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The Fog: The Opacity That Warns

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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, centred on escalation management; and the fog of Russia's internal struggle, marked by fatigue, militarisation, 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 III: The Fog**, examining Russia's internal front—the least legible dimension of the conflict. The system performs strength while pressure accumulates beneath the surface: *raison d'état* coexists with societal passivity, producing fragility that yields lurches rather than orderly decline. This Policy Brief maps that opacity through an economy of exhaustion, the “veteran variable” as battlefield costs migrate home, a society that holds still under pressure, elite cohesion sustained by fear and performance, and the indicators that often precede sudden shifts. The policy lesson is simple: do not mistake opacity for stability—prepare for discontinuity, monitor the silent front, and prioritise endurance over spectacle.

[Part I: The Fire](#) focused on Russia's war against Ukraine.

[Part II: The Ice](#) focused on Russia's long confrontation with NATO and Europe's security order.

THE FOG: THE OPACITY THAT WARNS

'I can say "No." There's nothing can stop me – as long as I can find the strength to face my destruction. I will say "No!"'

Vasily Grossman, Life and Fate.

INTRODUCTION: THE FOG AS STRATEGIC THREAT

In *Life and Fate*, Vasily Grossman gives these words to Ikonnikov, a former Tolstoyan imprisoned in a German concentration camp. Ikonnikov refuses to help construct a gas chamber, choosing conscience over survival. Soviet censors confiscated not just the manuscript, but the typewriter ribbons themselves. Grossman died in 1964 without seeing his novel published.

Russia's war system has inverted that choice. Where Ikonnikov found strength to say "No" and face destruction, Putin's Russia has mobilised hundreds of thousands who say "Yes"—and face destruction anyway. The britchka from *The Fire*—Gogol's ramshackle carriage, outwardly imposing yet structurally fragile—keeps rolling not because it is strong, but because turning back appears more dangerous than pressing on.¹

This is the fog: the internal front, where *raison d'état* coexists with societal passivity—producing fragility rather than resilience. Unlike the fire burning in Ukraine or the ice forming along NATO's borders, this dimension is opaque yet potentially decisive. The war's costs—economic exhaustion, veteran reintegration, societal endurance, elite cohesion—display the same contradiction: surface

conformity masking internal withdrawal; systems persisting not through strength but through society's refusal to challenge them openly.

The fog endures while pressure accumulates beneath—a combination that makes analysis harder over time and leaves surprise always possible.

1. THE ECONOMY OF EXHAUSTION

At June 2025's St. Petersburg forum, officials clashed openly over Russia's economic trajectory. Central Bank Governor Elvira Nabiullina warned of persistent inflation risks requiring cautious policy, while First Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov defended robust growth driven by defence spending.² By September's Vladivostok forum, Sberbank CEO Herman Gref—longtime Putin ally—declared the economy in "technical stagnation," approaching "zero growth."³ Yet at October's Valdai Club, Putin doubled down: sanctions had "completely failed," Russia had demonstrated "the highest degree of resilience."⁴

The gap between Gref's stagnation warning and Putin's triumphalism signals elite fracture over economic reality. When technocrats cannot agree on diagnosis, and the president dismisses both optimists and pessimists alike, the fog thickens.

The Impossible Balancing Act

The Central Bank's September 2025 decision laid contradictions bare. It cut rates to 17 percent, acknowledging inflation had "notably decreased." Yet Nabiullina qualified immediately: inflation expectations remained "elevated," and "if the budget deficit exceeds the level predicted in our baseline scenario, we will have limited room for cutting the key rate." The same week, Finance Minister Siluanov unveiled a 2026 budget allocating 38 percent of all spending to defence and security—a 2.5-fold increase from approximately 15 percent in 2021. As a share of GDP, defence spending has more than doubled from 3-4 percent pre-war to approximately 7 percent by 2025.⁵ The contradiction is profound: the Central Bank tries to

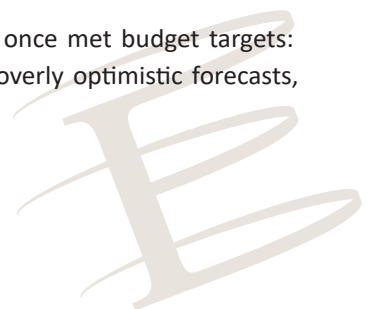
ease policy to support a slowing economy, yet cannot ease significantly because fiscal expansion—dominated by defence spending—keeps inflation structural rather than cyclical. Fiscal policy holds monetary policy hostage. This structural trap operates through specific transmission mechanisms. Defence procurement drives wages in military-industrial sectors far above civilian equivalents, creating labour market distortions that ripple outward. Enterprises competing for workers must raise wages to retain staff, feeding cost-push inflation even as consumer demand weakens. The Central Bank can raise rates to dampen demand, but it cannot address supply-side bottlenecks created by resource reallocation toward military production. Monetary policy becomes impotent against structurally embedded inflation.

Meanwhile, the civilian economy experiences a different reality. The policy paralysis reached the factory floor. AvtoVAZ cut its working week following a sales slump. The government responded by announcing a VAT increase from 20 to 22 percent for 2026—the second war-driven tax hike in six years—transferring additional burden to households already squeezed by 8 percent inflation.⁶ Consumer credit delinquency rates began climbing as households exhausted pandemic-era savings and wartime wage premiums faded for those outside the military-industrial complex.

This is not economic policy; it is an impossible balancing act. The Central Bank wants to ease, but defence spending prevents it. The Finance Ministry wants sustainable budgets, but military "needs" override discipline. The civilian economy contracts while the defence sector expands—the widening chasm between mobilization imperatives and economic sustainability. The economy splits into parallel tracks: a hothouse defence sector awash in state contracts, and an increasingly squeezed civilian sector bearing the costs through inflation, taxation, and resource starvation.

The Execution Gap

Since 2022, Russia has not once met budget targets: revenue falls short due to overly optimistic forecasts,



while spending overruns as military "needs" trump fiscal discipline. Siluanov's June promise of no tax increases, reversed by September's VAT announcement, exemplifies this pattern. The 2025 deficit will reach 2.6 percent of GDP—the highest since the pandemic—despite plans for restraint.

The execution gap manifests in granular ways. Regional budgets, dependent on federal transfers, find themselves squeezed between rising local costs—veteran benefits, compensation to families of the fallen, emergency infrastructure repairs—and delayed or reduced federal support. Governors resort to creative accounting: reclassifying spending categories, deferring maintenance, raiding reserve funds meant for natural disasters. The performance theatre extends downward: Moscow demands results; regions report success; reality deteriorates quietly beneath the reporting layer.

Economic strain transmits directly to households through inflation and VAT increases—taxes felt at every purchase, every day. When prices outrun wages, when promised payments slip, when supply chains stall, the bargain underpinning passive acceptance frays. The social contract that sustained acquiescence—"tolerate political constraints in exchange for material stability"—weakens with each broken promise about prices, each delayed benefit payment, each unexplained shortage.

2. THE VETERAN VARIABLE: THE HINGE WHERE COSTS MIGRATE HOME

Formal demobilizations by mid-2025 (approximately 137,000) understate the scale: they exclude contract rotations, mobilized personnel yet to be released, and families of casualties entering the benefits system. Alongside regulars and *kontraktniki* is a large contingent recruited from prisons on six-month contracts with promises of pardons and premium pay.

Veterans are both asset and latent threat. They carry skills and habits forged in violence into a society ill-equipped to absorb them, often with untreated trauma and elevated expectations after wartime pay exceeding 200,000

roubles monthly. From January to June 2025, more than 333,000 "serious and particularly serious" crimes were recorded—a 15-year high.⁷ While agencies do not track veteran-specific crime, independent reporting has documented at least 378 post-deployment homicides since February 2022.

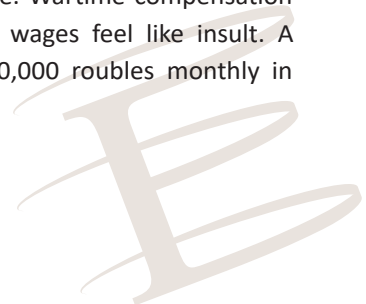
The pattern is grimly familiar: alcohol, domestic settings, sudden escalation, extreme brutality. Analysis shows that ex-convict recruits are notably more lethal than those without prior criminal records.⁸ One veteran told investigators: "I can explode... at the snap of a finger... not only verbally, but also physically." War "unbans" the prohibition on violence in the mind.

The psychology operates on multiple levels. Combat normalizes lethality as problem-solving. The adrenaline architecture of survival—hypervigilance, threat assessment, decisive action—cannot simply switch off upon return. Civilian irritations trigger combat responses. The mundane frustrations of bureaucracy, traffic, domestic disputes become unbearable to men habituated to resolving conflict through overwhelming force. For those recruited from prisons, this adds a layer of pre-existing violence patterns now validated by state service and untreated by mental health intervention.

Reintegration Without Capacity

Officially, 57 percent of demobilized veterans are employed—meaning nearly 60,000 lack stable work.⁹ Retraining pipelines exist on paper, but they address symptoms, not the core mismatch. Combat skills do not map neatly onto civilian labour markets; small and medium-sized enterprises cannot match defence-sector wages or tolerate behavioural risk. Defence plants cherry-pick the most employable veterans on premium terms, producing adverse selection: those least able to adapt circulate longest in civilian spaces with greatest social impact.

The economics are corrosive. Wartime compensation reset expectations; civilian wages feel like insult. A veteran accustomed to 200,000 roubles monthly in



the combat zone returns to a regional labour market where 50,000 roubles represents a good salary. The gap between wartime premium and peacetime reality creates a permanent sense of economic demotion. As the tax burden shifts and inflation erodes purchasing power, the gap between promised benefits and delivered reality widens. Veterans become a budget line the state cannot cut and a social reality it cannot fully support.

The structural problem deepens with scale. Each wave of demobilization adds to an accumulating population that shares grievances, networks, and combat skills. They form an informal constituency—not organized politically but connected through military channels, veteran organizations, and social media groups. They speak a common language of betrayal: promises made in recruitment, sacrifices demanded in combat, indifference experienced upon return. This constituency carries moral authority—"defenders of the fatherland"—that complicates the state's usual repressive responses. Cracking down on veterans' risks breaking the heroic narrative; accommodating them strains budgets and civilian institutions.

Trauma and the Mental Health Gap

Russia's Defence Ministry estimates that one in five war veterans suffers from PTSD—meaning at minimum 27,000 of the demobilized need treatment. Yet Russia has fewer than one therapist for every 7,000 adults, and even fewer with combat-trauma expertise.¹⁰ Russia's first increase in alcohol dependency diagnoses in a decade occurred in 2022—the year of full-scale invasion—rising from 53,300 (2021) to 54,200 (2022). Actual rates likely exceed reported figures substantially, as diagnosis requires clinical contact many veterans avoid.¹¹

Expanding trauma services at scale would contradict the heroic-sacrifice narrative and divert funds from priority spending. To acknowledge widespread PTSD admits the war's psychological costs; to fund comprehensive treatment diverts resources from military procurement. Institutions have been created—Putin established the "Defenders of the Fatherland" foundation—but capability

lags far behind mandate. The result is performative policy: visible ceremonies, limited treatment, and families left to manage the aftermath.

The mental health gap thus becomes another execution gap: decree meets reality and reality wins. Families absorb the burden—wives manage violent husbands, parents contain damaged sons, children grow up in homes saturated with unprocessed trauma. The violence migrates from the battlefield to the kitchen table, from the trench to the apartment block. Neighbours learn to avoid confrontation, police learn to tread carefully around "heroes," courts grant leniency citing military service. The informal accommodations corrode social trust and legal authority simultaneously.

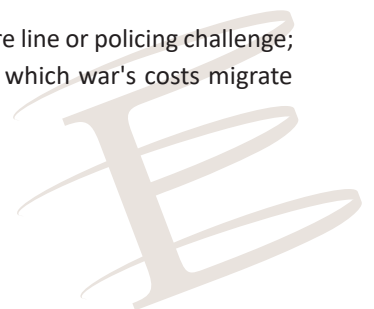
Lessons Unlearned

The Soviet and post-Soviet archive offered ample warning. Demobilization of the frontoviki after the Great Patriotic War brought a documented spike in banditry: murders increased from 7,131 in 1944 to 10,218 in 1946—a 43 percent surge.¹² The afgantsy of the 1980s were feted, then neglected; many drifted into organized crime, bringing military training and moral nihilism into the chaos of the 1990s. Their story became cautionary: a generation praised as heroes yet abandoned to alcoholism, unemployment, and violence.¹³

Russia had decades to build veteran support infrastructure based on these experiences. It did not, because doing so would require acknowledging war's costs—something the heroic narrative cannot tolerate. Instead, each generation rediscovers the same pattern: deployment, return, neglect, breakdown. The result: the Ukraine War produces the same pattern at vastly larger scale, with potentially hundreds of thousands of veterans—many of them former violent criminals—facing the same neglect previous generations experienced.

Veterans as Hinge

Veterans are not just a welfare line or policing challenge; they are the mechanism by which war's costs migrate



home. They link the economy (premium pay, benefits, employment strains) to society (crime, trauma, fear), institutions (courts granting leniency, police siding with "heroes"), and politics (narratives of sacrifice competing with fiscal reality). They convert battlefield learning into domestic risk.

Many veterans feel a magnetic pull back to the front—not to the "front line" where "the chance of dying" is too high, but to the "brotherhood" and "real emotions" they cannot find at home. This reveals why reintegration fails structurally: civilian life feels empty after sustained combat, creating a constituency whose most meaningful experience lies in continued war. Peace becomes unbearable; only renewed conflict restores meaning. This creates a constituency with a vested interest—psychological if not material—in perpetual mobilization.

3. THE SOCIETY THAT HOLDS STILL

The Federal Research Sociological Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences conducts the all-Russia monitoring survey *Kak zhiviyosh', Rossiya?* on an annual basis.¹⁴ The 2025 wave provides a coherent snapshot of how Russian society is coping with war, strain, and state power. Read properly—as a "thermometer" of publicly acceptable attitudes rather than a literal map of private beliefs—it reveals a stable façade built on a narrow peak of trust and a wide base of quiet anxiety.

Vertical Trust, Horizontal Anaemia

The trust architecture is pyramidal: the President sits at the summit with the highest benefit/trust scores; the Army follows; the Presidential Administration, Security Council, and Government are positive but notably lower. Everything that mediates pluralism—parties and movements, business and banks, the national media—registers negative trust. Legitimacy is hyper-personalized and securitized.

This structure has strategic implications. When trust resides only in the apex and the armed forces, all other institutions function as transmission belts rather than

stabilizers. The Duma cannot absorb discontent; parties cannot channel grievances; media cannot mediate between state and society. The vertical must bear all weight directly. This creates brittleness: when trust fractures, it has nowhere to redistribute.

Anxiety is Material First, Geopolitical Second

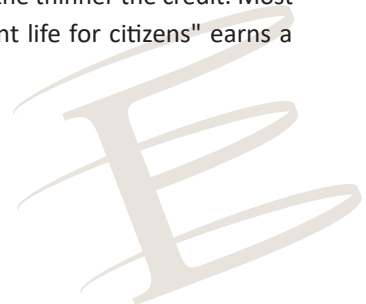
On the survey's weighted index of worries, day-to-day economics dominate: cost of living, food prices, utility tariffs, inflation—clustered at the most negative end of the scale. Problems tied to the war in Ukraine also score high, but they rank beneath the price shock felt in daily life.

These results align with IKAR's February 2025 survey, which found that 94 percent of respondents felt the impact of inflation in everyday purchases, 69 percent reported declining purchasing power, and more than half expected further deterioration in 2025.¹⁵

Personal anxiety centres on prices; political credit accrues to protection. The two coexist. Asked about daily worries, Russians voice economic strain. Asked what the state should deliver, they prioritise security and sovereignty. This dual-track structure—material anxiety in private life, security expectations of the state—sustains the façade of stability. But it is inherently fragile: if either track fails catastrophically, the other cannot compensate. A state that delivers security but immiserates its citizens eventually faces revolt; a state that delivers prosperity but appears weak invites challenges. Russia's current equilibrium depends on maintaining both tracks simultaneously, a feat becoming progressively harder.

The Delivery Gap: Security Over Welfare

When respondents score the state on its basic obligations, defence and the safeguarding of sovereignty and territory receive high marks. But the closer the function draws to everyday security—rights and equality before the law, housing, the environment—the thinner the credit. Most revealing: "ensuring a decent life for citizens" earns a negative score.



This is the core of the "strong façade / fragile reality" paradox: the state is credited for protecting more than for prospering. It can mobilize armies but not housing construction; it can resist NATO but not inflation; it can project power abroad but not justice at home. This asymmetry reveals which state capacities remain functional and which have atrophied. The coercive apparatus works; the welfare apparatus performs.

Why the Stillness Holds

Three mechanisms—each visible in the 2025 data—explain why the society doesn't move:

- **Moral substitution.** Security, unity, and service provide a language of meaning that substitutes for prosperity and political voice. People tolerate what they can morally frame. Between 2024 and 2025, the share of respondents who prioritize "life, dignity, rights and freedoms" drops markedly; unity of Russia's peoples and service/defence of the Fatherland rise. This shift reflects not necessarily genuine belief but adaptive framing: when material conditions deteriorate, the narrative of collective struggle and existential threat provides psychological compensation.
- **Comfort-class authoritarianism.** Jeremy Morris identifies what he terms "comfort-class authoritarianism": a regime sustained not by ideological fervour but by material convenience—digitised services, consumer access, predictable routines—that compensates for political exclusion by making private withdrawal tolerable. The digital infrastructure—mobile payments, delivery apps, online government services—creates an illusion of modernity and efficiency that coexists with political archaism. Citizens trade political voice for transactional convenience. The fog endures while pressure accumulates beneath.
- **Lowered expectations as psychological buffer.** The appearance of stability partly reflects relief that catastrophic 2022 scenarios did not materialize—hyperinflation, total mobilization, nuclear escalation, regime collapse. Only 51 percent report being

"satisfied with life," only 22 percent "satisfied with economic conditions." Current "optimism" is thus the ludicrous optimism of low expectations—"at least it's not collapsing" replaces genuine prosperity as the metric. This creates perverse resilience: so long as things remain merely bad rather than catastrophic, the threshold for protest remains high.

Why the Stillness Can Break

The same survey reveals how contingent this equilibrium is. Households already prioritize prices over geopolitics in their worry structure. If inflation or taxation bites harder, or if promised benefits fail to arrive on time and in full, quiet acceptance can tip into quiet refusal. The regime faces not just material strain but betrayed expectations of redistribution. Polling by Russia's Academy of Sciences shows dramatic volatility: pre-war, 60 percent believed the economy served only elites; in 2023, 44 percent believed it served the majority; by 2025, the majority again disagreed.

The brittleness lies in the narrowness of the margin. Small shifts in material conditions or narrative credibility can cascade into larger breakdowns. The system looks immobile because the incentives to move are weak and the penalties are strong; what appears as resilience is, in fact, a poised stillness—potential energy awaiting release.

4. ELITE COHESION: MANAGING THE WHIRLWIND

The Russian elite now operates inside the same fog it helped create. Economic exhaustion, veteran reintegration, and social fatigue converge at the summit, where cohesion rests not on shared vision but on a negative consensus: survival through loyalty.

The pre-war elite bargain was clear: obedience in exchange for wealth, mobility, and security. The war has shredded each pillar. Capital flight is blocked, Western assets are frozen, and foreign travel is restricted. Partnership has become servitude.



The Fractured Summit

The economic elite is fractured between technocrats such as Nabiullina and Gref—who argue for macro-stability—and mobilizers like Manturov—who equate patriotism with permanent war footing. Their open friction at the 2025 forums exposed a system unable to reconcile fiscal exhaustion with political triumphalism. The war has re-politicized every transaction: loyalty now determines credit lines, subsidies, and licenses. Market logic bends to political favor; economic rationality subordinates to strategic priority.

This creates impossible positions for technocrats. Nabiullina must execute monetary policy that acknowledges economic reality without admitting failure; Gref must manage Sberbank profitably while supporting state priorities that undermine profitability; Siluanov must balance budgets that structurally cannot balance. Their public warnings—"stagnation," "inflation risks," "limited room"—represent coded distress signals to audiences that cannot respond. The performance of economic management continues while the substance erodes.

Tatiana Stanovaya argues that the war has not disciplined Russia's elite; it has feralised it—pushing politics towards lawlessness and survivalism.¹⁶ Patronage expanded, but so did paranoia. The siloviki dominate resource allocation, squeezing technocrats while competing among themselves for Putin's favour and access to war-generated rents. Regional elites experience "dual captivity": dependent on Moscow for transfers yet blamed locally for shortages and casualties. The Kremlin governs them through rotation and fear—sudden dismissals, criminal investigations launched without warning, public humiliations that serve as lessons to others.

The Execution Gap and the Politics of Pretence

Russia's chronic execution gap—between decree and delivery—has become the organizing principle of elite behaviour. The 2026 budget projects 4 percent nominal spending growth, but with inflation around 8 percent, real spending flatlines or falls. Defence allocations officially

hold steady, yet additional military costs migrate into "National Security" categories, preserving the illusion of restraint while expenditure climbs.

Governors inflate recruitment and delivery numbers to protect themselves; ministries disguise deficits as "temporary reallocations." The performance matters more than the outcome. Fear of telling the truth upward replaces coordination. Regional officials report meeting quotas they have not met; factory managers report production levels they cannot sustain; recruitment officers report volunteers that do not exist. Each layer adds distortion until the top receives information wholly detached from reality.

The execution gap is not merely inefficiency; it is a control mechanism. When outcomes are unknowable, only proximity to the centre guarantees safety. Uncertainty itself becomes the currency of power. Those who can navigate ambiguity, who master the art of performing compliance while improvising survival, thrive. Those who demand clarity or accountability become vulnerabilities. The system rewards opacity and punishes transparency.

5. THE THRESHOLD QUESTION: WHEN DOES FOG PRODUCE RUPTURE?

Having examined the fire of battlefield attrition in Ukraine, the ice of confrontation along NATO's borders, and now the internal fog—economic exhaustion, veteran pressures, societal fatigue, and elite brittleness—a pattern emerges. These are not separate challenges but a single compounding mechanism. The fog does not merely obscure these pressures; it is these pressures.

The Compounding Dynamic

Economic strain constrains the state's capacity to meet its promises. The fiscal squeeze bleeds directly into the veteran variable: unfulfilled benefits, delayed compensation, and uneven reintegration produce a politically combustible constituency. Veterans are celebrated as heroes yet treated as dependants. Their absorption into the social and administrative fabric is

both a necessity and a danger—co-option averts unrest but corrodes elite privilege.

As these pressures accumulate, the society that holds still becomes a holding pattern: the private-comfort compact keeps people quiet, but each tax rise, price spike, or service cut erodes that tacit deal. In elite cohesion, the fog thickens at the top: a coercive elite rotates through purges and promotions while performing coherence.

What unifies these dynamics is the execution gap—the chronic distance between decree and delivery. Economic policy promises budget discipline yet overruns military spending while under-delivering on social welfare. Veteran reintegration announces comprehensive programmes yet struggles to employ even half of returnees. Society is told the state ensures "a decent life for citizens," yet surveys rate this its weakest obligation. Elites issue coordinated directives; governors fabricate compliance while improvising survival.

Russia's Risk Profile: Not Collapse, but Lurches

This dynamic rarely produces sudden collapse. Russia has repeatedly bent without breaking—1998's default, 2008's crisis, 2014's sanctions, 2020's pandemic. Historical depth provides cushions: resource wealth, nuclear deterrent, geographical scale, political apathy cultivated across generations. Yet resilience should not be mistaken for stability. What lies ahead is not linear decline but erratic movement: sharp turns, abrupt purges, local breakdowns, strategic overreactions.

The danger is a series of lurches—moments when accumulated stress discharges unpredictably:

- Repression spikes after small protests or battlefield setbacks
- Elite purges scapegoating governors, industrial managers, or generals
- Coercive mobilisation renewed despite prior assurances
- Regional instability as transfers tighten and local budgets collapse

- Economic panic: currency controls, emergency nationalisations, ad-hoc decrees that shatter investor confidence

Each lurch widens the execution gap and raises the probability of external aggression as internal relief. Fragility drives risk-taking: victories abroad are needed to justify losses at home. Battlefield gains become domestic necessity; escalation becomes pressure-release. Russia's fog is not passive; it is centrifugal. Opacity generates its own turbulence.

Observable Indicators

Western policymakers can watch for signals that often precede lurches:

- **Policy reversals without explanation** (rapid U-turns on tax, price, or mobilisation measures suggesting internal panic)
- **Unscheduled leadership conclaves** (Security Council sessions off-cycle, followed by personnel changes)
- **Unusual internal-security deployments** (Rosgvardia/FSB movements absent external triggers)
- **Synchronous media pivots** (from triumphalism to siege mood overnight)
- **Regional budget stress** (public appeals for emergency transfers; delayed salaries, pensions, veteran benefits across multiple regions simultaneously)
- **Execution-gap divergences** (GDP claims contradicting energy consumption, logistics data; widening misses on recruitment or output targets)

These do not predict specific outcomes, but they indicate rising internal pressure and diminished capacity to absorb shocks smoothly. The fog is thickest just before a lurch.

The Return to Peacetime – Or Its Impossibility

The ultimate stress test lies ahead. After years of permanent mobilisation, Russia must attempt to shift toward peacetime without dismantling the war structures that now sustain it. Defence absorbs nearly two-fifths of spending; entire regions depend on military procurement;

hundreds of thousands of workers derive income from war production. Scaling back risks unemployment spikes, regional dislocation, and loss of meaning for those who found purpose in mobilization. Maintaining it requires endless justification through fear and hostility—permanent enemies, perpetual threats, continuous sacrifice.

Veterans sit at the centre of this dilemma, the hinge where all four domains meet. Economically, they embody the state's unmet obligations—promises made, sacrifices demanded, support withheld. Socially, they are both hero and threat—celebrated publicly, feared privately. For elites, they are a new constituency that disrupts patronage networks, demands resources, and carries moral authority that complicates control. Morally, they incarnate the regime's deepest contradiction: sacrifice framed as redemptive duty yet experienced as unhealed damage.

The deeper question follows: can Russia return to a genuine peacetime society? War has re-militarised identity and embedded sacrifice in the language of normality. A society that defines itself by endurance struggles to re-learn ease. Peace would demand not just economic retooling but moral recalibration—admitting that suffering was not redemptive but wasteful, that sacrifice was not sacred but squandered. For a regime built on the sanctity of struggle, that admission is existentially dangerous.

For the West, this moral deadlock carries strategic consequence. A state that cannot return to peacetime will seek to prolong wartime conditions through other means. Even if the fighting in Ukraine subsides, the logic of confrontation endures. The demobilized economy would require acknowledging war's costs; the demobilized society would require processing war's trauma; the demobilized elite would require surrendering war's rents. None of these admissions come easily. For Russia, "peace" would mean disarmament of the system itself. It therefore remains structurally inclined toward friction with the West—through hybrid pressure, proxy war, or renewed military escalation—so long as internal stability requires external struggle.

6. LESSONS FOR THE WEST

Opacity itself is a strategic threat. Deterrence frameworks often assume a rational adversary doing cost-benefit calculus based on accurate self-knowledge. Today's Russia governs by improvisation and cannot reliably measure its own endurance. When distortion runs from factory ledgers to battlefield reports, even the top acts in the dark. Putin may believe his own metrics; alternatively, he may understand their falsity but cannot correct without admitting systemic failure. Either scenario produces decision-making decoupled from reality. Under such conditions, weakness produces adventurism, not restraint—because the system cannot accurately assess its own limits until it breaches them.

Four lessons follow:

1. **Do not mistake opacity for stability.** The thicker the fog, the greater the danger; systems that do not know their limits discover them violently. Western intelligence should monitor not just capabilities but execution gaps—the distance between what Russia claims and what it delivers.
2. **Monitor the silent front.** Budget execution gaps, regional protests, veteran benefits backlogs, and mobilisation patterns are earlier warnings than troop movements. The internal front precedes the external front. Track provincial budget crises, veteran crime rates, inflation-adjusted wages, and elite rhetoric shifts—these signal stress before military indicators do.
3. **Prepare for lurches, not collapse.** Build resilience for discontinuity: stockpiles, redundancy, pre-agreed crisis procedures. Expect abrupt escalation followed by improvised retrenchment. Russia's trajectory will not be smooth decline but jagged movement—periods of apparent stability punctuated by sudden breakdowns and aggressive compensations. NATO force posture must account for sudden, irrational moves driven by internal pressures. Western intelligence cannot fully penetrate.
4. **Exercise strategic patience.** The fog will not lift through rhetoric or wishful collapse predictions.

Russia's system has endured worse. What matters is not dramatic rupture but cumulative erosion—and whether the West can maintain institutional steadiness longer than Russia can sustain internal distortion. Endurance and institutional depth are the true metrics of Western strength. The contest is not sprint but marathon; not spectacle but grinding attrition of systemic coherence.

CONCLUSION: THE FOG ENDURES

There is no single line at which fog turns to rupture. The danger lies in indeterminacy: opacity conceals thresholds even from those who cross them. Russia's war machine endures not because it is strong, but because every actor within it fears that change would be worse. The same fear corrodes its capacity to adapt.

Vasily Grossman understood this condition: "If what is human in human beings has not been destroyed even now, then evil will never conquer." Russia's tragedy—and its threat—stem from the same source: the suppression of that "small kernel of human kindness" that allows societies to renew after war. The system demands sacrifice without redemption, endurance without purpose, loyalty without reciprocity. It hollows out the human capacity for renewal while demanding perpetual struggle.

For the West, the task is not to dispel the fog but to outlast it—to sustain clarity, capacity, and calm before a system that mistakes endurance for destiny. The confrontation that cannot thaw will be won not by spectacle but by institutional steadiness: maintaining alliances when Russia seeks to fracture them; sustaining defence production when budgets tighten; preserving democratic legitimacy when authoritarian efficiency seems appealing; upholding international law when expediency beckons.

The fog endures; so must we.

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Endnotes

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