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Administered Heroes: How Russia Governs Its Veterans

Joris Van Bladel



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Joris Van Bladel is Senior Associate Fellow in the 'Europe in the World' programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations. He studied Social and Military Sciences at the Royal Military Academy in Brussels and Slavic Languages and Eastern European Cultures at Ghent University. He holds a PhD in Arts from the University of Groningen. His doctoral research, *The All-Volunteer Force in the Russian Mirror: Transformation without Change* (2004), explored the persistence of military traditions in post-Soviet Russia.

Throughout and after his military career (1985–2006), he taught and lectured at institutions including the Royal Military Academy, Ghent University, the University of Amsterdam, Uppsala University, and the Technical University of Berlin. He has held research positions at the Center for Russian and East European Studies (University of Toronto) and at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Berlin.

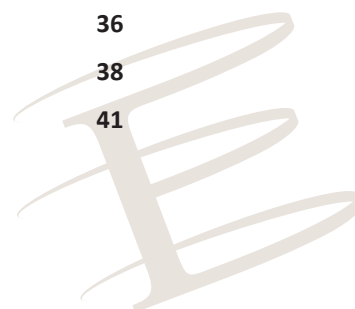
His work focuses on Russian military culture, strategic thinking, and the role of the armed forces in society, with a particular interest in why successive attempts at reform and modernization have repeatedly faltered against the weight of history and organizational culture. He is a regular media commentator on these issues.

In 2025, he published *Land van het Grote Sterven: Hoe Rusland de Westerse logica tart* [*Land of the Great Sacrifices: How Russia Defies Western Logic*] (Prometheus), a widely discussed book that traces the enduring patterns of Russian strategic culture and their impact on Western perceptions.



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Abstract

Russia's veterans of the war in Ukraine are rapidly becoming a defining social and political force in the country, yet they remain among the most analytically misread phenomena in contemporary Russian studies. Western commentary has largely focused on PTSD, violent crime, social instability, and high-profile incidents involving returning combatants. While such phenomena are real, they are often interpreted through therapeutic and highly individualised frameworks that sit uneasily with Russia's historically distinct approach to governing war experience. Understanding Russia's management of veterans requires a broader historical perspective: the Russian and Soviet state have traditionally approached veterans not simply as individuals to be treated, but as populations to be administered, categorised, emotionally managed, and politically integrated. This ambition has not always been realized. The Afghan experience demonstrated with uncomfortable clarity what follows when veteran governance fails: social marginalization, autonomous veteran networks, and forms of patriotic legitimacy the state could not fully control. The lessons drawn from that failure continue to shape the institutional architecture through which Russia governs its veterans of the war in Ukraine today.

Using a longue durée perspective, the paper traces Russian veteran policy from the late Soviet period to the war in Ukraine. It examines the development of the federal law "On Veterans," the emergence of the 'Special Military Operation' (SVO) veteran population, and the major expansion of official veteran categories after 2022. In Russia, veterans have historically functioned not primarily as former soldiers awaiting reintegration into civilian life, but as administratively defined status groups, bearers of symbolic legitimacy, instruments of state policy, and managed constituencies within a broader architecture of political and emotional governance. The Kremlin's current approach extends and intensifies this tradition. Veterans are simultaneously glorified, juridically recognized, selectively incorporated into state and security structures, redistributed across military, coercive, and patriotic institutions, and contained within channels designed to prevent the emergence of autonomous patriotic legitimacy outside state control.

Yet this process is defined by a central paradox. Russia has developed stronger mechanisms for the political integration of veterans than for their medical, social, or psychological reintegration. Symbolic heroization coexists with fragmented rehabilitation infrastructure, regional disparities, bureaucratic dysfunction, and the long-term social consequences of returning large numbers of traumatized and armed men into a society increasingly structured around permanent wartime mobilization. The Russian state appears more capable of absorbing veterans as a political category than of repairing them as human beings.

The asymmetry is structurally diagnostic rather than incidental. The tension between symbolic incorporation and uneven reintegration is not a policy failure awaiting correction. It reflects the deeper logic of a state that requires veterans as a political resource but cannot consistently sustain them as a comprehensive social obligation. How the Kremlin manages and stabilizes this tension will be one of the defining variables in the future relationship between militarization, state power, and society in Russia. The veteran question is not only a precise instrument for assessing the durability and internal contradictions of Russia's wartime authoritarian system. It is a means of understanding what kind of state prolonged war is turning Russia into.



Introduction

Although Russia had already produced a smaller but politically important generation of veterans during the Donbas conflict after 2014, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine transformed this into mass wartime veteran production on a scale not seen since the Second World War.¹ Hundreds of thousands of men have rotated through the front lines: wounded, traumatized, hardened by prolonged combat, and returning to a society reorganized around a war that is becoming ever more difficult to sustain.² What was conceived as a swift military operation has evolved into a prolonged war of attrition in its fifth year, generating demographic, economic, and social pressures the Russian state anticipated poorly and continues to manage unevenly. How it manages this growing population of former combatants is becoming one of the central and least understood questions in contemporary Russian politics.

Western commentary has not ignored the issue. Journalistic investigations, intelligence assessments, and policy analyses have multiplied since the full-scale invasion, focusing on PTSD, violent crime, alcoholism, the Wagner mutiny of June 2023, and the reintegration of pardoned ex-convicts recruited for frontline service. These phenomena are real.³ Yet the analytical frameworks through which they are interpreted remain surprisingly narrow. Western coverage has concentrated on the most visible manifestations of wartime trauma, including isolated violence, criminal recidivism, and psychological collapse, while paying far less attention to the institutional mechanisms through which the Russian state absorbs, categorizes, and governs war experience at scale. The result is an analysis that is event-driven where it should be structural, and psychologically centred where it should also be political.

The deeper problem is mirror imaging. Western analysis implicitly assumes that veterans are primarily former soldiers attempting to reintegrate into civilian life, and that the central challenge is one of psychological care, medical rehabilitation, and social support. These assumptions reflect the logic of Western liberal democracies, where veteran reintegration has historically been understood as a therapeutic and welfare issue: a debt owed by the state to the individual. Applied mechanically to Russia, this framework risks obscuring what is historically distinctive about how the Russian state has conceptualized and governed its former soldiers.

The Russian case presents a different analytical problem. Russia is not merely a country coping with the human consequences of war. It is the state prosecuting the war and reorganizing significant parts of its political, social, and institutional system around its continuation. The central question is therefore not how Russian veterans can be assisted, but how the Russian state manages, absorbs, redistributes, and politically instrumentalizes mass wartime experience, and how this shapes Russia's wartime resilience, internal stability, and long-term coercive capacity.

In Russia, veterans have rarely functioned as private individuals carrying the psychological burdens of war. They have occupied a different role: administratively defined status groups, politically and emotionally managed constituencies, carriers of symbolic legitimacy, and instruments of state policy. From the Soviet cult of the Great Patriotic War to the post-Soviet management of Afghan and Chechen returnees, the Russian state has repeatedly sought not merely to support veterans, but to categorize, hierarchize, incorporate, and politically channel them. The veteran category has long existed at the intersection of welfare policy, patriotic mythology, social control, and state-building. Reintegration, in the Western therapeutic sense, has rarely been the primary logic.

The current management of SVO veterans extends and intensifies these traditions.⁴ Since 2022, the Kremlin has expanded the legal and institutional architecture surrounding veterans: amending the federal law "On Veterans" to encompass SVO participants, volunteers, and irregular formations; establishing the Defenders of the Fatherland Foundation as a centralized coordination structure; launching "Time of Heroes" to channel veteran legitimacy into governance; and

integrating former combatants into state, patriotic, and security institutions at multiple levels. War experience is increasingly presented not merely as an individual burden to be managed, but as a strategic resource linked to regime stability, wartime mobilization, and long-term state resilience.⁵

Russian veterans should not be analysed primarily as a social or psychological problem awaiting resolution. They should be understood as a political-administrative category through which the Russian state absorbs, redistributes, and instrumentalizes mass war experience. This perspective generates three observations that structure the analysis that follows. Russian veteran governance is best understood not through therapeutic but through political-administrative frameworks. Russia has developed considerably stronger mechanisms for the political incorporation of veterans than for their medical, social, or psychological reintegration. And the contemporary Russian state increasingly redistributes wartime experience across military, political, educational, and coercive institutions rather than demobilizing it. The result is a gradual diffusion of war-derived authority, practices, and institutional logics throughout Russian state and society, extending the influence of war far beyond the battlefield itself.

That framework is defined by a central paradox. Symbolic heroization coexists with fragmented rehabilitation infrastructure, regional disparities, psychiatric shortages, bureaucratic dysfunction, and uneven implementation. The state appears more capable of absorbing veterans as a political category than of repairing them as human beings. This asymmetry reflects the structural logic of a system that prioritizes the political management of war experience over comprehensive social reintegration.

Methodologically, the paper combines contemporary analysis with *longue durée* reconstruction, tracing Russian veteran governance from the late Soviet period to the present war. It draws on Russian legal texts, official discourse, Russian and Western media, demographic estimates, and emerging scholarship on wartime authoritarianism and veteran politics. Given the opacity of Russian statistics on casualties, veteran numbers, and rehabilitation outcomes, quantitative estimates are presented as ranges with explicit uncertainty. The objective is analytical clarity regarding how the Russian state conceptualizes, governs, and attempts to absorb the growing veteran population.

The veteran question is not a peripheral welfare issue or a postwar problem in waiting. It is already one of the most precise diagnostic instruments available for assessing what kind of state Russia is becoming, and whether the system it has built to fight this war can absorb the consequences of fighting it.



PART I — THE RUSSIAN STATE AND THE GOVERNANCE OF WAR EXPERIENCE

Russia's management of its veterans of the war in Ukraine did not emerge from an institutional vacuum. It emerged from a tradition. Shaped over decades by a distinctive logic of administrative categorization, symbolic hierarchy, and political instrumentalization, that tradition predates the current war by generations and continues to define the terms on which the Russian state governs mass wartime experience today. Part I traces it from its Soviet foundations through the post-Afghan rupture and the evolution of the federal law "On Veterans." Its argument is that the Russian state has never primarily sought to reintegrate veterans into civilian life. It has sought to govern them as a political category within the state's broader architecture of power. That distinction is the key to understanding everything that follows.

1. VETERANS, SACRIFICE, AND STATE HIERARCHY FROM THE SOVIET UNION TO RUSSIA

In the Soviet Union and Russia, veterans were never merely former soldiers returning to civilian life. From the moment the Soviet state began organizing the recognition of wartime sacrifice, it did so through administrative categories, juridical hierarchies, and politically managed systems of privilege. Veterans were publicly glorified as embodiments of sacrifice, patriotism, and state survival, yet treated simultaneously with political caution and institutional mistrust. The veteran was not primarily a welfare recipient or an individualized trauma victim. He was a status group: defined, recognized, rewarded, and governed by the state. Behind the symbolic admiration lay a persistent concern that veterans could become an autonomous social and political force, particularly when self-organized outside official structures. Administrative management therefore served not only to honour sacrifice, but to incorporate, supervise, and politically domesticate wartime experience.

The Soviet experience of the Second World War established this tradition in its most durable form. The Great Patriotic War did not simply become a historical reference point or a national myth. It evolved into one of the central legitimizing pillars of the Soviet state and, later, of the Russian Federation itself. Victory in 1945 functioned simultaneously as a source of patriotic identity, political authority, and moral legitimacy within Soviet symbolic culture. The *frontoviki* were not merely remembered as former combatants but as men whose endurance and sacrifice had ensured the survival of the state itself.⁶

Yet this symbolic prestige always coexisted with a highly bureaucratic and hierarchical system of recognition. Soviet veteranhood was never an undifferentiated category. The state distinguished carefully between combat veterans, disabled veterans, rear workers, blockade survivors, decorated heroes, and numerous other subcategories. Access to privileges (housing, pensions, healthcare, transportation benefits, symbolic recognition) depended entirely on administratively defined status. Veteranhood became embedded in a broader Soviet tradition of corporatist social management, in which the state governed society through categorized groups tied to service, sacrifice, and political usefulness. Recognition was not universal or automatic. It was selective, hierarchical, and controlled.

Underlying this structure was a deeper characteristic of the Soviet system: the tendency to govern social contribution through legally defined hierarchies of recognition. Veterans were integrated not merely as recipients of social care but as officially recognized carriers of historical legitimacy. Their sacrifices validated the state, while the state monopolized the authority to define, recognize, and reward sacrifice. Veteranhood and state power became structurally inseparable.

At the same time, symbolic glorification frequently masked significant material shortcomings. The reality behind the victory cult could be startling in its brutality. As the journalist Jill Dougherty observed during her time in the Soviet Union, severely wounded veterans of the Second World War had been quietly removed from public life and resettled in

provincial cities, propelling themselves through the streets on makeshift boards in the absence of wheelchairs, with no rehabilitation and no recognition of disability rights.⁷ The state that had celebrated their sacrifice in monumental official culture had rendered them invisible in everyday life. Rhetorical celebration and material abandonment coexisted without contradiction. That combination did not undermine the system. It became one of its enduring characteristics. Symbolic compensation substituted for material integration. The state proved far more capable of honouring veterans in official discourse than of supporting them in daily life. This tension is the template for what follows.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 did not fundamentally alter these underlying patterns. The Russian Federation inherited Soviet institutions, bureaucratic practices, and the deeply embedded political centrality of war memory. The cult of the Great Patriotic War remained one of the few unifying narratives capable of transcending the ideological vacuum of the post-Soviet period. Veterans continued to function as privileged symbolic actors within state discourse, and the administrative logic of selective, hierarchical recognition survived largely intact. What changed after 1991 was not the underlying structure but the political pressures acting upon it, pressures that would soon be tested severely by a new generation of veterans emerging from a very different kind of war.

1.1. AFGHANISTAN AND THE POST-SOVIET RUPTURE

The Soviet war in Afghanistan introduced a profound rupture into the established relationship between the state, society, and veterans. Unlike the *frontoviki*, the *Afghantsy* did not return from a universally recognized war of national survival and unambiguous victory.⁸ They emerged from a politically ambiguous and increasingly unpopular conflict whose meaning remained contested even within the Soviet system itself.⁹ Estimates of Soviet personnel who served in Afghanistan range from approximately 620,000 according to official Ministry of Defence figures to substantially higher assessments approaching 750,000 or more.¹⁰ Even at the lower end, Afghanistan generated one of the largest postwar veteran cohorts in late Soviet history. The *Afghantsy* returned not only from an ambiguous war but from a collapsing imperial system whose ideological foundations were themselves disintegrating. Afghanistan exposed the limits of the Soviet model of veteran integration and confronted the state with a deeply uncomfortable problem: how to govern veterans whose sacrifice resisted absorption into an uncontested national myth.

This ambiguity fundamentally shaped the position of Afghan veterans within Soviet and later Russian society. The symbolic prestige associated with the *Afghantsy* remained significantly weaker than that enjoyed by the generation of 1945. Returning veterans often encountered indifference, public distance, or muted suspicion rather than admiration. Many struggled to reintegrate during the final years of the Soviet Union and the economic collapse that followed. Unemployment, alcoholism, psychological trauma, poor healthcare, and marginalization became recurring features of the post-Afghan experience. The visibility of socially marginal or criminalized veterans frequently distorted broader perceptions of the Afghan cohort, many of whom reintegrated without entering criminal or extremist networks.

Yet the *Afghantsy* also acquired a distinct social and political visibility that deeply affected state perceptions thereafter. Veteran organizations, informal networks, and associations of former Afghan soldiers became increasingly active during the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years. Their emergence generated considerable unease among the authorities. Afghanistan had produced not only wounded men, but men with combat experience, strong horizontal bonds, organizational capacity, and growing grievances toward the state. Veterans possessed symbolic authority rooted in combat experience itself: a form of autonomous patriotic legitimacy capable of competing with the state's own monopoly over patriotic authority.¹¹



The problem was not merely failed reintegration. It was the emergence of socially and politically influential wartime constituencies developing grievance structures and forms of legitimacy outside direct state control. The Afghan experience demonstrated with uncomfortable clarity what becomes possible when combat veterans organize autonomously, and the institutional memory of that demonstration has never fully faded.

The wars in Chechnya reinforced these concerns rather than resolving them. Public anxieties surrounding violence, criminality, and failed reintegration fed discussions of a possible "Chechen syndrome," understood less as a precise medical condition than as a broader fear that wartime violence and social dislocation were being reimported into civilian society.¹² The Chechen wars deepened the state's reliance on coercive institutions while reinforcing the perception that veterans represented both a strategic resource and a latent security risk.

The central lesson of Afghanistan and Chechnya was therefore deeply ambivalent. Veterans could become socially destabilizing when neglected, marginalized, or left outside official structures. Yet they could also be selectively co-opted, channelled into systems of state loyalty, and kept under administrative supervision. That realization would profoundly shape the evolution of Russian veteran policy in the decades that followed.

The Afghan experience remains important not because it offers a direct historical analogy, but because it functions as an institutional memory within the contemporary Russian state. The lesson drawn was not simply that veterans require support. It was that veterans left outside state-controlled structures can develop forms of autonomous patriotic legitimacy capable of challenging official authority. Much of the contemporary architecture of veteran governance can therefore be read as an attempt to avoid repeating that experience under conditions of mass wartime mobilization.

2. THE LAW "ON VETERANS" AS INFRASTRUCTURE OF WARTIME GOVERNANCE

The federal law "On Veterans" (Federal'nyi zakon "O veteranakh") is more than a piece of social legislation. Adopted in 1995 amid the institutional collapse of the post-Soviet transition, it has functioned from the outset as a mechanism of symbolic recognition, political stabilization, bureaucratic categorization, and state-building simultaneously. What began as a post-Soviet framework for organizing the legacy of earlier wars evolved into a highly flexible legal infrastructure capable of absorbing new forms of conflict, new categories of participants, and eventually the mass wartime mobilization generated by the war in Ukraine. Tracing that evolution reveals how the Russian state has historically conceptualized war experience and how it seeks to govern it today.

2.1. THE ORIGINAL 1995 LAW

The timing of the law's adoption is significant. When the State Duma passed it in December 1994, Russia faced a convergence of crises: the collapse of Soviet institutions, economic disintegration, the unresolved legacy of Afghanistan, and the beginning of the First Chechen War. Millions of former Soviet servicemen, including large numbers of recently demobilized officers facing professional displacement and pension instability, existed in a state of institutional uncertainty. Simultaneously, the Russian leadership feared the social fragmentation and political radicalization increasingly associated with parts of the Afghan veteran community. The law emerged not simply as social policy, but as an attempt to restore administrative order to the politics of sacrifice after the Soviet collapse.

The opening article is itself revealing.¹³ Rather than beginning with benefits, it opens with purpose: promising veterans not merely material assistance but "dignified life" (*dostoiniui zhizn'*), "active participation" (*aktivnuiu deiatel'nost'*), and

"honor and respect in society" (*pochet i uvazhenie v obshchestve*).¹⁴ These functions were simultaneously compensatory, symbolic, integrative, and disciplinary. From its first article, the law treated veterans not as welfare recipients but as a politically meaningful social category requiring management across multiple dimensions.

The structure reinforced this logic. Its opening articles established detailed categories of veteranhood: veterans of the Great Patriotic War, combat veterans, disabled veterans, labor veterans, blockade survivors, rear-service personnel, and numerous other subgroups. The state defined who counted, under what conditions, and within which hierarchy of recognition. Veteranhood was treated not as a homogeneous social condition but as a legally differentiated system of state-recognized sacrifice.

This hierarchy placed veterans of the Great Patriotic War at the symbolic apex. The law devoted extraordinary precision to codifying the categories associated with 1941-1945, legally institutionalizing the sacred status of the Soviet victory narrative and preserving one of the most important symbolic continuities with the Soviet Union itself: the idea that wartime sacrifice constituted a foundational source of political legitimacy.

Article 8, which defined state policy toward veterans, was equally significant.¹⁵ It established that state obligations extended beyond material support to encompass the preservation of veteran status, the maintenance of social prestige, patriotic education, and participation in public life. Veterans were thereby transformed into a semi-corporate social estate. They were not retired servicemen awaiting pension payments but politically meaningful actors whose symbolic function the state was obligated to sustain and direct.

The law also preserved Soviet traditions of corporatist governance. Recognition was linked to status, privileges, and state-defined entitlement. Housing, healthcare, pensions, transport benefits, prosthetics, tax reductions, and family support were distributed according to legally defined categories of sacrifice. The emphasis remained less on individualized rehabilitation than on incorporation into a state-recognized hierarchy of service, legitimacy, and political loyalty.

The appendix listing officially recognized combat operations, territories, and operational periods was among the law's most analytically revealing elements.¹⁶ It functioned not as a technical annex but as a geopolitical map of legitimate violence. The state determined which wars counted, which participants deserved recognition, and which forms of sacrifice would be incorporated into national memory and entitlement structures. By expanding and refining systems of formal recognition, the state acquired greater capacity to structure veteran constituencies through differentiated forms of incorporation, symbolic status, and institutional loyalty. Legal categorization thus functioned not merely as welfare administration but as political management. Some conflicts, including certain peacekeeping missions and Cold War interventions, remained excluded precisely because their political legitimacy was ambiguous. The appendix made explicit what the law implied throughout: veteranhood was a political construction, not a natural condition.

Three principles consequently became institutionalized and remain central today: selective recognition, hierarchical sacrifice, and the administrative management of war experience. Veterans were not simply former soldiers or victims of war. They were state-recognized status groups whose loyalty, legitimacy, and place within political order the state claimed the right to define.



2.2. PRE-2022 EVOLUTION

Although initially rooted in the legacy of the Second World War, Afghanistan, and early Chechnya, the law evolved into a far more flexible instrument. During the 2000s and 2010s, successive amendments expanded both the scope of recognized conflicts and the categories of eligible participants, adapting the legal framework to Russia's changing model of warfare and the expanding role of the coercive apparatus within the state.

The 2004 monetization reforms marked one of the most important turning points.¹⁷ By partially replacing broad Soviet-style privileges with centralized systems of administratively managed compensation and monthly cash payments, they transformed veteran policy from a diffuse symbolic privilege structure into a bureaucratically regulated mechanism of state-administered entitlements. The veteran increasingly emerged as a registered category within an expanding institutional system of compensation, documentation, and administrative supervision.

Over the same period, the law absorbed a wider range of coercive-state actors. Veteran status extended beyond conventional battlefield soldiers to include personnel from internal security structures, law-enforcement agencies, state security bodies, and later Rosgvardia. The distinction between external war, internal pacification, counterterrorism, and state security became progressively blurred.¹⁸ Participation in counterterrorist operations, internal security campaigns, and regional stabilization efforts in Chechnya and the North Caucasus was incorporated into the veteran framework. Russian veteran policy no longer concerned only interstate war or conventional military service. It increasingly encompassed participation in the defence and stabilization of the state's broader security space.

The conflict in eastern Ukraine after 2014 represented an especially important transitional phase. Although far smaller than the post-2022 veteran population, the Donbas conflict produced a politically significant generation of combat veterans whose exact size remains difficult to determine given the hybrid and partially deniable nature of the war. Volunteers, proxy formations, irregular fighters, intelligence-linked actors, and rotational personnel occupied a space between unofficial participation and gradual state recognition, many emerging from semi-autonomous nationalist and patriotic networks whose combat legitimacy existed only partially under direct state control.¹⁹ The Donbas conflict consequently functioned as a laboratory for expanding veteran categories to encompass hybrid and semi-official forms of warfare, accustoming the Russian state to the juridical normalization of undeclared combat participation. The earlier generation of Donbas veterans, whose incorporation into official structures remained uneven before 2022, was subsequently absorbed through retroactive legal recognition into the broader SVO veteran framework after the full-scale invasion.

The Syrian intervention reinforced this trajectory. Amendments recognizing personnel sent to perform "special tasks" in Syria established a legal template for expeditionary and politically ambiguous warfare, demonstrating the law's capacity to absorb semi-deniable military operations into systems of state-recognized sacrifice without requiring formal declarations of war.²⁰

By the eve of the full-scale invasion, the cumulative effect of these amendments had transformed the law from memory legislation into modular wartime infrastructure. New categories, new territories, and new forms of participation could be inserted into the legal framework as required. The Russian state had developed a highly adaptable mechanism capable of converting politically authorized violence into legally recognized veteran status. What followed after February 2022 was not the creation of a new system. It was the activation of one already built.



2.3. POST-2022 TRANSFORMATION

After February 2022, this system underwent a qualitative transformation. The law no longer merely recognized veterans after wars. It became an active mechanism for governing mass wartime participation during an ongoing conflict. Veteran status was no longer retrospective recognition. It became part of mobilization policy itself.

The first major amendments recognizing SVO participants were adopted almost immediately after the invasion began.²¹ The speed is revealing. From the outset, the Russian state understood that mass participation in the war would require rapid juridical incorporation into systems of status, compensation, and political management.

Subsequent amendments dramatically expanded the range of recognized participants. The veteran framework progressively incorporated volunteer formations, Rosgvardia personnel, FSB border units, prosecutors, investigators, auxiliary organizations, and individuals operating under various forms of contractual or semi-formal relations with the state. Particularly important was the retroactive integration of Donbas participants dating back to 2014, legally incorporating the unofficial earlier stages of the war into the state's formal veteran narrative.²² Continuity was thereby constructed retrospectively: the SVO was presented not as a new war but as the continuation of an already recognized struggle, its participants absorbed into a single institutional system of sacrifice, legitimacy, and entitlement.

Geographically and institutionally, the law's logic expanded in parallel. The distinction between external war, homeland defence, border security, internal pacification, and auxiliary support functions became increasingly blurred. Veteran status now encompassed not only direct combat participation but participation in the broader coercive ecosystem sustaining the wartime state.

Digitalization and administrative automation became equally important. Amendments linked veteran recognition to centralized digital platforms, interagency databases, automatic payments, standardized documentation, and integrated compensation mechanisms.²³ Changes governing burial administration, transportation of remains, and family compensation further reflected a state preparing institutionally for mass attrition under conditions of prolonged war.

The law consequently evolved into something far larger than a veteran support mechanism. It became a bureaucratic system for absorbing and regulating mass wartime participation at scale, simultaneously rewarding service, integrating potentially volatile constituencies into state-controlled structures, and constructing a unified legal narrative connecting Donbas, the SVO, border defence, Rosgvardia operations, volunteers, and auxiliary formations into a single institutional system of sacrifice and recognition.²⁴

2.4. RUSSIAN INTERNAL DISCOURSE ON VETERANS

This legal transformation is equally visible in official Russian discourse after 2022, where a parallel conceptual shift has taken place. Veterans are presented not merely as heroes deserving gratitude, but as a strategic governance category within the wartime state itself.

The "Time of Heroes" program, launched in 2024, is the clearest expression of this logic.²⁵ Designed to channel SVO veterans into senior positions in public administration, regional governance, and state institutions, it frames combat experience as a qualification for political leadership rather than simply a service to be rewarded. Veterans are presented as carriers of moral authority whose wartime formation makes them particularly suited to governing a society increasingly organized

around the values of the wartime state. The program has already produced cohorts of veteran-administrators embedded at multiple levels of Russian public life, from municipal governance to federal structures.²⁶

The Defenders of the Fatherland Foundation, established in 2023 as a centralized coordination body, reflects the same dual logic.²⁷ Formally a social support structure responsible for rehabilitation access, employment assistance, and psychological support, it simultaneously functions as an integrative political mechanism providing the state with a centralized point of supervision over the veteran population. Its purpose is to ensure that veteran legitimacy remains institutionally managed through official channels rather than developing into autonomous patriotic authority outside state structures.

Official discourse repeatedly emphasizes the notion of a strategic cadre reserve (*kadrovyy rezerv*): veterans redistributed into civilian governance, education, patriotic youth movements, and security structures. War experience is thereby presented not as personal trauma to be privately processed, but as a collective resource to be publicly redeployed in the service of the state.

Veterans are glorified as embodiments of patriotic sacrifice and incorporated into official narratives of national resilience. Yet the expansion of legal categories, administrative supervision, digital monitoring, and institutional integration reflects a persistent concern about the destabilizing potential of large numbers of armed and socially influential veterans operating outside state-controlled channels. The state glorifies veterans precisely because it cannot afford to leave combat-derived patriotic legitimacy ungoverned.

The post-2022 evolution of the system reveals something fundamental. The Russian state no longer merely recognizes veterans after war. It actively produces and governs them as a managed political category of the wartime order itself.

The historical evolution traced thus far reveals a consistent pattern. Veterans in Russia have rarely been treated as private individuals requiring reintegration into civilian life. Successive Soviet and Russian governments instead approached former combatants as politically significant status groups to be categorized, emotionally managed, incorporated into patriotic mythology, and integrated into the political and institutional architecture of successive Russian states. The current management of SVO veterans did not emerge from an institutional vacuum. It reflects and intensifies longstanding traditions through which the Russian state has repeatedly sought to absorb and govern the social consequences of mass war experience.

The contemporary scale of the problem, however, is qualitatively different. The question is no longer how Russia governed veterans in the past, but what happens when a prolonged industrialized war produces hundreds of thousands of combat-experienced men, vast numbers of wounded and disabled soldiers, and an expanding wartime social stratum increasingly penetrating Russian society itself. The veteran question cannot be reduced to a postwar welfare issue or a narrowly psychological problem. It has become part of a broader governance challenge involving mobilization, political stabilization, institutional adaptation, and the long-term management of violence within a society simultaneously continuing the war producing it.



PART II — GOVERNING THE SVO VETERAN STRATUM

If Part I examined the historical evolution of Russian veteran policy, Part II analyses how the full-scale war in Ukraine transformed veterans into a central object of wartime governance. The question is no longer simply how Russia recognizes veterans administratively, but how the wartime state absorbs, redistributes, and politically manages mass combat experience under conditions of prolonged mobilization.

3. THE EMERGENCE OF A WARTIME SOCIAL STRATUM

The war in Ukraine has produced a veteran phenomenon of a scale unprecedented in post-Soviet Russian history and likely unmatched since the Second World War. What initially appeared in 2022 as a temporary military operation has evolved into the large-scale and continuous production of combat-experienced personnel across multiple layers of Russian society. The opacity surrounding Russian wartime losses, recruitment flows, force rotation, and casualty statistics makes precise quantification impossible. Yet even under conditions of considerable uncertainty, one conclusion is unavoidable: the veteran question can no longer be understood as a narrowly defined administrative category affecting a discrete population of former soldiers. It increasingly reflects the emergence of a broader wartime social stratum penetrating large segments of Russian public and institutional life.

3.1. METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

Any attempt to quantify the scale of the contemporary Russian veteran population encounters structural rather than merely statistical obstacles. Categories overlap, institutional boundaries remain fluid, and the distinction between active servicemen, veterans, volunteers, contractors, and auxiliary personnel has become progressively blurred under conditions of prolonged war. Estimating the veteran universe requires navigating a constantly shifting administrative and sociological landscape rather than a stable and clearly defined population.

The principal difficulty concerns overlapping categories and the risk of double counting. Mobilized reservists may subsequently sign professional contracts; volunteers may be incorporated into regular military formations; wounded personnel often return to active service after rehabilitation; former PMC fighters have been redistributed across multiple state-controlled structures. Individuals may pass through several institutional categories during the course of the war while remaining continuously embedded within the combat system itself.

Rotating deployments introduce a further complication that distinguishes the Russian case from classical postwar veteran populations. Russia is managing veterans while simultaneously continuing the war that produces them. Large numbers of servicemen circulate repeatedly between the front, rear areas, military hospitals, rehabilitation centres, and redeployment cycles. The boundary between active participant and returning veteran consequently remains unstable and often administratively ambiguous. This is not a postwar demobilization problem. It is a wartime governance problem of a qualitatively different character.

The distinction between legal and practical veteran status further complicates any attempt at quantification. Russian legislation has gradually expanded formal recognition to encompass a wider range of wartime participants. Yet legal recognition does not always correspond to practical integration into veteran support systems, access to benefits, or stable institutional categorization. Implementation varies considerably across regions, institutions, and administrative structures, producing a significant and politically consequential gap between formal entitlement and actual provision.

These methodological limitations make statistical precision both difficult and, in some respects, analytically secondary. The central issue is not whether the Russian veteran population numbers precisely several hundred thousand or several million individuals depending on definitions and indirect exposure. What matters analytically is that the war has generated an expanding and socially significant wartime population whose boundaries remain deliberately fluid, partly because Russia continues to wage the war that produces it, and partly because the Russian state has a structural interest in maintaining flexibility over who counts, when, and under what conditions.

This paper does not claim that all veterans are successfully integrated into state structures, nor that all forms of wartime experience are politically manageable. Social marginalization, psychological distress, and incomplete institutional integration are real phenomena, even if their precise scale remains difficult to establish. Nor does the paper argue that the Kremlin possesses complete control over the long-term consequences of mass mobilization. The argument is more precise than that: the Russian state has developed historically rooted mechanisms for the political administration and redistribution of wartime experience whose logic and significance are consistently underestimated in Western analysis. Explaining those mechanisms is the central purpose of this paper.

3.2. ESTIMATING THE VETERAN UNIVERSE

The contemporary SVO veteran universe extends far beyond regular armed forces operating under conventional military structures. Since 2022, the Russian war effort has mobilized a highly fragmented and layered collection of military, paramilitary, security, and auxiliary actors whose legal status, institutional affiliation, and degree of formal recognition frequently overlap and resist clean categorization.

At the centre of this system remain the regular contract soldiers of the Russian Armed Forces, who continue to form the backbone of the professional military component deployed in Ukraine. Alongside them stand the hundreds of thousands of mobilized reservists called up following the partial mobilization announced in September 2022. Although formally distinct categories, the practical boundary between contract soldiers and mobilized personnel has often become blurred through renewed contracts, prolonged deployments, and repeated rotations. Volunteers recruited through regional battalions, patriotic initiatives, and ad hoc recruitment campaigns further complicate the picture, particularly as many were subsequently incorporated into regular structures or granted forms of veteran recognition.

Irregular and semi-state formations have added another layer of complexity. Private military companies, most notably the Wagner Group before the suppression of its mutiny in June 2023 and the subsequent redistribution of its manpower, recruited large numbers of personnel outside traditional military channels, including tens of thousands of prisoners drawn from the Russian penal system. Many former convicts subsequently received pardons, financial compensation, or veteran-related benefits despite their ambiguous legal status and incomplete integration into official military hierarchies. Parts of this manpower were redistributed into Ministry of Defence formations, volunteer corps, Rosgvardia structures, or successor organizations linked to the expanding Russian coercive apparatus, including the Africa Corps operating beyond Ukraine.

The broader wartime system also encompasses actors beyond the conventional battlefield. Rosgvardia personnel, border forces, military police, intelligence structures, logistical units, and auxiliary organizations have all participated directly or indirectly in the war effort. The distinction between combatant and non-combatant categories has become increasingly difficult to maintain under conditions of prolonged war and expanding militarization. Any estimate of the veteran population must additionally encompass the rapidly growing categories of wounded, permanently disabled, psychologically traumatized, and repeatedly redeployed servicemen. Russian official statistics concerning casualties and disabilities

remain tightly controlled, fragmented across institutions, and politically managed for reasons of wartime information security. The category of the hidden wounded is particularly significant: many injured servicemen pass through temporary treatment systems, return rapidly to active service, or avoid formal psychiatric registration due to institutional pressures, bureaucratic incentives, and the persistent social stigma surrounding psychological treatment in a military culture that structurally discourages it.

The social reach of the war extends further still through the families of the dead and wounded. Compensation systems, state support programs, memorialization initiatives, and regional assistance structures have increasingly transformed relatives of servicemen into politically and administratively significant constituencies in their own right. When this broader network of dependents, institutions, and communities is included, the indirect social reach of the SVO veteran phenomenon encompasses several million Russians across the federation.

3.3. A WARTIME SOCIAL STRATUM

The deeper analytical significance of the SVO veteran phenomenon lies not in the difficulty of counting its members, but in the nature of what it is producing. The war has generated not simply large numbers of former soldiers, but an expanding ecosystem of individuals, institutions, administrative structures, and social relationships increasingly shaped by prolonged military mobilization and wartime governance. Understanding this requires moving beyond individual veteran profiles toward the sociology of a society progressively organized around a war it cannot easily end.

The social reach of this transformation is extensive. Families of servicemen have become politically and administratively significant constituencies requiring compensation, symbolic recognition, and bureaucratic management. Financial compensation payments, veteran benefits, and memorialization initiatives are now deeply embedded within local administrative systems. Regional authorities devote growing resources to managing the practical and emotional consequences of military service, including housing support, employment assistance, educational benefits, and public commemorative activities. In many regions, the veteran question has become inseparable from the everyday functioning of local governance.

Schools and educational institutions have become important vectors of wartime socialization. Veterans and active servicemen are regularly incorporated into patriotic education programs, memorial ceremonies, and youth organizations designed to normalize military service and reinforce the legitimacy of the wartime state. The labour market has been affected unevenly but significantly. Military salaries, signing bonuses, compensation payments, and defence-sector employment increasingly shape local economic realities, particularly in economically vulnerable regions disproportionately targeted by recruitment campaigns. For significant segments of the population, military service has evolved into one of the few available channels of upward mobility, financial stabilization, and social recognition. The war consequently functions not only as a military conflict but also as a mechanism of socioeconomic redistribution operating through recruitment networks, compensation systems, and state-directed wartime spending.

Recruitment patterns reveal pronounced demographic asymmetries with important political implications. The social burden of military participation falls disproportionately on poorer provincial regions, ethnic minority republics, and economically vulnerable communities, while major urban centres remain comparatively insulated from the direct demographic costs of mobilization. This asymmetry is not accidental. It allows the Russian state to sustain large-scale wartime participation while limiting social disruption within the urban environments most politically and economically sensitive to the costs of war. Yet it simultaneously produces regions where wartime participation, military casualties,

compensation dependency, and veteran presence become deeply embedded within everyday social life in ways that will outlast the conflict itself.

Veterans increasingly appear not as exceptional figures temporarily removed from civilian society but as permanent participants within public administration, schools, patriotic organizations, and local governance. Wartime symbolism, military rituals, and public representations of sacrifice become progressively routinized within civic life. The boundaries between wartime and peacetime governance begin to erode as military service, patriotic mobilization, and state-managed violence acquire a more normalized and institutionalized presence across society. This process of normalization increasingly extends into academic, educational, and civic institutions themselves. Russian regional conferences, public forums, and research initiatives now openly address themes such as the “social adaptation” of SVO participants, patriotic education, volunteer mobilization, and the integration of veterans into civil society. Such developments illustrate how wartime discourse is progressively embedded within broader administrative, intellectual, and social structures, further blurring the distinction between military mobilization and ordinary civic life.²⁸ The veteran question is therefore becoming inseparable from the broader wartime transformation of Russian society itself and from the possibility that some of these wartime adaptations may persist long after the war itself has ended.

4. GLORIFICATION, REINTEGRATION, AND MANAGED TRAUMA

The expansion of Russia's wartime veteran population has forced the Kremlin to confront a challenge extending far beyond military administration or social welfare policy. The issue is not how to compensate former servicemen or provide postwar support, but how to politically and institutionally manage the social consequences of prolonged industrialized war under conditions of continuing mobilization. The central challenge is not therapeutic reintegration but the governance of large populations of combat-experienced men whose wartime legitimacy carries both stabilizing and potentially destabilizing implications.

The Kremlin's response operates across symbolic, institutional, and political levels. Veterans are glorified as embodiments of patriotic sacrifice while the state expands rehabilitation systems, compensation mechanisms, adaptation programmes, and psychological support structures intended to stabilize the social consequences of war. These processes cannot be adequately understood through conventional postwar reintegration frameworks. Russia is not attempting to demobilize society after the conclusion of conflict. It is attempting to absorb trauma, govern combat experience, and maintain political cohesion while continuing the war that generates these pressures. The result is a system of wartime adaptation whose objectives extend beyond therapeutic recovery to encompass stabilization, governability, patriotic mobilization, and authoritarian resilience.

4.1. SYMBOLIC HEROIZATION

The political management of veterans begins long before any administrative decision concerning rehabilitation, compensation, or reintegration. It begins with the construction of meaning. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the Kremlin has invested heavily in transforming participants in the Special Military Operation into central symbolic figures within the ideological architecture of the wartime state. This process extends well beyond conventional patriotic commemoration. Veterans are increasingly presented as embodiments of sacrifice, loyalty, endurance, and national continuity whose wartime experience serves simultaneously to legitimize the war itself and reinforce the authority of the state directing it. The symbolic management of veterans has therefore become an essential component of Russia's broader wartime mobilization strategy.

Central to this effort is the increasingly prominent narrative that veterans constitute a “new elite” forged through combat experience and patriotic sacrifice. Russian political discourse since 2022 has repeatedly contrasted wartime service with the perceived corruption, detachment, or moral weakness of parts of the prewar civilian elite. Participation in the war is increasingly represented not merely as military duty, but as a form of moral qualification for public authority, administrative responsibility, and political legitimacy. This framing serves a dual function. It symbolically rewards wartime participation while simultaneously delegitimizing detachment from the wartime effort as a form of moral failure rather than merely political disagreement.

Programs such as “Time of Heroes” institutionalize this logic. By channelling selected veterans into positions within public administration, regional governance, and state structures, the program presents combat experience as a credential for political leadership and patriotic legitimacy. Veterans are increasingly portrayed as carriers of moral authority whose wartime formation uniquely qualifies them to govern a society organized around the values of the wartime state. The political implication is clear: the war is represented not only as a struggle requiring sacrifice, but also as a mechanism through which a new generation of loyal and disciplined state elites can emerge. Pro-government media increasingly reinforce this narrative by portraying SVO veterans as future administrators, regional officials, and civic leaders uniquely qualified to govern through their wartime experience and patriotic sacrifice. Programs such as “Time of Heroes” are presented not merely as veteran support initiatives, but as mechanisms through which a morally renewed and politically reliable generation of state personnel can gradually replace parts of the prewar civilian elite.²⁹

This symbolic elevation is reinforced through a rapidly expanding ecosystem of patriotic glorification and media heroization. State television, regional media, documentary projects, social media campaigns, and public ceremonies increasingly portray veterans as patriotic exemplars embodying sacrifice, discipline, and loyalty to the state. Individual combat biographies are transformed into public narratives of moral virtue and national service, often detached from the operational ambiguities, losses, and contradictions of the war itself. Veterans consequently function not only as former combatants, but also as symbolic intermediaries between the state and society through whom the war acquires emotional legitimacy and social normalization.

Victory Day commemorations and the symbolic legacy of the Great Patriotic War provide the deepest historical scaffolding for this process. Since 2022, the Kremlin has progressively integrated the Special Military Operation into the broader mythology surrounding the Soviet victory of 1945, presenting contemporary veterans as heirs to the generation that defeated Nazi Germany. This symbolic fusion serves several political functions simultaneously. It sacralises the current war effort, strengthens patriotic identification, and situates present-day mobilization within one of the most emotionally resonant pillars of Russian state legitimacy. At the same time, it narrows the space for critical distance by embedding the war within a narrative of historical continuity, existential struggle, and national sacrifice that possesses deep emotional authority within Russian political culture.

Educational institutions and youth organizations have become central transmission mechanisms within this symbolic system. Veterans and active servicemen are increasingly incorporated into schools, patriotic education programs, memorial events, and youth movements as visible embodiments of civic duty and wartime sacrifice. Public memorialization has similarly expanded through monuments, plaques, school ceremonies, local commemorative initiatives, and regional rituals honouring fallen servicemen. These practices contribute to the progressive routinization of wartime symbolism within everyday civic life and gradually normalize the social presence of war across broader segments of the population.



The deeper political significance of this symbolic heroization extends beyond patriotic celebration itself. The Kremlin is not simply honouring veterans in a conventional commemorative sense. It is transforming them into politically usable carriers of patriotic legitimacy whose visibility reinforces emotional mobilization, social cohesion, and support for prolonged wartime governance. Veterans function simultaneously as symbols of sacrifice, guarantors of the war's moral legitimacy, and embodiments of the political authority claimed by the wartime state itself. Symbolic heroization is therefore not merely a supplement to the governance of veterans. It constitutes one of its central foundations.

4.2. THE EXPANSION OF VETERAN SUPPORT INFRASTRUCTURE

The rapid expansion of the wartime veteran population has compelled the Russian state to develop a considerably broader support and adaptation infrastructure than is often acknowledged in Western commentary. Contrary to simplified portrayals suggesting institutional indifference toward the human consequences of the war, the Kremlin has in fact invested significant political attention and administrative resources into the construction of an increasingly extensive system of veteran assistance, rehabilitation, and social adaptation. Since 2022, federal and regional authorities have expanded compensation programs, rehabilitation centres, prosthetics networks, psychological counselling services, employment initiatives, family assistance mechanisms, and specialized veteran institutions intended to absorb at least part of the growing social consequences of prolonged war.

At the centre of this expanding infrastructure stands the Defenders of the Fatherland Foundation, established by presidential decree in 2023 as a centralized structure coordinating support for veterans, wounded servicemen, and families of the dead. The Foundation rapidly developed regional branches across the federation and was tasked with assisting veterans in areas ranging from medical care and rehabilitation to employment, legal assistance, housing support, and psychological counselling. The creation of such a centralized institution reflects the growing recognition within the Russian state that the veteran question can no longer be managed through fragmented ad hoc measures alone. Instead, it increasingly requires permanent administrative structures capable of integrating wartime social management into the broader functioning of the state itself.

The expansion of rehabilitation infrastructure has proceeded simultaneously on multiple levels. Military hospitals, rehabilitation centres, sanatorium systems, and prosthetics facilities have been expanded or reorganized to cope with growing numbers of wounded and disabled servicemen. Public attention surrounding amputees and severely wounded veterans has accelerated investments in prosthetics production, rehabilitation technologies, and adaptation programmes intended to facilitate the return of wounded servicemen either to military structures or to limited forms of civilian functionality. At the same time, regional authorities and state-linked organizations have developed employment reintegration initiatives, retraining programs, and veteran placement mechanisms designed to channel former servicemen into administrative, educational, patriotic, and security-related sectors.

Psychological support and military psychiatry have also received greater institutional attention than is often assumed. The Russian state increasingly acknowledges the existence of combat stress, psychological exhaustion, and wartime trauma, particularly among heavily deployed units and wounded servicemen. The institutionalization of wartime psychological management accelerated rapidly after 2022. In 2023, the Russian Ministry of Health developed a dedicated PTSD treatment programme intended specifically for participants in the Special Military Operation, their families, refugees, and residents of border regions. The programme reportedly included standardized screening procedures, expanded psychological counselling, psychiatric referral mechanisms, rehabilitation protocols, and retraining initiatives intended to rapidly increase the number of specialists capable of managing combat-related psychological disorders. Military psychologists, psychiatric

support structures, adaptation programs, and counselling services have expanded across both military and civilian institutions. Family assistance programs similarly seek to manage the emotional and social consequences of prolonged deployments, casualties, disability, and reintegration pressures affecting relatives of servicemen. The expansion of these mechanisms reflects a growing awareness that prolonged industrialized war inevitably generates significant psychological and social strain requiring some degree of institutional response. Yet official and semi-official discussions increasingly acknowledge the limits of existing rehabilitation capacity. At a March 2026 conference in Voronezh dedicated to the rehabilitation of SVO participants, psychiatrists, psychologists, veterans, and volunteers described persistent shortages in long-term psychiatric care, insufficient frontline psychological support, and the rapid return of many servicemen to military duties after only limited treatment periods. A psychiatrist from Voronezh stated that psychological disorders of some kind were observed among a majority of demobilized servicemen, while PTSD treatment cycles often remained structurally incompatible with the operational demands of prolonged war. Participants also emphasized that the challenge extended beyond veterans themselves: society increasingly had to be prepared for the return of large numbers of combatants shaped by prolonged wartime experience.³⁰ Since 2023, Russian authorities have reportedly opened thousands of medical-psychological counselling offices across the country intended to support returning servicemen and their families. According to reporting by BBC Russian service, approximately 2,700 such centres had been established by 2025, although implementation remained highly uneven and many facilities reportedly suffered from understaffing and limited specialist expertise.³¹

Yet the broader logic of this expanding infrastructure differs in important respects from the therapeutic frameworks commonly associated with Western veteran reintegration systems. The primary objective is often not comprehensive psychological recovery in the liberal-individual sense, but stabilization, governability, and the preservation of social and institutional functionality under wartime conditions. Rehabilitation is closely connected to employability, patriotic integration, administrative management, and, where possible, return to productive participation within the wartime system itself. Psychological support therefore frequently functions less as an autonomous sphere of long-term therapeutic care than as one component within a broader strategy of wartime adaptation and social stabilization.

This distinction is particularly important because it reveals the specific character of Russian wartime governance. The Russian state is not ignoring trauma. Rather, it is attempting to administratively manage and contain the consequences of mass wartime experience while simultaneously continuing the war that produces it. The resulting infrastructure is therefore shaped not only by medical or humanitarian considerations, but also by political concerns linked to social stability, patriotic legitimacy, labour integration, and the long-term management of an expanding wartime population whose continued loyalty and functionality have become strategically important to the state itself.

4.3. STRUCTURAL WEAKNESSES AND UNEVEN CAPACITY

Despite the rapid expansion of Russia's wartime adaptation infrastructure, the system faces significant structural limitations that complicate its ability to absorb the growing social and psychological consequences of prolonged war. These weaknesses should not be interpreted primarily as evidence of state indifference or institutional collapse. Rather, they reflect the growing tension between the scale of wartime pressures generated since 2022 and the uneven capacity of Russian administrative, medical, and regional systems to manage them effectively over time. The central problem is therefore not the absence of state attention, but the limits imposed by institutional capacity, bureaucratic fragmentation, political priorities, and the continuing demands of ongoing war.



One of the most visible challenges concerns the increasing strain placed upon military and civilian medical systems. The prolonged nature of the conflict, combined with high casualty rates and repeated deployment cycles, has generated growing pressure on hospitals, rehabilitation centres, and specialized treatment facilities across multiple regions of the federation. Prosthetics production and rehabilitation programs have expanded significantly, yet bottlenecks remain frequent due to shortages of specialized personnel, logistical constraints, technological limitations, and uneven regional access to care. The visibility of severely wounded veterans, particularly amputees, has simultaneously increased public attention and exposed the practical difficulties of sustaining large-scale rehabilitation systems under prolonged wartime conditions. Russian officials, specialists, and lawmakers have themselves acknowledged significant shortages of qualified psychologists and trauma specialists, while wartime retraining programmes have expanded faster than the availability of experienced personnel capable of treating large-scale combat trauma. Russian wartime adaptation efforts increasingly rely on accelerated retraining schemes intended to expand the pool of personnel capable of managing trauma-related disorders, including through short-term psychiatric and psychological certification programmes for non-specialized medical staff.

Psychological care and military psychiatry face even greater structural difficulties. Although psychological support mechanisms have expanded institutionally, Russia continues to confront shortages of trained military psychologists, psychiatrists, and trauma specialists capable of managing large numbers of combat-related psychological cases. Wartime stigma surrounding psychiatric treatment remains particularly significant within military and security environments where emotional endurance, discipline, and functional resilience are strongly valorized. Interviews conducted by BBC Russian with mental health practitioners working in newly established counselling centres similarly suggest that many returning servicemen avoid psychological treatment altogether, often preferring alcohol consumption or informal peer networks over institutional therapy. In some centres, psychologists reported that military personnel formally referred for treatment simply failed to appear for appointments. Similar tensions surfaced publicly during a March 2026 conference on the rehabilitation of SVO veterans held in Voronezh, where psychiatrists, psychologists, veterans, and volunteers openly discussed the limits of existing adaptation mechanisms. Participants described persistent shortages of psychiatric personnel, insufficient frontline psychological support, and severe difficulties associated with returning from prolonged combat exposure to ordinary civilian life. One veteran and regional parliamentarian acknowledged that after discharge he no longer knew how to function outside military structures, arguing that the greater challenge was not preparing veterans for society, but preparing society for veterans returning from war.³² Under such conditions, psychological trauma frequently remains underreported, administratively minimized, or redirected toward rapid functional reintegration rather than long-term therapeutic treatment. Formal psychological assistance does not constitute the only framework through which wartime suffering is socially processed in Russia. In a social environment where psychological treatment may still carry stigma, distrust, or political ambivalence, some veterans and families appear to rely instead on informal religious, spiritual, shamanistic, or other non-clinical practices as mechanisms of emotional coping, meaning-making, and reassurance.³³ Such tendencies further illustrate that postwar adaptation cannot be reduced exclusively to institutional psychiatry or therapeutic intervention, but also unfolds through broader cultural and symbolic repertoires of endurance and social absorption. Such adaptive repertoires also resonate with broader anthropological observations regarding everyday strategies of endurance, emotional containment, and social coping within late Soviet and post-Soviet society.³⁴ The category of the “invisible trauma” therefore remains substantial, encompassing servicemen whose psychological deterioration does not necessarily appear within formal medical statistics but nevertheless affects family relations, social functioning, behavioural stability, and long-term reintegration into civilian life.³⁵ Discussions during the Voronezh conference similarly highlighted forms of psychological deterioration that often remain only partially visible within formal administrative systems, including emotional dislocation, aggression, denial, social maladaptation, and recurring behavioural instability among returning servicemen. Participants also noted that operational priorities at the front frequently limited the practical role of military psychologists, reinforcing the tendency toward delayed or incomplete treatment of combat-related trauma.³⁶

Independent Russian reporting has similarly described persistent behavioural and psychological carryovers among returning servicemen, including recurring combat dreams, emotional dislocation, hypervigilance, and difficulties readapting to civilian routines. Such accounts further illustrate the gap that may exist between formal administrative reintegration and the slower, less visible process of long-term psychological adaptation after prolonged combat exposure.³⁷

International reporting has similarly pointed toward the growing long-term strain placed upon Russia's psychological and psychiatric support systems. Interviews with Russian specialists and military families conducted by *El País* highlighted persistent shortages of qualified personnel, uneven regional access to treatment, continuing stigma surrounding psychiatric care, and concerns that many forms of combat-related psychological deterioration remain significantly underreported or socially hidden. Such assessments reinforce the broader picture of a wartime adaptation system that increasingly recognizes the problem of psychological trauma while struggling to manage its scale and long-term societal consequences effectively.³⁸

Regional disparities further deepen these structural weaknesses. The practical implementation of veteran support programs varies considerably across the federation depending on fiscal capacity, administrative competence, political priorities, and local institutional resources. Wealthier regions possess greater capacity to fund rehabilitation initiatives, compensation programs, and specialized medical services, while economically weaker regions often struggle to sustain comparable levels of support despite contributing disproportionately to wartime recruitment. As a result, the practical experience of reintegration, rehabilitation, and state support may differ significantly depending on geography, institutional affiliation, and category of service.

Bureaucratic dysfunction and administrative fragmentation also generate growing frustration among veterans and their families. Complaints concerning delayed compensation payments, difficulties obtaining legal recognition, inadequate medical treatment, housing disputes, or inconsistent access to benefits have become increasingly visible within regional reporting and social media discussions. Corruption and informal patronage networks further complicate implementation, particularly in regions where local authorities face limited administrative resources but expanding wartime obligations.

Category inequalities represent another important source of tension. Not all wartime participants occupy identical legal or symbolic positions within the Russian veteran hierarchy. Differences between regular contract soldiers, mobilized personnel, volunteers, PMC fighters, former convicts, Rosgvardia members, and auxiliary structures frequently produce unequal access to benefits, recognition, rehabilitation programs, and long-term institutional support. The expansion of formal veteran legislation since 2022 has partially reduced some of these disparities, yet practical implementation remains inconsistent and politically sensitive, particularly regarding categories associated with irregular formations or penal recruitment.

These weaknesses reveal an important analytical nuance often absent from external commentary. The Russian state is not passively ignoring the human consequences of the war. On the contrary, it increasingly recognizes the strategic necessity of managing the social and psychological pressures generated by prolonged mobilization. Yet the scale of the wartime veteran phenomenon, combined with uneven institutional capacity and the continuing demands of ongoing conflict, creates structural limitations that no symbolic glorification campaign or centralized administrative initiative can fully eliminate. The result is not a total failure of the support system, but a highly uneven landscape in which formal guarantees do not always translate into consistent practical outcomes.



4.4. DECENTRALIZED BURDEN-SHARING

Although the Kremlin has increasingly centralized the symbolic management of the veteran question at the federal level, much of the practical burden associated with reintegration, rehabilitation, and long-term social adaptation has been progressively decentralized onto regional and local structures. This asymmetry reflects a broader characteristic of Russian wartime governance: political legitimacy, patriotic symbolism, and strategic narrative remain tightly controlled from the centre, while the day-to-day management of the social consequences of war is often redistributed across governors, municipal administrations, regional institutions, employers, charitable organizations, and society itself.

Regional governors have consequently acquired an increasingly important role within the wartime adaptation system. Since 2022, many regional administrations have developed their own veteran assistance programmes, rehabilitation initiatives, compensation mechanisms, housing support schemes, and employment integration projects designed to address the practical consequences of military mobilization at the local level. Governors are frequently expected not only to facilitate recruitment and patriotic mobilization, but also to manage the growing population of wounded servicemen, bereaved families, and returning veterans within their respective regions. In practice, the veteran question has therefore become deeply integrated into the broader responsibilities of regional governance under wartime conditions.

Municipal adaptation has expanded in parallel. Local administrations increasingly organize commemorative events, family assistance programs, psychological support initiatives, educational integration projects, and forms of public recognition intended to maintain social cohesion around the war effort. Schools, local businesses, volunteer organizations, Orthodox charities, and patriotic associations often participate directly in these efforts, contributing to a broader socialization of wartime management beyond formal state structures alone. Reintegration consequently becomes not merely a governmental function, but a distributed social process involving multiple layers of local society.

The redistribution of wartime adaptation responsibilities increasingly extends into the labour market itself. Several Russian regions have introduced employment quota systems requiring larger enterprises to hire veterans of the Special Military Operation, sometimes backed by financial penalties for non-compliance. In 2026, the Republic of Tatarstan proposed fines for employers failing to meet mandatory hiring quotas for SVO veterans, illustrating how veteran reintegration is progressively being institutionalized through regional labour governance and semi-compulsory participation by employers.³⁹ Such measures further externalize the practical burden of veteran absorption onto regional administrations, businesses, and para-state social structures, reinforcing a broader wartime governance model based on distributed societal management rather than exclusively centralized federal provision.

This broader redistribution of responsibility also reflects important fiscal realities. The practical costs associated with rehabilitation, prosthetics, compensation payments, psychological counselling, housing assistance, and long-term support for veterans and their families are substantial and continue to grow as the war prolongs. Yet regional fiscal capacity across the Russian Federation remains highly uneven. Wealthier regions possess greater resources to fund rehabilitation centres, local veteran programmes, and supplementary support measures, while poorer regions often face greater demographic exposure to the war despite possessing fewer institutional and financial resources. The result is an uneven geography of reintegration in which local outcomes depend heavily upon regional capacity, administrative competence, and political prioritization.

At the same time, decentralization provides the federal centre with important political advantages. By redistributing much of the practical burden of wartime adaptation downward, the Kremlin limits direct federal exposure to local dissatisfaction,

administrative failures, and implementation problems that inevitably accompany prolonged war. Regional authorities absorb much of the day-to-day friction associated with compensation disputes, rehabilitation shortages, family complaints, housing problems, and reintegration difficulties. Responsibility for managing these tensions thus becomes partially fragmented across the federation rather than concentrated exclusively within federal institutions.

This process increasingly resembles a broader outsourcing of reintegration to society itself. Volunteer networks, patriotic organizations, employers, charitable foundations, educational institutions, religious structures, and informal support systems all participate in absorbing the practical and emotional consequences of war. Such decentralization does not imply state withdrawal. On the contrary, these initiatives often operate within broader systems of state coordination, patriotic mobilization, and administrative supervision. Nevertheless, the practical effect is that the Russian wartime adaptation system relies heavily upon distributed local management rather than exclusively centralized state provision.

The Kremlin centralizes symbolic legitimacy by monopolizing patriotic narratives, heroization, and the political meaning of wartime sacrifice, while decentralizing much of the practical burden associated with reintegration and long-term social adaptation. This combination allows the federal centre to preserve political control over the symbolic dimensions of the war while distributing a significant share of the material, administrative, and emotional pressures generated by prolonged conflict across regional and local society.

4.5. THE ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGEMENT OF TRAUMA

The expansion of Russia's wartime adaptation infrastructure ultimately reflects a broader transformation in how the state conceptualizes the veteran question itself. Trauma is not treated exclusively, or even primarily, as an individual medical condition requiring long-term therapeutic recovery. Rather, it increasingly appears as a governance problem involving social stability, political cohesion, institutional functionality, and the long-term management of a growing wartime population exposed to prolonged violence. The central concern of the Russian state is therefore not simply whether trauma exists, but whether its political and social consequences remain governable under conditions of continuing war.

This distinction is crucial because it shapes the logic underlying many contemporary Russian reintegration policies. Psychological stabilization, patriotic integration, employment placement, symbolic recognition, and administrative supervision frequently operate together as interconnected mechanisms intended to prevent the emergence of socially dislocated or politically autonomous veteran constituencies. The objective is not merely to heal wounded individuals, but to maintain functionality, emotional containment, and political controllability within a society increasingly penetrated by wartime experience. Some adaptation programmes reportedly focus less on long-term therapeutic recovery than on restoring minimal social functionality and emotional stabilization sufficient for reintegration into everyday civilian or institutional environments. Practitioners interviewed by BBC Russian service described programmes aimed primarily at helping returning servicemen re-establish basic social interaction and behavioural control rather than comprehensively treating combat-related trauma. Trauma management consequently becomes inseparable from broader systems of wartime governance.⁴⁰

This broader logic increasingly appears within Russian discussions of veteran rehabilitation themselves. At a March 2026 conference in Voronezh dedicated to the return of SVO veterans, participants repeatedly framed the issue not simply as one of individual treatment, but of broader societal adaptation to prolonged war. Veterans, psychiatrists, psychologists, and volunteers described a system struggling simultaneously with combat trauma, social reintegration, insufficient psychiatric capacity, and the continuing operational pressures of ongoing mobilization. One veteran and regional parliamentarian

argued that the greater challenge was not preparing veterans for society, but preparing society for veterans returning from war. The statement captured with unusual clarity the broader transformation already visible across Russia's wartime adaptation system: trauma management increasingly extends beyond therapy itself into the wider governance of wartime society.⁴¹

Historical memory also plays an important role in shaping this approach. The Soviet and post-Soviet experience of the Afghanistan war remains a particularly significant institutional precedent. The return of the *Afghantsy* during the late Soviet period exposed the political dangers associated with disillusioned veteran networks, informal patriotic opposition, criminalization, and the emergence of autonomous wartime identities insufficiently integrated into state-controlled structures. Within the contemporary Russian political imagination, Afghanistan functions not only as a military memory, but also as a cautionary lesson regarding the potential destabilizing effects of poorly managed demobilization and socially alienated veterans.

At the same time, Soviet and post-Soviet experience also demonstrated that war veterans did not constitute a homogeneous social category. Research on Afghan war veterans already pointed toward significant differentiation between veterans who struggled with criminality, addiction, violence, or social marginalization; those who adopted highly active civic or patriotic roles; and large numbers who ultimately became socially indistinguishable from the broader population.⁴² Contemporary Russian psychological research similarly points toward differentiated postwar trajectories ranging from relatively successful adaptation to partial reintegration difficulties and more severe psychological distress.⁴³ Rather than necessarily producing a uniform 'lost generation,' wartime experience appears to generate layered and uneven patterns of social absorption, adaptation, and marginalization.

This distinction is analytically important because it further complicates common Western assumptions that large-scale combat exposure automatically translates into generalized social destabilization or mass political radicalization. Trauma may exist extensively without necessarily producing politically autonomous or collectively destabilizing veteran constituencies. Russian and Soviet experience instead suggests that societies shaped by prolonged exposure to war can develop historically rooted mechanisms of normalization, privatization, compartmentalization, and uneven social absorption through which many veterans reintegrate into everyday life despite substantial psychological burdens.⁴⁴

The Kremlin's contemporary emphasis on vertical integration, controlled patriotic organizations, centralized symbolic management, and supervised veteran participation partly reflects an effort to shape these postwar trajectories administratively before autonomous veteran milieus can emerge outside state supervision. Concerns surrounding autonomous veteran organization are reinforced by reports describing the emergence of informal "combat brotherhoods" and veteran networks operating at the intersection of patriotic activism, local coercive influence, security structures, and criminality. Such developments evoke earlier post-Afghanistan anxieties regarding semi-autonomous veteran milieus capable of generating forms of informal authority and social power insufficiently controlled by the state.⁴⁵ They further help explain the Kremlin's preference for vertically integrated and institutionally supervised channels of veteran incorporation. The objective is therefore not simply to suppress instability, but to channel highly differentiated veteran experiences into institutionally manageable forms of social and political incorporation.

This concern helps explain the growing importance of state-linked patriotic structures, veteran organizations, and supervised forms of public participation. Veterans are increasingly incorporated into officially sanctioned associations, commemorative initiatives, educational programs, patriotic youth movements, and state-directed civic activities designed simultaneously to honour wartime sacrifice and maintain institutional oversight. Such organizations provide recognition,

social belonging, and symbolic status while also limiting the space for uncontrolled political self-organization outside the broader framework of the wartime state. Emotional integration and political depoliticization therefore often proceed in parallel.

Recent reporting surrounding a leaked presentation reportedly prepared within the Russian Presidential Administration further illustrates how the Kremlin increasingly conceptualizes the veteran question as a political management challenge. Although the authenticity of the document cannot be independently verified, its analytical significance lies in the language through which veterans are described and categorized. The presentation reportedly identified “veteran-ultrapatriots” as a potentially volatile audience possessing both organizational capacity and moral legitimacy derived from wartime sacrifice. The proposed response focused less on repression than on managed absorption through emotional alignment, symbolic recognition, state-sanctioned participation, and controlled institutional integration. Particularly striking was the explicit emphasis on emotional management as a governing technique intended to contain frustration, disappointment, and potential radicalization within administratively manageable channels.⁴⁶

This framing reinforces the broader logic already visible across Russia’s wartime adaptation system. The veteran question is not treated primarily as a welfare problem requiring comprehensive therapeutic recovery. It is increasingly approached as a challenge of political stabilization in which emotional containment, patriotic integration, and the prevention of autonomous mobilization become central objectives. Trauma management therefore extends beyond the medical sphere into the broader domain of authoritarian governance itself.

Recent strategic analyses have similarly emphasized that SVO veterans are emerging as an increasingly important systemic factor within Russian domestic politics, not primarily because all veterans become politically radicalized, but because the Russian state increasingly perceives veteran integration as a question of long-term regime management, wartime stabilization, and political controllability. The issue is therefore not simply the existence of trauma itself, but the management of differentiated postwar trajectories capable of generating both institutional loyalty and potential social volatility.⁴⁷

The Russian state also appears increasingly concerned with what might be described as managed decompression. Returning servicemen require mechanisms through which wartime experience can be socially absorbed without generating uncontrolled fragmentation, resentment, or political radicalization. Employment programmes, symbolic heroization, local commemorative rituals, psychological counselling, regional support structures, and patriotic participation all contribute to a broader process through which wartime experience is gradually redistributed into manageable institutional and social channels. Reintegration in this sense becomes less a transition back to civilian normality than a controlled adaptation to a society itself becoming progressively shaped by wartime conditions.

At the same time, this system remains deeply shaped by the continuing reality of ongoing war. Russia is not attempting to govern trauma after demobilization, but while continuing to mobilize, deploy, wound, and recycle large numbers of servicemen through the wartime system itself. Veterans may return to civilian environments only temporarily before renewed deployment; wounded servicemen may cycle repeatedly between rehabilitation and combat; patriotic mobilization continues alongside psychological exhaustion and social strain. Under such conditions, trauma management becomes an ongoing administrative process embedded within the broader functioning of wartime governance rather than a discrete postwar reintegration challenge.

The Russian state therefore does not simply seek to heal trauma. It seeks to govern the political and social consequences of mass trauma under conditions of prolonged industrialized war. This distinction helps explain why symbolic integration,

patriotic mobilization, employment adaptation, psychological stabilization, and administrative supervision increasingly function as interconnected components of a broader wartime management system whose ultimate objective is not only social recovery, but also political resilience and the preservation of governability itself.

4.6. STRUCTURAL PARADOX

The preceding sections reveal a central paradox at the heart of contemporary Russian wartime governance. The Russian state may be considerably more capable of politically integrating veterans than socially or psychologically reintegrating them. Over the course of the war, the Kremlin has demonstrated a significant capacity to construct systems of symbolic heroization, patriotic mobilization, administrative adaptation, and institutional absorption capable of integrating large numbers of veterans into the broader wartime order. Veterans are increasingly incorporated into state structures, patriotic organizations, educational initiatives, commemorative culture, regional governance, and coercive institutions in ways that reinforce the political legitimacy and emotional cohesion of the wartime state.

At the same time, however, the long-term social and psychological consequences of prolonged industrialized war remain far more difficult to manage fully. Rehabilitation systems remain uneven, psychiatric capacities limited, regional implementation inconsistent, and many forms of trauma structurally underreported or socially stigmatized. The expansion of adaptation infrastructure has improved the state's ability to stabilize and administratively manage wartime pressures, but it has not eliminated the deeper social strains generated by repeated deployments, family disruption, disability, alcoholism, psychological exhaustion, and the gradual normalization of violence within everyday life. The Russian wartime system appears increasingly capable of absorbing trauma politically without necessarily resolving it socially. This broader capacity for the social absorption and normalization of wartime suffering also resonates with earlier analyses emphasizing the enduring cultural centrality of sacrifice, endurance, and collective survival within Russian historical memory and military culture.⁴⁸

This distinction is important because it complicates simplistic assumptions regarding both Russian collapse and Russian stability. The persistence of social strain does not automatically translate into immediate political destabilization. Authoritarian systems may possess considerable capacity to contain, fragment, redistribute, and politically manage the consequences of mass wartime experience over extended periods of time. Through symbolic legitimization, decentralized burden-sharing, controlled patriotic organizations, employment adaptation, and vertical administrative integration, the Kremlin has thus far demonstrated a substantial ability to prevent the emergence of large-scale autonomous veteran opposition comparable to the politically destabilizing veteran milieus feared since the Soviet experience in Afghanistan.

Russian discussions surrounding veteran rehabilitation increasingly acknowledge this contradiction openly. At a March 2026 conference in Voronezh dedicated to the return of SVO veterans, psychiatrists, psychologists, volunteers, and veterans themselves described a system struggling simultaneously with trauma management, social adaptation, insufficient psychiatric capacity, and the continuing operational demands of ongoing war. Particularly revealing was the recurring argument that the challenge no longer concerned veterans alone, but society's capacity to absorb their return. The resulting gap between symbolic incorporation and substantive psychological reintegration is therefore not merely an external analytical observation. It is increasingly recognized within Russia's own wartime adaptation discourse itself.⁴⁹

Yet this capacity for political stabilization should not be confused with comprehensive social reintegration. Many of the pressures generated by prolonged war remain cumulative rather than immediately explosive. As Svetlana Alexievich's oral histories of Soviet war experience similarly illustrated, the social absorption of violence often unfolds through fragmented,

deeply personal, and frequently invisible forms of emotional adaptation rather than through openly articulated collective trauma.⁵⁰ Psychological deterioration, family strain, unequal access to support systems, regional disparities, invisible trauma, and the gradual militarization of civic life may continue to accumulate beneath the surface of formal political stability. The very mechanisms that enhance short-term governability, including patriotic normalization, institutional absorption, symbolic heroization, and redistribution of veterans into coercive or administrative structures, may simultaneously deepen the long-term penetration of wartime logics into Russian society itself.

The resulting paradox becomes central to understanding the broader dynamics of authoritarian resilience under conditions of prolonged war. Russia's wartime system may prove more adaptable, absorptive, and politically resilient than many external observers initially assumed. At the same time, however, this resilience increasingly depends upon the continuous management, redistribution, and normalization of mass wartime experience across society. The veteran question therefore illuminates not only the strengths of the contemporary Russian wartime state, but also the deeper forms of long-term social degradation and institutional militarization that prolonged conflict may gradually produce even in the absence of immediate political rupture.

5. REDISTRIBUTING AND REUSING WAR EXPERIENCE

The preceding section examined how the Russian state manages the social and psychological consequences of mass wartime participation through symbolic heroization, institutional adaptation, and the political governance of trauma. Section 5 moves from management to redistribution. The question is no longer primarily how Russia contains the social costs of war, but how it actively reuses and redistributes wartime experience across the military system, civilian society, coercive institutions, and political structures.

This process of redistribution constitutes one of the paper's central analytical observations. Veterans in Russia are not simply returning from combat and reintegrating into civilian life. They are being channelled into roles that extend the reach and cultural influence of wartime experience far beyond the battlefield itself: as instructors and institutional mentors, patriotic educators and youth organizers, security personnel and political administrators. The cumulative effect is not demobilization. It is the progressive embedding of combat-derived values, networks, and institutional logics throughout the Russian state and society.

5.1. INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING

Russian veterans play an increasingly important role inside the military system itself. One of the most consequential and least discussed effects of the war in Ukraine may be the gradual veteranization of the Russian armed forces: the growing presence of combat-experienced personnel throughout training structures, tactical adaptation processes, and military education. Veterans do not merely represent a postwar social category. They increasingly function as transmission belts of battlefield adaptation within a military still fighting the war that produced them.

The Russian military's operational learning cycle since 2022 has been neither smooth nor systematic. The initial invasion phase exposed catastrophic weaknesses in command structures, logistics, communications, and tactical doctrine. What followed was not planned institutional reform but improvised adaptation under fire. Over time, Russian forces adjusted: small assault groups, decentralized infiltration tactics, dispersed logistics, drone integration, and fortified defensive systems became normalized across the force. This adaptation occurred not through doctrinal overhaul but through attrition-driven improvisation. Russia learned, in large part, because it had no choice.



Russian military learning has historically privileged informal transmission, experiential authority, and improvisation over institutionalized doctrine. Combat experience carries significant prestige inside Russian military culture precisely because formal military education has often proved inadequate under operational conditions. Veterans returning from Ukraine are increasingly used as instructors, trainers, and repositories of tactical knowledge, particularly regarding drone warfare, artillery coordination, trench assault, electronic warfare adaptation, and survival under conditions of constant aerial surveillance and attritional pressure. Their authority derives less from rank or formal qualification than from having been there.

Russian adaptation occurs not despite systemic waste and attrition, but partly through them. The continuous cycling of personnel through combat, casualties, rehabilitation, and redeployment generates a permanent flow of battlefield experience back into the military system. Veterans do not transmit knowledge through orderly institutional channels. They transmit it informally, locally, and imperfectly: on training grounds, between rotations, and through the credibility that a front-line instructor carries before recruits who know the difference. This is a fragile and inefficient learning system. Under current conditions, however, it remains the primary one.

The process remains uneven. Rigid hierarchies, corruption, poor inter-unit coordination, and high personnel turnover continue to limit the systematic institutionalization of combat lessons. Battlefield experience is being generated and lost in parallel. The Russian military is not building institutional knowledge in any stable cumulative sense. It is cycling through it under conditions of permanent attrition.

Yet the cumulative effect may prove significant over time. The longer the war continues, the more combat veterans circulate through military academies, training centres, reserve structures, and operational units. The force taking shape is increasingly conditioned by large-scale industrial warfare, drone-saturated battlefields, mass casualties, and prolonged attritional combat. Veterans are not simply returning from war. They are becoming the institutional memory of a military being rebuilt, imperfectly and at enormous human cost, around the experience of fighting it.

5.2. PATRIOTIC MILITARIZATION

The redistribution of war experience is not confined to military institutions. It extends into civilian society through an expanding system of patriotic education, youth militarization, and memorial culture in which veterans increasingly serve as the primary human embodiment of combat-derived values. The veteranization of the military and the militarization of civic life are not parallel processes. They are mutually reinforcing ones whose combined effect is greater than either alone.

Since 2022, the Russian state has intensified its investment in patriotic education across all levels of the school system. Veterans and active servicemen are regularly incorporated into classroom visits, school assemblies, memorial ceremonies, and civic education programmes designed to present military service as a natural and honourable expression of citizenship. Their presence is not incidental. It reflects a deliberate effort to use the moral authority derived from battlefield experience as an instrument of intergenerational socialization. Veterans do not merely appear as guest speakers. They function as living embodiments of the values the state seeks to transmit: sacrifice, discipline, loyalty, and readiness to serve.

The Yunarmiya movement, Russia's state-sponsored military-patriotic youth organization established in 2016 and significantly expanded after 2022, occupies a central place within this effort. Yunarmiya provides structured channels through which military symbolism, patriotic identity, and physical discipline are transmitted to younger generations well before military service age. Veterans serve as mentors, instructors, and symbolic patrons within these institutions,

lending battlefield credibility to what might otherwise appear as purely ceremonial patriotism. By embedding combat-derived legitimacy within state-supervised educational and civic institutions, the Kremlin channels the moral authority of wartime service into controlled forms before alternative veteran identities or autonomous patriotic networks can consolidate outside official frameworks.

Memorial culture has expanded in parallel. Commemoration of fallen servicemen has become an increasingly visible element of local civic life, particularly in regions with high recruitment and casualty rates. Local ceremonies, school memorials, regional monuments, and community mourning rituals structure the public experience of the war for populations without direct combat exposure. Veterans participate actively in these commemorative practices as witnesses to sacrifice, custodians of memory, and representatives of the wartime state within local communities. They provide a human connection to a conflict that remains physically distant from most civilian environments. That function is stabilizing. It is also politically purposeful.

Veterans occupy a central role in this process not because the state lacks alternative instruments, but because no other instrument can replicate what they provide. State media, official rhetoric, and institutional campaigns can transmit messages. They cannot reproduce the authenticity associated with lived combat experience. The emotional authority of a veteran speaking to schoolchildren about sacrifice, duty, and survival carries a weight that politicians and bureaucrats cannot easily generate.

The long-term implications extend well beyond the current war. A generation of Russian schoolchildren is being socialized within an educational environment increasingly saturated with military symbolism and the normalized presence of combat veterans. Whether this produces durable ideological transformation or largely performative conformity remains uncertain. What is clear is the scale and deliberateness of the investment. The Russian state is systematically shaping the civic culture of the next generation around the experience and values of this war. The consequences of that investment will not be measured in years. They will be measured in the political culture of the generation now sitting in Russian classrooms.

5.3. REDISTRIBUTION INTO COERCIVE ECOSYSTEMS

One of the most significant forms of veteran redistribution occurs within the broader coercive institutions of the wartime state. Rather than transitioning fully into civilian life, many veterans are channelled into Rosgvardia, private security organizations, regional enforcement structures, infrastructure protection bodies, and successor formations linked to former PMC networks. The common denominator across these destinations is continuity rather than demobilization.

Rosgvardia has emerged as one of the most important institutional destinations for veterans seeking continued employment within state structures. Established in 2016 as a centralized internal security force directly subordinate to the President, Rosgvardia expanded its role significantly during the war, participating in rear-area security, territorial control, and auxiliary combat functions in Ukraine. Veterans with front-line experience bring tactical competence, physical conditioning, and institutional familiarity with violence that make them attractive recruits for an organization whose functions span internal order, counter-protest, and territorial security. The absorption of veterans into Rosgvardia is therefore not merely an employment solution. It represents the incorporation of combat-derived coercive capacity into the domestic security architecture of the Russian state.

Private security organizations constitute another important channel. Russia's private security sector has expanded considerably since 2022, absorbing veterans seeking employment consistent with their wartime skills and institutional

background. Veterans in this sector remain embedded within coercive networks while operating outside direct state command structures, creating a diffuse reservoir of trained personnel that the state has structurally enabled even where it does not directly command them.

The post-Wagner redistribution illustrates the broader pattern most clearly. The suppression of the mutiny in June 2023 did not eliminate the organizational networks and manpower Wagner had generated. Significant portions of its personnel were redistributed into Ministry of Defence formations, Rosgvardia units, and successor organizations including the Africa Corps operating across sub-Saharan Africa under modified institutional arrangements.⁵¹ The reportedly leaked Presidential Administration presentation explicitly identifies overseas deployment to the Africa Corps as one mechanism for managing potentially disruptive veteran-ultrapatriot constituencies. Redistribution abroad thus functions as a pressure valve within the broader system of veteran management.⁵²

Regional enforcement and infrastructure protection complete the picture. Local authorities, regional governors, and state-linked enterprises increasingly employ veterans in security and enforcement roles that extend the coercive reach of militarized governance into everyday regional administration. The boundary between military, security, and civilian administrative functions consequently becomes increasingly blurred across significant parts of the federation. Veterans are not simply returning from war. They are being redistributed across institutions that preserve, repurpose, and extend the reach of combat experience long after the fighting itself has ended.

5.4. VETERANS AS A MANAGED POLITICAL CONSTITUENCY

The redistribution of veterans into military, patriotic, and coercive structures cannot be fully understood without addressing the political logic that drives it. Veterans do not merely represent a social or administrative challenge for the Russian state. They constitute simultaneously a strategic political resource and a potential political threat. How the Kremlin manages this dual character is one of the most revealing dimensions of Russia's approach to prolonged war.

The fear is historically grounded. The Afghan veteran experience of the late Soviet period demonstrated with uncomfortable clarity what becomes possible when combat veterans develop autonomous networks, articulate grievances publicly, and build political identities outside state-controlled structures. Veterans returning from a morally ambiguous war with organizational capacity, horizontal bonds, and legitimate grievances proved difficult to contain within official channels. The Kremlin has not forgotten this lesson. Much of the contemporary architecture of veteran management is constructed around the determination not to repeat it.

The response is a deliberate strategy of selective co-optation combined with structural fragmentation. Programs such as "Time of Heroes" absorb the most politically ambitious and publicly visible veterans into state structures, transforming potential critics into institutional stakeholders with direct interests in the continuation of the existing order. By channelling veteran legitimacy into governance roles, the state rewards wartime service, creates a loyal cadre of veteran-administrators embedded within the political system, and reduces the available pool of credible leaders for any potential autonomous veteran movement. Co-optation is not generosity. It is pre-emption.

The broader veteran population is fragmented across multiple categories, institutions, and administrative channels in ways that complicate collective organization. Contract soldiers, mobilized reservists, volunteers, former convicts, PMC veterans, Rosgvardia personnel, and auxiliary formations each occupy distinct legal, institutional, and symbolic positions within the Russian veteran hierarchy. A veteran population divided across competing categories and institutional loyalties

is considerably harder to mobilize as a unified political constituency than one organized around a shared identity and common grievances. Division is policy.

State-linked veteran organizations complete the architecture. They operate as controlled patriotic associations rather than independent advocacy bodies, providing social belonging and symbolic recognition while functioning as mechanisms of supervision and political channelling. Independent veteran advocacy outside these structures remains constrained. Attempts to organize around specific grievances, compensation disputes, or political demands are treated with institutional suspicion. The space for autonomous veteran political organization is narrow, and the Russian state has structured it deliberately to remain so.

The boundaries of acceptable wartime experience are increasingly codified through coercive legal mechanisms. The 2022 introduction of Article 352.1 of the Russian Criminal Code criminalized "voluntary surrender," reinforcing a longstanding Soviet and Russian suspicion toward captivity and perceived battlefield disloyalty. Soldiers returning from captivity or accused of surrender occupy an especially ambiguous position: they may possess combat experience and veteran status, yet remain politically suspect. Wartime sacrifice in Russian military culture is measured not only by participation in combat but by continued loyalty, endurance, and political reliability under conditions of extreme coercion.

This logic has deep Soviet roots. The criminalization of surrender echoes the wartime jurisprudence of the Stalin period, when Order No. 227 and NKVD blocking detachments enforced discipline against soldiers deemed insufficiently loyal. The specific punishments differ. The underlying political logic does not. The Kremlin seeks not merely to integrate veterans, but to hierarchize and discipline wartime legitimacy itself.

The result is a system that needs veterans as symbols but fears them as actors. Thus far the Kremlin has managed this tension with considerable effectiveness, combining heroization, material incentives, co-optation, fragmentation, and administrative supervision into a strategy whose internal logic remains coherent. Whether it remains sustainable is a different question. The veteran population is growing. Material expectations are accumulating. The gap between symbolic glorification and practical support is becoming increasingly visible to those living on the wrong side of it. The strategy that has contained veteran politics so far was designed for a shorter war than the one Russia is fighting.

5.5. REDISTRIBUTION INSTEAD OF DEMOBILIZATION

The preceding sections reveal a pattern that challenges the conventional framework through which postwar veteran phenomena are typically analysed. Russia is not demobilizing its war experience. It is redistributing it. Veterans are not transitioning from wartime to peacetime social roles. They are being absorbed into a framework of permanent mobilization that is becoming an increasingly normal feature of Russian political and social life.

This redistribution operates across multiple channels. Within the armed forces, veterans transmit battlefield knowledge and operational culture through training structures and instructional roles. Within educational institutions and youth organizations, they serve as instruments of patriotic socialization and intergenerational militarization. Within coercive ecosystems, they extend the reach of combat-derived security capacity into regional governance, domestic enforcement, and overseas deployment. Within political structures, selectively co-opted veterans lend patriotic credibility to state institutions while controlled organizations limit the emergence of autonomous veteran movements. Prolonged mobilization gradually transforms war from an exceptional condition into an organizing principle of governance itself.



The cumulative effect is the progressive embedding of combat experience, military values, and conflict-conditioned institutional logics throughout the Russian state and society. Military culture penetrates civilian governance. Coercive capacity diffuses across institutional boundaries. Patriotic mobilization becomes normalized within educational and civic life. The boundary between wartime and peacetime governance erodes not through a dramatic rupture but through the accumulated weight of thousands of individual institutional decisions, administrative arrangements, and political choices that each make sense within the logic of prolonged war. There is no single moment at which Russia becomes a more militarized society. There is only the gradual disappearance of the boundary that once separated the two.

Societies that demobilize gradually return toward prewar institutional norms as wartime structures lose their purpose and personnel return to civilian roles. Societies that redistribute rather than demobilize follow a different trajectory. Institutions, networks, coercive ecosystems, and political cultures shaped by prolonged war do not simply dissolve when combat operations cease. They persist, adapt, and continue to shape governance, civil-military relations, and political culture in ways that often prove resistant to reversal. The Soviet Union after 1945 did not demobilize its wartime political culture. It institutionalized it. The consequences shaped Soviet governance for decades.

Russia's current trajectory suggests a comparable dynamic, albeit one shaped by the specific conditions of an authoritarian state fighting a prolonged war of attrition without the legitimizing effect of an unambiguous victory. Veterans are not simply the human product of war. They are increasingly the human infrastructure of a state being rebuilt around the experience of fighting it. When the fighting eventually stops, that infrastructure will remain. The state it has helped to construct is unlikely simply to revert to what existed before February 2022. The question is not whether prolonged war transforms states. It always does. The question is what kind of state Russia is becoming, and whether the institutions, cultures, and coercive ecosystems being built around this war have already acquired a momentum of their own.

The developments analysed in Part II complicate many of the assumptions that continue to structure Western discussions of Russian veterans and wartime resilience. The central issue is no longer whether Russia faces trauma, social strain, or reintegration difficulties. It clearly does. The more difficult analytical question is whether Western frameworks adequately capture how authoritarian systems govern, absorb, and redistribute these pressures under conditions of prolonged war. Part III therefore turns to the broader strategic and conceptual implications of the Russian case.



PART III — STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

Western frameworks for analysing Russian veterans have consistently focused on the wrong problem. The issue is not how veterans return from war. It is how prolonged war reshapes governance, coercive capacity, and state-society relations themselves. Part III examines the analytical limits of dominant Western approaches and the broader strategic implications of Russia's evolving wartime system for European security planning.

6. THE LIMITS OF WESTERN REINTEGRATION FRAMEWORKS

The dominant Western frameworks for analyzing veterans of the war in Ukraine share a common assumption: that the central question is one of reintegration. How do former soldiers return to civilian life? What psychological care do they require? What risks do traumatized veterans pose to domestic stability? These are legitimate questions. Applied to the Russian case, they systematically misread the phenomenon they seek to explain.

The first distortion is therapeutic reductionism. Western commentary has consistently privileged PTSD, psychological collapse, and individual trauma as the primary lenses through which Russian veteran phenomena are interpreted. This reflects the institutional logic of Western liberal democracies, where veteran reintegration has historically been understood as a welfare and medical challenge: a debt owed by the state to the individual, discharged through counselling, rehabilitation, and social support. The assumption is that states failing to provide adequate therapeutic care will face predictable social consequences: crime, substance abuse, domestic violence, and eventual political instability.

The framework is not wrong. It is incomplete. Russia faces these consequences, and they are real and growing. But therapeutic reductionism misses the deeper structural logic at work. The Russian state is not simply failing to provide adequate care. It is governing trauma through a different logic entirely: one in which psychological stabilization, patriotic integration, employment placement, and administrative supervision operate together as instruments of political management rather than individual recovery. Measuring Russian veteran policy against Western therapeutic standards produces the misleading conclusion that Russia is doing reintegration badly. The more precise conclusion is that Russia is doing something categorically different.

The second distortion is spectacular-event bias. Western analytical attention has disproportionately focused on high-profile incidents involving returning veterans: violent crimes, the Wagner mutiny, the reintegration of pardoned convicts, isolated acts of public disorder. These events are real and analytically significant. But they are systematically unrepresentative of the broader institutional mechanisms through which the Russian state manages its veteran population. Focusing on the dramatic while neglecting the slow and institutional produces an analysis that is event-driven where it should be structural. The result is a recurring cycle of alarm at individual incidents followed by puzzlement when broader social collapse fails to materialize on the expected timeline.

The third distortion is mirror imaging: the projection of Western assumptions about civil-military relations, individual rights, veteran autonomy, and state-society relationships onto a system organized around fundamentally different political logics. Western liberal frameworks assume that veterans are primarily private individuals whose relationship with the state is mediated by rights, entitlements, and legal protections. In Russia, veterans have historically been political-administrative categories whose relationship with the state is mediated by status, hierarchy, symbolic recognition, and managed incorporation. This was true of the frontoviki after 1945, of the Afghantsy whose difficult reintegration became an institutional lesson for the post-Soviet state, and of the Chechen veteran cohorts whose management shaped the legal

and administrative architecture that now governs SVO participants. Applying the first framework to the second produces systematic misunderstanding of both Russian capacity and Russian vulnerability.

Western analyses predominantly ask how veterans recover. The Russian case requires asking how the state governs war experience politically. These are not the same question. Conflating them generates conclusions that are simultaneously partially correct and structurally misleading. Russia may be failing to heal its veterans in the therapeutic sense while succeeding in governing them politically. Both can be true. Understanding which dimension is operative requires analytical frameworks calibrated to the Russian system rather than imported from institutional environments organized around different assumptions.

The Russian case demonstrates that authoritarian states possess historically specific mechanisms for the administrative absorption of mass violence without necessarily resolving its human consequences. Political absorption and social healing are distinct processes. They can be decoupled. Russia has decoupled them. Recognizing this is the precondition for any accurate assessment of Russian wartime resilience, internal stability, and long-term coercive capacity.

7. POSTWAR RUSSIA: DEMOBILIZATION OR MILITARIZED STABILIZATION?

What kind of Russia will emerge from this war? Two inadequate answers dominate current discussion. The first anticipates social collapse: a state overwhelmed by traumatized veterans, accumulated grievances, and institutional dysfunction, destabilized from within by the human consequences of a war it cannot win cleanly. The second anticipates authoritarian stabilization: a state that absorbs the costs of war through repression, propaganda, and institutional control, emerging militarily hardened and politically consolidated. Both answers contain partial truths. Neither captures the trajectory that the evidence suggests.

The more accurate picture is one of institutional containment coexisting with slow-burning social degradation. The Kremlin combines glorification with containment, incorporation with control. This capacity is real, historically rooted, and should not be underestimated. Yet institutional containment does not resolve the underlying human consequences of prolonged industrialized war. It contains, redirects, and normalizes them. Psychological deterioration, family breakdown, alcoholism, invisible trauma, regional demographic asymmetries, and the gradual normalization of violence accumulate beneath the surface of formal political stability. These are not immediately explosive pressures. They are cumulative ones. The distinction matters enormously for strategic assessment.

Veteranization captures one of the most significant long-term dynamics. As combat-experienced personnel circulate through military academies, training structures, regional administrations, coercive institutions, educational systems, and patriotic organizations, they progressively reshape the institutional culture of the Russian state. Military values, coercive logics, and conflict-conditioned mentalities penetrate civilian governance not through a single dramatic rupture but through the accumulated weight of thousands of individual institutional placements, administrative decisions, and political choices. The institutional imprint of this war will outlast the war itself.

Current trajectories suggest that Russia is not building the institutional conditions for a return to prewar normality. It is constructing a permanent mobilization framework in which military values, coercive ecosystems, and veteran-administered institutions become constitutive features of governance rather than temporary wartime adaptations. When combat operations cease, that framework will not dissolve. It will adapt. And it will continue to shape Russian political and social life in ways that carry the imprint of this war for decades.



Several specific strategic implications follow for European planners.

Russian coercive capacity deserves more sustained analytical attention than it currently receives. Combat-experienced personnel redistributed across Rosgvardia, private security, regional enforcement, and successor PMC structures mean that Russian coercive capacity is not concentrated in the conventional military alone. It is distributed across a broader ecosystem of armed and institutionally embedded actors whose collective weight will shape Russian internal governance and external projection long after any ceasefire.

The persistence of conflict-conditioned mentalities within Russian society and state institutions has direct implications for hybrid security planning. A society that has normalized military service, legitimized political violence, and embedded veteran administrators within governance structures at multiple levels will not rapidly produce the conditions for genuine political liberalization or institutional demilitarization. European planning assumptions that anticipate a postwar Russian reset should be treated with considerable caution.

Long-term Russian mobilization potential similarly deserves reassessment. A military whose institutional culture is increasingly shaped by veterans of large-scale attritional warfare, whose training structures are staffed by combat-experienced instructors, and whose reserve systems encompass millions of men with recent frontline experience represents a qualitatively different threat than the pre-2022 Russian military. The veteranization of the armed forces may produce, over time, a force better adapted to industrialized attritional warfare than the one that invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

European societies may ultimately discover that the central strategic challenge posed by Russia is not merely its capacity to wage war, but its capacity to govern the social consequences of prolonged war without demobilizing them. The veteran question is therefore not a peripheral welfare issue or a postwar problem in waiting. It is already one of the most precise instruments available for understanding what kind of state prolonged war is turning Russia into — and what that state will look like when the fighting eventually stops.

CONCLUSION

This paper began with a question that Western commentary has often framed incorrectly. Not: are Russian veterans a social problem? But: how does the Russian state govern them as a political category? These are not the same question. The difference is the difference between an analysis calibrated to the Russian system and one that projects assumptions from liberal-democratic welfare states onto an authoritarian wartime order organized around fundamentally different institutional logics.

What this paper has argued across its three parts is consistent and cumulative. The Russian state possesses historically specific mechanisms for absorbing, categorizing, symbolically elevating, and politically managing former combatants. The Special Military Operation did not create this system. It intensified and expanded it at a scale not seen since the Second World War. The legal architecture, institutional apparatus, symbolic heroization, coercive redistribution, and patriotic mobilization analysed throughout this paper are not improvised responses to wartime necessity. They are the product of decades of accumulated institutional practice, shaped by the lessons of Afghanistan and Chechnya and now operating under conditions of mass mobilization.



Yet the central argument is not that this system functions comprehensively. It is that it functions selectively, and that this selectivity reveals something fundamental about the Russian wartime state. Russia has developed considerably stronger mechanisms for the political integration of veterans than for their medical, social, or psychological reintegration. Symbolic heroization coexists with fragmented rehabilitation infrastructure, psychiatric shortages, regional disparities, invisible trauma, and the long-term social costs generated by returning large numbers of combat-experienced men to a society reorganized around a war it cannot easily end. The state can incorporate veterans more effectively as a political constituency than it can repair them as human beings.

This asymmetry is not simply a policy deficiency awaiting correction. It is structurally revealing. It reflects the logic of a state that requires veterans as a political resource but struggles to sustain them as a comprehensive social obligation. Political incorporation and social healing are distinct processes. Russia has decoupled them. That decoupling is sustainable in the short term because authoritarian systems possess considerable capacity to contain, fragment, normalize, and redirect the consequences of mass wartime experience. It is not indefinitely sustainable. The social costs of prolonged industrialized war are cumulative rather than immediately explosive, and they continue to accumulate regardless of how effectively they are politically managed.

The significance of the veteran question therefore extends beyond veterans themselves. It offers one of the most precise instruments for assessing the broader transformation of the Russian state under conditions of prolonged war. It illuminates both the adaptive capacity and the structural limits of authoritarian resilience. It reveals a state becoming more militarized in its institutions, more coercive in its governing ecosystems, and increasingly dependent upon the redistribution of wartime experience as a mechanism of political cohesion and regime reproduction.

More broadly, the Russian case suggests that the relationship between war and authoritarian resilience deserves greater analytical attention than it has received. Contemporary debates often assume that prolonged war necessarily weakens states through accumulating social and economic costs. Russia demonstrates a different possibility: that authoritarian systems may absorb, redistribute, and politically manage significant portions of those costs for extended periods. The veteran question therefore illuminates not only Russia's future trajectory, but a broader question about how authoritarian states govern the social consequences of mass war.

Russia's capacity to govern war experience politically should not be confused with an equivalent capacity to medically, socially, or psychologically reintegrate those who carry it. That confusion has distorted Western analysis throughout the war. Correcting it is not merely an academic exercise. Understanding how Russia governs war experience has become essential to understanding what kind of state prolonged war is producing. The veteran question is not a peripheral issue of social policy. It is one of the most precise instruments available for assessing the future trajectory of Russia itself, and the kind of state that will remain when the fighting eventually stops.



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