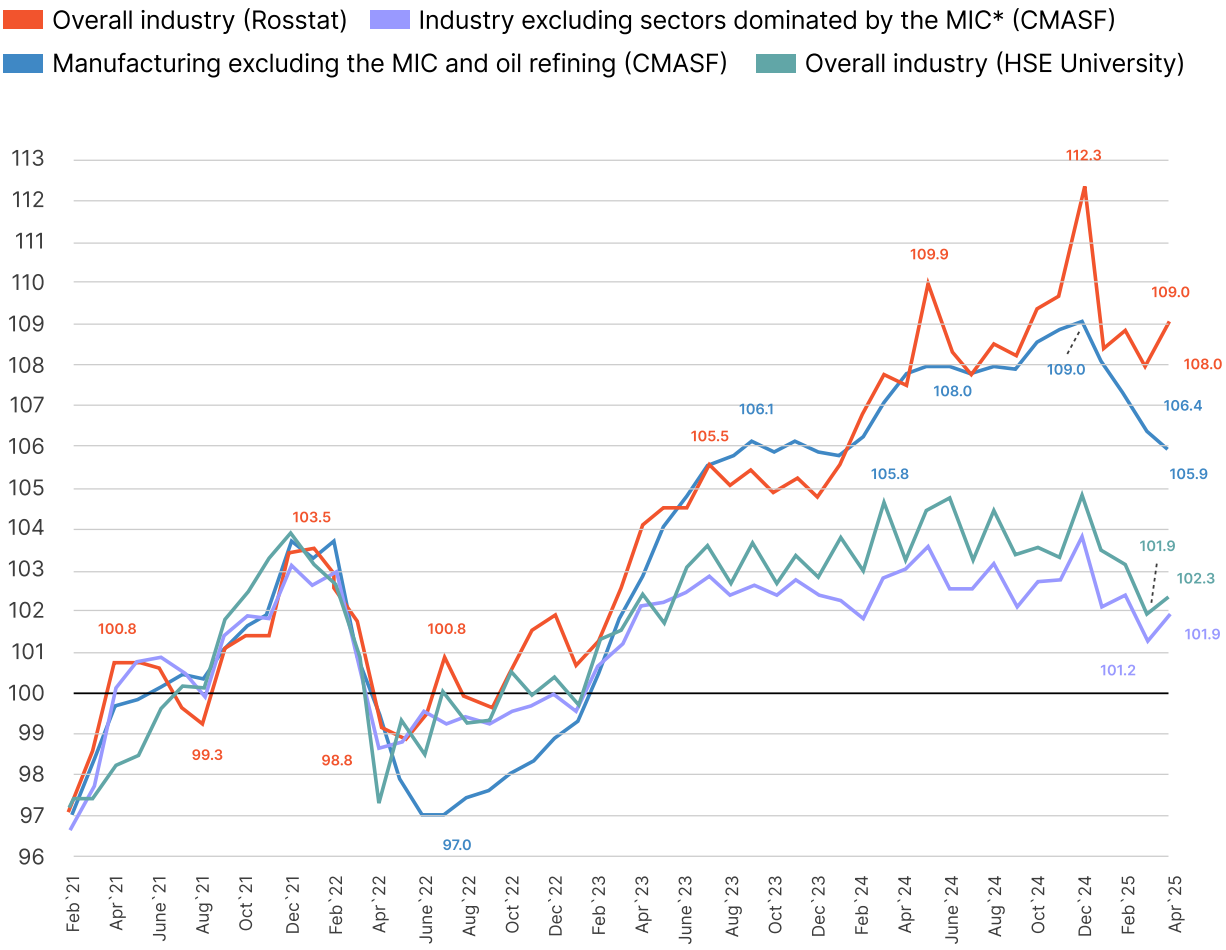
The nature of warfare and the Russian army's demand for armaments changed rapidly during the war: the use of tanks turned out to be much less effective than the generals had hoped; more artillery and shells were needed for offensive and defensive actions; the appearance of drones forced Russia first to import them from Iran, and then to launch its own production. In addition to battling drones, the MIC designed and started to produce electronic warfare instruments. In the absence of modern aviation in Ukraine, glide bombs, which the MIC modelled on the American ground-launched small diameter bombs (GLSDB) and launched into mass production in the first half of 2023, proved highly effective in overcoming defensive lines.

By the summer of 2023, the MIC's capacity to increase production was exhausted, which was reflected in the stagnation of the industrial output at that time. By the end of 2023, the MIC was able to build and launch several new production facilities (mainly for drones and electronic warfare equipment), which resulted in the accelerated growth of industrial production and the economy.

Russian statistics carefully conceal all the MIC's performance information, so all estimates are illustrative. The most interesting is the graph constructed by the Centre for Macroeconomic Analysis and Short-term Forecasting (CMASF), created by the now Minister of Defence Andrei Belousov, which obtained the most detailed information on the performance of the Russian industry.

Its graphs show the dynamics of the entire industry, including MIC (red and yellow lines), and the dynamics of the industry from which sectors with a high share of defence products are excluded (blue and green lines).[60]

Russian industrial output according to Rosstat data, and estimates by CMASF and HSE



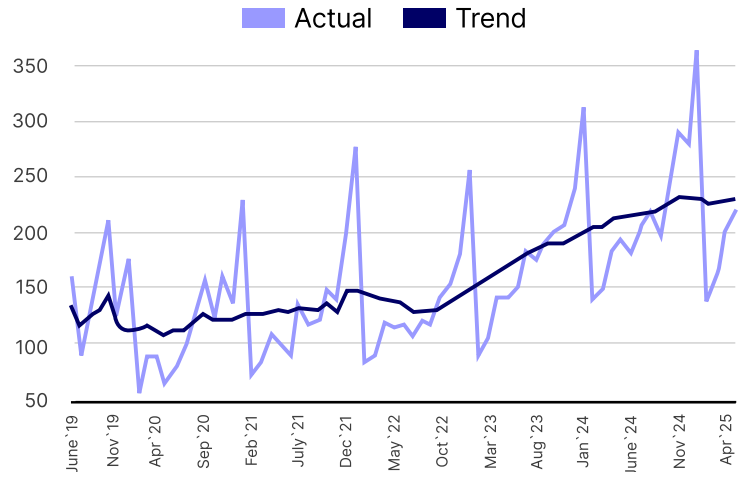
*Manufacture of fabricated metal products not elsewhere classified; computers, electronic and optical products; aircraft; other transport equipment not elsewhere classified.

Source: Centre for Macroeconomic Analysis and Short-term Forecasting (CMASF)

In addition, the CMASF shows the production dynamics in the industrial sectors with a high share of defence products, which gives an indication of the MIC's production intensity.

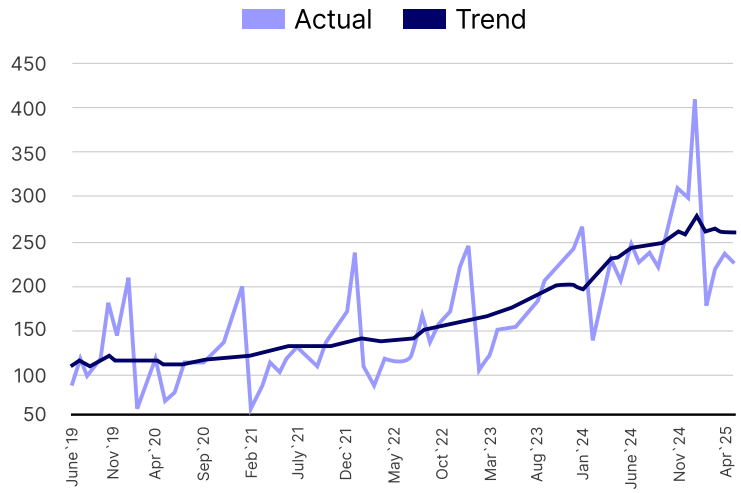
Those charts show the first wave of military production growth over the first half of 2023. For this purpose, the MIC had to recruit additional employees and switch to a two- or three-shift operation mode. The second wave of military production growth started at the end of 2023 and its potential seems to be coming to an end this spring. The growth was associated with the launch of new industrial facilities that do not require significant investments and sophisticated equipment. Although it has proved impossible to find statistical evidence that the Russian authorities forced private companies to reduce civilian production in favour of increasing military production, such a policy may have existed in a limited form.

Manufacture of computers, electrical and optical products



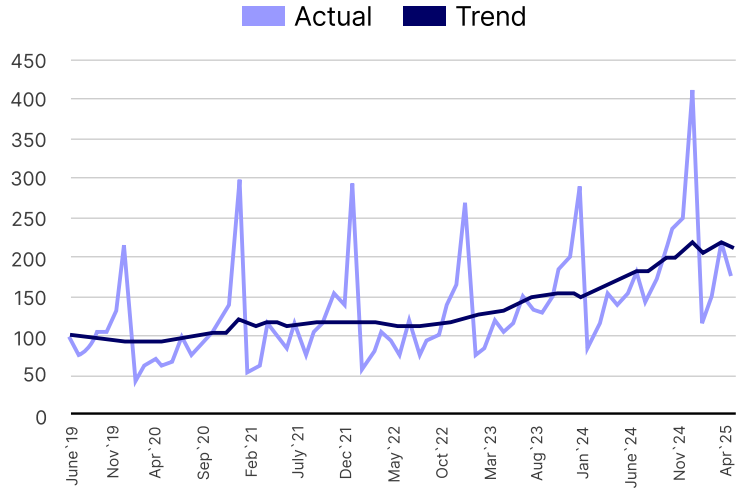
Source: Centre for Macroeconomic Analysis and Short-term Forecasting (CMASF)

Manufacture of ready metal products apart from cars and equipment



Source: Centre for Macroeconomic Analysis and Short-term Forecasting (CMASF)

Manufacture of other transport means and equipment



Source: Centre for Macroeconomic Analysis and Short-term Forecasting (CMASF)

How sustainable is military spending?

Can Russia continue to finance the war at current levels, and if so, for how long? Given the limited spending on arms and ammunition, the Russian budget will not be seriously strained if the Kremlin continues the war for another year or two. Inflation – the main indicator of economic disequilibrium – may rise, but if the budget deficit is constrained at the current level, the increase in price growth will be moderate.

The most serious challenge for the Russian economy by early summer 2025 is not the inflation rate but the recession in non-military industrial sectors, caused by the Bank of Russia adopting a tight monetary policy. From mid-summer 2023, the central bank consistently raised its key rate which reached 21 per cent by November 2024. The logic behind the monetary authorities' actions was ambiguous: price growth was driven by higher military outlays and a redistribution of resources – factors the interest-rate hikes could not influence. Instead, the increase in the interest rate led to a rise in the cost of bank loans and leasing payments, which put severe pressure on the civilian sectors of the economy. The government's decision to stop subsidising mortgage interest rates exerted additional pressure on economic activity, causing a downturn in construction and building-materials production. As a result, at the turn of 2024 and 2025, statistics recorded a sharp slowdown in the economy – GDP growth in the first quarter of this year amounted to 1.4 per cent against 4.3 per cent in 2024.

The slowdown in growth led to a reduction in inflation tax, while the rouble strengthening led to a fall in oil and gas revenues. This combination came as an unpleasant surprise to the Russian budget, and the government had to introduce, so far minor, spending cuts. There is no reason to believe that the Ministry of Finance will not be able to finance the current year's budget expenditures. Still, if the economy does not return to higher growth rates, the need to cut non-military spending may become more stringent when planning next year's budget. There is no doubt that Putin's economic team can convey to him the nature and magnitude of the problems in the economy, but he now considers them manageable and within bounds. It is impossible to imagine a combination of economic difficulties that would cause the Kremlin to abandon the war.

What about the post-war future?

Over three years of war, the Russian army has gained unique experience in conducting military operations using a wide range of weapons. Undoubtedly, this experience will be carefully studied and analysed by Russian military planners. Based on the conclusions drawn, the decisions will be made on the prospects or lack thereof for individual systems, the need for minor improvements or significant modernisation of existing systems, or the creation of fundamentally new ones. It would be naive to think that any expert today can foresee how quickly and in what quantities new weapons systems will enter the Russian army.

Meanwhile, the Russo-Ukrainian war is asymmetrical in the weaponry available to the two sides. The Russian military has almost all types of offensive weapons in its arsenal. At the same time, the Ukrainian army is limited to the types and quantities of weapons supplied by its western partners. Ukraine's arms production, except for drones, lags far behind the army's needs. For example, because of the lack of modern aviation, ballistic missiles, and a sufficient number of long-range missiles in the Ukrainian military, the Russian army did not face any contest for air superiority over its own territory.

In the scenario of a stable ceasefire, restoring economic growth will remain a significant challenge for the Russian authorities. Since Russia did not carry out economic mobilisation after the outbreak of the war and did not restructure civilian enterprises to produce military goods, the key constraint on economic activity will be the lack of available production capacity. Before the onset of the industrial recession (end of 2024), Russia's capacity utilisation rate was 75 per cent in manufacturing and 82-85 per cent in retail and services. Reducing defence procurement will free up some production capacity. However, it cannot readily be converted to non-military production.

To increase industrial potential, the economy needs to build new facilities requiring new equipment and technology. European countries traditionally supplied equipment and technology to the Russian economy. Yet, economic relations with Europe have been frozen since the beginning of the war, and even if European sanctions are removed gradually, the technology transfer to Russia will hardly resume in a short time. Increased trade with China and imports of machinery and equipment from that country allow Russian companies to maintain and modestly modernise existing facilities. However, direct investment from China in Russia is insignificant in volume and concentrated in the commodities sector's projects that involve exports to China. Such a scenario for Russia would mean low growth rates and a gradual widening of its technological gap with advanced countries.

Conclusion

Assuming that Western technological sanctions remain in place and China will not provide Russia with access to its advanced machine tools and AI-related technologies, Russia's role in the latest 'revolution in military affairs' will be limited. But this does not mean that the Kremlin will be unable to maintain the current level of military spending (deducted payments to households). The MIC's products used by the Russian army do not require the latest technological advances; the production of most of the imported components began 10-15 years ago and is located in countries that have not joined the sanctions alliance.

The inability to import modern technological equipment will constrain the MIC's ability to create and produce more modern weapons. Yet as the war in Ukraine shows, Russian generals and politicians believe that land warfare without the use of nuclear weapons can still be fought using old methods.

A ceasefire and potential renewal of military action: possible reactions from Russian society and war veterans

Ella Paneyakh

It is clear from numerous sociological sources that Russian society is generally indifferent to the war in Ukraine with a minority of genuine supporters. But what people are afraid of is an aggressive mobilisation; the growth of organised crime (which in reality is only starting to be seen, although many people are expecting it); and they are fearful of those returning from the frontline. Despite censorship, people hear about almost any violent incident involving war veterans who have come home. They are so concerned about this that it is written about both in local media and on social networks.

Journalists from the Russian opposition publication 'Vyorstka' have found 750 victims of such crimes;[61] and even 'Gazeta.ru', which is censored, runs a separate column devoted to violent incidents carried out by 'participants in the special military operation'.[62]

Fear of mobilisation

However, what people fear most is mobilisation. The aggressive mobilisation of 300,000 men, mainly working poor from Russia's hinterland, which took place over the course of three weeks in September 2022 shook society more than the unleashing of the full-scale invasion in February of that year, never mind the seizure of Crimea in 2014. No other event has had such an influence on the mood of the Russian people. Only the major market crises of 1998 and 2008 even come close.

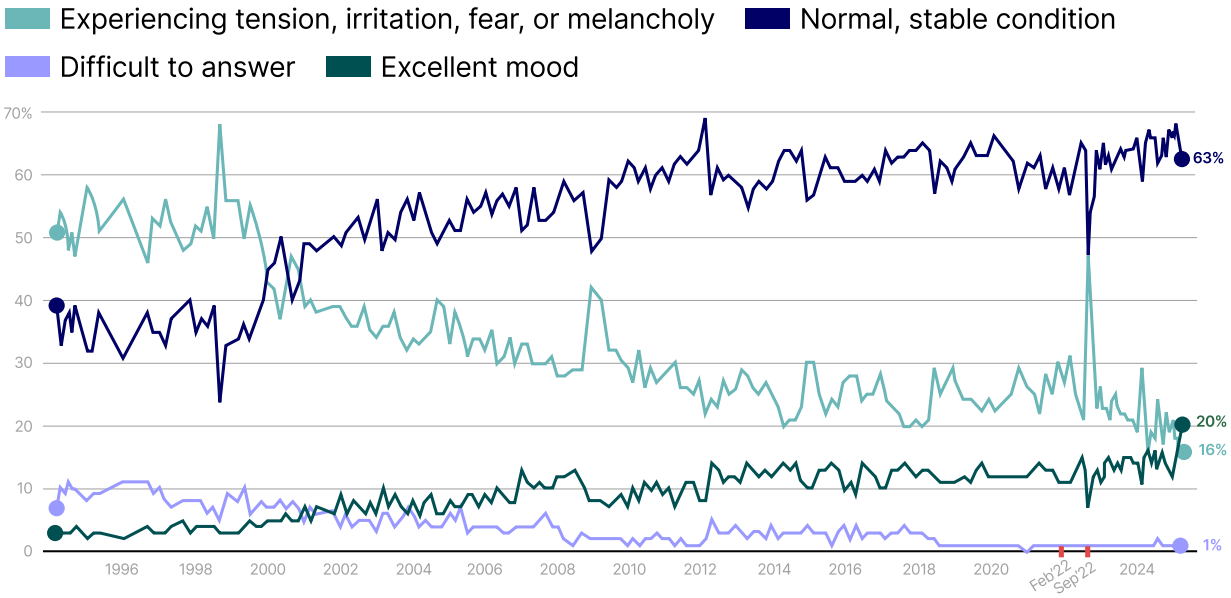
The significant redistribution of financial resources in favour of unproductive expenditures expectedly led to a loss of equilibrium, which resulted in higher inflation rates – cumulative price growth since the start of the war has exceeded 35 per cent. However, this is not unusual for Russia: the accumulated inflation rate in 2011-2020 amounted to 84 per cent (6.3 per cent on average per year). The slowdown in inflation at the end of spring 2025 is not sustainable, as it results from deflation in the non-food product segment caused by the strengthening of the rouble.

The mobilisation not only revealed the administration's lack of organisation, it was also, in some cases, deliberately hindered by the employers of men who could be called up. As a result, the Kremlin is now trying to do everything to avoid a repeat of the situation.

The mobilisation changed people's attitude to the warring army. This had reached a peak in August 2022. According to Levada Center, 77 per cent of people supported the army at that time, but trust in the army has fallen since then albeit not significantly. It stood at 69 per cent in September 2024.

‘What would you say about your mood in recent days?’

In % of respondents



Source: Levada Center

The issue of trust in the army

Even under President Boris Yeltsin, the army was the most trusted public organisation, especially as society began to lose faith in the other state institutions. Since Putin came to power, the army shared this position of trust with the Russian Orthodox Church and the new president, a situation which continued throughout the first decade of this century and beyond. After the crackdown on opposition movements in 2011-12 and the seizure of Crimea, trust in the army (and, indeed, the special services) grew exponentially, especially as society witnessed a virtually bloodless victory in Crimea which at first glance did not demand any sacrifice on the part of ordinary citizens. At the start of the 2020s the army had an even higher trust rating than the president; but the growth in its popularity, which had continued even after the launch of the full-scale invasion, was broken by the mobilisation.

It should also be noted that in post-Soviet Russia, just as in the USSR, the Kremlin has traditionally made sure that the army does not play any political role in society. As a result, no senior career officer has been used as a propaganda figure in the current military campaign, nor have they attained any kind of personal popularity in society. State propaganda praises only private soldiers who have taken part in the war, preferably those who have died in the process.

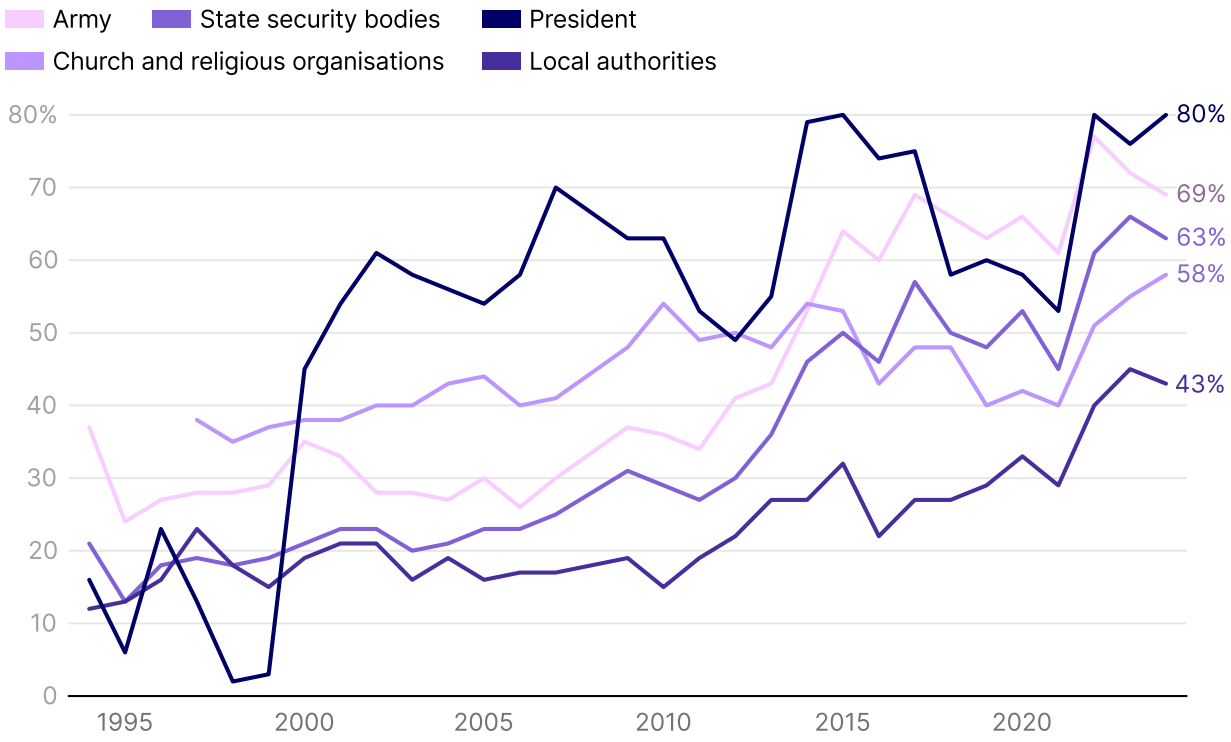
Consequently, the relative decline in the reputation of the army as a state institution is more likely to suit the Kremlin; as is the system of signing up soldiers on contract since this diverts funds for the conduct of the war to regional budgets (which are responsible for the majority of huge payments), at the same time making citizens less interested in the fate of those who have been paid to take part in the war.

Yet if society reacts calmly to any suggestion that the authorities are hiring new men to take part in the war for large sums of money, the merest hint of an aggressive mobilisation of reservists causes panic; and any attempt to involve conscripts in the fighting is fraught with problems, even in the current climate of repression and censorship.

At the same time, society is not worried about more human rights' violations, 'tightening the screws' or greater repression by the regime. As far as these are concerned, people are more than ready to accept the situation; those people who value human rights are demoralised and divided. But the overwhelming view in society now is that even a human life is not worth much, and political freedom even less.[63]

Public trust in Russian institutions (1994–2025)

In % of respondents



Source: Levada Center

These ratings show the institutions that were at one time among the three most trusted by society and are based on Levada Center data.

The challenge of returning war veterans

Nevertheless, despite the stereotypes, the average 'peaceful' Russian citizen does not condone violence and is afraid of it. All those who like violence and are not afraid of it are already earning money thanks to the war, while the bravest citizens who are against the war are either in prison or have left the country. The majority of people do not like to take risks of any kind, especially risks to their own person.

As war veterans return in increasing numbers from the front, conflicts will inevitably take place with those they perceive as 'cowards' who did not go to fight. This is a dangerous combination given the inevitable decline in living standards[64] and the presence back in Russia of a large number of people who have benefitted from the war financially.

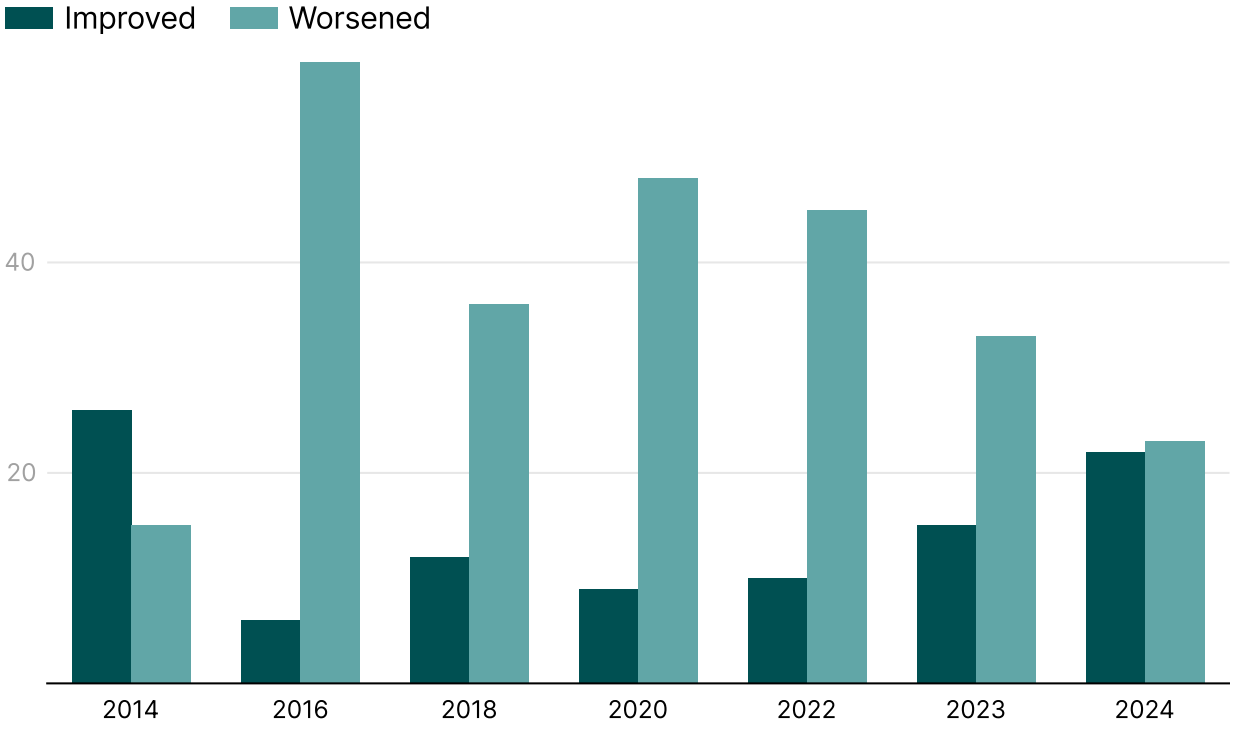
As well as those who have taken part in the fighting, there are others who have passed through the areas of the 'special military operation' and its environs:

- Bureaucrats who further their careers by temporarily joining privileged military units (such as the army's fighting reserve); in reality, these people are pseudo-veterans because they serve away from the dangerous frontline areas and for short periods (3-6 months), while ordinary contract soldiers cannot leave service of their own accord;
- Bureaucrats who have been sent on temporary, well-paid assignments in the occupied territories;
- Those from the power ministries *(siloviki)* who have been temporary well-paid assignments in the occupied territories;
- Volunteers, pseudo-volunteers and those whose business is involved with the war, both shady and perhaps initially legal, but who have then received work privileges outside the rules in return for helping the frontline;
- Workers who have been on temporary, well-paid assignments connected to the war (e.g., builders engaged in constructing fortifications in areas near the frontline, long-distance lorry drivers, etc.).

These people have all claimed to be participants in the 'special military operation' (some with formal privileges, others without); they all have experience of working in lawless areas, and they have definitely widened their social circles – most notably the bureaucrats. They will compete against genuine veterans and against their colleagues who have no military experience and bring a new way of doing things to their local communities, the state apparatus and the power structures.

It should also be noted that there are many families of manual labourers, the technical intelligentsia and others whose professions have been in short supply during the war, whose well-being and social standing have significantly increased. They are at far less risk of being without an income as soon as the 'special military operation' is over than those who have been engaged in the fighting; and this cannot but anger the latter group. By the start of 2024 the number of those who had benefitted materially from the war was virtually the same as the number of those who had suffered as a result of it; and hopes for a better future had increased for an even bigger part of the population.

Public assessment of personal changes in living standards (2016–2024)



Source: Federal Research Sociological Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences (FRSC RAS)

On the other hand, there is a sub-group of people among the contract soldiers (and there are now more contract soldiers in the army than anyone else), who are socially embedded, have maintained their contact with their families, have survived the frontline, and have managed even partially to save some of their earnings from the war for peacetime. These people could cause the greatest problems when they return from the war. They are better connected socially and more ambitious than those who signed up for the front because they were disengaged from society and underprivileged, and they will want to use their military experience, their new connections and their ability to survive in order to utilise their privileges as participants in the 'special military operation'. What is more, they will not want their level of earnings to fall.

As a result, Russia will see a community of aggressive men coming together who are former mercenaries not just with military experience, but who know how to organise themselves and have made sure that they were well provided for in wartime by using their own money and cooperating with each other (they held common funds in each unit). These people will be able to grind out new positions for themselves in society.

As well as these people, there will be a whole new social layer of around one million citizens who have been wounded in the war, who will be full of resentment for their social circles, and who will be predominantly on Russia's periphery and in small towns.

So, if the war ends suddenly, there will be a cruel and vicious competition for diminishing resources at every level of society.

This will involve administrative resources, manipulation of the powers of the law enforcement authorities, and the direct use of criminal violence; there will be a large grey zone overlapping these three areas. And all this will be taking place against a background of collapsing infrastructure, an under-financed social sphere and a dangerously low birth-rate.

Such a society will not want to accept state investment in anything it considers peripheral, be it the restoration of the occupied territories, aid to allies or even investment in military industry. People will also resent improved pay for industrial workers who did not fight at the front, when veterans of the war are trying to re-adapt to life in peacetime; and few of these people will be willing to take up manual labour.

And on the other hand, society is likely to be in favour of the increased repression of criminals to take violent crime off the streets; and even for the renewal in some (probably limited) form of military action since this would have the same effect and may even lead to a partial revival of the economy. In any case, it is highly probable that people would hope for this; after all, it worked after 2022.

Conclusion

To maintain control over society, it would make more sense for Putin to start a small new war as soon as the current one is over (or even before this one finishes). This would prevent most contract soldiers from returning home, while mobilised soldiers would be released as a gesture of goodwill. Such a war would not have to be victorious; rather, it would be drawn out, albeit with regular small successes. Its purpose would be to justify the militarisation of society and the investment in rearming and the subsequent fall in the standard of living; and also to occupy both those who had been fighting and the aggressive part of the population, who otherwise would have to be partially integrated into society with unpredictable political consequences and partially neutralised.

About the authors

John Foreman is a NEST Centre Associate Fellow. He most recently served as the UK Defence Attaché to the Russian Federation, providing strategic advice to Ministers and representing the UK Chief of Defence Staff. Previously, he was also UK Defence Attaché in Kyiv, and had military diplomatic appointments in the US, with NATO, and the EU. He served afloat on global maritime operations during his Royal Navy career, commanding two warships.

Alexander Golts is a NEST Centre Contributing Author and an Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies. For over 40 years, he was a journalist specialising in military issues and worked for several publications, including 'Red Star', the official newspaper of the Soviet/later Russian Ministry of Defence.

Sergey Aleksashenko is NEST Centre's Head of Economics. He is an expert on the economies of Russia and Ukraine as well as global financial issues. He is well known for his publications and commentary on economic change in Russia. He served as Deputy Minister of Finance of the Russian Federation (1993-1995) and as First Deputy Chairman of the Russian Central Bank (1995-1998). He has been a board member of several Russian companies, both state and private.

Ella Paneyakh is NEST Centre's Head of Sociology. Her research background includes studies of the Russian bureaucracy and criminal justice system, modernisation, post-Soviet transformation and business. Previously she was a professor in the Department of Political Science and Sociology at the European University at St Petersburg and a columnist for the business newspaper 'Vedomosti'.

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55. During the three years of the war, the size of the Sovereign Wealth Fund shrank from nearly nine per cent of GDP to two per cent of GDP
56. When the budget revenues and expenditures forecast is based on a lower rate of price growth than the actual one, budget revenues grow in line with inflation and exceed the planned level; at the same time, budget expenditures are fixed in nominal terms. As a result, the budget has excess revenues that can be used to reduce the deficit or increase expenditures as Putin decides
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