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# War as Social Elevator

## The Socioeconomic Impact of Russian Military Keynesianism



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Center

Marlène LARUELLE

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#### **Ifri**

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE

Tel: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 – Fax: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: [accueil@ifri.org](mailto:accueil@ifri.org)

**Website:** [ifri.org](http://ifri.org)

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# Author

**Marlène Laruelle** is professor of international affairs and political science at the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) at the George Washington University (Washington, DC), and director of the Illiberalism Studies Program. She was an associate research fellow at Ifri's Russia/Eurasia Center between 2009 and 2024. Her most recent publication is *Ideology and Meaning-Making under the Putin Regime* (Stanford University Press, 2025).

# Abstract

In order to finance its war effort, the Russian state has spent substantial sums of money and implemented a form of “military Keynesianism” that is transforming society at both the socioeconomic and cultural levels. This has partially rebalanced the wide disparities in wealth, levels of consumption, and social prestige in Russian society by granting significant financial and symbolic advantages to peripheral Russia, which has long been overlooked by the central government.

However, Russian military Keynesianism has had negative impacts, and three years after the start of the war, the socioeconomic benefits it has brought to the poorest strata of Russian society seem to have reached their limits. Regardless of the country’s economic future and political developments, the changes brought about by the war will leave their mark on Russian society for years to come.

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# Introduction

The impact of the war in Ukraine on Russian society is still not well understood in the West, where debate focuses mainly on Russian public opinion and its apparent support for the war in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> While Russian society is resilient and has adapted to the uncertainties of the war, mixing cautious optimism about the present with deep anxiety about the future,<sup>2</sup> less is known about the socioeconomic impact of the war on Russian society. In order to finance the war effort, the Russian state has spent substantial sums of money and implemented a form of “military Keynesianism”,<sup>3</sup> i.e., a massive redistribution of state income to industries linked to the war effort on the one hand, and significant financial support for the hundreds of thousands of men at the front on the other. This military Keynesianism has transformed society at both the socioeconomic and cultural levels. It has partially rebalanced the wide disparities in wealth, levels of consumption, and social prestige in Russian society by granting substantial financial and symbolic advantages to peripheral Russia, which has long been overlooked by the central government.

Russian military Keynesianism has had negative impacts, however: the depletion of public resources, persistent inflation, civilian sectors struggling to cope with the priority given to military industries by the state, and growing dependence on China. What is the socioeconomic and cultural impact of this military Keynesianism? Which Russian regions are winning and losing in this war economy? What impact would a mass return of veterans to Russia have on Russian society?

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Translated from French to English by Cadenza.

1. E. Koneva, “The Ratings Game of Vladimir Putin”, *Academic Policy Paper Series*, No. 7, The Russia Program, January 31, 2025, available at: <https://therussiaprogram.org>.

2. D. Volkov, “Long-Term Adaptation: How Past Crisis Experience Helps Russians Stay Optimistic”, *Russia Post*, August 23, 2024, available at: <https://russiapost.info>; D. Volkov, “Russians Look Back on 2024: Inflation as Chronic Disease, End to War a Distant Dream”, *Russia Post*, January 13, 2025, available at: <https://russiapost.info>; M. Alyukov et al., “‘We Need to Carry on’: Ethnography of Russian Regions During Wartime”, *Academic Policy Paper Series*, No. 5, The Russia Program, December 17, 2024, available at: <https://therussiaprogram.org>.

3. V. Ishchenko, I. Matveev, and O. Zhuravlev, “Russian Military Keynesianism: Who Benefits from the War in Ukraine?”, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 865, November 27, 2023, available at: [www.ponarseurasia.org](http://www.ponarseurasia.org).

# The success and limits of Russian military Keynesianism

Since the start of the war, Western experts have made conflicting assessments of the Russian economy, fluctuating between predictions of imminent collapse and high levels of resilience. Overall, the Russian economy has withstood Western sanctions better than expected, adapting its domestic market to new sources of imports, strengthening or creating partnerships with countries in the “Global South”, and, in particular, spending huge sums of money to support the war effort.<sup>4</sup>

This military Keynesianism took shape in the second half of 2022, when the Kremlin realized it had to adapt the Russian economy to a long-term confrontation with the West. This new strategy was fully developed by 2023 and the first half of 2024.<sup>5</sup> Manufacturers of military equipment and the industries directly linked to war (transport, IT, electronics, and so on) experienced spectacular growth, increasing by 3.6% in 2023 and 3.9% in 2024.<sup>6</sup> However, signs of a slowdown appeared in the second half of 2024, and this contraction is now clearly visible.

The Russian central bank’s efforts to combat inflation by raising the key interest rate (20% in June, 2025), the instability of the ruble (fluctuating between 80 and over 100 rubles to the dollar), and the secondary sanctions applied to foreign companies that cooperate with Russia have been the most visible outward signs of the downturn. However, this economic slowdown has not undermined the Russian government’s political resolve: The 2025 federal budget has allocated 8% of gross domestic product (GDP), or around \$200 billion, to defense and national security—a record for post-Soviet Russia—which accounts for over 40% of total budgetary spending, outstripping social spending, which had dominated previously.<sup>7</sup>

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4. A. Libman, “Will the Strategy of Isolating Russia Ever Work?”, *Russia Post*, January 25, 2024, available at: <https://russiapost.info>.

5. T. Rybakova, “The End of ‘Military Keynesianism’ in Russia”, *Russia Post*, December 9, 2024, available at: <https://russiapost.info>.

6. “Russia Full Year GDP Growth”, Trading Economics, available at: <https://tradingeconomics.com>, accessed April 28, 2025.

7. A. Voloshinov, “GD prinâla bûdžet na 2025 god s rekordnymi tratami na vojnu” [State Duma passes 2025 budget with record war spending], *Deutsche Welle*, November 21, 2024, available at: [www.dw.com](http://www.dw.com).



Some economists, such as Sergey Aleksashenko, Vladislav Inozemtsev, and Dmitry Nekrasov, have assessed this military Keynesianism as a success for Vladimir Putin's regime, since it has enabled the country to cope with sanctions, boost military industrial production, and provide full employment.<sup>8</sup> For example, the ruble was the world's best-performing currency in 2024, according to Bloomberg.<sup>9</sup> Others, such as Yuri Danilov and Alexandra Prokopenko, have detected weaknesses in this war economy: financial instability, default risk, a growing labor shortage, and the depletion of public resources.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the state has spent around half of its sovereign wealth fund (\$56 billion in reserves in 2024, compared with \$113 billion before the war<sup>11</sup>). The Russian war economy will therefore have to address four challenges in the short and medium term: increased public funding of the military sector to the detriment of civilian sectors, public spending higher than revenues, people's incomes rising faster than the supply of consumer goods—causing inflation—, and growing dependence on China.<sup>12</sup>

Companies linked, either closely or loosely, to the military-industrial complex have seen their orders increase significantly (this includes a number of subsectors such as metal production), at the expense of service sector companies, which have seen a decrease in state aid and increases in taxes and the cost of products from abroad.<sup>13</sup> The risk of bankruptcy has also become very high: By the end of 2024, over 20% of companies in the manufacturing sector were allocating more than two-thirds of their pretax profits to debt repayment, twice as many as in 2023.<sup>14</sup> Leading industry figures, such as Alexey Mordashov, chairman of Severstal, Russia's leading mining company, and Sergei Chemezov, head of the state-owned Rostec corporation, have also reported difficulties in managing debt.

In addition, the Russian economy is dealing with a chronic shortage of skilled labor, due in particular to the slowdown in population growth and the departure of qualified young people abroad. The war has exacerbated this systemic problem, requisitioning hundreds of thousands of men for the

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8. S. Aleksashenko, V. Inozemtsev, and D. Nekrasov, "Dictator's Reliable Rear: Russian Economy at the Time of War", Center for Analysis and Strategies in Europe, November 2024, available at: <https://case-center.org>.

9. "Ruble is Top Performing Global Currency as US Trade War Hits Dollar", *Bloomberg News*, April 15, 2025, available at: [www.bloomberg.com](http://www.bloomberg.com).

10. Y. Danilov, "How Government Policies Are Weakening the Stability of the Russian Economy", *Russia Post*, January 10, 2025, available at: <https://russiapost.info>; A. Prokopenko, "Russia's Economic Gamble: The Hidden Costs of War-Driven Growth", Carnegie Endowment, December 20, 2024, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

11. P.-M. Meunier, "Russia Is on a Slow Path to Bankruptcy, But How Slow?", *War on the Rocks*, September 11, 2024, available at: <https://warontherocks.com>.

12. I. Lipsits and Y. Senshin, "Russia Is Squandering the Last Remaining Reserves and Savings Accrued in the Pre-War Period", *Russia Post*, July 19, 2024, available at: <https://russiapost.info>.

13. N. Trickett, "Russia's Tired 'Hydraulic Keynesianism'", *Riddle Russia*, September 26, 2024, available at: <https://ridl.io/russia>.

14. "Does Russia Really Face a Wave of Bankruptcies?", *The Bell*, March 21, 2025, available at: <https://en.thebell.io>.

front, causing a high number of deaths and injuries,<sup>15</sup> and prompting over half a million qualified people to go into exile since February 2022.<sup>16</sup> The unemployment rate is very low (around 2%<sup>17</sup>), and the country is currently short of nearly 5 million workers, or 7% of its workforce.<sup>18</sup> This shortage has been exacerbated by the anti-migrant policies initiated by the Russian authorities after the terrorist attack on the Crocus City Hall in March 2024, drastically reducing immigration from Central Asia and the Caucasus.<sup>19</sup> Despite very attractive salaries (see below), the defense sector is short of 160,000 specialists, a figure that could rise to 250,000 by 2025–2026, according to First Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov.<sup>20</sup>

In such a mixed economic context, the war economy in place since 2022 is having significant spatial and social impacts.

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15. Y. E. Fedorov, “Russian Military Manpower After Two and a Half Years of War in Ukraine”, *Russie.Eurasie.Reports*, No. 48, Ifri, November 2024, available at: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

16. The figure is around 800,000, although some have since returned to Russia. See M. Zavadsкая, “The War-Induced Exodus from Russia: A Security Problem or a Convenient Political Bogey?”, *FIIA Briefing Paper*, No. 358, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, March 2023, available at: <https://fiia.fi>.

17. “Russia: Unemployment Rate From November 2020 to November 2024”, Statista, accessed May 19, 2025, available at: <https://www.statista.com>.

18. A. Sakhnin and L. Smirmova, “Russia Struggles to Fill Jobs”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 2025, available at: <https://mondediplo.com>.

19. M. Saillofest, “La Russie a déporté 80 000 migrants en 2024, soit deux fois plus que l’année précédente” [Russia deported 80,000 migrants in 2024, twice as many as the previous year], *Le Grand Continent*, January 10, 2025, available at: <https://legrandcontinent.eu>.

20. “Manturov zaâvil, što potrebnost’ v kadrah dlâ OPK v RF sostavlâet 160 tys. Čelovek” [Manturov stated that the need for specialists for the military-industrial complex in Russia is 160,000 people], *TASS*, June 7, 2024, available at: <https://tass.ru>; “Situaciû s kadrami v sfere OPK obsudili na Kadrovom kongresse v Moskve” [The personnel situation in the military-industrial complex was discussed at the specialist congress in Moscow], *Smotrim*, July 11, 2024, available at: <https://smotrim.ru>.

# The spatial and social rebalancing produced by the war

Military Keynesianism is transforming Russian society on several levels, creating a spatial and social rebalancing effect in a country that has traditionally been divided into a number of large socioeconomic regions with very different ways of life. Among the wealthiest are the two capitals (Moscow and Saint Petersburg) and the major cities (Yekaterinburg, Kazan, Novosibirsk, Sochi, and so on), followed by the oil- and gas-producing regions (including the Khanty-Mansi and Yamalo-Nenets autonomous districts) and the black earth of southern Russia, with its agro-industrial economy (Krasnodar, Rostov, Voronezh, Stavropol, and so on).

At the bottom of the scale is peripheral Russia, with its small provincial cities and rural areas that are spatially, logistically, and socioeconomically marginalized—among the poorest of which are Russian regions such as Pskov or Ivanovo, and a large number of republics in Siberia (such as Buryatia and Tuva) and the North Caucasus.<sup>21</sup> Before the war, over 55% of the value of the country's total output was concentrated in the ten richest regions, while the ten poorest regions produced about 1%. In 2019, the variation in per capita GDP between Russia's federal subjects ranged from 1.5 million rubles for the richest to 145,700 rubles for the poorest.<sup>22</sup>

Paradoxically, the war has led to a kind of rebalancing. The Central, Urals, and Volga federal districts, which are home to the military-industrial complex's major industries and their metals and electronics subsidiaries, saw their industrial production increase substantially.<sup>23</sup> The same applies to the logistics and transport sector, and to everything linked to the war effort: the textile industry for uniforms, the agrifood industry to feed the men at the front, and so on. While the oil- and gas-producing regions were in recession or were stagnating as a result of sanctions, the regions of Penza, Tula, Samara, Bryansk, and Sverdlovsk, and the republics of Udmurtia, Chuvashia, and Mari El experienced a rapid increase in industrial output.<sup>24</sup> This would

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21. M. Laruelle and J. Radvanyi, *Russia: Great Power, Weakened State*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023, pp. 22–23.

22. Ibid.

23. "Gross Industrial Production Data for 2022–2024 (point 16)", Rosstat, available at: <https://eng.rosstat.gov.ru>.

24. N. Zubarevič, "Èkonomičeskaâ geografiâ èpohi SVO" [Economic geography of the SVO era], Re-Russia, June 13, 2023, available at: <https://re-russia.net>.

partly explain why the former governor of Tula, Alexei Dyumin, was promoted to Aide to the President of Russia and Secretary of the State Council in 2024. In addition, two of his close associates, Dmitry Milyaev and Vyacheslav Fedorishchev, became governors of Tula and Samara, respectively, two key regions for the military-industrial complex.

Some regions in the Far East have also been economically revitalized, such as the territories of Khabarovsk and Transbaikalia, since they have become major logistics hubs as part of the reorientation of Russian trade toward Asia, and China in particular.<sup>25</sup> Finally, the “new territories”, i.e., the four Ukrainian regions (Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson) annexed by Russia (but only partly occupied) in September 2022, benefit from special subsidies and significant investment in the (re)construction sector—Mariupol being one example—and offer very high salaries (more than \$2,700 a month, i.e., more than double the highest average regional monthly wage<sup>26</sup>) to anyone prepared to come and settle there to actualize the Russian occupation.<sup>27</sup>

As is often the case, spatial differences reflect social fault lines. If we shift our analysis from regions to social groups, two groups that are widely represented in the regions mentioned above have seen their living standards improve significantly because of the war.

First, employees of the military-industrial complex (from engineers to blue-collar workers), i.e., between 3 and 4 million people, including 500,000 to 800,000 new employees since the start of the war.<sup>28</sup> Not only do they enjoy exemption from military service (in 2025 the exemption was lifted, before being reinstated sector by sector<sup>29</sup>), but they also benefited when their salaries were doubled in the fall of 2022. In addition, they are able to accumulate various benefits, such as mortgage subsidies or paid vacations by the Black Sea. Some companies have even offered a gift of 10,000 rubles (around \$100) to employees who convince one of their acquaintances to join the company, a sign of the need for workers in this sector.<sup>30</sup>

25. Ibid.

26. N. Nedyelko, “Russia Uses Pay, Perks to Promote Labor Migration to Occupied Areas in Ukraine”, *RFE/RL*, April 10, 2024, available at: [www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org).

27. D. Lewis, “Economic Crime and Illicit Finance in Russia’s Occupation Regime in Ukraine”, *Serious Organised Crime & Anti-Corruption Evidence Research Paper*, No. 20, September 2023, p. 42.

28. “Čislennost’ kadrov, zdejstvovannyh v OPK Rossii, dostigla 3,8 mln čelovek” [The number of people working in the military-industrial complex in Russia has reached 3.8 million], *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, August 12, 2024, available at: [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru); M. Starchak, “Russian Defense Sector Increasingly Having Trouble Attracting Workers”, *Russia Post*, August 19, 2024, available at: <https://russiapost.info>.

29. “Skol’ko dejstvuet bron’ ot mobilizacii?” [How Long is the mobilization exemption valid?], *SecretMag*, November 30, 2024, available at: <https://secretmag.ru>.

30. “Èkonomičeskâ geografiâ èpohi SVO”, op. cit.; S. Savina, “My zainteresovany, čtoby vy zarabatyvali lîm” [We are interested in you earning a million], *Vazhnye istorii*, April 8, 2024, available at: <https://istories.media>.

The second social group to benefit from the state's generosity is soldiers sent to the front, particularly those who sign a contract with the Ministry of Defense. The figures released by the Russian authorities (around 400,000 contract soldiers recruited per year in 2023 and 2024) are often contradictory and should therefore be treated with caution, as several investigative journalists have shown.<sup>31</sup> In order to attract as many volunteers as possible, the state has gradually increased its offer (see below)—a sign that recruitment is not as easy as the official media reports.

Recruitment has also taken on a spatial dimension, with strong competition between regions and cities: Regional and municipal authorities have increased signing bonuses in order to attract more volunteers and demonstrate their loyalty to the Kremlin. For example, the Crimean authorities are proposing to allocate a plot of land on the peninsula to every signatory, regardless of their place of registration (*propiska*), in the hope of attracting people who dream of retiring to the sun and the sea.<sup>32</sup>

Some regions have sent more contract soldiers to the front than others. According to the BBC and Mediazona, by March 2025, the number of confirmed deaths had reached 100,000 people identified by name, and 160,000 if the number of probate files processed by the Russian administration is taken into account.<sup>33</sup> An analysis of these indicators makes it possible to identify the geographical “pockets” that send the most soldiers to the front: the territories of Krasnodar and Transbaikalia, the regions of Rostov and Pskov, the republics of Tuva, Buryatia, and Dagestan, and, to a lesser extent, the republics of Kalmykia, Udmurtia, Altai, Adygea, and Mari El.<sup>34</sup>

The poorest republics of the North Caucasus and southern Siberia, along with the large agricultural regions of European Russia, form a major source of military recruits: They have the largest number of men—young, but not exclusively so, since the data confirms that most men at the front are aged between 30 and 45<sup>35</sup>—without steady incomes or fulfilling employment. In the ethnic republics, it is not just holders of the nationality in question who are being recruited, but ethnic Russians as well—the main criterion being poverty and a lack of career prospects.

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31. K. Bonch-Osmolovskaya and S. Savina, “More Soldiers at All Costs”, *Vazhnye istorii*, August 1, 2024, available at: <https://istories.media>.

32. “Učastnikam vtorženiâ v Ukraïnu, zaključivšim kontrakty v Krymu, budut vydavat' zemel'nye učastki na poluostrove” [Participants in the invasion of Ukraine who signed contracts in Crimea will be given plots of land on the peninsula], *Meduza* (published on Telegram), August 27, 2024, available at: <https://t.me>.

33. “Russian Losses in the War with Ukraine”, *Mediazona*, May 2025, available at: <https://en.zona.media>.

34. S. Savina and K. Bonch-Osmolovskaya, “Kakie regiony otdali bol'she vsego mužčin na vojnu” [Which regions sent the most men to war?], *Vazhnye istorii*, October 5, 2022, available at: <https://istories.media>; L. Solanko, “Where Do Russia's Mobilized Soldiers Come from? Evidence from Bank Deposits”, *BOFIT Policy Briefs*, No. 1, 2024, available at: <https://ideas.repec.org>.

35. “Russian Losses in the War with Ukraine”, op. cit.

As Ekaterina Kurbangaleeva demonstrated, it is therefore the poorest regions of Russia that benefited from a noticeable increase in revenues since the beginning of the war, resulting in an increase in total tax revenues. “In 2024, 49 territories—nearly 60% of all regions—exceeded a 50% growth threshold in total tax revenues relative to 2021 and nearly half of the regions on the 2024 list were previously considered underdeveloped.”<sup>36</sup> This is the case for the Tula Oblast (+122% in total tax revenues), Perm Krai (+127%), Republic of Kalmykia (+101%), Chuvash Republic (+99.7%), Magadan Oblast (+99.5%), Republic of Mari El (+93%), and Zabaikalsky Krai, Smolensk Oblast, Kostroma Oblast, and Karachay-Cherkess Republic (each around +78%) and most remarkably, Amur Oblast, which saw its total tax revenues surge by 309%.

Residents of the large cities, especially Moscow and Saint Petersburg, have largely been protected from conscription and the pressures of recruitment, since the authorities do not want to deal with the upper classes, whose loyalty is needed to maintain the regime’s stability. The two major cities have therefore sought to compensate for their low recruitment rates by offering higher sums of money to attract contract soldiers from other regions, enabling Moscow to emerge as the leading recruiter of contract soldiers.<sup>37</sup> Hence, wealthy regions use their revenue to attract contract soldiers from poor regions, who then benefit from their soldiers putting money back into the local economy. These spatial and socioeconomic transformations have also had an impact on Russian citizens’ household spending and consumption habits.

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36. E. Kurbangaleeva, “Economic Gains and Political Loyalty: How Rising Incomes Drive Support for Russia’s Authoritarian Regime” [forthcoming].

37. “Ot mèra Moskvyy potrebovali otpravit’ na vojnu 23 tysâchi moskviçej” [Moscow mayor asked to send 23,000 Muscovites to war], *The Moscow Times* (published on Telegram), August 14, 2024, available at: <https://t.me>.

# The monetization of wartime patriotism and its social impacts

In order to attract contract soldiers, the authorities have increased their financial and symbolic initiatives. They are offering salaries of around 200,000 rubles a month (around \$2,000, compared with a national average of \$800 in 2024), as well as signing bonuses of up to 2 million rubles (\$20,000<sup>38</sup>). By combining these federal and local entitlements, some soldiers can amass a substantial starting package (in the range of \$50,000), and, if they are not killed or wounded at the front, can accumulate sums that many of them would never have been able to earn in a lifetime of hard work. Wounded soldiers, meanwhile, can receive 3 million rubles (around \$30,000) from the state, plus regional benefits, and in the event of death, the family receives 5 million rubles (\$50,000), again supplemented by additional regional allowances.

All soldiers receive the title “special military operation veteran” (SVO veteran), a prestigious status that is in keeping with the status of veterans of the Great Patriotic War and the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya. It is accompanied by economic and social benefits that are limited in absolute terms but significant for the most vulnerable classes: medical cover, better working conditions, payment of regular bills, paid vacations, and priority access to public transport. Their families are included too: Soldiers’ children are entitled to study at university free of charge and do not have to pay school canteen fees; family health insurance is taken care of; they are granted low-interest loans, and so on.<sup>39</sup>

This social spending, which puts a strain on the state budget, is nonetheless beginning quietly to be reduced. In November 2024, for example, the government changed the procedures for paying compensation for injuries sustained at the front, separating serious injuries (3 million rubles—the amount that used to be paid automatically) from minor ones (1 million rubles—a new category), leaving soldiers at the

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38. “Skol’ko polučaût kontraktniki i mobilizovannye v 2023 godu?” [How much do contract soldiers and mobilized soldiers receive in 2023?], *RTVI*, October 1, 2023, available at: <https://rtvi.com>.

39. E. Krayetskaya, “L’goty učastnikam SVO i členam ih semej” [Benefits for SVO participants and their family members], *Delopress*, 2023, available at: <https://delo-press.ru>.

mercy of the medical bureaucracy and its corruption for decisions on the status of their injury.<sup>40</sup>

The war is changing Russia's social structure. In the summer of 2024, the salaries of combat soldiers were in the top 10-15% of salaries nationally.<sup>41</sup> The Center for Macroeconomic Analysis and Short-Term Forecasting (TsMAKP), a government-affiliated think tank, even discussed the emergence of a new middle class thanks to these huge transfers of public money.<sup>42</sup> For example, the number of people with an average monthly salary of more than 100,000 rubles (\$1,000) doubled between 2021 and 2023, rising from 5.7% to 10% of the population.<sup>43</sup> Average salaries rose by several percentage points, even after adjusting for inflation, while household consumption increased significantly in 2023 and the first half of 2024.<sup>44</sup> Data from Rosstat (Federal State Statistics Service) confirms the rise in real disposable monetary income.<sup>45</sup>

In June 2024, according to Levada-Center,<sup>46</sup> household confidence was at its highest level since the 2000s. Russians have started buying cars again (mainly Ladas<sup>47</sup>) and going on vacation more often (domestic tourism is on the rise<sup>48</sup>). They are also accumulating savings, with a 35% increase in cash deposits in banks in 2023 compared to 2021.<sup>49</sup> Poverty has reached one of its lowest levels since the fall of the USSR: 7.2% of the population in 2024, or 12 million people.<sup>50</sup>

This financial redistribution has created a number of problems, however. There is a positive statistical correlation between regions where a large number of men go to the front and those with the highest number of

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40. "Resolution of the Government of the Russian Federation of November 13, 2024", No. 1534, accessed April 28, 2025, available at: <https://publication.pravo.gov.ru>.

41. D. Massicot, "Russia's Post-War Military Recruiting Strategy Emerges", *War on the Rocks*, August 16, 2024, available at: <https://warontherocks.com>.

42. "Učastniki vojny v Ukraine stali novym srednim klassom Rossii" [Participants in the war in Ukraine have become the new middle class in Russia], *The Moscow Times* (published on Telegram), August 22, 2024, available at: [https://t.me/moscowtimes\\_ru](https://t.me/moscowtimes_ru).

43. Ibid.

44. C. Weaver, J. Conboye, et al., "Russia's Surprising Consumer Spending Boom", *Financial Times*, July 26, 2024, available at: [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com).

45. *Russian Statistical Yearbook 2024*, Rosstat, 2024, available at: <https://rosstat.gov.ru>.

46. *Socio-Economic Indicators*, Levada-Center, available at: [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru), accessed April 28, 2025.

47. Y. Garaeva, "Russian Car Market Is Emerging from the Crisis", *Realnoe Vremya*, September 27, 2024, available at: <https://m.realnoevremya.com>.

48. A. Avramenko, "Turizm pošël v rost: s kakimi itogami rossijskaâ otrasl' vstupila v 2024 god?" [Tourism is growing: what are the results of the Russian industry entering 2024?], *RussPass Zhurnal*, March 22, 2024, available at: <https://mag.russpass.ru>.

49. "Russia's Surprising Consumer Spending Boom", op. cit.

50. However, changes in methodology have probably "excluded" around 2 million poor people. See A. Ivanov, "2,4 mln bednyh vypali iz statistiki Rosstata v 2024 godu" [2.4 million poor people excluded from Rosstat statistics in 2024], *Tochno*, March 27, 2025, available at: <https://tochno.st>.



bank loans.<sup>51</sup> This means that families with a member at the front are taking out new personal loans or mortgages to improve their quality of life and housing, with all the potential damaging effects of debt, particularly the inability to repay.

At the beginning of the war, the accumulation of debt was a major reason for enlisting in the army.<sup>52</sup> However, new social strategies have emerged since 2023: Rather than debt, the driving force behind enlistment now seems to be the desire to rapidly accumulate start-up capital, which is often invested in home improvements, renovations, or the purchase of a car. Enlistment is therefore now less about people in very insecure situations than about the rural lower middle class treating it as an investment project.

Moreover, while this military Keynesianism has had a rebalancing effect, it has not fundamentally altered Russia's social stratification. The return to prewar levels of activity has not benefited the entire population: According to the Russian central bank, more than a third of Russians suffered a fall in real income between February 2022 and February 2024.<sup>53</sup> This rebalancing seemed to have passed its peak by early 2024: The wealthier classes gradually regained their financial optimism, and, as the months went by, the less well-off groups felt less financially secure, particularly as a result of inflation affecting basic necessities.<sup>54</sup> In January 2025, Levada-Center noted that the Russian citizens who were the most anxious about the year ahead were the poorer classes, people from rural backgrounds, and the elderly, while the most optimistic were younger, wealthier, and from the major cities, especially Moscow.<sup>55</sup>

The future of this financial windfall is uncertain, even though, for the time being, the authorities seem determined to continue paying their contract soldiers generously. According to Alfa-Bank analysts, in 2025, the salary rise (taking into account inflation), which was visible in 2023 and 2024, has now stopped.<sup>56</sup> And so far, four regions (Yamal-Nenets district, Nizhnii-Novgorod, Belgorod and Bashkortostan) have already decreased

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51. V. Zvonovskiy, "The Economic Divide of War: How the Russia-Ukraine Conflict Reshaped Regional Prosperity", *Academic Policy Paper Series*, No. 3, The Russia Program, November 2024, available at: <https://therussiaprogram.org>.

52. V. Zolkin, "Russian POWs' Interviews with English Subtitles", YouTube, accessed April 29, 2025, available at: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

53. J. Vercueil, "C'est la rente pétrolière qui maintient à flot l'économie de la Russie" [Oil revenues keep Russia's economy afloat], *Le Monde*, April 11, 2025, available at: [www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr).

54. V. Zvonovskiy, "The Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on the Dynamics of Russians' Material Well-Being", *Academic Policy Paper Series*, No. 10, The Russia Program, March 2025, available at: <https://therussiaprogram.org>.

55. *Expectations for 2025*, Levada-Center, January 14, 2025, accessed April 29, 2025, available at: [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru).

56. "V Rossii praktičeski ostanovilsâ rost real'nyh zarplat" [In Russia, real wage growth has practically stopped], *The Moscow Times*, May 31, 2025, available at: [www.moscowtimes.ru](http://www.moscowtimes.ru).

the jackpot they offer at the signature of a contract with the Ministry of Defense.<sup>57</sup>

While the material benefits that soldiers and their families have derived from the war may gradually diminish, veterans enjoy significant and probably enduring symbolic recognition from the state.

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57. “Den’gi končaûtsâ’. Četvertyj region snizil ‘pod’emnye’ dlâ zapisyvaûšihâ na vojnu v Ukrainu” [“Money is running out.” A fourth region has reduced bonuses paid to those who sign up to fight in Ukraine], *The Moscow Times*, June 3, 2025, available at: [www.moscowtimes.ru](http://www.moscowtimes.ru).

# The valorization of veterans: Reintegration and the indoctrination of society

The veterans' issue is a delicate subject for the Russian authorities, since they are both a source of social and political problems and the benchmark for a new loyal and patriotic elite. Both facets are evident in official discourse. On the one hand, veterans are commonly referred to by Russian bureaucrats as “the new *Afgantsy*” (in reference to the Soviet veterans of the Soviet–Afghan War, who were largely abandoned by the government of the time and a source of social unrest). Even key figures such as Sergey Kiriienko acknowledge that veterans “are adjusting poorly” to their return to civilian life.<sup>58</sup> And indeed, by May 2025, about 40 percent of demobilized veterans could not find a civilian job.<sup>59</sup>

On the other hand, Vladimir Putin presents them as Russia’s “real elite”, capable of replacing or, at the very least, cleaning up the cynical and corrupt elite inherited from the 1990s.<sup>60</sup> The number of “special military operation veterans” recognized by the Russian government is difficult to estimate. The *Prokuratura* (Procurator’s Office) has already distributed 300,000 veterans’ certificates (the document is also given to wives in the event of a soldier’s death), and the Ministry of Labor is anticipating around 750,000—probably an estimate of the total number of veterans once the war is over.<sup>61</sup>

One of the major social challenges posed by the return of veterans is, of course, linked to medical problems—for example, in 2023, over 70,000 prostheses were required, particularly for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to the Ministry of Health, 20% of the soldiers

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58. A. Pertsev, “V Kremle sčitaút, čto učastniki vojny ‘ploho adaptiruútsá’ k mirnoj žizni posle vozvrašeniá s fronta” [The Kremlin believes that war veterans are “adjusting poorly” to civilian life after returning from the front], *Meduza*, July 19, 2024, available at: <https://meduza.io>.

59. “Počti polovina demobilizovannyh učastnikov vojny v Ukraine ne smogli najti rabotu” [Nearly half of demobilized veterans in Ukraine failed to find work], *The Moscow Times*, June 2, 2025, available at: [www.moscowtimes.ru](http://www.moscowtimes.ru).

60. “Učastnikov SVO Putin nazval podlinnoj èlitoj” [Putin calls the participants of the SVO the real elite], *Interfax*, February 29, 2024, available at: [www.interfax.ru](http://www.interfax.ru).

61. “Učastniki SVO polučili status veterana boevyh dejstvij” [SVO participants receive combat veteran status], *Pobeda RF*, March 26, 2024, available at: <https://pobedarf.ru>; “Ministerstvo truda i socrazvitiá zakazalo 230 tysáč udostoverenij dlá členov semej pogibših veteranov boevyh dejstvij” [The Ministry of Labor and Social Development has ordered 230,000 certificates for family members of deceased combat veterans], *Věrstka* (published on Telegram), September 18, 2023, available at: <https://t.me>.

who have already returned from the war and sought psychological help—a minority—are suffering from PTSD.<sup>62</sup> The implications for their health (alcoholism, drug use) and for society (domestic violence, crime) are potentially far-reaching and are already evident in individual cases.<sup>63</sup> By way of comparison, we know, for example, that more than half of the veterans of the Soviet–Afghan War were suffering from alcoholism or drug addiction in 1989, that two-thirds of veterans of the Chechen wars suffered from PTSD, and that more than 100,000 veterans were in prison in the mid-2000s (out of a total of 900,000).<sup>64</sup>

Even though the Russian state is better organized today than it was in the 1990s or early 2000s, the lack of a culture of treating mental illness and the inadequacy of the hospital system in the provinces will play a key role in the success or failure of attempts to reintegrate these men, who number in the hundreds of thousands. By the spring of 2024, two years after the start of the war, some 200 veterans had already been convicted, mainly for domestic violence, and between 100 and 500 people had reportedly been killed or injured by veterans.<sup>65</sup> These figures could rise dramatically once the war is over and the soldiers have returned home.

In this context, the work of associations will be decisive. There are already at least seventy veterans' associations in existence, of varying sizes and with differing aims, offering services for reintegrating veterans into civilian life and providing them with legal aid. They all belong to the Union of Veterans, which is well integrated into the paramilitary institutions linked to the Ministry of Defense. For example, a new association, the “SVOi Military Brotherhood” (a play on words involving SVO, the “special military operation”, and *svoi*, a Russian term meaning “our own”), held its launch meeting in the fall of 2024 at the Central House of the Russian Army in Moscow.<sup>66</sup>

Veterans are presented by the regime as a new pool of managers for Russia. The “Time of Heroes” (*Vremia geroev*) training program, which was launched in the spring of 2024 and is managed by the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration

62. L. Lemiasova, “Nasiliâ bol’she, bezopasnosti men’she” [More violence, less security], *Vazhnye istorii*, September 16, 2024, available at: <https://istories.media>.

63. M. Ilyushina, “Russia Sends Soldiers to War but Ignores Mental Trauma They Bring Home”, *Washington Post*, December 10, 2022, available at: [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

64. T. Lattanzio and H. F. Stevens, “Wounded Veterans, Wounded Economy: The Personnel Costs of Russia’s War”, *War on the Rocks*, July 9, 2024, available at: <https://warontherocks.com>.

65. “Rossiû zahlestnula volna voennoj prestupnosti: počti 200 učastnikov SVO osudili po nasil’stvennym stat’âm” [Russia is overwhelmed by a wave of military criminality: almost 200 “SVO participants” have been convicted for violence], *The Moscow Times*, April 11, 2024, available at: [www.moscowtimes.ru](http://www.moscowtimes.ru); “Soputstvuûšie žertvy. Kak učastniki vojny v Ukraine, vernuvšis’ v Rossiû, prodolzhaût ubivat’ i kalečit” [Collateral victims: How veterans of the war in Ukraine continue to kill and maim upon their return to Russia], *Planeta Press*, April 25, 2024, available at: <https://planeta.press>.

66. “SVOi: v Rossiî poâvilos’ novoe obšestvennoe dvizhenie veteranov SVO” [“SVOi”: A new association for SVO veterans has emerged in Russia], *Argumenti*, October 26, 2024, available at: <https://argumenti.ru>.

(RANEPA), is a prime example of how highly they are valued. However, this social advancement strategy has so far involved only around a hundred people and assumes that veterans already have a higher education degree and management experience, which is only true of a tiny minority.<sup>67</sup> More than 300 veterans stood as candidates in the September 2024 local elections, mostly for the presidential party, United Russia, demonstrating again the political desire to promote them as role models.<sup>68</sup> A few have been given important political positions, such as Artyom Zhoga, a former high-ranking officer from Donetsk, who was appointed “Presidential Plenipotentiary Envoy” to the Ural Federal District—a symbolic role rather than one that involves decision-making. Another veteran, Sergei Sokol, failed in his attempt to be elected governor of Khakassia, which confirms that veteran status is no guarantee of winning a political contest.

However, genuine social mobility for veterans is not strictly speaking about political posts, but instead involves professions and ranks lower down the administrative ladder. So far, three regions (Moscow, Samara and Vologda) are requiring businesses with more than 100 employees to hire 1 percent of their workforce among veterans.<sup>69</sup> A number of veterans have also returned to civilian life in the booming patriotic education sector (where funding rose from 5 billion rubles in 2022 to 40 billion rubles in 2023 and 45 billion rubles in 2024<sup>70</sup>). Many of these jobs are linked to sports and paramilitary activities—a traditional niche for veterans of the Soviet–Afghan War.<sup>71</sup> Others have joined the national education system and are responsible for teaching students the new patriotic disciplines introduced in 2022. They are trained by Rosmolodezh (the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs), which organizes the training seminars.<sup>72</sup> A new program on homeland security and defense, and another entitled “Lessons in Courage”, are increasingly being taught by veterans who, in the future, might also play a part in all civic education courses (an idea supported by

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67. Details of the program can be found at “Programma ‘Vremia geroev’”, accessed April 28, 2025, available at: <https://времягероев.рф>.

68. A. Vinokurov, “Boevye v dejstvii” [Combat in action], *Kommersant*, September 24, 2024, available at: [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru).

69. “Tretij rossijskij region obázal biznes brat’ na rabotu učastnikov vojny” [Third Russian region requires companies to hire veterans], *The Moscow Times*, May 29, 2025, available at: [www.moscowtimes.ru](http://www.moscowtimes.ru).

70. “Finansirovanie proektov po patriotičeskomu vospitaniju dostignet 46 mlrd” [Funding for patriotic education projects to reach 46 billion rubles], *RBC*, October 9, 2023, available at: [www.rbc.ru](http://www.rbc.ru).

71. M. Laruelle, “Patriotic Youth Clubs in Russia. Professional Niches, Cultural Capital and Narratives of Social Engagement”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 67, No. 1, 2015, pp. 8–27, available at: <https://tandfonline.com>.

72. “‘The Explosions Calm Them Down’: What Russian Soldiers Are Teaching Children After Returning from the War in Ukraine”, *Meduza*, April 26, 2023, available at: <https://meduza.io>.

Kiriyenko himself).<sup>73</sup> To prepare them for this, a teacher training center reserved for war veterans opened its doors in 2023.<sup>74</sup>

Veterans are also celebrated in public life: All associations and charities are now required to welcome them into their ranks. All television programs, from talk shows to reality shows, feature veterans. A special program, “Our Own” (*svoi*), is even dedicated to them, with veterans and their families going on to talk about their exploits, their patriotism, and their family values, and demonstrating how the women and children reorganized their lives while waiting for the hero’s return. Veterans also occupy the visual space of many Russian cities and villages, where large posters carrying their photos and names are displayed. Television stations broadcast numerous Ministry of Defense recruitment advertisements celebrating “real men” (*nastoiashchie muzhiki*) who are motivated by their sense of responsibility and their patriotism, and an archetypal masculinity—criteria traditionally well received by the Russian public, who see the army as the embodiment of these values, and did so even before the outbreak of the conflict in 2022.<sup>75</sup>

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73. S. Kiriyenko, “Brief” (published on Telegram), August 20, 2023, available at: <https://t.me/rusbrief>.

74. V. Rubanov, “Veteranov SVO podgotovât dlâ prepodavaniâ novogo predmeta v školah” [SVO veterans to be trained to teach new subjects in schools], *TVZvezda*, September 6, 2023, available at: <https://tvzvezda.ru>.

75. “Gotovnost’ k službe v armii i neustavnye otnošeníâotnosheniia” [Readiness for military service and informal relations], *VTsIOM*, December 21, 2020, available at: <https://wciom.ru>.

# Conclusion

While the military Keynesianism implemented by the Russian authorities in 2022 to cope with the war effort in Ukraine has succeeded in keeping the Russian economy afloat, it has also transformed society. Regardless of the country's economic future and political developments, the changes brought about by the war will leave their mark on Russian society for years to come. An entire generation of men and families will have been shaped by the experience of the front and the financial and symbolic recognition that came with it.

This monetization of service to the fatherland, which some have called the “economics of death”, or “deathonomics”<sup>76</sup>—because it gives greater value to a soldier who has died at the front than to his labor—has paradoxically enabled peripheral Russia to access public spending on a scale unseen since the fall of the Soviet Union. Yet this has not profoundly altered post-Soviet social stratification. Three years after the start of the war, the socioeconomic benefits that military Keynesianism has brought to the poorest strata of Russian society seem to have reached their limits. The wealthy and well-off strata have largely avoided the front line thanks to the large-scale enlistment of poorer members of society, resulting in the indirect legitimization of each group's fixed social role in contemporary Russia.

Furthermore, maintaining the cost of this social spending will remain a challenge for the Russian economy and for the new regional balance that has emerged from it. The regions that have gained from the conflict due to the presence of the military-industrial complex on their soil have no interest in seeing the public financial windfall come to an end, and are hoping that a Cold War approach will be retained, where military spending will continue to take priority, even when there is no ongoing military conflict. The regions that have provided the most men, and which are therefore suffering demographically from high combat mortality rates, might also be penalized by the loss of income reinvested by soldiers' families if the generous salaries paid to contract soldiers were to come to an end. Ethnic resentment in the republics and regions that have sent men from their minority groups to the front is also a possibility.

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76. I. Tumakova, “Vladislav Inozemcev —o tom, kak ‘grobovye’ i drugie vyplaty izmenili èkonomiku strany” [Vladislav Inozemtsev explains how “death payments” and other payments changed the country's economy], *Novaia gazeta*, July 25, 2023, available at: <https://novayagazeta.ru>.

In more general terms, social spending will play a major part in the development of veterans' communities and their role in the political arena. A number of scenarios are emerging. It is possible to imagine veterans gradually being forgotten by the authorities and returning to the anonymity of peripheral Russia, as was the case with the *Afgantsy* and, to a lesser extent, the veterans of the war in Chechnya. They will nurture the bitter memory of the "fat years", leaving society, associations, and families to bear the burden of accumulated physical and mental trauma. In this scenario, the prestige of having been in the army may wane, and the younger generations may see the veterans as a counter-model symbolizing social failure—a scenario that is completely at odds with government expectations.

Another potential development would see veterans challenging the Kremlin from maximalist positions, rallying behind the more nationalist military bloggers and the voices criticizing the authorities' excessive "softness" in their war aims, in the manner of Yevgeny Prigozhin in 2023. Depending on the terms of the ceasefire, the most radical and hawkish section of the elite—those who believe that Ukraine must be entirely defeated by force and the conflict resolved militarily—may find popular support in veterans' communities. Military blogging circles are likely to nurture this culture of war and resonate with some veterans, particularly those retraining in patriotic education.

A third scenario, the one the authorities want to see, would be the successful integration of veterans into postwar Russian society, inspiring citizens' patriotism and transforming the elites. As was once the case with the Communist Party card, participation in the war in Ukraine would become the new party card, guaranteeing social advancement and serving as a pledge of ideological loyalty. The upper classes, who have carefully avoided the front, might then find themselves symbolically penalized. In this final scenario, however, the veterans will not be alone: They will have to compete with a new generation of bureaucrats who have taken advantage of the conflict to climb the ranks of the state apparatus, and with all those hoping for a return on their investment for their years spent in the "new territories" of occupied Ukraine. Indeed, many Russian politicians make symbolic trips to the front to benefit from phony legitimacy as a veteran.<sup>77</sup> New bureaucratic rivalries might therefore shape Russia's postwar political culture.

Another possibility is a combination of the three scenarios, with different strategies used depending on the veterans' associations that spring up and the new leaders that emerge from them. Previous historical experiences of the successful or failed reintegration of large groups of veterans provide an interesting basis for comparison, including the veterans of the First World War in Europe. It is likely, for example, that some veterans will want a peaceful return a long way from the front, while others

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77. K. Smolyakova, "Russia's 'Veteran' Politicians", *Riddle*, April 14, 2023, available at: <https://ridl.io>.



will engage in vigilantism, creating brotherhoods in arms that could potentially be exploited by some of the elite. Soldiers being used to war and the generous earnings that come with it might make it easier for the regime's hawks to gain popular support for new war plans, while the private mercenary market will do well in the Russia of tomorrow, and will be exported.

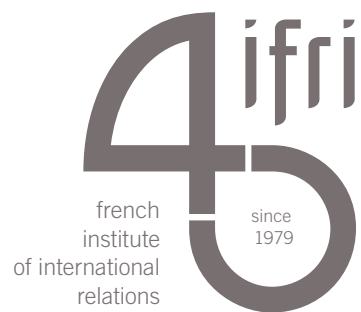
In any case, postwar Russian society will be more militarized than it is today, and this sector of society is likely to remain opposed to the West and any idea of rapprochement with past enemies, in contrast to other social groups that will be relieved to see an end to the fighting and are hoping for a return to normality. As a result, the Russian ideological arena may well be more fragmented than might be imagined in the near future.

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27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – France

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