

From the Donbas to Africa: How Returning Fighters Could Fuel a New Mercenary Wave

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What will happen to the thousands of militaries involved in the war between Russia and Ukraine once the war is over? Hundreds of thousands of battle-hardened soldiers from Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine will have to be demobilized once a credible ceasefire agreement/peace accord is signed. Depending on the outcome of the war, both states will want to keep sizable and strong armies, Ukraine for deterrence purposes and Russia either for control of its seized territory in Ukraine or, in case of a clear loss, for continued aggression to reach its political objectives, both in Ukraine and beyond. Yet, in spite of these factors, a large number of soldiers will have to demobilize from the national armed forces.

Introduction

The DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration) process of soldiers recently engaged in a war is always a challenging and complex process, characterized by tension, uncertainty and the risk of eruption of violence. The process can nevertheless be managed and controlled if a stable peace accord exists and if state- and international institutions have legitimacy, authority and trust from the soldiers and the population. However, in the case of the Russia-Ukraine war, the sheer number of soldiers – by some estimates up to 600,000 – that will have to be demobilised is a problem itself. Reintegrating [350,000 veterans](#) into the Ukrainian society ravaged by war for more than 3,5 years will be deeply problematic. Similarly, while Russia as the attacker has escaped the damaging and horrible consequences of the war, some of its soldiers – many of whom are former convicts – will also need to be absorbed by a war-distorted economy with a rising hidden unemployment and a society not ready for integration

of veterans marked by trauma, and/or a past criminal record.

This scenario opens the possibility for the creation of new PMCs (Private Military Company) and mercenary groups. Russia already has a tradition of state-controlled mercenary groups – most notably the infamous Wagner group which has both [played a decisive role in the early phase of the Ukraine invasion](#), but also in several [states in Africa](#). The Wagner group's transformation into state-controlled Africa Corps following Prigozhin's death, has removed the possibility of plausible deniability, yet its presence and activities in Africa remain. Ukraine has so far not the same history of mercenary groups or PMC, even though Ukrainian veterans previously have deployed to the Middle East and Africa as military contractors, joining existing organisations. Yet, the Ukrainian government is currently [debating establishing PMC](#), with the dual aim of supporting the ongoing war and to be a future employer of veterans – including abroad. It is therefore not implausible to imagine the creation of new such groups as hundreds of thousands of soldiers will need to be absorbed outside of the state institutions.

The aim of this policy brief is to draw attention to two possible scenarios in the aftermath of the Russia's war against Ukraine. First, the deeply challenging demobilization process of possibly more than half a million battle-hardened soldiers, many suffering from trauma and PTSD, in fragile and ravaged societies, implying new security risks and difficulties in rebuilding peace in Ukraine. Second, the risk that the massive number of soldiers will lead to the creation and recruitment of new mercenary groups and PMCs

respectively. Groups which have been increasingly used in Africa by authoritarian governments keen to maintain power and fight extremist violence.

This is an exploratory brief, meaning that it projects possible scenarios rather than present definite conclusions based on research projects. The overall objective of this analysis is to draw attention to the challenges, some of which are already underway, but which will multiply once a sustainable ceasefire, stalemate or peace agreement has been reached. Regardless of the outcome of the war, there will be a demobilization process for parts of the armed forces on both sides, making such an analysis not only relevant, but crucial to prepare for the future.

The inherent risks of DDR processes

Since the end of the Cold War, DDR has become a cornerstone of post-conflict peacebuilding. It is a political, social and economic process which refers to the efforts undertaken to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate combatants, including both members of a national armed force and those attached to a non-state armed organisation. The aim of such a process is to facilitate reintegration of fighting units into civilian life while also contributing to security and stability necessary for a long-term peace to be established. Common challenges to DDR processes include lack of political will, fragile ceasefire or peace accord, fragmented armed groups and limited state capacity with weak oversight and data system.

In the case of the Russia-Ukraine war, there is so far no ceasefire, much less a peace accord, even if new plans are being discussed at the time of writing (Nov 2025). Given the fact that this war is in many ways existential for Ukraine, any type of negotiated settlement to the war will most likely mean that there still will be doubts about Russia's sincere commitment to such an ending. On the Russian side, anything short of a clear victory and further territorial annexation will imply a loss, and the political will to demobilise considerable numbers may therefore not be strong. The insecurity and the lack of political will are likely to characterise the DDR processes in both of the

countries, which can result in a fragmented, fragile and inconclusive process.

Limited state capacity and oversight mechanism of the DDR process is another common challenge. State institutions' capacities and capabilities have often been considerably decimated by the war, resulting in constrained budgets, fewer, or less educated staff, and in some cases destroyed infrastructure. In most post civil war settings, where state armed actors and national militias and rebels have been fighting against each other, the DDR efforts are partly managed by a third party: an international organisation like the UN, the IOM or the World Bank, as the trust between the parties is low. For Russia however, external involvement is unthinkable and in a high-intensity interstate war, such as the Russia-Ukraine one, it is also highly likely that state institutions lack the capacities for the implementation of such processes, leading to lack of effective oversight, corruption, and only partial demobilisation which contributes to continued insecurity and fragility.

The risks related to DDR in Russia

Russia has been involved in several wars over the past century, including the WWII and the war in Afghanistan in the 1980's, both resulting in a large number of soldiers to demobilize with deeply troubled reintegration processes. Today the government is attempting to draw on these experiences to anticipate challenges after the Ukraine war. While the demobilisation process from the WWII was publicly seen as successful, with many veterans enjoying tangible benefits in education and employment, the treatment was uneven and frequently arbitrary. The experience of Afghanistan was even more problematic, with veterans receiving scant benefits, fomenting grievances and resulting in a destabilising factor for the state as veterans organised or joined criminal groups. Lessons learned from these experiences include efforts to give veterans preferential treatment and integrate them efficiently in society to avoid new moral, political and economic risks against the state power. In line with this logic, the Russian government has employed both carrots and sticks to keep the demobilised veterans from

the Ukraine war on side. A large [number of benefits to veterans](#), including free land, cash payments and preferential tax status and favorable loans are part of these. In addition, Putin has set up a program in March 2024, [entitled the “Time of Heroes”](#) to train military personnel into positions in government agencies and state-owned companies and thereby create a pool of loyal personnel with practical leadership and combat experience to rely on. An alleged 14,000 people applied during the first 24 hours, with some of the selected already occupying high functions, prompting Putin to expand the program in 2025. The Russian government has also set up [Kremlin-controlled associations](#), such as the Military Brotherhood Movement, to co-opt veterans, while efforts to constrain activist groups have been made by cutting state funding and banning criticism of the war through legislation.

While these efforts suggest that the Russian government has anticipated and prepared for the demobilisation process in relation to the Ukraine invasion, several challenges remain and some problematic issues have already surfaced. So far, approximately [140,000 soldiers have demobilized](#) since the start of the war in 2022, most of which appears to have integrated into civilian life. Yet, this process have been accompanied by a rise of violent crime with links to veterans returning home. The Defence Ministry estimated that around one in five veterans suffers from PTSD in a country which has fewer than one therapist per 7000 adults. Combined with increasing alcohol dependency and untreated trauma, this contributes to the rise in violent crime and community-level instability. A study found that since February 2022, Russian soldiers and officers have been [linked to more than 750 fatal or near-fatal](#) incidents, most of which occurred in domestic and local communities. This is not surprising, given that Russia has been notorious for enlisting [between 120,000 to 180,000 convicts](#) in the war against Ukraine, without excluding those who have committed particularly violent crimes. It is thus probable that the figures of violent crimes related to demobilized veterans will increase further in the event of a peace or ceasefire accord, making the integration process a destabilizing factor for society at large.

The risks related to DDR in Ukraine

While the current legislation only [allows demobilization once martial law](#) is lifted, Ukraine’s Commander-in-Chief, Oleksandr Syrskyi, has estimated [that around 350,000–500,000 troops](#) will be eligible for demobilization, within the first 6 to 12 months after the war. In addition, Ukraine’s Deputy Minister of Veterans Affairs, [Maksym Kushnir, has stated](#) that after the war, veterans and their family members will constitute around 5-6 million people. This indicates that the risks commonly associated with demobilization, as mentioned above, are likely to be amplified in Ukraine for several reasons discussed below.

While Ukraine is likely to seek the retention of a significant share of its current personnel to maintain future self-defence capacity, this objective will be difficult to achieve. The [absence of a demobilization plan](#) is one of the most contested aspects of current service conditions, and post-war prolonging of military contracts is likely to face resistance. Although demobilization may occur in phases, the sheer number of soldiers will still pose a challenge in itself. Moreover, because current military contracts do not provide a mechanism for demobilization, many soldiers will have served for exceptionally long periods. As a result, a large share of soldiers will have experienced prolonged and intense combat exposure with significant physical strain and psychological trauma.

At the same time, the combination of physical destruction, economic instability and widespread need for mental-health support across the Ukrainian population, will make the reintegration of such a large number of former soldiers an immense social and economic challenge. Veteran care systems are [already under severe pressure](#), and existing public services are unlikely to meet the demand without substantial external support and long-term planning, especially given the continued need for external funding, the availability of which remains uncertain. Grassroots initiatives and NGOs, such as Nova Ukraine and Veteranka, provide important supplements to official state support structures for specialized veteran care. However, they face similar challenges regarding long-term financing and the risk of fragmentation, which can make it difficult for

certain groups of veterans to access the support they need. Compounding these pressures is the likelihood of [high unemployment among former veterans](#), a pattern seen in many other post-conflict societies where infrastructure and business has been destroyed. A similar challenge is likely in Ukraine, where veteran unemployment already exceeds 30% according to government data, which is significantly higher than the remaining population. This gap is driven in part by [persistent stereotypes about veterans'](#) mental health and by [inadequate support for reintegration](#) into civilian.

Finally, Ukraine's mobilization of convicts into the AFU, while significantly different from Russia's, in that it is voluntary and the excludes perpetrators of [particularly violent crimes](#) such as multiple murders, treason or sexual offenses, may nonetheless create additional reintegration challenges. Some former convicts may be especially inclined to seek employment in security or combat roles outside state structures after the war. Having gained military training, combat experience, and a renewed sense of belonging through participation in the armed forces while concurrently facing limited reintegration opportunities into the formal labor market upon return, these veterans may view PMCs as one of few viable paths to economic survival and social recognition. Approximately [10,000 convicts](#) have been mobilized by the AFU during the full-scale war, most of them serving in infantry units where combat intensity, [and thus the likelihood of trauma](#), is the highest.

The prospective rise of PMCS from Russia

Rather than a longstanding tradition, Russia's reliance on state-linked PMCs has emerged only in recent years, largely through ad hoc arrangements and legal grey zones that gradually became integrated into its broader security and foreign-policy practice. Wagner is the most well-known example but far from the only actor in this industry, which also includes PMCs such as Redut, Patriot and Storm-Z, the latter [relying exclusively on convicts](#). Several experts have highlighted a rapid expansion of these groups in recent years, suggesting that Russia is actively investing in their growth not only to sustain its

war in Ukraine but also [to project influence abroad](#). On the one hand, Russia's increasing reliance on irregular armed formations is a way to [avoid politically costly mass mobilization](#) and demobilization at home, and on the other it is an effective way of blurring the line between state-controlled and private groups, making it easier for [the Russian MoD to denounce responsibility](#).

Russia's widespread recruitment of convicts into both the regular armed forces and PMCs further illustrates this trend. In 2023, some estimates indicated that at least [54,000 convicts](#) had been recruited, while, as mentioned, new estimates suggest that these numbers have [risen to up to 180,000](#). Reports indicate that Russian authorities, including the MoD in coordination with local administrators, [have pressured prisoners](#) to sign military contracts. Yet, pseudo-PMCs like Wagner have been particularly aggressive in this approach. For example, [the UN](#) has documented intimidation tactics towards convicts, including restricting communication with families and lawyers and forced transfers to training facilities in Rostov, and subsequent deployment to Ukraine without identification documents.

Russia's investment in PMCs is further demonstrated by a significant push to expand recruitment to these groups in different advertisement practices. Some units have advertised a doubling of salaries ([from around \\$2,000 per month to over \\$4,000](#)), which ties into a broader tendency of the Russian armed forces to offer a combination of pressure and financial incentives for military service, particularly [targeting poor regions and ethnic minorities](#). In addition, [recruitment campaigns for PMCs](#) are widely distributed online and in public spaces in form of billboards near metros and as ads on porn sites, [according to by Vladimir Osechkin](#), director of Russian oversight organization [Gulagu.net](#).

Looking ahead, these dynamics of active recruitment into PMCs suggest that the Russian government is likely to continue emphasizing PMCs as a central component of its military strategy. Yet, some sources even indicate that [the Kremlin itself fears this process](#), seeing the demobilization of its "prisoner army" as a significant societal risk.

Consequently, it is likely that Russia will seek to deploy such individuals abroad as contract soldiers, simultaneously sustaining its overseas military reach and reducing potential domestic disruption, but in case needed: bring them back to fight closer to home.

The prospective rise of PMCs from Ukraine

Ukraine does not share the history of PMCs with Russia, yet, throughout the last year, PMCs have emerged as a politically and socially significant topic in [Ukraine's post-war planning debates](#). Notably, a new draft law [introduced on 6 May 2025](#), referred to as the "Draft Law on PMSCs," indicates a step toward facilitating the establishment of PMCs in Ukraine. [According to article 260](#) of the Criminal Code of Ukraine, PMCs and the formation of paramilitary armed groups are currently prohibited. Yet several such companies exist operating in legal gray zones, such as 'Omega Consulting Group' which operates in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. [Other PMCs](#) have been absorbed into the the National Guard of Ukraine during the full-scale war, including Azov Brigade (formerly Black Corps), or into Ukraine's International League such as Freedom of Russia Legion (FRL) and Kalinoŭski Regiment from Belarus, and are therefore no longer PMCs.

For some policymakers, including members of the ruling Servant of the People party, PMCs are seen as a potentially attractive tool to manage post-war demobilization, as they could provide both employment opportunities for veterans while maintaining national defense capabilities. As reported by the [Kyiv Independent](#), MP from the Holos party, Andrii Osadchuk stated: "I am also looking at it from an (international) perspective. I've long believed that once we emerge from this nightmare, the vast military expertise Ukraine has gained shouldn't be wasted – it should be leveraged, even commercially." [Similarly, Fedir Venislavskyi](#), a member of the Ukrainian parliament's Defense and Intelligence Committee, emphasized the growing international demand for PMCs to carry out missions abroad: "So this is also a tool of international political influence for Ukraine. Ukraine has well-trained specialists in this field, and this is an

opportunity for Ukraine to expand its sphere of influence on the African and Asian continents, and so on." Yet, there is no unity in the Rada (parliament) and some MPs argue that PMCs should only be established after [the war's "hot phase."](#) This, however, suggests that the dispute is not so much about if PMCs should be legalized and expanded, but rather when.

In addition, while the AFU are transitioning toward a [NATO-standard corps-based command structure](#), in which brigades report to a corps that report to regional commands, the restructuring is difficult to conduct during war and not fully implemented. The army is therefore still characterized by a high degree of decentralization. In this structure, brigades often operate with considerable autonomy, including forming [their own collaborations with weapons manufacturers and securing equipment support independently](#). This decentralized model has enabled notable adaptability and innovation during the war, but it also raises potential challenges for a future demobilization process. In such a context, it cannot be ruled out that certain brigades or sub-units, accustomed to autonomous operation and external partnerships, would attempt to maintain independent structures or evolve into informal security formations.

Government representatives have stressed that Ukrainian PMCs will differ fundamentally from Russia's model, as they will be [operating under state regulation](#), integrated into established defense structures, [paying taxes to the Ukrainian budget](#), and adhering to international law. Yet, [as noted by one observer](#), the new draft bill allows PMCs to use "armed force capabilities" under "exceptional circumstances," a provision that leaves much to interpretation and depends on the jurisdiction of the host state. Last year, a similar bill was discussed, receiving support by the MoD, which nonetheless warned that the proposal, in its current form, [contradicted several international treaties and the Ukrainian constitution](#), and therefore required revision. It is thus plausible that a revised version will eventually be adopted. However, regulatory measures alone may prove insufficient, especially if they fail to properly [govern PMC operations abroad](#). Combined with

potentially weak or underdeveloped reintegration efforts for veterans, especially of former convicts, the future establishment of PMCs could lead veterans to seek employment with groups internationally.

A deeply unstable global environment and its implication for Africa

The demobilisation of soldiers from Russia and Ukraine will take place in a deeply unstable global environment, characterised by a Global Power Competition, a decline of multilateralism and a heavily restructured security landscape regardless of when it will take place. In Africa in particular, the past decade has seen a changing security architecture, defined by a rise of ad hoc coalitions, regional forces and mercenaries, strongly linked to an upsurge of armed conflicts, an unprecedented expansion of violent jihadist organisations, a new coup wave and relatedly, an authoritarian turn with military leaders in power. An enlarged offer of ‘guns for hire’ will undoubtedly be attractive to many African leaders who are facing insurgencies, or who simply want to secure their regime maintenance strategy.

The use of mercenaries or PMC on the African continent has seen a renewed increase over the past years, with the Wagner group deployed to Sudan, Libya, and Central African Republic amongst others. Yet, African governments have also procured services from other mercenaries, including Romanian troops in the DRC, while Chinese PMCs have become increasingly used for protecting commercial interests on the continent. The former Blackwater CEO, Erik Prince has also offered private soldiers in support of the government in the DRC, and was seen visiting Niger earlier this year, reflecting a wider trend in Africa towards increased reliance on external private contractors/mercenaries. The use of PMCs is both responding to African leaders who want an externally provided regime maintenance strategy while at the same time giving external actors a possibility to increase influence in an increasingly crowded conflict management space. The existing Global Power Competition is not restricted to the East, but is also playing out on the African continent with African leaders

as active participants. As such, the possible upsurge of the number of battle-hardened mercenaries and PMCs with new technological know-how, particularly on the use of drones which is increasingly used in counter-terrorism operations by African security forces, represents an attractive offer for African governments, yet with limited oversight and accountability attached.

Conclusion

In December 2025, there is no accepted peace accord, ceasefire or peace plan that promises an end to Russia’s war in Ukraine. Proposals and negotiations have so far fallen short of stopping the war and Russia has repeatedly violated fragile ceasefire agreements, making it hard to predict when there will be a more long-term end to the fighting. Western analysts have long argued that Russia won’t stop its efforts to conquer territory in Ukraine, but will continue deeper into Europe, if not stopped. There are thus arguments for a constrained and limited demobilisation of Russian troops in the short to medium term. However, given the sheer numbers of soldiers involved on both sides of the war, there will most likely be some sort of demobilisation process, or in lieu of a demobilisation process, a transformation and outsourcing of forces to work as military contractors for the state, thereby being ready to be called in again when needed.

Regardless of when a more stable end to the war comes, European states and multilateral institutions such as the UN and the EU should start to reflect over how they can assist Ukraine in its demobilization process when the time comes. Questions about financing DDR processes, identifying employment opportunities and preparing for integration efforts into a shattered society should be addressed well before any stalemate, peace accord or longer ceasefire are effective. All efforts should be made to ensure that the basis for a functional, inclusive and stable peace in Ukraine is put in place. So should questions about what rules and regulations should govern the creation, use and deployment of military contractors and PMCs in and outside of Europe, as Ukrainian know-how from the war will be in high

demand. These questions are uncomfortable and might only seem for the distant future, but if left unaddressed for too long, might become sources of renewed contention and institutional strain that will undermine European and international efforts to manage the conflict's aftermath.

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