BRIEFING PAPER
416
September 2025

Veterans of Russia's war of aggression

Failed reintegration as a threat to the post-Putin era

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Summary

- Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the eventual demobilization of troops is set to pose the greatest veteran reintegration challenge in Russian society since World War II. Problems that have already emerged, such as crimes committed by veterans, will almost certainly increase.

- Russian society is unlikely to be welcoming towards veterans, either now or in the future, due to emerging inequalities. These inequalities stem from the high rewards paid for military service and the many other privileges granted to veterans and their relatives.

- Besides offering various benefits, the Kremlin has sought to prepare for this situation by appointing veterans to positions in regional administrations. However, efforts to maintain their respected status will fall short amid the unprecedented number of veterans. Moreover, those promoted to high-profile bureaucratic roles do not actually represent the broader veteran population.

- The simmering discontent among veterans is unlikely to pose a critical threat to Putin's rule because the conditions for any kind of oppositional political organization are non-existent under the current regime. Instead, the veteran problem, the scale of which remains unclear, could become a significant factor in deepening the political crisis in post-Putin Russia.

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Introduction

There is broad consensus among Russia observers that the vast number of veterans will constitute one of the most significant domestic repercussions of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Historical examples from post-war societies, such as the Soviet-Afghan War, show that problems caused by veterans are the rule rather than the exception.[1] In the case of Russia's current war of aggression against Ukraine, two factors are likely to intensify such problems: the recruitment of soldiers based on large financial incentives and Vladimir Putin's cherished belief that veterans should be treated as the country's new elite. From an economic perspective, the civilian sector is unable to offer salaries comparable with the rewards paid to soldiers, which may drive veterans to seek better-paid jobs, taking advantage of the privileges granted to them. From a social perspective, this is likely to increase rivalry between the civilian population and veterans, resulting in dissatisfaction on both sides.

In light of studies on post-war societies, it is also highly unlikely that veterans would feel widely welcomed and respected in a society seeking to comprehensively reject all elements reminiscent of war. This contradiction is already evident between Putin's declared war policy and the public's desire for the war to end, as seen in several social surveys conducted during the conflict. The Kremlin's preparations for the return of soldiers are reflected in high-profile integration projects, whose main addressee, however, seems to be Vladimir Putin rather than the hundreds of thousands of ordinary veterans. While the eventual scale of tensions and conflicts caused by returning veterans remains to be seen, it is clear that they will persist and cannot be avoided.

This Briefing Paper examines the veteran issue facing Russia, analyzing its scale, specific features, and potential political consequences. The paper argues that although problems are inevitable and likely to grow, veterans are unlikely to pose a threat to Vladimir Putin's regime. Rather, the veteran issue, alongside other post-war problems, may contribute to the erosion of Putin's position, and the true threat potential of veterans may only be realized in the political ferment of post-Putin Russia.

Veterans in Russia: Current problems and future scale

All wars end eventually, and all wars have long-term consequences, especially for the warring parties. This has been particularly evident in Russia and the Soviet Union, where the aftercare and social integration of war veterans have been poor. In the current war of aggression, the most clearly visible consequence has been the crimes committed by veterans in various parts of Russia. For example, in the second half of 2024, registered cases of rape and domestic violence grew by 50% compared to the first half of the year. In addition to the increase in cases, authorities have also come under increased pressure to register these crimes due to their social visibility.[2] The war has left many veterans with deep trauma, often accompanied by criminal behaviour. In addition, a significant number of Russian veterans of the current war are prisoners and convicted

1 Crotty, Martin, Neil J. Diamant and Mark Edele (2020) *The Politics of Veteran Benefits in the Twentieth Century: A Comparative History*. Cornell University Press.

2 Romanova, Olga (2025) Nayemniki, a ne geroi [Mercenaries, not heroes]. *Radio Svoboda*, 9 August 2025. https://www.svoboda.org/a/naemniki-a-ne-geroi/33498638.html.

offenders who were pardoned on condition that they be recruited and deployed. Their reintegration into society is inherently difficult. For example, by February 2025, the majority of the 378 veteran-related crimes resulting in death were committed by individuals with a criminal background, although they represent only a minority of all veterans.[3]

"Considering the scale of the current war, it is clear that the problems caused by veterans will not diminish."

Considering the scale of the current war, it is clear that the problems caused by veterans will not diminish. In comparative terms, for example, in Tajikistan after the collapse of the USSR, many veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War aligned with non-state violent actors during the country's civil war. In the same vein, in 1990s Russia, Afghan War veterans were heavily represented in organized crime.[4] The Soviet Union's ten-year war in Afghanistan, however, was modest in scale compared to the current conflict. More than 620,000 Soviet soldiers participated in the Soviet-Afghan War, while the Soviet Union's population at the end of the conflict in 1989 was over 286 million. At present, an estimated 650,000 Russian soldiers are fighting on the Ukraine front at any given moment, while Russia's population is around 140 million. In other words, both the absolute number and the population-based share of those who participated in the war of aggression will be considerably higher than after the Soviet-Afghan War. Over a million veterans is probably a conservative estimate.

Besides crime, another major challenge to the reintegration of veterans into society stems from the recruitment of soldiers based on remuneration several times higher than average wages. Although such high payments can be considered helpful for post-war integration, they hardly provide a permanent solution. A significant number of soldiers are volunteers attracted by money, and the considerable sums have already strained regional budgets, which are largely responsible for these payments. At the same time, it is highly uncertain whether soldiers attracted by high rewards would be willing to return to their low-paid pre-war jobs. Moreover, Russia's poorer regions have been overrepresented in recruitment numbers, war deaths, and the distribution of payments. Consequently, they will also be overrepresented among veterans and bear the heaviest economic burden after the war, further exacerbating regional disparities across the country. The lack of better-paying jobs may also drive veterans to more affluent areas in search of higher wages, which in turn could heighten social tensions in the labour and housing markets of larger population centres.[5]

It is known from post-war societies that citizens' attitudes towards all aspects associated with war, especially towards injured veterans, tend to be equivocal. In the case of the current war, the widespread desire among Russians for the conflict to end, combined with the fears already expressed about crimes committed by veterans, suggests that attitudes towards them will remain equivocal.

The Kremlin's means of integration: Insufficient, demonstrative and potentially counterproductive

By the end of June 2025, more than 137,000 soldiers had returned home from the front. Efforts have been made to facilitate their integration through legislative measures, such as prohibiting the dismissal of recruits from their previous jobs, prioritizing them in job searches, and offering various benefits, including holidays and treatment in sanatoriums. Employers are also offered various subsidies to employ veterans. Although the country is effectively at full employment, according to the responsible minister, Tatyana

3 Bolee 750 zhertv: kak vernuvshiesya v Rossiyu uchastniki voyny v Ukraine snova ubivayut i kalechat [More than 750 victims: how Ukraine war veterans who returned to Russia are killing and maiming again], *Vyorstka* 24 February 2025. https://verstka.media/kak-vernuvshiesya-v-rossiyu-uchastniki-voiny-v-ukraine-snova-ubivayut-i-kalechat.

4 Balázs Göransson, Markus, Tuychi Rashidov and Nurali Davlatov (2024) Soviet-Afghan War Veterans as Violent Specialists amidst State Disintegration and Civil War in Tajikistan, 1990–1992. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 37, 1; Galeotti, Mark (2018) "Gangster's paradise: how organised crime took over Russia". *The Guardian*, 23 March 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/23/how-organised-crime-took-over-russia-vory-super-mafia.

5 Trickett, Nick (2025) All or Nothing. *Riddle*, 29 May 2025, https://ridl.io/all-or-nothing/.

President Putin meets with service members as part of the *Time of Heroes* programme, which aims to integrate veterans into high-ranking public positions, in Solnechnogorsk in the Moscow region in June 2024.
Photo: Alexander Kazakov, AFP / Lehtikuva

Golikova, 57% of veterans were employed in May 2025, and 20% of these were self-employed. Similarly, the *Defenders of the Fatherland* (*Zashchitniki otechestva*) foundation, established to integrate veterans, received almost 30 billion roubles in 2024–2025, and according to its own statement, 2,500 veterans have found jobs through it.[6] Since reliable statistics are unavailable on this matter, it is not possible to form a clear picture. In any case, based solely on official announcements, of the more than 100,000 veterans who have returned so far, tens of thousands have not found work, have not applied for work, or are unable to work.

Although there is support for veterans' integration, the fact that they are generally poorly educated makes them a less desirable workforce, a perception that partly reflects society's equivocal attitudes towards them. Negative sentiments are likely to intensify due to the privileges offered to them at the expense of genuine competence. The most visible example of this is the quotas granted to veterans and their children for higher education, which correspondingly reduce the number of free study places. In 2025, almost 3,000 people were admitted to Russian universities under a special quota for "veterans of the special military operation", which was 58% more than in 2024. It is revealing that "83% were admitted without taking exams or would not have been admitted without a quota because their scores were below the passing

6 Borisenko, Lyubov (2025) Posle fronta – v shkoly i na gossluzhbu [After the front – to schools and civil service]. *Novaya Gazeta*, 26 July 2025. https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2025/07/26/posle-fronta-v-shkoly-i-na-gossluzhbu.

threshold".[7] Among Russia's top universities, the Higher School of Economics admitted the largest number of quota students without exams. To the extent that ordinary Russians' attitudes towards veterans do not meet Putin's declared expectations, the ever-expanding privileges tailored to veterans and their relatives are likely to increase suspicions towards them. These privileges may also reinforce veterans' sense of their own special status, and any weakening of that status after the war could increase resentment among them.

"To the extent that ordinary Russians' attitudes towards veterans do not meet Putin's declared expectations, the ever-expanding privileges tailored to veterans and their relatives are likely to increase suspicions towards them."

The eagerness of Russia's once top-quality and relatively independent universities to increase quotas for veterans and their relatives is indicative of the Kremlin's total control over the country's higher education. This reflects the state bureaucracy's need to appease the president's views on the prominent role of veterans in society. The starting point of this effort can be traced to Putin's declaration in February 2024 that veterans are the country's new elite, after which First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration Sergey Kiriyenko launched the *Time of Heroes* (*Vremya geroyev*) programme to integrate veterans into the administration. The programme is a selection system, similar to Kiriyenko's other cadre projects: after the application process, the best veteran candidates are appointed to various administrative positions. According to official data, there were 44,000 applicants in the first round of the programme, 83 of whom were selected for actual positions. Although Russians hold a relatively positive view of veterans serving in the role of local authorities after the war, this perception appears to have been shaped by the state media, as the actual number of veterans in such positions remains limited.[8]

It is striking that the veterans appointed to the "new elite" under the programme promoted by Putin are anything but ordinary veterans. Among them are, for example, Yevgeny Pervyshov, a member of parliament from the ruling United Russia party, who was appointed Acting Head of Tambov Region, and especially several career officer-politicians: Colonel Alexey Kondratyev, Senator of the Russian Federation from the Kursk Region; Colonel Artem Zhoga, Plenipotentiary Representative of the President of the Russian Federation in the Urals Federal District; Colonel Alexander Shlyapnikov, Deputy Governor of the Kaluga Region; and Lieutenant Colonel Artur Orlov, Chairman of the Board of the Youth Organization *Movement of the First*. This "crème de la crème" of the programme appears to consist of those who can be considered to have entered the war zone in its earlier stages to advance their careers. Now, under the new high-profile veteran project, they have found another channel for career development and for securing their positions.[9] In light of these profiles, it is not surprising that rank-and-file veterans who fought on the front lines, or ordinary mobilized personnel, are not being promoted to administrative leadership positions in various regions.

In addition to appointing veterans with political or professional officer profiles to nominally high positions, the Kremlin's reasoning for placing veteran-based officials in the regions rests on reasonable expectations that numerous future veterans will present various demands to regional authorities. Hence, if there are no veterans among those authorities, this might arouse wider dissatisfaction, whereas authorities with a veteran background may inspire respect and temper such demands.[10]

7 Uzhvak, Polina, Rina Nikolayeva and Sonya Savina (2025) "In 2025, nearly 3,000 Russian troops who had fought in Ukraine, and their children, were admitted to the top Russian universities through quotas. That's one and a half times more than last year". *Vazhnye Istorii*, 5 August 2025, https://istories.media/stories/2025/08/04/v-2025-godu-v-luchshie-rossiiskie-vuzi-po-kvotam-postupili-pochti-3-tisyachi-uchastnikov-voini-v-ukraine-i-ikh-detei-eto-v-poltora-raza-bolshe-chem-god-nazad/.

8 Gileva Aleksei, Marina Vyrskaia, Ilia Nadporozhskii and Margarita Zavadskaya (2025) Panel Study of Russian Public Opinion and Attitudes, Wave 4 (Unpublished report), University of Helsinki.

9 Novaya Gazeta (2024) Geroi svoyego vremeni, 5 December 2024, https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/12/05/geroi-svoego-vremeni.

10 Radygin, Artom (2025) "svoi" vo vlasti? ["Our own" in power?] *Radio Svoboda*, 14 May 2025. https://www.svoboda.org/a/svoi-vo-vlastj-/33413532.html.

On the other hand, these choices mean that a sharp divide will remain between authorities with veteran backgrounds and rank-and-file veterans who make demands. In this case, one may ask how credible a front-line soldier would consider a "comrade in arms" who spent the war somewhere in the rear or only briefly visited the war zone and occupied territories.

At the same time, the regime seems to have no intention of elevating rank-and-file veterans to potentially prominent positions. For example, in the 2024–2025 primaries for regional candidates of the ruling United Russia party, veteran candidates performed strikingly poorly, and most of those who succeeded had not actively participated in military operations.[11] Moreover, the overwhelming majority of regional administrations recently appointed by the Kremlin are still occupied by civilian bureaucrats. From the perspective of the accelerated nationalization and redistribution of private enterprises during the war, the main beneficiaries are businessmen loyal to Putin, not veterans.[12] Instead, veterans are increasingly being directed to symbolically visible but less powerful positions, particularly those involved with implementing patriotic education and youth policy in various regions.

Are veterans a threat to Putin's power?

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the consequences of a large-scale veteran problem for a country's political development is Weimar Germany, where millions of veterans played a major role in the rise of right-wing radicalism and ultimately in the Nazis' ascent to power.[13] Under Putin's rule, however, the widespread frustration among veterans – judging by Russia's past experience – is unlikely to pose a critical threat to the regime despite the inevitable problems ahead. A key factor is the state's strong control over civil society and the latter's limited capacity for independent coordination, including with non-democratic actors. The Putin regime's long tradition of divide-and-rule tactics, particularly the selective co-optation and repression of certain groups, has proved to be an effective tool of authoritarian control. Veterans are not a unified group, and, as current practices suggest, it is easy to create hierarchies and divisions among them that torpedo their unity.

"The political significance and threat of veterans will only be realized as part of the post-Putin power struggle."

In the inevitable tensions between society and veterans, the civilian population's equivocal attitude towards veterans may actually serve Putin's position. Those who have benefited from Putin's power and are dependent on him, as well as society at large, prefer to rely on the president rather than on veterans who may criticize him. Of course, this requires that Putin maintain his previous opportunism in protecting his position should the "new elite" he currently cherishes begin to organize against him. The closest example of a political threat posed by individuals with a veteran background was the mutiny of the Wagner mercenary army led by Yevgeny Prigozhin in the summer of 2023. This episode revealed both the regime's and the army's passivity and dependence on Putin's decisions, while at the same time underscoring the very limited prospects for a broader coup attempt by an actor like Prigozhin.[14]

11 Bol'shinstvo «veteranov SVO» vnov' proigrali praymeriz «Yedinoy Rossii» v regional'nyye parlamenty [Most of the "SVO veterans" again lost the "United Russia" primaries for regional parliaments]. *Vyorstka*, 26 May 2025. https://verstka.media/bolshinstvo-veteranov-svo-vnov-proigrali-prajmeriz-edinoj-rossii-v-regionalnye-parlamenty.

12 Kynev, Alexander (2025) Novyi start: regional'naya politika i regional'naya nomenklatura v Rossii na chetvertom godu «SVO» [New start: regional policy and regional nomenclature in Russia in the fourth year of SVO]. *Re:Russia*, 9 July 2025, https://re-russia.net/expertise/0319/; Yakovlev, Andrey (2025) Molchaniye elit. Pochemu nyneshnyaya natsionalizatsiya – bol'she, chem prosto peredel sobstvennosti [Silence of the elites: Why the current wave of nationalization is more than just a redistribution of assets]. *Vazhnye istorii,* 29 July 2025. https://istories.media/opinions/2025/07/29/molchanie-elit-pochemu-nineshnyaya-natsionalizatsiya-bolshe-chem-prosto-peredel-sobstvennosti/.

13 Koenig, Christoph (2023) Loose Cannons: War Veterans and the Erosion of Democracy in Weimar Germany. *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 83, No. 1.

14 Laryš, Martin (2025) Pro-war hardline influencers in Putin's regime in the context of Russia's re-invasion of Ukraine. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol 41, 4. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1060586X.2025.2509057?src=recsys.

Instead, the inevitable yet insufficient integration of an unprecedented number of veterans into society – combined with wide-ranging economic challenges after the war and Putin's inability to convince the elite and society of the necessity of the war – may become critical factors in the significant weakening of his position and eventual loss of power. In this respect, the political significance and threat of veterans will only be realized as part of the post-Putin power struggle. More specifically, it is logical to anticipate a collision between the promise of high status for veterans and the Putin regime's ultimate inability to fulfil it. In this case, an analogy with Weimar Germany may become more relevant; a weak successor to Putin could be challenged by veteran-based radicalism that neither a fragile regime nor a fragmented society would be able to curb.

Conclusions

It is reasonable to assume that the challenges of massive demobilization are among the factors reducing the Kremlin's willingness to end the war. Officially, the return of veterans has been prepared for through legislation and high-profile integration projects. However, taking into account the scale of the war and the eventual number of veterans, it is clear that the state's actions are insufficient. The high status assigned to the war and its veterans is a key part of Putin's legitimization of power and the political control associated with it. Ensuring the satisfaction of veterans who have endured the war and its horrors is therefore understandable. Yet the primacy of war in the administration's priorities, and in Putin's legitimacy, is likely to exacerbate rather than alleviate the problems of the near future.

The demonstrative nature of integration projects leaves countless rank-and-file veterans outside the high status promised to them. Patriotic education and youth policy, already long militarized, are set to become even more so as war veterans become their main implementers. At the same time, as state resources dwindle, the regime's actions so far do not indicate that veterans are being granted real access to the new elite. Furthermore, rotating positions in the administrations of occupied Ukrainian territories provide significant promotion opportunities in the Russian bureaucracy and, in many cases, make officials eligible for veteran status. Yet corrupt and criminal practices in these regions risk becoming increasingly widespread in administrative routines.[15] In terms of veterans' actual integration, the misuse of veteran status to advance careers fuels resentment among those excluded from privileges, who see themselves as the true veterans.

Ultimately, Putin's position is protected by the fragmentation of disaffected groups, their lack of means to oppose him, as well as civil society's equivocal attitude towards veterans. After Putin, however, the situation is likely to change. Grievances stemming from the failure to guarantee at least some degree of the high status promised to veterans, together with various problems related to their welfare, will come to the fore without the political constraints of the past. With politically conciliatory approaches weak or absent, veterans are among those for whom the threshold for using violence is low. The much smaller number of Afghan War veterans played a prominent role in the violent and criminal activities in the former Soviet Union in the 1990s. It would be surprising, therefore, if the hundreds of thousands of veterans of the current war of aggression failed to have an impact on the power struggles in post-Putin Russia.

15 Petrov, Nikolay (2025) The "Donbasisation" of Russia. *SWP Comment*, 22 May 2025. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2025C22_DonbasisationRussia.pdf.

BRIEFING
PAPER
416
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ISBN 978-951-769-834-4
ISSN 1795-8059
Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen
Cover photo: Aleksandr Potashev, iStock

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