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## The Fire: The Offensive Meant to Decide the War

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### THE FIRE, THE ICE, AND THE FOG: A SUBLIMATION OF THE RUSSIAN THREAT

Now in its fourth year, Russia's war on Ukraine has become more than a battlefield confrontation. It is fire, ice, and fog at once: the hot war in Ukraine fought with mass, drones, and attrition; the cold confrontation with NATO, centered on escalation management; and the fog of Russia's internal struggle, marked by fatigue, militarization, repression, and a growing social isolation, as much of the population seeks to distance itself from the war both mentally and in daily life.

Considered alone, each dimension distorts the picture. Taken together, they reveal a Russia both fragile and resilient, archaic and adaptive.

This is **Part I: The Fire**, focusing on Russia's war against Ukraine. Two further Policy Briefs will follow, each covering the other fronts of Russia's struggle.

### THE FIRE: THE OFFENSIVE MEANT TO DECIDE THE WAR

*A smart britchka drew up to the inn, its wheel worn through, its body so rickety it would scarcely last more than a stage...*

*'Do you think it will be going as far as Moscow?'*

*'I think it will.'*

*'But not as far as Kazan, eh?'*

*'No, not as far as Kazan.'*

*Gogol, Dead Souls.*

The *britchka* in Gogol's tale captures something essential about Russian power in 2025. Outwardly impressive yet structurally precarious, it moves forward through momentum rather than design. Like that rickety carriage, Russia's war machine appears both formidable and fragile, advancing on worn wheels and a tottering frame. The question is not whether it can travel, but how far before the wheels give way.

### THE TOTTERING FIRE

The Russian invasion of Ukraine entered its fourth year in the summer of 2025. Despite repeated predictions of exhaustion, the fire of combat continued to burn with intensity. It is fire in the most literal sense: artillery

pounding trenches, drones buzzing overhead, infantry waves advancing through minefields. It is also the fire of missiles and glide bombs, launched night after night against Ukraine's cities, power grids, and transport hubs, a campaign designed to exhaust society as much as to wear down the army. Civilian and military infrastructure alike are targeted, turning the entire country into a battlefield under constant fire.

But the fire is also figurative, consuming lives, resources, and societies. For Russia, it has become more than a military effort, it is a political statement, a demonstration that Moscow will endure no matter the cost. Here lies the central tension: the same fire that devastates also sustains, revealing a system at once resilient and brittle, enduring yet fragile in form.

This contradiction was captured long ago in Gogol's *britchka*, outwardly smart, yet rattling forward on a worn wheel and tottering frame. Russia's war effort mirrors that image. It looks clumsy, outdated, and wasteful, yet it keeps moving. And as in Gogol's dialogue, perhaps it will go as far as Moscow, but not as far as Kazan. The question is not whether it moves, but how far it can go. In its very persistence, it generates not despair within Russia, but conviction, the belief that victory remains possible.

Western observers have often misread this fire. Sometimes they underestimated it, focusing on failures and predicting collapse by pointing to staggering casualties and waste. At other times they overestimated it, treating every Russian adaptation as proof of regained invincibility. Both views miss the deeper reality. Russia's war effort is brutal and destructive, but not chaotic. It is archaic yet adaptive, resilient yet brittle. Above all, it is effective, and in the Russian way of war, effectiveness matters more than efficiency.

This defines the summer of 2025. Russia fights with mass and improvisation, with disregard for life and material economy. It adapts not by choice but by necessity, yet continues to achieve tangible results on the battlefield. To understand this, we must move beyond clichés of Russian backwardness or Western superiority. The task

is to analyze coldly how mass, persistence, and adaptation shape the Russian way of war, and where its limits may lie.

### A CAMPAIGN OF PRESSURE

The summer offensive of 2025 is presented by Moscow as the campaign that could decide the war. Its objectives are limited in scope but heavy in significance: to break Ukrainian defenses in select sectors, to seize towns and villages that can be displayed as symbols of progress, and to sustain a constant sense of crisis for Kyiv and its Western supporters.

The logic is one of exhaustion, not decision. Gone are the grandiose visions of a lightning strike on Kyiv. Russia no longer believes in rapid breakthroughs. Instead, it seeks to stretch Ukrainian forces, compel redeployments, and wear down reserves. Territorial gains are counted in kilometers, not sweeping maneuvers. Yet those kilometers matter. They demonstrate that the Kremlin can still move forward, still inflict pain, still sustain the war. Within Russia, they nourish a euphoric conviction that victory is possible, an optimism built not on creativity or maneuver but on sheer destructive power, increasingly woven into the country's martial identity.

On the ground, the offensive unfolds as a series of grinding battles. Each advance is preceded by hours of shelling and relentless drone surveillance. Small infantry units then press forward, often composed of mobilized men, ex-prisoners, and irregulars. Losses are enormous, but commanders accept them. What matters is persistence, not elegance. This is war as pressure, war as endurance—fire that must not be allowed to die out.

### MASS ON THE BATTLEFIELD

The summer offensive rests on three pillars: relentless infantry waves, overwhelming drone saturation, and sustained artillery fire.

Infantry use epitomizes Russia's reliance on mass. Mobilized citizens, penal recruits, and irregulars are pushed forward in repeated assaults. Most are poorly

trained, but their purpose is not individual success. Their task is to exhaust defenders, consume ammunition, and force rotations. Behind them, *kontraktniki* and more experienced units consolidate gains. Heavy casualties are assumed and accepted.

It is tempting to dismiss these tactics as primitive. Yet their effectiveness lies in persistence. As a recent U.S. Army report noted, Russia has reverted to Soviet form on the battlefield: “mass over maneuver, quantity over quality, capacity over capability, brutality over precision, mobilization over readiness.”<sup>1</sup> This is not mere incompetence. It reflects a military culture in which human life is treated as material, a resource to be consumed for strategic effect.

Artillery remains central. Russian batteries fire immense volumes of shells, now guided by drones. No longer blind barrages, these strikes are adjusted in real time. The effect is devastating, Ukrainian positions are destroyed systematically, and rotations are punished immediately. Ammunition stocks are strained, but still sufficient to sustain this tempo.

Drones have become the medium of fire. Small quadcopters scout trenches, larger strike drones hit logistics hubs, electronic warfare drones jam communications. For the first time, drones allow mass attrition to be executed systematically. The battlefield is transparent, soldiers fight under constant surveillance, with death descending from a buzzing speck in the sky.

### DRONES AT THE CORE

Drone warfare has shown Russia’s ability to adapt through necessity. The 2022 invasion relied on maneuver and armored thrusts. They failed. Ukrainian resilience forced Moscow to abandon its preferred approach and accept positional warfare. This shift was not a choice, but a consequence of failure.

Once forced, Russia adapted decisively. Drones were integrated at every level: reconnaissance, targeting, strike, and electronic warfare. Production was expanded

with Iranian designs, Chinese components, and domestic improvisation. Quality was uneven, but quantity mattered more.

Here the Russian way of war reveals its distinctive logic. As Roger Reese once noted of the Soviet army, effectiveness does not require brilliance, innovation, or even motivation, only size, obedience, and endurance.<sup>2</sup> The same principle applies today. Drones do not need to be exquisite, they need to be numerous. Soldiers do not need to be highly trained, they need to be present in mass. Fire does not need to be precise, it needs to be overwhelming. Effectiveness, not efficiency, is the measure, and in the arithmetic of a grinding war, this has produced results.

### THE TRIPLE-CHOKEHOLD

By the summer of 2025, these elements - infantry waves, drones, and artillery - had crystallized into what Western analysts have termed a “Russian tactical triangle,” a framework some describe more starkly as a “triple-chokehold.”<sup>3</sup> It is less a doctrine than a recurring cycle, a rhythm of operations that blends mass with systematic precision.

The cycle unfolds in three steps. First come ground assaults by small, mobile units, often on quad bikes, motorcycles, or on foot, whose task is to pin defenders and compel them to reveal firing lines. Next follows persistent UAV surveillance, mapping every movement and probing defenses for vulnerabilities. Finally, Russia applies precision exploitation: artillery, glide bombs, and strike drones concentrate on the weak points thus exposed, with follow-on forces consolidating incremental gains.

This is not maneuver in the Western sense. It does not seek breakthrough. Instead, it imposes pressure, enforces constant exhaustion, and makes every defense costly. In doing so, Russia has found a systematic way to turn failure of maneuver into endurance, combining mobility, attrition, and psychological pressure in a grinding but effective cycle.



## FROM MANEUVER TO ENTRENCHMENT

The most striking transformation of the war has been Russia's shift from maneuver to positional warfare. Doctrine and culture favor speed, breakthrough, and mobility, deep operations designed to crush an opponent. That preference has not disappeared, but battlefield reality forced a reversion.

Ukrainian defenses blunted Russian thrusts. Counterattacks inflicted heavy losses. Tanks and columns were exposed under drones and satellites. Advances stalled. Russia had no choice but to retreat, dig in, and accept attrition. Belts of trenches, fortifications, and minefields reshaped the front.

This was adaptation born of necessity. Russia does not prefer trenches, but it made them work through mass. Defensive belts slowed Ukrainian offensives to a crawl. By 2025, the battlefield resembled the fortifications of the First World War more than the fluid battles of modern doctrine. Yet they were effective enough to hold.

In short, Russia adapted because it failed. Unable to sustain maneuver, it entrenched, and in doing so, turned failure into endurance.

## MASS AS GRAMMAR OF POWER

To understand this persistence, we must look beyond numbers. In the Russian way of war, mass is more than manpower or shells. It is a cultural principle, a reflection of the state and of society.

Mass shapes human relations, privileging obedience and endurance. It shapes organizations, favoring size and centralization. It shapes industry, prioritizing volume over innovation. And it shapes civil–military relations, where society is treated as a reservoir of sacrifice. Mass is not incidental, it is the grammar of Russian power.

From a Western perspective, this is alien. We prize precision, economy, and technology. Russian warfare, by contrast, appears excessive and repellent: staggering

casualties, destroyed towns, waves of expendable soldiers. It looks like waste, far removed from our doctrines of efficiency.

But for Russia, mass is rational. De-modernization works. It sustains pressure. It reflects a worldview in which effectiveness, not humanity, is decisive. The real question is not whether this way of war is modern or civilized, but why it remains effective, and where its limits may lie.

## EFFECTIVENESS OVER EFFICIENCY

This principle - effectiveness over efficiency - explains both Russia's persistence and its contradictions. It sustains pressure while accepting enormous waste, achieves tactical gains while strategic costs accumulate. As Roger Reese observed of the Soviet Army in the Winter War:

*"The Red Army showed to be effective... unit cohesion, though challenged, remained intact... morale sometimes waned but never collapsed... discipline, though tenuous, did not give way. Civilian support and soldiers' morale were shaken, yet the army endured long enough to give the high command time to regroup and change strategy."*<sup>4</sup>

The Soviet Army was inefficient, brutal, and wasteful, yet effective enough to achieve its aims. The Russian Army of 2025 follows the same pattern. It is not brilliant or efficient, but it is effective in pressing forward, surviving, and imposing costs.

This is the Russian way of war: effectiveness matters more than efficiency. It fuels, on the one hand, a sense of superiority over the West, the belief that endurance and sacrifice outweigh precision or elegance. On the other, it underpins the conviction that the *Russkiy Mir* earns its place in the world through suffering and persistence. Together, these beliefs form a defining characteristic of Russia's martial identity.



## RECRUITMENT AND ENDURANCE

To sustain the fire, Russia draws on multiple sources of manpower. Professional *kontraktniki* remain the backbone, but they are supplemented by mobilized citizens, prisoners released into service, irregulars - notably Chechen formations - and foreign soldiers. These foreigners appear in two forms: institutionalized contingents provided through state-to-state agreements, and individuals recruited on a more ad hoc basis from across the globe. The most striking example is the deployment of North Korean troops. Reports suggest approximately 40,000 total, deployed in phases beginning with an initial contingent of 10,000 in March 2025, followed by additional deployments through July.

This system is coercive and uneven, but it produces quantity. Ex-prisoners are treated as expendable, hurled into high casualty assaults. Irregulars add numbers and fulfill specific tasks, while individual foreign recruits serve mostly symbolic roles. Across all categories, motivation is largely external, driven by pay, material benefits, or the absence of alternatives rather than intrinsic belief in the war.

Such reliance on external incentives sustains the flow of recruits but weakens cohesion and long-term endurance. Soldiers fight because they are compelled or compensated, not because they are invested in the cause. This keeps units functional in the short term, but erodes resilience over time. When pressure intensifies, fragile commitment risks giving way to exhaustion, desertion, or collapse.

The limits are clear: casualties hollow out cadres, morale is strained, mobilization breeds social fatigue. The system can endure in the medium term, but in the long run it is brittle, a model built on compulsion and improvisation. The contradiction is stark: while the state glorifies sacrifice as civilizational strength, recruitment rests less on conviction than on coercion and cash.

## THE THRESHOLD QUESTION

Here lies the central dilemma: is Russia approaching a point where mass and persistence no longer suffice?

In manpower, quality declines as losses mount. Replacements often arrive with little experience, and morale remains uneven. Yet, so far, Russia has managed to recruit the necessary numbers to sustain its strategy, but only at a steadily rising financial and economic cost. The paradox is stark: while the state glorifies sacrifice as civilizational strength, the manpower pool is sustained less by conviction than by cash, coercion, and material incentives. The myth of sacrifice endures in rhetoric, but in practice, it is the economy that bears the true weight of sustaining the war, a burden that will be explored further in Part III, *The Fog*.

In materiel, bottlenecks persist. Ammunition and drones remain abundant, but armored vehicles and precision systems are scarce. Sanctions restrict access to advanced components, even when circumvented. Production sustains the current tempo, but its long-term capacity is uncertain.

Summer 2025 may not yet be the breaking point. But it sharpens the question: how long can mass carry Russia forward? Where is the threshold beyond which persistence turns from strength into fragility, when the myth of sacrifice that fuels Russia's martial identity collides with the material limits of its war effort?

## OBSESSION AND EROSION

Russia's war effort has become all-consuming. The Kremlin's fixation on Ukraine concentrates political, economic, and military resources on a single front. This obsession sustains the fire in Ukraine, but corrodes Moscow's influence beyond it.

In the South Caucasus, Armenia drifts out of Moscow's orbit while Azerbaijan asserts itself with Turkish backing. In Chechnya, the façade of loyalty conceals growing strains. In Syria and Iran, commitments absorb resources

without yielding decisive leverage. In Central Asia, Russia's partners hedge toward China, deepening economic and security ties with Beijing.

The return of Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025 shaped Moscow's calculations. For the Kremlin, his election brought hope of relief, weakened U.S. commitment to NATO, pressure on Europe to scale back support for Kyiv, and prospects for negotiations on Russian terms. Moscow sought to seize this moment by intensifying its offensive, aiming to create facts on the ground that could frame any future talks.

Yet the effect proved uncertain and double-edged. Trump's rhetoric unsettled allies and injected doubt into Western cohesion, but it did not produce the collapse of support for Ukraine that Moscow expected. If anything, attempts to leverage American ambiguity sharpened European awareness of the stakes. What was meant to strengthen Moscow's hand instead risked deepening its isolation.

The paradox is striking: the more Russia insists on holding Ukraine, the more its wider sphere of influence frays. What was meant to secure Russia's role as a great power accelerates the erosion of its periphery. The fire that sustains Russia on the front line is the same fire that consumes its authority abroad. In seeking to prove that sacrifice earns it a place in the world, Russia risks burning away the very foundations of its broader power.

### **FIRE, UKRAINE, AND EUROPE'S DILEMMA**

The Russian threat presents itself in two ways. For Ukraine, it is existential. The fire is aimed directly at its state, its sovereignty, its people, even its culture. Russia seeks to burn Ukraine down as a political community, to force submission. And given the policies already observed in occupied territories, forced Russification emerges as the ultimate outcome of Russian domination.

For Europe, the threat is different. It does not take the form of imminent invasion, but of the Russian way of warfare itself. Already, Russia wages a hybrid struggle in

Europe — infiltrating, deceiving, and undermining — yet it stands ready to turn brutal, violent, and destructive if the moment demands. Today it poisons with disinformation and subversion; tomorrow it can devastate with fire and steel. Russia's way of war is alien to our strategic culture. It is built on mass, on effectiveness over efficiency, and on endurance as a political principle. The danger lies in cognitive dissonance. Our own culture, built on efficiency and technological superiority, struggles to comprehend an approach that treats human life as expendable material and views destruction itself as victory.

The Russian threat to Europe is therefore not only military but cognitive. Our inability to grasp its logic blinds us. The fire of 2025 shows that Russia's way of war, however brutal, remains effective — and Europe's greatest danger is to refuse to see it for what it is.

### **CONCLUSION – THE TOTTERING FIRE**

The fire of 2025 exposes the central paradox of Russia's war effort. Moscow wages a violent and grinding campaign, driven into exhaustion by failure, yet still able to sustain pressure and project momentum. The Russian art of war is rooted in mass, not only as numbers but as a cultural principle shaping organizations, industry, and civil–military relations. The army is clumsy and wasteful, yet it endures; it reacts to setbacks rather than shaping events, yet adapts enough to keep fighting.

At the same time, the war represents a deliberate regression. De-modernization works. Russia has abandoned maneuver and precision in favor of mass, attrition, and industrial firepower. This backward step does not weaken its approach but, paradoxically, strengthens it within its own logic. By reverting to simpler and more brutal methods, it has rediscovered effectiveness in destruction. In this worldview, failure itself becomes a source of optimism, and destruction is equated with victory, a grim inversion that sustains both the war effort and the belief that it can prevail.

For Ukraine, this fire is existential. For Europe, the danger lies in how far this way of war stands from our own



worldview. Russian warfare rests on mass, destruction, and persistence; Western strategic culture prizes precision, economy, and the avoidance of large-scale war. For Russia, war remains integral to identity and statehood. For the West, it is remembered as calamity, a failure of politics. The true danger is cognitive: the gap between these perceptions blinds us, tempting us to underestimate, misinterpret, or dismiss what Russia is actually doing.

The paradox of the Tottering Fire is therefore twofold. It is destructive yet effective, regressive yet enduring. It generates not despair but a dangerous belief in victory. At the same time, this obsession with Ukraine erodes Russia's wider power. External factors inject uncertainty into Western cohesion, but in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and beyond, Moscow's grip weakens. The fire that fuels Russia's persistence also burns away its influence.

For the West, the task is to see this clearly, without illusions of superiority. The Russian way of war is not about brilliance or speed, but about outlasting an opponent through persistence. In a war of exhaustion, victory is measured not by rapid gains but by the longevity of effort. As Gogol's *britchka* reminds us, the vehicle may be tottering, its wheel worn thin, but it keeps moving. The question is not whether it moves, but how far it can go.

Here lies the deeper divide. For the West, war is failure, a disaster, a collapse of politics, something to be avoided at all costs. For Russia, war is different: it is a proving ground, a crucible of identity, and a path to recognition. War is not only an instrument of policy but a civilizational claim, proof that the *Russkiy Mir* earns its place in the world through sacrifice.

Russia's martial logic can be summed up in a grim system of equations:

Failure is Success.  
Loss is Pride.  
Destruction is Victory.  
Stasis is Momentum.  
Regression is Progress.  
Suffering is Strength.

This analysis reveals both how Russia fights and what lessons the West must draw if it is to avoid strategic surprise. Understanding Russia's approach, and why it remains effective despite its contradictions, is essential for European security.

## THE STUDY OF VICTORY

The war in Ukraine is not only fought on the battlefield but also in the way victory is conceived. Russia's practice of war follows a logic that is often alien to Western eyes, yet it remains brutally effective. Distilling these insights allows us to see both how Russia fights and what lessons the West must draw if it is to avoid being surprised again.

### How Russia fights

- **A dual threat:** existential for Ukraine, cognitive for Europe.
- **Mass as principle:** not only numbers, but a cultural code shaping state, society, and military.
- **Adaptation through failure:** Russia prefers maneuver but falls back on trenches and attrition.
- **Effectiveness over efficiency:** persistence and endurance matter more than precision or innovation.
- **Recruitment by compulsion and improvisation:** mobilized citizens, prisoners, irregulars, and foreigners patched together into a force sustained by sheer quantity.
- **Money as leverage:** financial incentives drive mobilization but create fragile loyalties that unravel under strain.
- **Foreign contributions:** contingents such as North Korean soldiers symbolize a coalition dimension, while ad hoc recruits play mostly symbolic roles.
- **Extrinsic motivation:** most soldiers fight for pay, benefits, or under coercion, not conviction, weakening cohesion and long-term resilience.
- **Fragile sustainability:** casualties hollow out cadres, morale frays, mobilization breeds fatigue; the model endures in the medium term but is brittle in the long run.
- **De-modernization works:** reverting to simpler, mass-based methods has proven brutally effective.

- **Destructive optimism:** incremental gains feed a euphoric belief in victory, absorbed into Russia's martial identity.
- **The paradox of fire:** destructive yet effective, archaic yet adaptive, fragile yet resilient, a logic of victory far removed from our own.

#### Lessons for the West

- **Adapt or be outpaced:** survival hinges on rapid, industrial scale adaptation, not pre-war perfection.
- **Fight in three eras at once:** maneuver, trench, and drone warfare will coexist and interact.
- **Unlearn to relearn:** the wars we trained for will not return; drones are rewriting the rules.
- **Mass can crush finesse:** "good enough" at scale can overwhelm precision if sustained.
- **Keep thinking on the move:** strategy must evolve with the war's cycle of action and reaction.
- **Mobilize society:** endurance depends on populations conditioned to bear the costs of war.
- **Outlast to win:** victory may hinge less on speed than on sustaining support longer than the enemy can attack.

The lessons are clear. The Russian way of war will not end with the war in Ukraine, it reflects a deeper civilizational logic. Unless Europe internalizes this, it will be surprised again, and again. Part II examines how this challenge manifests in Russia's confrontation with NATO itself.

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## Endnotes

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