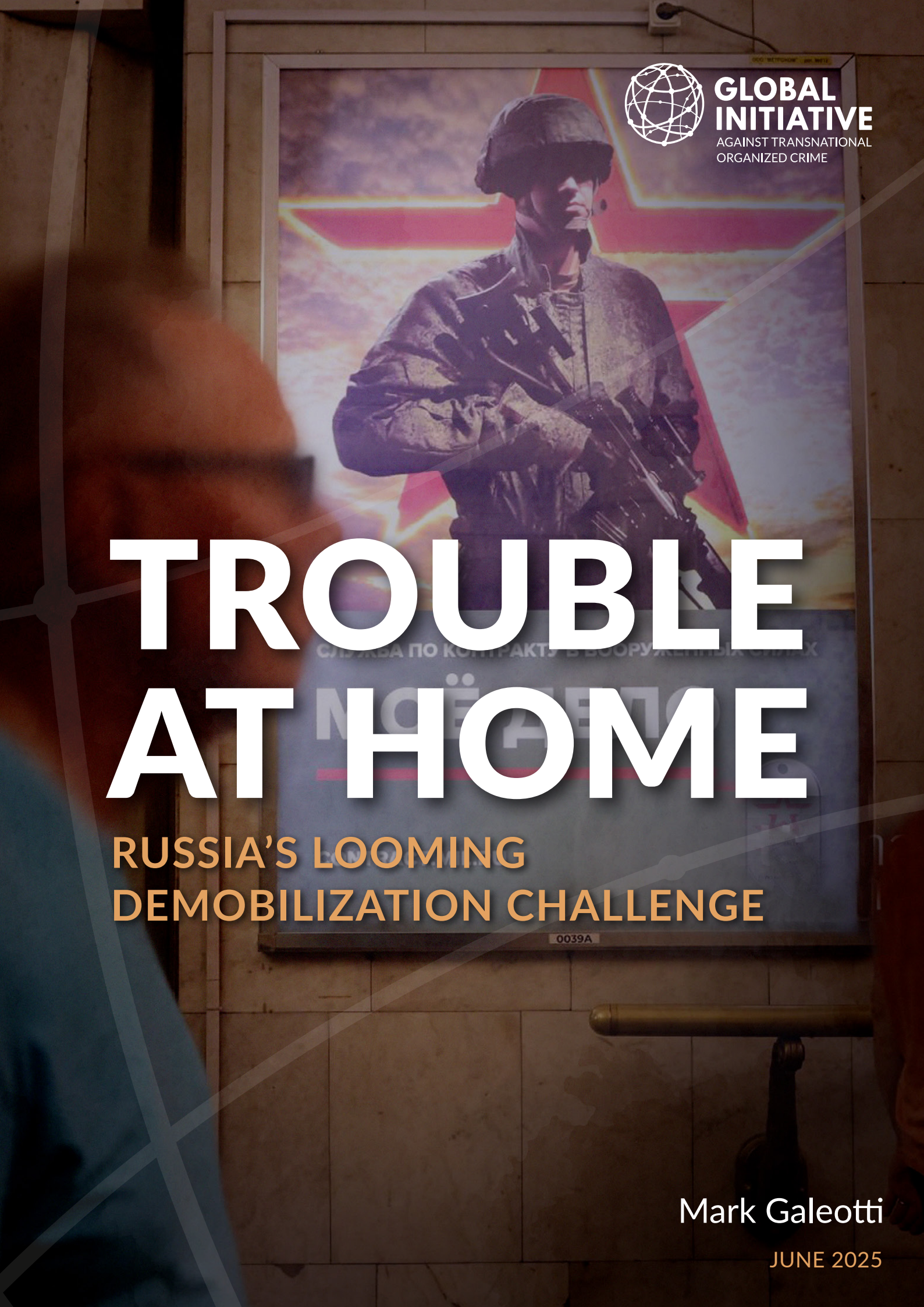

GLOBAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

TROUBLE AT HOME

RUSSIA'S LOOMING DEMOBILIZATION CHALLENGE

Mark Galeotti

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GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

Afgantsy	'Afghans', veterans of the Soviet war in Afghanistan
Avtoritet	'Authority', senior criminal-business figure
Chechentsy	'Chechens', veterans of the Russian wars in Chechnya
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration
DNR	Donbas People's Republic
EU	European Union
FSB	Federal Security Service
FSIN	Federal Penitentiary Service
LNR	Luhansk People's Republic
MVD	Ministry of Internal Affairs
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
Rosgvardiya	National Guard
SVA	Union of Veterans of Afghanistan
SVO	Special military operation (official Russian term for its invasion of Ukraine)
Ukraintsy	'Ukrainians', veterans of the war in Ukraine

INTRODUCTION

Ivan Rossomakhin was the wild child of the village of Novy Burets in Russia's Kirov region. He had a string of public order offences to his name. In 2019, the 24-year-old had murdered a fellow villager in a drunk argument. He was arrested, and the next year sentenced to 14 years in a high-security penal colony. In 2022, though, as entrepreneur Yevgeny Prigozhin began recruiting soldiers for his Wagner mercenary army in the camps, he promptly signed up on a contract that would see him released after six months' combat. In 2023, he was released and returned to Novy Burets. Far from having been rehabilitated, his behaviour was even worse, and he took to smashing up cars with an axe and threatening to 'kill everyone'. The police arrested him, gave him five days' administrative detention on hooliganism charges and promised that they would frogmarch him to the station with his possessions and send him packing. This they duly did, but he only went as far as the neighbouring town of Vyatskiye Polyany. There, the next day, he raped and then stabbed to death an 85-year-old pensioner.[1]

This time, he was sentenced to 22 years in the IK-1 Kotchika maximum security penal colony, with the appellate court then increasing his sentence to 23 years. He was out within a year, though, this time signing up for one of the regular army's Storm-V penal units.[2] Furious locals complained that he had become 'untouchable' because of his willingness to fight in Ukraine.[3] A Russian criminologist who has studied the case said it is thought this unstable, murderous man has, during his second tour of duty, fallen in with rather more serious criminals, and that 'by the time he comes out again, he may have gravitated from drunken murder to organized crime killer-for-hire'.[4]

After more than three years of full-scale war in Ukraine, Russia is already experiencing severe effects at home, from the stresses on the health and social care systems because of the return of injured veterans, to crimes committed by paroled convict-soldiers, like Rossomakhin, released from prison to fight. Indeed, Moscow's decision to enlist convicted gangsters, murderers, rapists and similar serious criminals on a mass scale is not only one of the most distinctive aspects of this war, but one that will ensure that the impact at home will be unusually disruptive.

The effect not just on crime rates, but the very characteristics of crime – including rising levels of violent and armed offences and an 'arms race' between organized gangs as they recruit war veterans – are marked and becoming more serious. As of writing in March 2025, despite President Donald Trump's efforts to negotiate or impose a stable and lasting peace, the greater likelihood is of a ceasefire or temporary freezing of the conflict, at best. This is likely to lead to more soldiers being released from the front, and the impact at home, artificially held back by the Kremlin's reluctance to demobilize troops, will become even more pronounced. The destabilizing implications will be felt not only by Russia, but also its neighbours, which face risks from the proliferation of illegal weapons to the violent overspill

of criminal conflicts, and the global community as a whole. Hence, a properly managed disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) strategy for the country, and not just the veterans, will be vital to avoid domestic turmoil or renewed violent revanchism.

This report explores the criminogenic impact of returning soldiers, now and in the future, in Russia: on ordinary crime and on organized crime, on society as a whole, from the degradation of wider law-enforcement capacities to the political framing of the returning soldiers (including their crimes). Crime is so often a response to a range of other failures on the part of the state, from a failure to make good on promises of practical advancement to a willingness to scapegoat the soldiers for its own blunders. This report therefore adopts a deliberately broad perspective, exploring the unfolding failure of the state at local and national level to provide adequate practical, medical and psycho-social support for the veterans, which also contributes to their alienation and criminalization. It concludes with a series of practicable recommendations, largely for Russia, but also the outside world.

Criminogenic effects of war

'Situations like the "cold summer of '53", when thousands of criminals were amnestied [from the Gulags] in one go by Beria's decree, and post-war Odessa, where de facto power was temporarily seized by the criminal element, will inevitably be reproduced in Russia in the foreseeable future.'[5]

Imagine a typical domestic squabble: a man, consuming copious alcohol, notices something he doesn't like. Maybe his mother didn't love him enough, or his father was playing music too loud, or a group of strangers failed to take an interest in his phone videos. But in all of these cases, the slight led to murder: the mother was hacked to death with an axe, the father stabbed with a kitchen knife and one of the unassuming strangers shot to death in their home. What all these cases had in common was that the perpetrator was a veteran criminal whose propensity for violence had been exploited by the state, rewarded and ultimately justified: these were the convicts recruited to fight in Ukraine and then exonerated.[6] Many of these war-traumatized men, with all their old grudges made raw in the trenches of Donbas, came back believing in their own impunity, with one veteran, after attempting to beat a woman to death with his crutch, showing police his service papers, expecting not to be charged because he had fought in the war.[7]

Overall, since February 2022 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has become a more violent country, including serious and organized crime. While official statistics try to sugarcoat the data, some figures suggest an overall rise in violent crime by as much as 10% in 2023 alone, with the proportion committed by serving military personnel doubling in the first half of 2024.[8] Since the beginning of the so-called 'special military operation' (SVO, from the Russian) in Ukraine in February 2022, Russian independent journalists have documented nearly 500 cases where veterans have murdered or caused grievous bodily harm to a civilian back home, with 242 civilians killed and 227 gravely injured. Typically, the victims are family or acquaintances, and while the perpetrators are war veterans, they are nearly twice as likely to also be ex-convicts: in one study, 180 were soldiers, while 246 were conditionally released ex-convicts.[9] Most of these tragic tales relate to the poor impulse control and lethal training of psychologically scarred ex-soldiers. However, as will be discussed below, there are also cases in which they have instead turned to more deliberate and organized criminal activity.

Yet what makes this especially striking is that the overwhelming majority of Russian soldiers involved in the war have not yet come home. In practice, both mobilized reservists and volunteers are largely still being kept in the SVO zone, or a handful of nearby training, recuperation and reorganization depots. While assessments of the overall size of the Russian deployment at any one time range from 600 000 (estimates

from the International Institute for Strategic Studies) through 700 000 (Russian President Vladimir Putin's figure) to 800 000 (according to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky), so far it seems fewer than 100 000 have been released from the fighting.[10] That they appear responsible for such a serious increase in crime is striking – until one realizes that most of them are paroled ex-criminals.

As noted, one of the particular characteristics of this war has been Russia's recruitment of formerly convicted criminals or those facing charges, an initiative originally adopted by the Wagner mercenary army and then the regular armed forces in their Storm-Z and then Storm-V penal units, as a way of avoiding mobilizing the general population.[11] Ukraine's Foreign Intelligence Service claimed in January 2025 that up to 180 000 convicts had been recruited to fight in the SVO as of November 2024.[12] These figures are to an extent corroborated by domestic Russian sources. At the end of 2023, Vladimir Osechkin, head of the Gulagu.net project, an umbrella human rights monitoring association, said over 100 000 convicts had been released from Russian prisons and sent to fight in the SVO, citing a source in the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN). Olga Romanova, founder of a charity supporting convicts and their families, said 120 000 prisoners had been recruited, with about 50 000 recruited by Wagner and the rest by the defence ministry.[13]

These figures have been challenged by the Russian government, but official sources have indirectly hinted at similar numbers. According to the FSIN, over the past two years the prison population decreased by 120 000, from January 2023 to January 2025.[14] Although Deputy Justice Minister Vsevolod Vukulov has framed this more as a result of alternative rehabilitation measures, this is only part of the reason, especially because the proportionate decline in the male prisoner population was so much higher.[15] Other data suggests that a good portion of this reduction was due to recruitment efforts: in 2022 alone, about 32 000 people had 'disappeared' from Russian prisons. According to independent media outlet MediaZona, Vukulov's figures suggest that by the end of 2023, that reduction amounted to 54 000 prisoners.[16] Indeed, a number of prison camps are in the process of being closed, as a result of the decline in the prison population. Last year, for example, two high-security facilities in the Sverdlovsk region were closed: IK-52 and IK-54.[17]

Russia has already suffered terrible losses as a result of its invasion: as of the start of 2025, between 167 194 and 234 669 troops had been killed, according to the BBC's count, and a minimum of 172 000 and 611 000 wounded, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies.[18] However, it faces the likelihood of an even broader criminal and social crisis after the fighting stops. All told, perhaps over 1.5 million Russian men and women had participated in the war as of the start of 2025. As more and more of them begin to be demobilized and return home, Russia will see an influx of veterans not just bearing the psychological impacts of war, but armed with illegal weapons, and likely to be denied the work opportunities, public respect, and medical and social care they need and have been promised.

New wars, familiar problems

'There was a question once: how now to avoid what they called the "Afghan syndrome". We had a difficult moment in our country. [Veterans] came home, but did not do anything for themselves. And many people – criminal structures, criminals – attracted them to various, you know what kind of organizations.'[19]

This has, after all, been the sad consequence of past imperial wars in which Russia has been involved. Discussing the impact of the Soviet war in Afghanistan and the Russian wars against rebellious Chechnya, Major General of Justice Igor Komissarov, a former assistant to the head of the Investigative Committee, Alexander Bastrykin, who himself had served in Chechnya, noted that 'in the … '90s, the backbone of

organized crime groups were former "*afgantsy*" and "*chechentsy*"', as the veterans of these conflicts were known.[20] So, while history is not destiny, the recurrence of these problems – and, especially, the connection between demobilization and a propensity for criminality – would suggest deep-seated cultural and political factors inhibiting a more productive approach towards DDR.

The 1979–88 Soviet–Afghan War was a long conflict that involved around a million Soviet citizens, both soldiers and civilians. This was out of a total Soviet population of more than 275 million, so only one in every 275 Soviet citizens was directly involved. On the other hand, 1.5 million (and counting) SVO veterans have been drawn from Russia's 144 million people, so one in 96 have already been involved. The Afghan war was thus a substantially smaller commitment, even if it did take place against the backdrop of Mikhail Gorbachev's dismantling of the ideological foundations of the USSR, and the progressive political and economic collapse of the system. Either way, it still had a significant and dangerous effect on the country. The failing Soviet health system was manifestly incapable of addressing the needs of the returning *afgantsy*, who also faced practical problems finding work and social isolation, being considered the dangerously unstable products of a failed war.[21] The result became known as the so-called 'Afghan syndrome', a loose, non-technical term used to encompass numerous problems:

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and lesser, but still challenging, mental carry-overs from the stress of war
- Drug abuse, whether because of addiction to medical painkillers or exposure to opiates and marijuana in Afghanistan
- Physical ailments and disabilities
- A general failure to reintegrate into civilian life, which especially led to some veterans drifting into political extremism or criminality[22]

The veterans faced a shameful degree of neglect from the Soviet state and public alike, in part because of the scapegoating so often experienced by soldiers deemed to have lost 'their' war (although the overwhelming majority were, unlike the SVO participants, conscripts, who had no choice in the matter), and in part the collapse of the USSR's state and economy. Although the majority managed to adjust and assimilate, according to the Union of Veterans of Afghanistan, as of the end of 1989, 372 000 *afgantsy* were suffering from alcoholism and drug addiction to one degree or another.[23] Meanwhile, a substantial number drifted into crime, playing a key role in the emerging organized criminal underworld of the time.[24] As part of a backlash, some *afgantsy* conversely became vigilantes, breaking the law in the name of some higher morality. Igor Dembovski, who served in the war from 1982 to 1984, was one: 'When I returned home to St Petersburg, I went into the streets and started using my fists. I beat up punks on the Field of Mars and the Nevsky Prospect … I even almost landed in jail. In short, I spent the entire summer cleaning the rabble out of the city.'[25]

Likewise, the 1994–1996 and 1999–2009 Chechen wars, whereby Moscow sought to crush secessionism in the North Caucasus republic of Chechnya, were to have a direct impact on the Russian underworld. The first war essentially ended in an unstable draw, and involved more than 70 000 Russian troops and security personnel; the second, which saw the rebels crushed and an autocratic local regime imposed, was a larger affair, with over 100 000 Russian personnel deployed. These were mostly fought by conscripts, who, having served their terms, rotated back into civilian life. Even though these wars were on a smaller scale, there was, again, a marked failure on the part of the state to address the psycho-social needs of the veterans and equally evident criminal implications. A particular problem was not only the institutionalized brutality meted out against the Chechens[26] – which the

Russian forces were required to execute – but also the extensive use of police and special-purpose mobile units (OMON) in what were, in effect, combat missions for which they were neither properly trained nor psychologically prepared. As Ruslan Aushev, a decorated war hero of the Afghan war who later became president of the neighbouring Republic of Ingushetia, observed:

> Policemen found themselves in a situation where they had to shoot people, to kill and be shot at. They returned home in a state of total psychological shock, and were expected to go back to maintaining public order. The 'Chechen syndrome' is rife in the police force, transmitted from 'policemen from Chechnya' to those who had no part in antiterrorist operations. This is evidenced in the many cases of abuse perpetrated against citizens by men in uniform.[27]

As a result, the Chechen wars not only exacerbated the existing brutal practices of the security forces, which poisoned the relationship with society that is so crucial to combating crime, but also drove yet more veterans, police as well as soldiers, into active criminality. One such example can be seen in the gang run by Sergei Domanin, a former senior lieutenant in the marines. Domanin made a point of recruiting *chechentsy*, as their willingness to use violence allowed him to maintain a three-year reign of terror in Timashevsk, in the Krasnodar region, between 1995 and 1997.[28]

In short, while war is hell, peace does not offer an immediate transition to paradise. Despite the past examples of Russia's wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya, the Kremlin – and Russian society – is only now beginning to come to terms with the criminogenic implications and social challenges being thrown up by the conflict in Ukraine and thus the potential implications of an end to the war. It is neither impossible nor too late to develop and implement an adequate strategy for DDR. But the clock is ticking.

Russian troops in the first Chechen war. The wars in Chechnya drove many Russian veterans into criminality in civilian life. *© Ivan Shlamov/ AFP via Getty Images*

FROM WAR CRIMES TO STREET CRIMES

'Not a day goes by without an "incident" with a former Wagnerite [mercenary] or just a former serviceman returning from battle. Who beat, cut or even killed someone.'[29]

Although the impact is currently dammed by the government's refusal to demobilize large numbers of soldiers, even the limited number of Russian returnees, and soldiers on leave or medical furlough, are having a distinct impact on the violent crime rate. As already noted, at least 242 people have been killed, according to an investigation by the independent media outlet Verstka, and another 227 have been seriously injured since the beginning of the war in Ukraine.[30] However, to this toll must be added all the attempted murders and assaults, the wider terror being felt in homes, streets and villages where violent or abusive veterans have returned and, above all, the likely effect when the hundreds of thousands of soldiers still locked into the war are finally unleashed.

Rising crime

'I think that with the weakening of the state apparatus and all state bodies, there will be more violence. The reasons are the growing number of people who have experienced military action, the illegal flow of weapons, and the degradation of the justice system.'[31]

The authorities are claiming that there has been a decline in levels of violent crime; their own data ultimately belies this. According to Irina Volk, official spokesperson of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), in 2024 the number of murders and attempted murders decreased by 9.8% compared with the previous year; the number of unlawful acts against the person decreased by 7.7%; and cases of serious bodily harm decreased by 8.1%. The total number of crimes registered decreased by 1.8%.[32] This reflects a trend pre-dating the war. In 2021, the overall crime rate fell by 1.2%, and then by a further 1.9% in 2022 and 1% in the first six months of 2023.[33] Indeed, 2022 saw a particular fall in such serious offences as crimes against the person (–5.5%) and attempted rape (–4.2%), even if this was overshadowed by robbery (–10.5%) and criminal hooliganism (–13%).[34] All this would seem quite a turnaround from 2020, when 50 of Russia's 85 regions and federal units were reporting an increase in crime, according to the General Prosecutor's Office, and the overall crime rate was up 1.2%.[35]

The truth is more complex. It does appear to be the case that 2022 saw a genuine decrease in violent crime, which could perhaps be explained by a short-lived 'patriotic boost' and the deployment of large numbers of young men to the war.[36] However, in practice, the evidence suggests an overall increase

in crime in general, and serious, organized and armed crime in particular, but that the data is lagging or incomplete for three main reasons:

- **Under-reporting and declining detection rates because of an overstretched police force.** Even Volk has conceded that there may be more crimes going undetected because the MVD is increasingly under-strength, not least as serving officers and potential recruits are instead attracted to the SVO given the inflated salaries and huge signing-on bonuses being offered.[37] As will be discussed below, this undercapacity is a long-term problem exacerbated by the SVO.
- **A political imperative to appear to be making progress in fighting crime**. This leads, among other things, to some crimes being recorded as lesser offences. Although, as noted below, many of these will be corrected in due course, this is much less likely to happen with unsolved crimes that do not end up being heard in court, which is where the correction would usually take place. As one police officer admitted, 'A missing persons case can easily be lost in the files, in a way a suspected murder just won't.'[38]
- **A selective decision of when to announce the figures.** Issues such as the misrecording of serious crimes as mere administrative offences and the like tend to be caught and corrected when a case goes to trial or on appeal. As a result, there is often a lag before the figures are revised upwards. In the words of a researcher in the MVD Academy, 'If you announce the figures early, they sound great – and who notices later when they are corrected?'[39]

Given these confounding factors, data from Bloomberg based on official supreme court records paints a rather different picture.[40] It suggests the number of murders and sex offences, particularly against children, have not declined in the past two years, but actually surged by 62%. Likewise, working off the updated records in the unified interdepartmental information and statistical system suggests that 579 089 serious and especially serious crimes were registered in Russia in 2023, which is the highest for the past 12 years.[41] In other words, going by the 'deep data', rather than the MVD's own public statements, demonstrates that, since the start of the war, crime has increased, and serious, violent and organized crime in particular.

Social and geographic variation

'As soon as the military action started [in the Donbas], we had an influx of criminals and local prostitutes. New thieves pushed out the old ones and scattered around the area. While the old thieves weren't dealt with nicely, the rogues, drug dealers and thieves were forced to flee and rush to the Rostov region.'[42]

Behind the aggregate crime rates lie a whole range of regional and social variations. Even before the full-scale invasion, the undeclared conflict in the Donbas had encouraged certain criminal flows across the national border and led to rising crime, especially in the neighbouring Rostov region. Likewise, the social and geographic origins of the volunteers for the SVO also dictate the distribution of the effects. The distribution of soldiers has a complex impact. In the first instance, they provide temporary local injections of resources that may help reduce the causes behind certain kinds of crime. It is not just that they are paid substantial salaries (typically three and a half times the national average), but their families also receive sizeable payments if they fall in battle.[43] The volunteers come disproportionately from poorer regions, so the effects are all the more significant there: 'Economic crimes such as theft and robbery, which are associated with poverty, have decreased because the war has poured money into the poorest regions and the poorest segments of the population,' according to sociologist Ekaterina Khodzhaeva.[44]

Members of the Wagner mercenary army. The group recruited convicts and many, on their return to Russia, re-offended.
© Stringer/AFP via Getty Images

At the same time, though, crimes committed by servicemen outside the SVO combat zone appear to have increased by more than 20% in 2024, after an even more dramatic jump between 2021 and 2023, when it rose fourfold to 4 409.[45] (Here, the role of convicts recruited into the military is an even more serious issue – see the next section.) Indeed, according to *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, data from local courts suggests that the number of military officers convicted on criminal charges had increased a staggering sevenfold since 2022, as of April 2024.[46] The widespread use of illegal narcotics as a coping strategy, as well as the use of painkillers for the wounded, has also contributed to the wider Russian drug problem.[47] Amphetamines and marijuana are widely used, and enterprising drug couriers will even deliver to the front line.[48] Considering the higher levels of drug use among ex-convicts recruited into Wagner in 2022 and 2023 on short-term contracts and then demobilized back into civilian life after their tours, illegal narcotics have also spread into the wider underworld. In 2024 alone, 51.4% more crimes related to drug trafficking were detected and more than 28 tonnes of drugs seized compared with the previous year.[49] Beyond drugs, offences with which the veterans are especially associated are unpremeditated assault, murder and sexual violence.

Regionally, there appears to be a strong correlation between certain more serious crimes and proximity to the war or to levels of recruitment into the wartime military. The Rostov region, for example, whose capital, Rostov-on-Don, is the overall headquarters of the SVO, recorded an official rise of 1.9% in serious crimes in 2024, with psychologists citing social anxiety about the war as a factor.[50] Yet the region's proximity to the front, and the impact of returning veterans and convicts, while not directly cited, cannot be denied. According to independent figures, while the Rostov region has the sixth highest increase in crime levels in the country, it has experienced skyrocketing levels of gun crime, fuelled by the easy access to illegal weapons 'bled' from the war.[51] It also has seen its murder rate outpace the rest of the country, including one of the highest rates of killings committed by returning veterans, who have claimed the lives of at least 11 victims.[52]

The Moscow and Krasnodar regions have also been suffering an exceptional upsurge in serious crimes since the end of 2023,[53] as have Tatarstan and the Tyumen region.[54] Like Rostov, Krasnodar also

abuts onto Ukraine, while Tatarstan, Krasnodar and Moscow are three of the four regions where the bonuses paid to volunteers – made up of payments from both the local and federal government – are the highest multiples of the national average wage.[55] Couple that with the fact that they are among the regions that seem to have suffered the highest casualties (although the Kremlin does not issue figures for the dead and wounded broken down by region), it seems reasonable to posit that there is a direct correlation between serious crime rates and local levels of participation in the war.

The convict army

'Do you have anyone who can get you out of the Zone? There are two of them – Allah and God – but they get you out in a wooden box. I take you out of here alive. But I don't always return you alive.'[56]

YEVGENY PRIGOZHIN

A particular feature of this war has been Russia's recruitment of over 180 000 convicted criminals as soldiers, as of writing.[57] It is worth noting that Kyiv has also adopted this approach on a smaller and more restricted scale.[58] The initial impetus came from the Wagner mercenary army and its head, Yevgeny Prigozhin, himself a former convict.[59] Under an extralegal scheme, albeit winked at by the Kremlin, Wagner began recruiting prisoners in 2022. The initial deal was that convicts could expect a pardon after six months of service on the front. But this process was not spelled out legally and was grounded in secret orders from military authorities. This led to discrepancies between what convicts were promised on paper and what they would actually get, and has resulted in at least 20 lawsuits, with convicts who fought in the SVO suing the defence ministry.[60] Wagner was notoriously wasteful with the lives of its convict-soldiers. For example, *The New York Times* followed a group of recruits from a penal colony in Chelyabinsk, most of them serving jail terms for drug trafficking. By the end of 2023, out of 197 of these recruits, 172 had been killed on the front. The population of the prison, which has a capacity of 1 500, had been reduced to 900 thanks to recruitment.[61] Nonetheless, many did survive through their six-month tours and returned to Russia, all too often to commit crimes again.

The Russian government took note of the Wagner experiment, and replicated Prigozhin's successful experience of recruiting from prisons into units first known as Storm-Z (the 'Z' denoting *zek*, the slang

A Russian penal colony, November 2022. The Russian military later replicated the Wagner group's practice of recruiting prisoners as soldiers into its Z- and V-units. *© Alexander Nemenov/AFP via Getty Images*

term for a convict), later renamed Storm-V (the 'V' for the more palatable *vityaz*, knight).[62] (These units are also used as punishment details for regular troops.) However, the authorities also realized they needed more safeguards against a growing contingent of dissatisfied convicts who felt they had been exploited and betrayed. As a result, the regular army recruits on open-ended contracts: convicts can be released from service before the end of the SVO, not on full pardons but conditional parole, meaning that if they re-offend they also have to complete their previous sentence. They are generally released from service because of serious injury, conspicuous bravery or, to be blunt, bribery.[63] Even so, these soldiers are causing havoc. In the first nine months of 2023 alone, one estimate is that at least 147 Russian soldiers were tried for murder outside combat zones, killing fellow servicemen and civilians alike.[64]

Legislators began streamlining the convict recruitment process so that, in the words of Andrei Kartapolov, head of the Duma Defence Committee, 'it will allow us to expand the base of recruiting our armed forces with contract soldiers both in the SVO and in other situations'.[65] Two laws signed by Putin in October 2024 allowed defendants to sign contracts in exchange for their sentences being reduced or avoiding criminal trials altogether, even when their trial has already gone to court.[66] According to a defence ministry source, in future, 'out of about 60 000 defendants, they're expecting to take 40%'.[67] The measures have raised serious concerns about social instability, given numerous examples where this has encouraged violent offenders to continue acting with effective impunity, knowing they could simply volunteer before their trial, if caught. Maria Davtyan, head of the Centre for the Defence of Domestic Violence Victims at the Consortium of Women's NGOs, has warned that 'this level of lawlessness, where you can't simply prosecute someone [but] absolve them of liability when they committed a violent crime, is a global precedent, of course'.[68]

'They kill in droves'

'They killed and kill in droves, just in droves. Both civilians and soldiers. And only some hellish cases are investigated and go to court. How does it work? Either the military police keep a particularly close eye on a specific unit. Or, if some out-of-the-ordinary case occurs, the matter reaches the higher-ups, and they send down some instructions to the military police. Otherwise, there is solidarity – they do not touch or notice murders and other crimes.'[69]

It is too soon to measure the full scale of the impact these measures will have on crime and social unrest, but anecdotal evidence of violent criminals believing in their impunity, with onlookers afraid to call the police, is growing. Davtyan cites one case in which a domestic abuser was charged with several violent offences, but his case was suspended when he went to the front. After returning home, he beat his wife and her son, nearly crippling her, while neighbours were too afraid to interfere because the assailant was a war veteran. In court, the assailant told his wife: 'You're wasting your time – I'll avoid punishment and nothing will happen to me.'[70] Families of victims are increasingly organizing and petitioning authorities to impose better control on returning veterans.[71] Meanwhile, in practice, courts are handing down lighter sentences for convicts who have served in Ukraine, particularly if their crimes are drug or weapons possession. Agreeing to serve in the SVO has become a quite literal 'get out of jail free card'.[72] For example, in 2019, Ilya Metlitsky of St Petersburg was sentenced to 16 years in a maximum security penal colony for the murder of his girlfriend, whom he had stabbed 107 times before taking a selfie with the corpse.[73] In 2022, though, he signed a contract with Wagner and joined the mercenary army, being demobilized in 2023. In December of that year, he attacked a girl he knew and had been stalking with a syringe apparently containing HIV-infected blood. Fortunately for her, the needle caught in a mobile phone in her pocket and broke off. Despite this falling within the category of a serious assault, the court took his status as a

veteran into account and he was simply fined 25 000 rubles (€270) – because this time he agreed to sign up for service in a Storm-V detachment.[74]

Even standing parliamentarians have voiced their objections to the bills extending the scope for recruiting convicts and those awaiting trial, fearing they will lead to unrest as well as the continued degradation of the army. 'How does this relate to the principle of inevitability of punishment?' asked Renat Suleimanov, a deputy of the usually submissive Communist Party. 'We are, in essence, creating a legal way to evade responsibility.' Raising the spectre of Nestor Makhno, the Ukrainian anarchist revolutionary who led the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of Ukraine during the Russian Civil War, Suleimanov warned: 'We are now turning the army into some kind of Old Man Makhno's gang of criminals. We recruit marginal elements and try to build our armed forces from this.'[75]

Unlike the *shtrafbat* penal battalions deployed by the Soviets in World War II, drawn largely from Gulag inmates, the modern convict units are not kept separate from the regular troops. As a result, the evidence suggests that Wagner, known for its brutal methods, and the prison culture of the Storm-Z/V units, has infected the rest of the military rather than being tamed by it. In an upbeat account, one Storm-V fighter claimed that 'all our thieves' and prison concepts went to zero in a couple of days – the environment turned out to be absolutely unwilling to cultivate criminal traditions and norms'.[76] However, in general, the constant stream of credible allegations of looting, rape and similar crimes committed by soldiers, as well as the spread of practices such as 'zeroing' – summary battlefield executions for a failure to obey orders – and the execution of prisoners all attest to the Wagnerization of the regular army.[77]

The practice of recruiting convicts and remand prisoners thus not only undermines the deterrent effect of the courts, it has also Wagnerized the wider military and will lead to the release back into society of often very damaged and dangerous individuals. 'Convicts in places of imprisonment are already in a state of stress when they sign a contract and go to fight, on top of this is post-traumatic stress syndrome, which is often found in those who were in "hot spots",' observed Komissarov. 'Very often, ordinary guys who went through military conflicts went crazy.'[78] Yet, increasingly, it is not just convict soldiers who commit such crimes. As of October 2024, almost 500 civilians had become victims of SVO veterans, mostly not ex-convicts or even just mercenaries: at least 242 killed and a further 227 receiving life-changing injuries.[79]

The proliferation of illegal weapons

'Regions bordering the war zone will at some point see a tidal wave of weapons. Then it will start to flow into neighbouring Russian regions, and this will affect the crime situation there as well. And this is a delayed effect, this will happen over months, years, maybe even decades.'[80]

The scale of the violence is magnified by the veterans' easy access to weapons. Even before the 2022 invasion, there was a problem with the flow of illegal guns from the rebellious pseudo-states of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR). Back in 2015, a retired police colonel said: 'A lot of weapons have been coming from Ukraine lately. The DNR and LNR are literally stuffed with them.'[81] Weapons diverted from the SVO are already being used in Russia. In December 2022, for example, Vladimir Yakimov, who had volunteered for service in Ukraine, was given medical leave. In an argument with his wife, he drew his service-issue 9 mm Makarov pistol – which he ought to have surrendered on leaving his unit – and shot and killed her.[82] A combination of unstable veterans

and poor inventory control has already led to a slew of such incidents, but the real danger comes from the proliferation of these weapons into the wider underworld.

While there has been considerable attention paid to the challenge posed by illegal weapons on the Ukrainian side of the front line, it is clear that there is already a serious problem on the Russian side, too, and it will become more marked with any end to the fighting.[83] Before the start of the war, there were 6.5 million weapons legally in civilian hands (including around a million 'traumatic weapons' firing rubber bullets), with most of the rest being hunting rifles and shotguns. Meanwhile, the best estimate of illegally held guns of every kind was around 12 million.[84] In that context, one might think that the underworld market was already saturated, and the impact of any new illicitly held weapons might be minimal. However, many of the illegally held weapons are old and have not been kept in good condition, such that they may be unusable. Others will be buried or otherwise lost. And the weapons making their way onto the black market now are likely to be new and advanced ones, such as the 5.45 mm AK-74M and AK-12 assault rifles, more exotic guns, such as the silenced 9 mm AS Val and VSS Vintorez, or heavy weapons. And, meanwhile, hand grenades have also become noticeably more widely available.[85]

To a considerable extent, these are 'trophy weapons' picked up on the battlefield, and therefore unrecorded and unregistered. Service weapons are logged and although there are numerous cases of soldiers bringing them back into Russia from the SVO, it was generally when they were temporarily furloughed for medical or similar reasons and were expected to return. The process for ensuring and recording the return of issued weapons when servicemen are demobilized appears to be relatively efficient and effective. As one police officer explained: 'There is always going to be incompetence and corruption, but, on the whole, if 20 assault rifles were issued, 20 will be logged back.'[86] Claiming to have lost one's weapon on the battlefield is not only likely to lead to a fine, undercutting the potential gain, but also a search of the soldier's possessions, running the risk of a serious charge. The same police officer admitted that secreting ammunition was rather easier, but generally believed that the greater risk was additional weapons picked up by soldiers on the battlefield. 'That is where most of the weapons [from the SVO zone] that we've encountered have been.' This is also suggested by the

Ammunition seen in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine. Weapons diverted by ex-servicemen pose a major risk as they proliferate in Russia. *© Ukrinform/NurPhoto via Getty Images*

appearance among the unregistered weapons either seized by the authorities or used in crimes of small arms either made in Ukraine and not exported to Russia (such as Fort-17 pistols manufactured after 2014) or supplied to the Ukrainian forces (including American M4 carbines).[87]

Furthermore, while the National Guard (Rosgvardiya) – the security force with primary responsibility for legal and illegal arms – is seeking to crack down on the spread of unlicensed weapons, politicians from the ruling United Russia bloc are actually encouraging liberalization of gun control laws, especially for war veterans. In part, this is driven by an ideological commitment to gun ownership, but also a rather unclear belief that those who fought in the SVO not only have the skills to keep their weapons safe (a distinctly questionable assumption given the limited training given to many), but also that they need to be armed for 'social protection', whatever that may mean. To this end, in December 2024, deputies Andrei Kartapolov, Aleksandr Khinshtein, Ernest Valeev and Anatoly Vyborny submitted to the Duma a bill 'On Amending Article 13 of the Federal Law "On Weapons"'. As of writing, the bill is still under review, but is expected to pass into law, and it will allow veterans of the SVO to acquire multi-shot and rifled weapons without the current need for prior experience of safely owning a smoothbore weapon.[88]

The fear, which has been expressed by some National Guard officers, is that such liberalization of firearm ownership will make it harder to identify illegal weapons, and that war veterans will engage in black market trading of guns either stolen from official stocks or, more likely, picked up as trophies on the battlefield. According to court records, 72 former SVO servicemen have already been convicted of arms possession.[89] However, of more immediate concern is the increase in gun crime, usually involving illegal weapons, given the relative strictness of Russia's gun laws. Between April 2022 and April 2023, crimes involving firearms increased by 32%, especially in the Crimea, Kursk and Belgorod regions on the Ukrainian border and in Moscow.[90] The border regions saw especially dramatic rises: in the first 10 months of 2022, crimes using guns and explosives increased by 675% in Kursk, 213% in Belgorod and 133% in Crimea.[91] Meanwhile, the city of Rostov-on-Don seems to be retaining its dubious title as the 'most dangerous city in Europe'.[92] Some of the illegal weapons being used in this rising incidence of gun crime seem to have been from the stock of over 250 000 confiscated weapons (most from the war zone) held under National Guard supervision, and which, from 2024, were meant to be transferred to police forensic laboratories.[93]

Nor does it help that the divide and rule model for managing the security agencies under Putin, whereby the agencies often have overlapping and competing responsibilities, means that gun control has become the subject of bureaucratic turf wars. As mentioned, Rosgvardiya is the ostensible lead agency for controlling firearms. However, not only is it often more concerned with using this power to put pressure on private security firms to force them into its own private security arm, FGUP Okhrana, but it also faces empire-building resistance from the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the consequences of its own creation.[94] Following a resolution of the Security Council in 2005, the MVD led in the formulation of an Interdepartmental Comprehensive Plan of Measures to Combat Illegal Trafficking in Weapons, Ammunition and Explosives.[95] Relevant divisions were established within the ministry's public security service. However, when the Rosgvardiya was founded in 2016, it was essentially by stripping the public order elements from the regular police, a process that caused much bad blood as well as a series of operational problems.[96] As a result, relations between the National Guard and the MVD and police are often fraught. Meanwhile, before the war, the FSB – the most powerful internal security agency, and the one on which Putin most relies – had sought to gain a greater role in the control of weapons ownership, with a draft federal law On Amendments to the Federal Law On Weapons and Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation.[97] After considerable haggling, the law eventually came into force in 2023, but it created legal ambiguities that both the FSB and Rosgvardiya have sought to exploit, leading to failures to share intelligence in a timely manner. In the words of a prosecutor, this provided a 'perfect opportunity for the gun-runners, so long as the [two agencies] refuse to talk to each other'.[98]

FROM WAR TO GANG WAR

'After they have been in this war, I am sure that they now have a feeling in their heads that everything is possible. And these "hero" murderers, "hero" criminals, will now, I think, do something terrible in their own cities, where they are returning.'[99]

Some public figures piously hope that fighting for the Motherland in the SVO will somehow be a redemptive experience, guiding people away from the underworld. Danil Sergeev, a criminologist, has said of the convicts recruited into the Storm-Z/V detachments that

> [t]heir criminal history and behaviour are carefully studied, and maniacs, serial rapists and other especially dangerous criminals are not sent to the combat zone in principle. In addition, many of those prisoners who go to the SVO have a real motivation to fight for their country – sometimes those who have only a few months left in prison go.[100]

However, the reality is much less encouraging, in that not only have criminals convicted of some of the most vicious crimes been welcomed into the Russian military, but their deviant values and criminal experiences have also been propagated within the rest of the troops in the SVO. One military commentator exulted that 'yesterday's heroes of street gangs stormed Panjshir [in Afghanistan], took Grozny [in Chechnya], and are now beating the enemy in the Special [Military] Operation.'[101]

Of course, there is a corollary: that yesterday's soldiers become today's gangsters.

From the Zone to the SVO (and back)

'War never stops. You can have as much peace as you want, but a new war will begin. As long as thieves exist, they fight …'
'Do thieves support Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin?'
'Yes, the thieves I know are all for Putin.'[102]

Even before one considers the veterans who may be drawn into organized criminality, it is worth noting that it is not just low-level gangsters who have been recruited into the SVO, but also more senior underworld figures who not only as a result may get freed earlier, but can use their time in service to spread their values and recruit new members for their gangs. Prigozhin's early recruits were ordinary criminals. The legacy of the (admittedly increasingly archaic) 'thieves' code' and its proscriptions for working for the state helped ensure that organized crime gang members were initially reluctant to

A mural celebrating members of the Wagner group. Several organized crime figures fought under the banner of Wagner and, later, in Russian military detachments. *© Pierre Crom/Getty Images*

enlist.[103] Indeed, at first, prominent criminals made their views known through the extraordinarily effective prison grapevine that they were opposed to any underworld members joining Wagner, and this was then reinforced by a gathering of senior gangsters in Dubai.[104] In December 2022, though, there was a change of sentiment when one of the most powerful *avtoritety*, or underworld authorities, publicly encouraged criminals to take advantage of the opportunity. This man, Zakhar Kalashov (aka 'Shakro the Younger'), even made a statement to camera,[105] which was then broadcast on prison television in the Vladimir, Kostroma, Magadan and Novosibirsk regions immediately after Putin's New Year's address.[106]

The mood in the underworld changed markedly, and as well as lower-level gangsters, local captains and even gang leaders began to join. Later, in June 2023, there would be another attempt by both *avtoritety* and some of the remaining traditional criminal leaders known as *vory v zakone* ('thieves within the code') to dissuade members of the underworld fraternity to enlist, sending round a common letter proclaiming: 'Prisoners, this is not our war, and ruining yourself for the sake of money and freedom is inappropriate and wrong, since this act is of a vile nature.'[107]

Nonetheless, large numbers continued to take advantage of the offer, even after the defence ministry had taken over the operation and tightened the conditions of service. Although there is disagreement over the figures,[108] the general belief is that Wagner had recruited some 50 000 criminal-soldiers by February 2023, when Prigozhin's right to recruit from the Zone, as the penal system is known by its inmates, was revoked.[109] A large number died, especially in the meatgrinder that was the July 2022–May 2023 Battle of Bakhmut, in which Wagner took the lead. Indeed, it is not out of the question to assume most were not meant to survive to the end of their six-month tours.

Established organized crime figures who fell fighting under the banner of Wagner or, later, the regular army's Storm-Z and Storm-V detachments included Stanislav Lobyanov of the Tsapkov gang from

Krasnodar territory; Alexander Yenaleyev, leader of the Trassoviki gang from Naberezhnye Chelny in Tatarstan; the *avtoritet* Sherali Khatamov ('Sasha Uzbek') from the Altai; Sergei Gryaznov ('Fighter') from the Metsenatovskaya group; and Roman Kibirev from the Pivzavodsky group, both from the Trans-Baikal.[110] Sergei Maksimenko and Igor Kusk were no longer gang leaders, but both fallen Wagner fighters had, in their time, been part of the Olimpia gang from Penza and Kuskovskie in Tatarstan, respectively.[111] Belgorod *avtoritet* Nikolai Arshinov ('Kalbon') ended up serving in the Chechen-raised Akhmat Battalion until his death in May 2023.[112] Olga Romanova of the NGO Rus Sidyashchaya has claimed that 12 *vory v zakone* have fallen fighting in the SVO, although it has been questioned whether they were all legitimately of this standing within the criminal fraternity.[113] While hailed by some as a perverse benefit for Russian society, these deaths actually raise the danger of destabilizing an underworld whose balance of power is already under pressure. As one prosecutor observed:

> An organized criminal group that was being run by its *avtoritet* or his representatives from inside the Zone suddenly loses its chief, and who knows what happens: sometimes, a successor simply takes control, all nice and smooth, but at other times we have trouble. Internal struggles, another gang trying to move in, bodies on the streets.[114]

Nonetheless, many of the organized crime figures who had joined Wagner did make it to the end of their contracts and were released, at which point they began reoffending. For example, Yenaleyev's right-hand man, Sergei Zuzlev, also served in Wagner, but survived, and took his position as head of the Trassoviki on his return, a gang that had become infamous in the 2000s for posing as traffic police to stop and rob trucks on the highway between Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan.[115] Andrei Seleznev ('Selya'), one of the heads of the Herat-Ural gang from Nizhny Tagil, likewise joined the military to avoid sentencing on murder changes,[116] as did Dmitri Vedernikov ('Veder'), boss of Transbaikal's infamous Metsenatovskie group. As of writing, both are still alive.[117]

Galvanizing the gangs

'What really worries me, depresses me, is that a lot of the guys out there [in the SVO] are perfectly decent – it's only a minority who are the thieves and rapists. But then you put them in the worst situations, the worst company, a lot will get bad ideas, and when they get home, they won't be able to fit back into their old lives. They'll be angry, they'll have killed. Who will offer them something, if not the gangs?'[118]

Arguably, even more dangerous is the degree to which the SVO has already begun to galvanize and destabilize the Russian underworld through the influx of veterans, as a mild harbinger of what is likely to happen when the war ends or is frozen. After all, although the overwhelming majority of demobilized veterans are likely to readapt to civilian life in one way or another, the experiences of Chechnya and, especially, Afghanistan stand as stark warnings of the degree to which others will respond to the challenges of life with violence or drift into petty crime, or even by joining organized crime gangs.[119] To a large degree, the latter will be recruited for their skills and willingness to use violence, as 'torpedoes' or 'bulls' – contract killers and security guards, respectively.

The result is often a destabilizing 'arms race'. If one gang begins to recruit veterans, then its rivals feel they must follow suit, lest they become vulnerable. Once they have hired more hitmen and enforcers, this creates its own temptation to use violence. As one gangster put it, 'you can't have these people just sitting around, eating their way through the kitchen. If you have them, you want to send them out foraging and hunting, to stock up the fridge, rather than empty it'.[120] This is a recipe for increased

suspicion, hostility and ultimately turf wars, and globally there is no greater single driver of homicide than inter-gang violence.

It is also likely that new gangs composed of veterans will emerge, typically built around a group of soldiers who fought (and perhaps plundered) together and thus share bonds of trust and loyalty. After all, organized looting and drug trafficking within the military has reached such a stage that it ought to be considered organized criminality. In 2024, two Russian drone operators recorded a video meant to be released only in the case of their deaths.[121] They accused their regimental command staff of being behind the large-scale theft of equipment, drug trafficking and looting. Furthermore, they claimed that other whistle-blowers had been sent to the front to die. They later claimed that they themselves had been transferred to an assault unit, and they were killed by a Ukrainian attack.[122] Their case became something of a cause célèbre precisely because it was so familiar: among soldiers and war correspondents alike, such incidents, and the organized military criminality behind them, were regarded as commonplace.[123]

At present, these 'khaki gangs' are still largely to be found in and around the SVO theatre of operations, but in due course they will either be redeployed and continue to operate within a peacetime military or else be demobilized and have the option of transferring their activities back to their home turf. This will only be exacerbated by the presence of organized crime figures able to connect them to the underworld.

For example, in September 2024 it emerged that Sergei Butorin ('Osya'), a legend of the gangster 'wild 90s' and leader of Moscow's powerful Orekhovskaya gang, had had his application to join a Storm-V detachment approved (he had been refused in 2022).[124] He had been convicted in 2011 of the murder of 40 people and, as a result, had been confined to IK-18 Yamalo-Nenets, one of the seven special regime prison colonies used for more serious criminals, known as Polar Owl. Escape from Polar Owl is regarded as virtually impossible, but as one Russian crime journalist observed, 'Osya seems to have found a way.'[125] However, a main concern – one shared within the Moscow police – is that Butorin is not simply using the SVO as an opportunity to get out of a life sentence but, given that he used to be the head of Orekhovskaya's wing of killers, that he's also looking to gather new recruits.

UNDER PRESSURE

'What frustrates me is the way that, these days, everyone from [Prime Minister Mikhail] Mishustin down says that much needs to be done to prepare for the return of the soldiers, but no one at the top seems to be doing anything.'[126]

Although President Putin – who tends to try to dissociate himself from potentially difficult policy issues – has avoided addressing this issue, an increasing number of senior Russian officials and politicians have begun to acknowledge that there are a range of serious potential consequences not just from the war, but also from the return of veterans. While concerns have been raised about the criminal implications of the war, its wider impacts will be felt in areas ranging from healthcare to elite politics, which will also have spillover effects beyond Russia's borders.

Public health under pressure

With so many demobilized veterans having already returned to committing crimes, this also raises the spectre of a wider 'criminalized generation' of former soldiers.[127] However, the social impact of the war will be much greater than just the crimes committed by returning soldiers, not least because many of those crimes will simply be wider manifestations of the psycho-social effects of serving in the SVO, which will also be communicated to veterans' families, neighbours and workmates.

Preliminary research by the Bekhterev National Medical Research Center for Psychiatry and Neurology in St Petersburg suggests that 3% to 11% of veterans will experience full-blown PTSD and that this will specifically afflict at least 30% of the wounded.[128] However, Deputy Defence Minister Anna Tsivileva admitted in 2024 that 20% of all veterans were experiencing PTSD, and global studies have suggested that 25% to 50% of combatants tend to fall prey to it.[129] This suggests that, as of the time of writing, Russia will have to cope with upwards of 250 000 former soldiers battling PTSD.

There is already growing concern about a possible repeat of the 'Afghan syndrome'. However, Mikhail Yashin, chair of the Society of Disabled Veterans of the Afghan War, believes that this time could be different because, while the *afgantsy* returned in the context of a weak state and were effectively abandoned, and the *chechentsy* were ignored because they were involved in a domestic conflict, the new generation of *ukraintsy* will hopefully be rehabilitated and reintegrated.[130] On paper, the benefits available to veterans and their families are considerable – from mortgage relief and extra vocational education, to guaranteed healthcare and the right to suitably modified cars for those disabled from

injury.[131] But the benefits for the *afgantsy* were also plentiful – the issue was, rather, how easily and for how long they could get the benefits and care they had been promised, if at all.

The SVO and its accompanying sanctions are already having an impact on public health and social care – with 40% of federal spending currently going to defence and security – and this trend is likely to continue, regardless of whether 2025 sees an end to the fighting.[132] Healthcare workers have seen their incomes diminish and, as of the end of 2023, Russia faced a shortfall of 26 500 doctors and nearly 60 000 mid-level practitioners such as nurses, paramedics, midwives and technicians.[133] The influx of wounded veterans is already putting heavy pressure on certain sectors of the healthcare system, such as trauma medicine, prosthetic medicine and rehabilitation. This will only increase as more veterans return.

Even more striking are the shortcomings of psycho-social care and rehabilitation services – not just for veterans but also their families and the bereaved. In a media interview, Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Russian defence think tank Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, noted that the defence ministry 'initially did not pay enough attention to PTSD and focused mainly on physical injuries', but suggested that 'over time it has understood the importance of solving this problem. Ukraine syndrome will be a much bigger phenomenon than the Chechen syndrome … or the Afghan syndrome [.] It will be comparable in scale to the Vietnam syndrome in the United States and will last for many years'.[134]

Indeed, from 2023, the government began to pay more attention to the problem. That year, Putin established the Defenders of the Fatherland fund to address veterans' needs. However, its 1.8-billion-ruble budget (€20 million) is insufficient, as it is meant not only to cover psycho-social care but everything from educational assistance to job placement.[135] There are also extensive national and, specifically, local efforts to encourage civilians to donate funds or goods to support rehabilitation efforts for veterans and their families, but this remains little more than a stopgap.

There is also too little being done to address the issue of alcohol and drug dependency and addiction (one labour ministry source warned that 'the first year after the war will be a year of heavy drinking').[136] So far, the emphasis is still primarily on policing and punishment, not psychological rehabilitation and addressing the issue of addiction as a result of self-medication to cope with the horrors of war. A doctor specializing in drug dependence in the Rostov region was forthright, highlighting that 'when a person sees all the horrors and filth of war – limbs ripped off, open wounds, death – a lot of

The return of Russian military veterans poses several serious potential consequences, from those that constitute a criminal threat, to constrained state public health and psycho-social support.
© Contributor/Getty Images

them will try to mute them with drink and drugs. Otherwise, they would just go mad'.[137] However, an awareness of the problem is still not necessarily being translated into concrete programmes to address the veterans' needs.

The issue is not simply a question of resources in an increasingly tight spending environment, but also an official reluctance to admit the scale of the problem. Many officials and even some practitioners close to the state continue to try and play it down. For example, Dr Mikhail Reshetnikov, rector of the East European Psychoanalytical Institute, argued that 'the hysteria around the possible number of post-traumatic disorders that is being whipped up in the mass press needs to be repudiated', even as a leaflet was being prepared for nationwide distribution under the auspices of the Russian Academy of Sciences to give soldiers' spouses guidance on supporting veterans with PTSD, such as not sneaking up on them, to avoid triggering combat reflexes.[138]

Law enforcement under pressure

The criminal threat posed by the minority of veterans unable or unwilling to conform once back in civilian life will be met by a law enforcement body that is itself under pressure. As noted above, the police are increasingly understaffed, not only because existing personnel and potential recruits have instead been lured by the much more substantial salaries paid to volunteers for the SVO, but also because the massive expansion of defence-industrial production, with factories operating 24/7, has meant that police salaries compare unfavourably to them, too. An average police officer's salary is 60 000 rubles a month (€650).[139] Meanwhile, the minimum salary paid to a soldier in the SVO is 210 000 rubles (€2 250).[140]

In May 2024, Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev directly cited this as the key problem, lamenting that they '[could] not print money, increase salaries as the main motive for attracting people to serve in internal affairs agencies'.[141] As a result, while in November 2022 the police force was 90 000 officers understaffed,[142] and despite Putin decreeing an increase in the total size of the MVD by 2025, as of November 2024 the staffing gap had grown to 173 800, or almost 20% of the total.[143]

The paramilitary National Guard has a slightly different challenge. Incautiously deployed en masse during the initial invasion, due to Putin's apparent conviction that most resistance could be confined to riots and street protests, they suffered serious losses in the early months, before they were largely withdrawn.[144] As well as leading to considerable dissatisfaction (notably, during the short-lived Wagner mutiny in 2023, many National Guard units essentially stood down), this has also left them understaffed. National Guard commander Viktor Zolotov has refused to follow Kolokoltsev's example and disclose the shortfall, but it faces similar challenges to the police, with local officers from Sverdlovsk to the Yamalo-Nenets autonomous region reporting serious shortages.[145]

A growing sense of national disenchantment is undermining long-standing efforts to repair relations between the police and the wider public. However, the main issue is that, at the very time when the influx of veterans brings a wide range of complex criminal challenges – from violent spousal abuse to heavily-armed organized crime gangs – Russia's law enforcement agencies are under-strength, largely due to the SVO.

Pressure on policy

One estimate is that – in addition to the cost of the war, from the lost productivity of the fallen, to state expenditure on equipment and ammunition – the anticipated post-war crime surge will levy a cost on the economy of 0.2% to 0.6% of its GDP, which would be roughly equivalent to €3.8 to €11.5 billion

a year, or up to twice the healthcare budget.[146] Furthermore, employers are legally required to keep jobs open for those who volunteered to fight, meaning they could be forced to pay off those they already hired to fill their positions. And these veterans will be hard to dismiss, even if they prove to be problematic. As a result, it is possible that (as in Soviet times) there may be employees kept on the payroll who are not expected to work.[147]

However, there is little that can be done to address this wider economic challenge within the parameters of Kremlin policy, especially as part of this is a result of foreign sanctions. Nonetheless, this will inevitably affect the whole range of public services. One area that is open to being addressed, at least partially, is the question of rehabilitating veterans and readapting them to civilian life. Some specific recommendations are provided further below, but what is clear is that while there is much discussion of the need for policy responses, there is no consensus on the specifics, and there are questions as to the actual level of political capital the regime is willing to devote to it. The authorities are certainly aware of the looming challenge and lawmakers are calling for better rehabilitation efforts, but the regular calls for action suggest the process is currently stalled.

After a 12-year-old girl was murdered in Kemerovo region in June 2024 by a repeat offender released from prison after serving in the SVO, the head of the State Duma Committee on Family Protection, Fatherhood, Motherhood and Children, Nina Ostanina, warned there could be more such cases:

> I can't say [when a bill on rehabilitation will appear], because our defence committee hasn't come up with such an initiative yet. … [W]e … should hurry [and] protect the interests of children. [W]e will also encourage the specialized defence committee to come up with such a proposal.[148]

More significant yet was an intervention from Artem Zhoga, one of the very few SVO veterans given any meaningful public role. After his appointment in 2024 to the position of Plenipotentiary Representative to the Urals Region, he offered an unsparing but coded warning of the risk to an equivalent of the 'Afghan syndrome' after the end of the SVO:

> The SVO will end sooner or later. And thousands of guys will return home. And we will need to work with them. And we will already have a mechanism in place, an algorithm of actions for accepting these guys into social life. [T]here will already be developments of technical organizations. A training mechanism will be established. A mechanism for working with them in a psychological format will be established.[149]

Commentators at the time noted that Zhoga kept presenting these initiatives as being in the future, and interpreted them not so much as predictions as calls to action. He is not alone, as even loyalists such as Speaker of the Senate Valentina Matviyenko have begun pressing the government to make more serious efforts to reintegrate veterans into civilian life.[150] In an essentially autocratic system, such signals, however weak, reflect disquiet within the elite and attempts to signal to the Kremlin the need to respond. The longer such signals appear largely to be ignored, the greater that disquiet.

Pressure on the regime

Policy disputes – and the associated struggles for resources – represent a challenge ultimately to the regime itself, given Putin's role as the final arbiter on such disagreements. The SVO is clearly contributing to the emergence of subtly framed but nonetheless unmistakeable differences over policy. Even Alexander Bastrykin, head of Russia's Investigative Committee and a man known for his rigid loyalty to the Kremlin, in 2024 began expressing cautious reservations about the practice of recruiting

convicts. His warning that recruitment of such men ought to be undertaken 'very carefully and take into account each specific situation individually' was widely interpreted as a rebuke, especially to the 'revolving door' allowing released convict-soldiers to evade responsibility for subsequent crimes by re-enlisting.[151]

A particular issue is the status of the veterans. Putin himself (likely encouraged by the First Deputy Head of his Presidential Administration, Sergei Kirienko) has tried to elevate SVO veterans as the basis of a new elite. In a February 2024 address, he described 'those who serve Russia, hard workers and soldiers, reliable, trustworthy people who have proven their loyalty to Russia by deeds, in a word, dignified people' as 'the genuine elite'.[152] However, veterans are, so far at least, being kept far from the levers of power. A small number, such as Zhoga, have acquired some degree of political standing, but there are no 'big beasts'. Presumably mindful of the potential political danger of war heroes emerging among the senior officers, it is only relatively junior figures who are coming under the spotlight, often conveniently posthumously.

While preventing the rise of potential rivals – Afghan war heroes generals Alexander Rutskoi, Boris Gromov and Alexander Lebed would all in different ways become thorns in the side of Putin's predecessor, Boris Yeltsin[153] – it also means that there are no figures who might be able to both represent and manage the veterans. After all, as journalist Valery Shiryaev noted, 'many veterans will feel in the near future that the promised benefits are distributed among them absolutely unevenly. At the same time, the new leaders may not have any authority at all among the front-line soldiers'.[154] Thus, the danger is that, like the *afgantsy*, the SVO veterans may disproportionately adopt ultra-nationalist positions that are either explicitly anti-Kremlin or at least problematic, such as by stirring up interethnic tensions.

This is compounded by the way they are being presented as the archetypes for a muscular, aggressive form of patriotism, especially in youth propaganda outreach.[155] This may meet the needs of the moment and the importance of wooing volunteers and reconciling civilians to the costs of the war, but in the longer term encourages a macho cult of violence that can be socially disruptive and difficult to control.

Putin's rhetoric has striven to elevate Russian soldiers to the status of a patriotic elite. The risk is a rise in ultra-nationalism among veterans.
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Pressure across the world

'Russia will always matter … we're not going to be able to avoid dealing with Russia.'[156]

Although the primary impact of the return of the veterans will be on Russia, it is worth noting the secondary effects outside its borders. First, on global illegal gun markets. Considering the saturation of the Russian market, as noted above, illegal weapons are likely to divert to other markets, whether in Europe and Latin America – where Russian-based gangs already have wide networks of criminal clients[157] – or beyond.

Considering the different and more extensive underworld connections of Russian-based organized crime groups compared with their Ukrainian counterparts, as well as the inevitable competition for European markets, guns from Russia will also more easily make their way to other markets further afield where the Russian criminals have stronger contacts, such as the Middle East and Africa. An Israeli police analyst who monitors the flow of illegal weapons noted that 'while there are a lot of weapons circulating in the region … previously quite controlled markets such as the Emirates and Iran seem to be showing early signs of an inflow of weapons' not from usual sources such as Syria and Iraq but 'directly from Russia'.[158]

Without becoming too alarmist – the risk remains low, although it will grow the longer the war continues – it is worth noting that, even within Russia, some are expressing concern that the stresses of the war, combined with the return of the veterans, could destabilize the country such that it repeats the turbulence of the 'wild 90s' – or even worse. As one criminologist gloomily predicted:

> Russia is now at the very beginning of a new crime wave, which will be much worse than the 1990s and 2000s, since there are no honest cops left … All the criminologists I know and respect are all in anticipation of a crime catastrophe like the one that happened during the Civil War of 1918–1920.[159]

Were this nightmare scenario to come about, the implications are serious and long term. They would not only include a new outflow of refugees and asylum seekers, but also the displacement abroad of gangs on the losing side of turf wars and even less state capacity to control smuggling of illicit goods across Russia's borders. The 'wild 90s', after all, not only saw violence and anarchy in Russia – they also saw Russian, Chechen and other gangs from the region clashing in locations ranging from Tallinn to New York, and the formation of criminal partnerships with the Italian mafia, Latin American drug cartels and even the Japanese Yakuza. One Europol analyst warned that this kind of criminal upsurge in Russia would have 'a domino effect across Europe, as dirty Russian money, émigré gangsters and new criminal routes would successively destabilize countries to the west'.[160]

Finally, a failure to properly address veterans' needs could drive them into active politics, which would be more likely skewed towards nationalist rather than liberal politics.[161] They are already being wooed by extremist groups who are beginning to peddle the notion that any ceasefire or end to the war that does not see Moscow in full control of Ukraine is some kind of stab in the back.[162] This could ensure that Putin is replaced or succeeded by a regime or leader committed to righting perceived wrongs, perhaps by restarting the war in Ukraine or, even more dangerously, 'come roaring back to get their vengeance', in the words of British Chief of the General Staff General Sir Roly Walker, punishing the West for its support for Kyiv.[163]

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A VIABLE DDR STRATEGY

'Now [the veterans] are returning to a country, the majority of which does not know what war is, they have only seen it on TV. And they have been in an extreme situation, they have seen special orders, they have seen how laws do not work. Society is not ready to understand and accept them.'[164]

Even back in 2015, after Moscow had intervened in an undeclared conflict in the south-eastern Ukrainian Donbas region, some were wondering whether, when the Russian 'volunteers' returned, their country might be gripped by a 'Donbas syndrome'.[165] This did not happen on any large scale for three reasons: because many of the fighters remained within the DNR and LNR pseudo-states, because the war simmered down to a low-level conflict, and because the deployments of Russian troops were often small-scale and temporary: one or more battalion tactical groups would intervene, and then be withdrawn to the Russian 'mainland'. While the DNR and LNR became virtual bandit kingdoms, the impact at home was minimal.[166]

This is now a very different situation, qualitatively and quantitatively, and whatever the challenges currently being experienced, they will really begin to bite when the guns go silent, whether because of a ceasefire that lasts into the months – at which point the pressure to rotate forces will become irresistible – or a proper peace. It may be hyperbole to believe that, in the words of Rostov-based journalist Kirill Krivosheev, 'in the event of a ceasefire, a stream of criminal scum who went crazy at the front will simply pour into Russia',[167] but given that, at the time of writing, there finally seems to be the potential for some kind of peace process, Moscow needs to develop and implement a robust DDR policy at pace. It cannot wait until the shooting stops – and it cannot assume that this is just a social and criminological threat.

Already, for example, one organized crime group stands accused of having been recruited by Ukrainian intelligence to procure 1 kilogram of radioactive Cesium-137 to stage an incident in the SVO zone to make it look as if Moscow was using weapons of mass destruction, in return for US$3.5 million.[168] This case sounds more cinematic than fact, but a Russian security officer involved in the investigation reported that, although the claims about the isotopes may be a fabrication, there was a kernel of truth in that the Ukrainians are seeking to use crime groups in Russia to carry out sabotage operations.[169]

There are, of course, existing initiatives, from the regular services of the health ministry through to the activities of local charities and the Defenders of the Fatherland fund, as well as the new Association of Veterans of the SVO. But these are not enough. Russia needs a comprehensive, all-of-government and all-of-society approach to the coming DDR crisis.[170] The following recommendations cannot pretend to cover all the necessary elements but represent responses to a sample of the most urgent, important or neglected issues.[171]

Disarmament

- **Improve controls on the trade in trophy weapons.** As already noted, a particular problem is the use and trade in trophy weapons collected from the battlefield and thus unregistered (a challenge also in Ukraine[172]). To this end, soldiers and, particularly, cargo transports returning from the SVO zone need to be thoroughly checked. Rather than, as now, the checks being carried out by the unit's own soldiers themselves, this ought to be conducted by the Military Police, who operate outside the immediate unit chain of command.[173] Failing all that, although there is considerable resistance to the idea within the law enforcement community, a buy-back scheme, even if only a temporary one, may be worth debating. One way of making this more palatable is to present it as an alternative to an amnesty for veterans willing to surrender or register unregistered weapons, something one Rosgvardiya officer denounced as 'simply legalizing crime, because we have decided that we can't be bothered to enforce the law'.[174]
- **Disarm the gangs.** Attention also needs to be given to the demand side of the equation. With so many illegal weapons already in circulation, the main potential buyers are organized crime gangs. They may be seeking weapons for their own needs (especially if they have also recruited veterans accustomed to their use) or else to trade. Not only ought this to be made a law enforcement priority, but the Russian police and security apparatus customarily uses so-called 'prophylactic conversations' for everything from intimidating protesters to warning off organized crime groups from carrying out activities that the Kremlin wants to keep beyond the pale.[175] Chechen gangs were threatened with heavy-handed police action if they supported the rebels during the two wars, for example. This provides a channel of communication that could be used to try and deter gangs from engaging in the acquisition and sale of illegal weapons.
- **Improve not just inventory control but also stockpile security, perhaps with a destruction programme.** The military may keep a relatively good inventory of its weapons, even if heavy losses on the battlefield make this difficult. However, there are reasons to believe that control of confiscated illegal weapons is less comprehensive, as witnessed by the use in crimes of guns and grenades that, on paper, were in the possession of the National Guard. To this end, greater attention needs to be paid to holding on to those weapons seized, which may mean consolidating them in fewer, better-maintained national arsenals rather than largely in local ones, as is currently done. Despite Moscow's habitual parsimony in holding onto military materiel in case it becomes of use in the future, a programme to destroy or at least render permanently harmless some of these weapons may also be worth considering, especially the older and less well-maintained ones. At present, for example, vintage bolt-action Mosin–Nagant rifles and Nagant M1895 revolvers originally developed in the late 19th century are still being stored, even though, as one National Guardsman put it, 'they'd be best sold to collectors than kept here under guard'.[176]
- **Harness those who cannot be disarmed.** Most veterans can and will readapt to civilian life. However, those who cannot or will not should, in a sense, also be considered weapons. It is worth

channelling their aggressive tendencies in legal and productive ways. The emergency services are desperate for new recruits, and although they at present cannot compete with the salaries offered to fighters in the SVO, they do offer reasonably attractive remuneration as well as often congenial career tracks for those looking for work defined by adrenaline and purpose. While the police and National Guard will be looking for recruits, so too may the fire and rescue services, which in the past have offered lifestyles that bridge the experiences of war with a sense of positive mission. However, the burgeoning private military companies might also play a role here, if the state is willing to step away from its current model of treating organizations like Wagner and the new Africa Corps as sometimes deniable, sometimes extra-legal arms of the state,[177] and instead reconstitute them in line with international practice. This is unlikely under the present government, so an alternative would be Russia's private security companies, many of which are respected international providers of demining, maritime protection and similar services.[178]

- **Resolve the bureaucratic turf wars.** As noted above, the characteristic inter-agency rivalries for which the Russian security sector is notorious also impede efforts to disarm the country. There is little that can be done to improve relations between the Rosgvardiya, MVD and FSB in the medium term. However, it is possible to resolve the jurisdictional issues that impede intelligence sharing. The FSB's essentially political role and its focus on threats to the state rather than to society make it a poor choice to take the lead on combating the trade in illegal weapons. Instead, for all its flaws, Rosgvardiya remains the most logical agency to prosecute this effort. Ensuring that this primacy is respected in practice and not just on paper may yet prove difficult. Just as the National Anti-Terrorism Committee is a multi-agency body chaired by the director of the FSB – which is the lead agency in combating terrorism – it may be worth exploring the creation of a similar body that can be chaired by the head of the National Guard, or a representative to coordinate the struggle against illegal weapons trafficking.

Demobilization

- **Develop a comprehensive plan for the managed release of soldiers back into civilian life.** This is the essence of demobilization, although other aspects will be covered below. There is a fear that at first, during a ceasefire or even post-war period, the Kremlin may be reluctant to demobilize and simply allow a mass exodus. Some expectations are apocalyptic, anticipating marauding gangs of veterans looting, raping and killing as though still in Ukraine. This is a distinctly unlikely scenario, but healthcare, psychological support and the promised social housing and employment assistance would be overstretched to the point of collapse by the potential release at once of several hundred thousand volunteers, including tens of thousands of paroled convicts.

  The release will have to be staged to avoid that, but with transparent criteria as to the basis on which demobilization takes place, to avoid the appearance of favouritism and the temptation to desert. Soldiers may initially be sent to bases away from the war zone to surrender their weapons, have their needs assessed and also to experience an interval between the front line and home to begin to acclimate themselves.

- **Ensure this plan provides clear and properly resourced pathways for insertion.** In the DDR lexicon, insertion means the process for the successful return of former soldiers into civilian life, generally with a package of support measures from education to counselling. These should, as far as possible, already be in place for their return. Where this is not possible – and especially if the war ends or freezes in 2025, which is unlikely – then there needs to be transparency as to what

will be available and when. A sense of social justice, or that of a social contract being met, is an important aspect of reconnecting disillusioned veterans.

- **Maximize the value and capacity of civil society in general, and the veterans' movement in particular.** The state does not have to do everything – and should not. Indeed, veterans are often best placed to understand and help fellow veterans. Organizations such as the Union of Veterans of Afghanistan (SVA) have already begun to pass on their experiences and lessons to the new generation of veterans. As SVA board member Andrei Kochelyagin put it, 'our main goal is to unite veterans of different wars, because veterans who performed international duty in Afghanistan have adapted. They have already gone through what the SVO fighters have yet to go through. My task is to share my accumulated experience of public work'.[179] Such activity – carried out on a veteran-to-veteran basis rather than through the mediation of the state – needs to be encouraged and supported.

  Meanwhile, the government needs to ensure that it does not drive the emerging veterans' movement into some of the same traps experienced by the *afgantsy*. Factionalism, personal disputes and, most corrosively, struggles over access to resources led to the emergence of a variety of movements of which the SVA, which is now dominant, was only one. The state encouraged this division to control the movement, but this was at the expense of its effectiveness and integrity. In the early 1990s, even the SVA became a virtual smuggling operation, and the focus of murderous struggles for control of its income streams.[180] It is unlikely that such an extreme outcome will happen again, but the state's tendency to use the tactics of divide and rule to control civil society will have to be curbed if the veterans' movement is to play a full role in the DDR process.

Reintegration

- **Address veterans' practical needs, in line with the promises made.** This is the practical extension of the initial demobilization process: it is not something done at once when the soldiers hand in their uniforms, but a process taking place at the community level. The official rhetoric stresses the importance of this duty. Kirienko has been eager to talk up not just the state's but the president's personal commitment to supporting and integrating the veterans. In January 2024, he told a meeting of veteran representatives that:

  > [Putin] gives us a very important example of our attitude towards the heroes – on 1 January, he met with veterans of the special military operation in hospital, and during the family Christmas holidays, the families of the fallen soldiers. The head of state showed us all that he treats the participants of the special military operation as relatives, close people, family.[181]

  However, so far practical outcomes have lagged far behind the rhetoric. The housing market is facing an affordability crisis that will challenge the state's capacity to make good on its promise to ensure adequate access.[182] As for employment, although at present there is labour hunger, with joblessness at a record low, this has been driven not just by the demands of the SVO but also the buoyant defence-industrial sector.[183] This would seem to suggest that there will be jobs for the veterans when they come home. However, not only will the salaries be generally far below what they have been earning ('in civilian life you will have to work for pennies again'[184]), but there is no guarantee that they will have the requisite skills, or that the opportunities will be in their home region – an important consideration in such a huge country. Reintegration may thus require not just reskilling programmes but also relocation subsidies.

- **Address veterans' medical and psycho-social needs, in line with the promises made.** There is the need for serious investment in medical and psycho-social rehabilitation resources, ready to meet the substantial, complex and long-term needs of the veterans. In fairness, preparations are being made:

  > Medical and psychological assistance offices are being created in polyclinics, new positions for psychologists have appeared in dispensaries, whose task is to provide psychological assistance, and if necessary, motivate people to see a psychiatrist and follow his recommendations, including taking medications.[185]

  However, again, this needs to be considered also in geographic terms, as a disproportionate number of the soldiers do not hail from the relatively well-served major cities, but rural localities that are already suffering from a shortfall of services.[186]

- **Develop a narrative that supports reintegration.** True reintegration also relies on acceptance from the wider community. Veterans of wars deemed to be defeats or failures tend to be scapegoated, as witnessed by the experiences of the *afgantsy*. One can presume that whatever comes of the SVO, the Kremlin will spin it as a victory, but this is not guaranteed to convince the Russian people or extend to the soldiers. Indeed, as soldiers return home and a more accurate sense of the war and the often-brutal way it was fought spreads, there is a serious risk that this will lead to their being ostracized or demonized, making it more likely that they will be tempted to respond in kind and drift into violent, criminal or extremist groups. It does not help that senior government figures persist in putting the blame on them; while publicly praising them, for example, Kirienko reportedly told a closed meeting of deputy governors that the veterans were 'adapting poorly' to civilian life and that this reflected their own poor levels of political awareness.[187] Of course, much depends on the outcome of the war. Whatever it is, Kremlin propagandists will trumpet it as a victory, but it is less clear that the kind of outcome that seems most likely – de facto retention of the occupied territories, a guarantee that Ukraine will not join NATO and a degree of sanctions relief – will convince most Russians that this was indeed worth the blood and treasure that has been spent.

  It will therefore be important to develop narratives about the veterans that avoid stereotyping them as dangerous, broken and feral victims, but conversely avoid the inauthentic propaganda currently on offer, which is clearly not convincing. The aim is to ensure that they can be reintegrated on a community basis and are not scapegoated or encouraged to be the stormtroopers of a new revanchism. 'People who go to defend the Motherland should know that they will be needed, they will have work, they will be in demand, not just in demand, but respected,' said State Duma deputy Oleg Leonov.[188]

- **Address the question of 'cultural demobilization'.** Developing reintegrationist narratives also depends on addressing a wider question. As mentioned above, the Kremlin is looking to lean on SVO veterans as a political support base but also as exemplars of a muscular new patriotism. Efforts are being made to engage them as youth workers, have them speak to schoolchildren and generally become part of the 'agitprop' arm of the state. There is a tension here in that veterans' groups are generally more interested in supporting reintegration rather than becoming nationalist cheerleaders. However, they depend on central and local governments for their funds and political traction. Thus, while the chair of the Defenders of the Fatherland foundation, Anna Tsivileva, made it clear that she saw the movement's priority as being involving veterans 'in projects aimed at strengthening civil society – they should participate in public life, and their examples should be used to educate young people', Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova retorted that:

> It is important that you work with us, with our children, with the younger generation, to raise them as worthy members of our society. To explain and show by personal example how, on the one hand, it is very difficult, and on the other, very honourable to defend your country.[189]

In other words, while – with, inevitably, some high-profile jingoistic exceptions – the veterans' movement wants to turn soldiers back into civilians (as, indeed, so too do most soldiers), the state seems more interested in using them to make civilians think like soldiers and whip them into a xenophobic and militaristic culture. This is incompatible with the veterans' readaptation into normal life.

International partnerships

As noted above, what happens in Russia does not only affect Russia. As hard as Westerners may find it to consider this, it may be appropriate for other nations to explore what they may need to do – themselves or together with Russia. If some kind of equitable peace in Ukraine can be achieved, then this is likely to become much more palatable both in the West and Russia, which is regarding the West with suspicion considering its support for Kyiv. Three first steps might be:

- **Narrative de-escalation.** It will be a long time, one would imagine, before Russian and Ukrainian veterans can come together to try to build bridges. However, there are ways that third countries can contribute to supporting narratives that do not exacerbate the inevitable negative feelings and avoid again treating all Russians – or even all Russian soldiers – as a single, undifferentiated mass of war criminals and their supporters and facilitators. Accepting that in an authoritarian police state such as Russia the substantial numbers who oppose the war cannot safely protest, just as not every soldier is a rapist or executioner, is not only morally right – it also helps dispel the xenophobic attitudes that in the past have helped rationalize criminality directed against foreigners.[190]
- **Focused intelligence sharing.** Police cooperation and intelligence sharing between Russia and most Western countries has shrivelled to almost nothing for political reasons. Given that one of the Western concerns is the potential outflow of weapons (and maybe even gunmen), then this may be an area in which it is worth reviving 'cop-to-cop' contacts, initially through the good graces of Interpol, but ideally by breathing new life in the network of law enforcement liaison officers at respective embassies. One of the remaining European law enforcement liaison officers still based in Moscow noted that 'at present, it is very, very difficult to talk to the MVD, and even the FSB is often inaccessible. Actually having an issue of mutual interest to discuss could also help unlock wider cooperation … eventually'.[191]
- **Sharing best practice.** It is understandable that there may be resistance to the idea of providing any support to Russia, especially to veterans of a brutal imperial war. However, providing technical assistance and best practice costs nothing, or next to nothing, and not only demonstrates our common humanity and a recognition that soldiers cannot always be blamed for their government's actions, but undermines Kremlin narratives about the unremitting Russophobic hostility of the West.

NOTES

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