

EGMONT PAPER 116

– MAY 2022 –

The Russian Soldiers' Question Revisited

*On the Application and Meaning of
Russian Military Conscription in Ukraine*

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Key Points

The Russian authorities apply an “algorithm of lies”, the Russian armed forces have become a sealed organization, and tactical information about Russia’s war in Ukraine is fragmented and unreliable. Hence, definite conclusions concerning the Russian soldier cannot be drawn. Instead, the following observations and trends may be presented:

- Russia’s surprise is not the invasion of Ukraine per se. The real surprise is Russia’s underperformance in battle.
- The Russian army keeps struggling with the structural problems of the past. As a result, it has exposed its traditional combat behaviour with a high tolerance for losses and the tacit permission to apply brute force.
- Given enough time and means, the brute force of the expendable unprofessional soldier may also achieve victory in battle.
- The study of Russia and its military is, therefore, the study of a stagnant, suboptimal system that, against all odds, endures. This demands a specific analytical methodology.
- The Russian armed forces are a force-in-being going through a transition from a mass army to an all-volunteer force. Currently, about a quarter of the military is conscripted, and approximately 45 percent is contracted. Indeed, about 70 percent are enlisted soldiers. With an officer corps representing about 23 percent of the force, this leaves almost no billets for non-commissioned officers in the Russian military. This organizational structure has a high impact on combat readiness and battle performance.
- Russian society has high esteem and trust in the Russian armed forces. It also supports conscription. Nevertheless, only twenty percent of the youngsters answer the call of duty. Russia is a phony country.
- The current spring recruitment cycle (1 April-15 July 2022) may be considered a more accurate indication of popular support for Putin’s war in Ukraine than public opinion research. Russian conscription may be regarded as a referendum and the *voenkomati* as the voting stations.
- Officially, deviant behaviour exposed in phenomena such as *dedovshchina* and *gruppovshchina* is under control. There are objective arguments for believing that the conditions in the barracks have been improved. However, based on sociological and demographic data, it may be deduced that the Russian armed forces are still recruiting the majority of their conscripts (and contract soldiers) among the least socially privileged layers of society and Russia’s non-Orthodox population. If true, traditional deviant behaviour and malpractices may continue until today. Lacking objective, organization-wide, and independent data, one cannot deny or confirm the clichés of the past. What is left are conjectures.
- The Russian army in Ukraine is showing varying levels of combat readiness. Some units are fully professionalized, while others still have more than fifty percent of conscripted soldiers. Some units are *full ops*, while others miss more than 30 percent of personnel.
- The Russian ground forces count about 30 percent of conscripts in their ranks. However, we have no reliable information about how many conscripts have participated in front-line operations in Ukraine, if at all. Consequently, we have no idea about the impact of conscripts on the battle performance of the Russian army.



- In Ukraine, we observe abandoned soldiers who lack the necessary leadership and command structures to act professionally. Under these conditions, the Russian soldier represents a danger, if not a risk. He is not only a victim of the system but also a potential perpetrator, if not a potential war criminal.
- One of the most urgent problems of the Russian army is one of training and leadership on a tactical level. Thus, the Russian soldiers' problem is larger than the choice between *prizivniki* and *kontraktniki*, as both may perform well if trained and led well. In this sense, the discussion on the all-volunteer force is misplaced; it is a faint, misunderstood imitation of a Western model.
- Under the current conditions, the real meaning of conscript soldiers – a contingent of about 220,000 – is that it represents a guaranteed source of recruitment for contract soldiers and, if general mobilization has been announced, a group of soldiers that can be 'lawfully' added to the manpower in Ukraine necessary to achieve victory.
- Therefore, we expect pressure from the military to escalate the conflict rather than to de-escalate. Moreover, we observe increased political pressure to expand the contingent of conscripts (up to 300,000). Hence, the war in Ukraine stimulates de-professionalization rather than the professionalization of the Russian armed forces.
- What is left is misery, endless misery as only the dead have seen the war's end.



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“It is one thing to say that a tyrant regards human life as of little worth; it is another, larger thing to say that the bureaucracy the tyrant rules does the same. But it is enormous to say that a malignant bureaucracy has so traumatized its nation that generations of individuals place similar small values on their own lives.”¹

Introduction

On 10 May 2006, amid the Second Chechen War (1999-2009), Vladimir Putin addressed the Federal Assembly mentioning the problem of military conscription. He bitterly observed that the general staff could barely assemble 55,000 men to fight the Chechen insurgents while the Russian military counted 1,4 million people. *“This is how kids who had never seen combat before were sent to fight”*. This deplorable state of affairs made him make a significant promise: *“I will not forget this ever. And it is our task to make sure that this never happens again”*.²

On 8 March 2022, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Putin addressed Russian women on International Women’s Day, saying, *“I emphasize that conscript soldiers are not participating in hostilities and will not participate in them. And there will be no additional call-up of reservists”*.³

During his reign, Putin’s message on military conscription has proven to be consistent.⁴ Facts on the ground, however, have shown a different picture. Soon after the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war, on 24 February 2022, Russian conscripts soldiers were caught prisoner, declaring they had no clue about their mission or the exact context in which they were fighting. In Russia, mothers of conscripted soldiers, afraid that their sons would be used as cannon fodder, were anxiously enquiring with the authorities about the whereabouts of their sons. On 9 March 2022, one day after Putin’s declaration, General-Major Igor Konashenkov, the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD), publicly admitted that conscripts were active on Ukraine soil, saying, *“Unfortunately, we have discovered several facts of the presence of conscripts in units taking part in the special military operation in Ukraine”*.⁵ Predictably, he minimized the importance of their deployment and promised to bring the conscripts back to Russia as quickly as possible.

These contradictory observations are both familiar and surprising for those acquainted with Russian defence policy and the Russian soldiers’ problem.⁶ They are familiar, given Russia’s woeful record of its treatment of its soldiers throughout its history. Russian soldiers’ life has been notoriously harsh and expendable.⁷ However, one might be surprised by the same observation, especially since the Russian military has gone through a decade and a half of military reform and modernization in which professionalization and combat readiness have been given the highest priority.⁸

“And that’s the shock”, professor Stephen Kotkin, a renowned Russian expert and biographer of Josef Stalin, exclaimed. *“The shock is that so much has changed, yet we’re still seeing this pattern they can’t escape”*.⁹ Kotkin made this remark in the context of Russia’s current political developments, confirming Russia’s authoritarian tradition. Similarly, in 2004, we labelled Russia’s attempt to professionalize its armed forces as a process of *“transformation without change.”*¹⁰ At the time, we reminded the reader that the Russian military was an utterly conservative organization facing considerable resistance to liberate itself from the shackles of its past. We also warned the reader that declarations of the Russian authorities do not necessarily reflect reality and that the mere imitation of western ideas in the Russian context may have perverse outcomes.

Based on our former research and our observation of Russia's military conduct in Ukraine, we will re-assess the Russian soldiers' problem. As such, we will focus on military, social, and political aspects related to Russia's practice of military conscription. Since we consider this phenomenon a magnifying glass through which one can observe Russian society, we hope to provide insights concerning Russia's military organization, military mentality, public opinion, and civil-military relations relevant to the current crisis in Ukraine.

Caution, however, should be observed. As we now witness the world's "first TikTok war", it might be clear that our observations are incomplete, indirect, and prone to manipulation and fabrication.¹¹ Moreover, after a period of relative openness in the 1990s, which had more to do with chaos than with deliberate preference, the Russian military has become a "sealed organization" – a prison, as Anna Politkovskaya once noted¹² – walled in by an increasingly restrictive law and a rigorous campaign of censorship and intimidation.¹³ On top of that, one must remember that Russian politics is steered by propaganda and status anxiety, blurring the distinction between ambition and reality.¹⁴ As a result, on military affairs especially, official declarations and state-managed media outlets are often misleading, inaccurate, and, thus, unreliable. As a result, we sometimes have to report that we cannot draw definite conclusions based on the available (open) sources. This might be disappointing, but we prefer to say that we are ignorant rather than confirming our own opinions based on unsubstantiated proof.

The Russian "force-in-being": in transition between the mass army and the all-volunteer force

Since 7 May 1992, the official founding date of the Russian armed forces, Russia has struggled with a manpower problem as it has gone through a chaotic and rudderless period of (radical) demobilization, downsizing, and restructuring.¹⁵ These developments were imposed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and, thus, by chaos rather than well-considered choice. Under these circumstances, one can barely speak about reform. Yet, throughout this period, one fundamental reform question has kept haunting the Russian high command: should the traditional conscription system of mass mobilization remain in place, or should the Russian army modernize and transform into an all-volunteer force?

The choice between *prizivniki* (conscript soldiers) and *kontraktniki* (contract soldiers) is a choice that goes beyond the mere payment of soldiers. It touches upon vital questions such as the war one is preparing for, the intrinsic meaning of "the professional soldier", the society in which the military is acting, and the relationship between the political and military elite. Russia's recruitment practice must thus be considered as part of a *Gestalt* – a structured whole, of which the sum is more than the composing parts – providing insight into Russian (military) posture, its organizational culture, and its civil-military relations.

The characteristics of the main types of armed forces under discussion may be outlined as follows:

- Mass armies reflect the dominant societal trends such as industrialization, the rise of nation-states (and nationalism), and the existence of large bureaucratic organizations. In this context, nations are mobilized to fight each other in total, industrialized, symmetric wars steered by deep battle theory. The emphasis lies on the ground forces, which constitute the least technologically advanced of all the branches, yet the most significant force in the military. The chain of command is linear, centralized, and hierarchical, comparable with practices in industrial society. The economy, the education system, and the nation's militarized culture all support the preparation and waging of the next war. Conscription is the primary method of recruitment. Skeleton military units provide basic military training, impose the values of the state, and, ultimately, supply the reserve forces. In times of crisis, these large

reserve forces, supported by massive strategic arsenals, are mobilized to fight wars of attrition. This means that the military has a crucial state-building function besides its prominent military role. As a result, the military is one of the leading state institutions in society, receiving high status and esteem as well as a prioritized position in the allocation of state means.¹⁶

- The all-volunteer force is a much smaller, more diverse, highly mobile, and agile force that anticipates rapid changes in a globalized world. Risks, complexity, and unpredictability go with the virtual and information society. Therefore, the military is a highly flexible force in a state of permanent readiness. It has been steered by theories such as “network-centric warfare” and “sixth-generation warfare”, in which the development of command, control, communications, computer, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems and firepower in support of relatively small groups of combat units is vital. Precision overrules mass in all its applications. Horizontal communication is emphasized more than vertical communication. Personal initiative, trust, and respect are necessary attitudes for military success. Therefore, this organization requires highly trained personnel with higher educational qualifications, possessing intrinsic motivation. Professional soldiers – men and women – become valuable assets, not just expendable cannon fodder. The position of the all-volunteer force and its status in society is somewhat marginalized as not the whole nation is mobilized to support it. Moreover, far-away conflicts are not in the immediate interests of their citizens. Hence, society is less militarized.¹⁷

Russian strategists are well aware of these developments.¹⁸ The Russian military has never lacked the intellectual capacity or theoretical insights to understand modern warfare’s organizational consequences. Russian history has produced several brilliant strategists and revolutionary military thinkers, including Alexander Suvorov, Alexander Svechin, and Vasily Sokolovsky, to name just a few.¹⁹ However, confronted with its Soviet legacy, imposing a materiel-focused rather than a human-focused mindset, the Russian military has proven to be a conservative institution, reluctant to change. As a result, from 1991 to 2007, the Russian army remained an outdated and ineffective organization. This state of affairs was also visible on the battlefield when the Russian military underperformed in Chechnya and Georgia.²⁰

In October 2008, Minister of Defence Anatoly Serdyukov and Chief of Staff Army General Nikolai Makarov presented a radical new reform plan and, in 2011, an ambitious rearmament and modernization programme.²¹ Serdyukov’s “perspective look” expressed a clear and coherent set of goals allowing for a systemic change in the Russian Armed Forces.²² Despite the usual organizational resistance,²³ the deeply entrenched idea of the mass army was left behind as one of the end goals of Serdyukov’s plan, established somewhere in 2020, was the all-volunteer force or fully professionalized army. This has been a revolutionary development in Russian military affairs, justifying Serdyukov’s phrase: Russia’s “New look” armed forces (*novyj oblik vooruzhennyh sil*).

Still, despite a period of reform and modernization of about 15 years, in 2022, Russia maintains a hybrid recruitment system engaging both contract and conscript soldiers. In military organizational studies, this type of organization is called a “force-in-being”, a military organization in a state of transformation between a mass army and an all-volunteer force.²⁴ There are structural and institutional reasons explaining this situation.

First and foremost, Russia’s path toward the all-volunteer force has been determined by structural constraints imposed by Russian society, including economic, demographic, and societal limitations. In 2021, this led both Minister of Defence Shoigu and Colonel-General Yevgeny Burdinsky to declare that, for the time being, a fully contract army was too expensive.²⁵ Secondly, there is still no consensus within the Russian high command to abolish conscription altogether. There still are conservative voices who suffer from what Jeffrey Michaels calls “the Barbarossa syndrome”. This is the fear that Russia could be the victim of a surprise attack either from the West (NATO) or the South (China).²⁶ In that case, Russia must be

able to mobilize a large reserve force to counter this attack. Moreover, these voices emphasize the critical task of the armed forces to discipline the Russian youth and educate them on military and patriotic values. The “red army ghost” has not left the Russian General Staff entirely.

Despite this societal and political reality, Vladimir Putin has regularly reiterated his promise of the full professionalization of the military. However, it is quite telling that Vladimir Putin made this promise in 2001, 2007, 2012, 2017, 2018, and 2019. These years corresponded with Russia’s electoral seasons or periods when Putin’s approval ratings were under pressure.²⁷ Apparently, Putin considers the issue of military conscription a sensitive issue that influences his status as a strong leader. According to the popular myth of the “good tsar who stands above the bad Boyars”, he has to protect the conscripted soldiers against the abuses of the military elite. But also, the Russian president, so it seems, struggles with the discrepancy between ambition and reality.

Russia’s “one-million-men” force: between ambition and reality

As of 1 January 2018, the total number of active military personnel (*Shtatnaja chislennost’ voennosluzhashchikh*) is 1,013,628 as established by presidential decree Nr. 555 (3 November 2017).²⁸ The “regular number” fixed by law is a rather theoretical number used to plan budget expenditure for salaries and other payments to military personnel. The actual number (*real’naja chislennost’*) is lower as some posts remain vacant, and for some positions, one person may occupy a combination of billets.

Deduced from several recent statements issued by the Russian MoD and General Staff, the manpower target is 966,000, and the actual number is approximately 910,000.²⁹

Category	Targeted	%	Actual	%
Officers	220,000	23 %	211,000	23 %
Warrant officers (<i>praporshchiki</i>)	50,000	5 %	49,500	5 %
Contract Soldiers (<i>kontraktniki</i>)	435,000	45 %	430,650	47 %
Conscripts (<i>prizivniki</i>)	261,000	27 %	220,000	24 %
Total	966,000		911,150	
Reserve Force	2,000,000		200,000	

Table 1: Number of active troops in the Russian Military per category

Based on these figures, about 23 percent of the Russian military has an officer rank, and about 71 percent are enlisted. Sixty-six percent of the enlisted soldiers are contracted, while 33 percent are conscripted soldiers. In total, nearly a quarter of the military is still conscripted. Compared with the situation in the 1990s and 2000s, which showed an officer-heavy organization, this personnel structure shows a somewhat normalized pyramidal form. (It was indeed one of the main objectives of Serdyukov’s reform initiative to streamline the organizational structure by undoing the organization of approximately 150,000 officers.)

However, despite attempts to establish one, the Russian military does not have a well-developed professional NCO corps.³⁰ This reality and the lack of a sufficient number, and the lack of experience, of junior officers make the Russian enlisted soldiers somewhat “abandoned” and “self-reliant”. This structural reality has implications in terms of command and control, combat readiness, and the organizational culture of the Russian military.

Besides these officially reported figures, other sources publish different estimates of manpower. In 2022, the authoritative Military Balance reported a total number of 900,000 active troops in the military. The CIA factbook (March 2022 edition) set this number lower, at approximately 850,000 total active-duty troops and 200,000 reserve forces.³¹

On 30 March 2022, a noteworthy article appeared in the online newspaper Novye Izvestia, discussing the spring recruitment season 2022 of the Russian military. It said that “the number of military personnel in the country should be 1 million, while their real number is less than 800 thousand”.³² Concretely, the article mentioned that the military lacked about 225,000 people (especially in the coastal troops and the troops for chemical, biological, and radiation protection.) This would mean that it could count only on approximately 790,000 active troops.

This number below 800,000 returned in an article published by the Russian version of Gogov, a web application connecting governments and citizens by posting official government information. In 2018, the number of military personnel was 794,000.³³ These figures differ significantly from the official MoD number of 910,000.

Based on open sources, the following estimates are the actual numbers of active troops in the Russian military in 2022. These numbers suggest a difference between the reported and actual numbers of active manpower in the military.

	RUS MoD	Mil Balance	CIA World Factbook	Novye Izvestia
Active troops	910,000	900,000	850,000	790,000
% conscripts	24%	24%	26%	28%

Table 2: Total number of active troops in the Russian military - Different sources

Why devote so much attention to the observed discrepancy between targeted and actual numbers or between ambition and reality? First of all, to indicate that official figures from open sources are potentially misleading. Moreover, this discrepancy creates perverse effects in everyday practice. People under pressure to achieve (unrealistic) targets will use “survival strategies” to realise their goals.

This seems to be the case with the recruitment of conscripted soldiers. In the biannual recruitment seasons, the *voenkomati* – the local military selection and recruitment boards – that do not achieve their recruitment targets have been known in the past to go out into the street to check youngsters ad random. If eligible for military service, they bring these youngsters manu militari to the *voenkomati* or even directly to the assembly points from which they are sent to the units.

The same coping strategy has been reported concerning the recruitment of contract soldiers. Because the MoD has imposed unrealistic recruitment targets for contract soldiers, it has turned out that the primary source of recruitment for contract soldiers is the pool of conscript soldiers. It has been testified that once the drafted soldiers are in the barracks and at the mercy of their commanders, they have been put under moral and physical pressure to sign up as *kontraktniki*. Even though this practice may help achieve the recruitment targets, the question remains if this brings the best soldiers with the appropriate motivation to the units.



Conscript soldiers in the Russian army: between numbers and real-life practice

NUMBERS, NUMBERS, NUMBERS...

The target number for conscript soldiers is transparent as twice a year it is published in preparation for the spring (April-July) and autumn (October-December) recruitment seasons. From 2018 on, this figure has been relatively stable at approximately 260,000 conscripts per year.³⁴ On 31 March 2022, Putin signed a decree for the spring draft season, fixing the target at 134,500 conscripts, comparable to the spring draft number in 2021.³⁵ With an effective enlistment of 220,000 soldiers, as mentioned by Shoigu in December 2021, this would mean that 85 percent of the scheduled billets are filled. The other 40,000 conscripts are unavailable or sent to other security departments, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the FSB, and other power institutions.

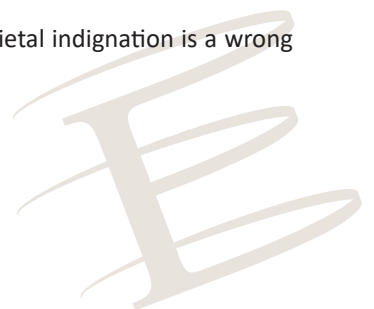
Most of the Russian conscripts in the military are enlisted in the ground forces and serve in all types of army units, even the most operational units such as airborne troops and *Spetznaz*, though not in the same proportion. For instance, in the airborne forces (VDV), in 2020, of a total strength of 45,000 active men, about 8,200 were conscripts (18 percent) and 32,800 were contract soldiers (72 percent). The *Spetznaz* units still use conscripts with a comparable percentage of draftees (15 to 20 percent). Alternatively, there are units with a much higher rate of conscripts, possibly up to 50 percent. Moreover, there may be fully professionalized subunits in larger units (for instance, battalions in a Brigade or BTG – Battalion Tactical Group), while others remain with a higher level of conscripts (up to 70 percent). Therefore, it is impossible to determine the number of conscripts used in each unit based on open sources: it may vary from zero to 75 percent. Thus, linearly extrapolating the number of 24 percent of conscripts over all the units of the Russian services and units may draw a wrong picture of the Russian military.

CONSCRIPTS AND MILITARY READINESS

As of 1 January 2008, the service period for conscripts has been fixed at one year.³⁶ This affects the combat readiness and cohesion of the Russian Armed Forces. If we consider a period of 3 months of training to prepare a soldier from the individual to the company/squadron level in a Mechanized Infantry unit (or Motor Rifle unit) and a period of 3 to 6 months to prepare the same soldier for a specific operation as standard, it might be clear that a service period of 12 months is too short to fight in (offensive) large-scale, high-intensity conflicts. Moreover, the vast turnover of soldiers in the units undermines their cohesion and operability.

However, also here, nuance is called for. The combat readiness of conscripts is not only determined by the time soldiers serve. Even before 2008, when conscripts were serving 24 months, military readiness showed to be substandard. This is well demonstrated during the Chechnyan wars (1994-1996 and 2000-2009).³⁷ Thus, military readiness, both for conscript and contract soldiers, depends first and foremost on the level of instruction, training, and motivation/empowerment of the soldier, and not just on the period of service. The Ukraine forces prove that soldiers may be very effective on the battlefield with a minimal period of instruction. This observation has several consequences:

- Replacing conscripted soldiers with contracted soldiers without changing the organizational culture is no guarantee of improving combat readiness.
- Replacing conscripted soldiers with contracted soldiers to avoid loss of status or societal indignation is a wrong motivation. It has nothing to do with the foundations of an all-volunteer force.



- The professionalization of soldiers is a military issue rather than a financial one. Untrained professional soldiers form a kind of contradiction in terminus. Paying soldiers for the sake of paying without proper training, instruction, and leadership result in a mercenary army (*nayomnaya armiya*) rather than a professional army.
- Not being able or willing to send one's conscripted soldiers into "hot zones" is a waste of resources, and cripples the combat readiness of the military, in particular when conscripted soldiers staff a quarter of the organization.³⁸
- Therefore, the discussion about the professionalization of the Russian Armed Forces in terms of combat readiness is, to a certain extent, a misplaced discussion. The conditions preparing soldiers for combat have first and foremost to do with the organization's structure and culture, revealing how soldiers are treated. Both conscript and contract soldiers may perform well if led with respect and trust. Therefore, not the level of payment is the most critical issue. The way soldiers are fed, clothed, housed, informed, engaged, trained, motivated, etc., is fundamental to evaluating the Russian military's level of professionalization – and thus combat readiness.

Besides the theoretical discussion about using contract soldiers instead of conscripts, there is a convenient reason to maintain conscription. About 37 percent of the posts in some units are unfilled.³⁹ The availability of conscripts ensures a pool of soldiers guaranteed by law who can fill these places. Conscription is thus maintained out of necessity. This might be why some State Duma Defence committee members have been lobbying for an increased number of conscription billets of up to 300,000 per year (instead of the current 260,000).⁴⁰ In other words, there is political pressure to increase rather than decrease the pool of conscripted soldiers.

LIFE IN THE BARRACKS

In the 1990s and 2000s, the situation of the Russian conscript soldier was notoriously harsh, which contributed to and sustained the negative spiral the Russian military found itself in. As draft-dodging became a general practice among youngsters, only the most socially deprived youngsters ended up in the barracks, which, in its turn, only made the situation in the barracks worse. Life in the barracks was brutal at best and mortal at worst. The Russian military's "peacetime deaths" scandal was a well-known and documented fact.⁴¹ Besides the abuse of their superiors, Russian soldiers were the victim of *dedovshchina*,⁴² the systematic abuse of younger soldiers by their *dedy* – their "grandfathers" or elder colleagues – and *gruppovshchina*,⁴³ referring to violent clashes among ethnic groups and the (racist-inspired) abuse of ethnic minorities.

What can be said on these issues anno 2022? Unfortunately, not that much with certainty. There are indications that the social conditions in the military have improved in the last decade. The reduction of the service period to one year, Serdyukov's and Shoigu's reform efforts imposing the professionalization of the Russian soldier, and the genuine efforts of Minister of Defence Shoigu to invest in the human capital of the military have most probably contributed to an improvement of the conditions of the Russian soldiers, both contracted and conscripted.

Lately, the General Staff has reported that the quality of the conscripted soldiers has improved, suggesting that the negative spiral the Russian military found itself in in the past has been reversed into a positive turn. It is said that the physical fitness, education level, age, etc., of the enlisted cohort are improving. In 2021, for example, it was reported that 20 percent of the cohort had a university diploma, 33 percent had a diploma of graduation from a technical school, and the physical condition of the soldiers has significantly increased over the last years.⁴⁴ Never shy to emphasize his achievements, Shoigu has declared that "*the social issues of servicemen and their family members are being successfully resolved*".⁴⁵

Most observers confirm that the situation of the Russian soldiers has improved. The 2022 Military Balance, for example, noted in the most general terms that "*Morale has been improved because of better pay, terms and conditions, and greater*

prestige associated with military service".⁴⁶ However, other voices, primarily situated in Russia's liberal opposition camp, contradict the abovementioned views.⁴⁷ Based on the social stratification "Four Russias" (*chetyre rossia*) of the Russian geographer Natalia Zubarevich,⁴⁸ Mikhail Pirogovsky claims that the rank-and-file soldiers are still coming from the Russian regions beyond the big cities, where he graphically characterizes life as follows:

"Born there? Your alcoholic father has quite possibly been beating up your granny for her \$US150 pension, and junkies were doing salt in the back of your class in the eighth grade. Collection of scrap metal was an honourable alternative to petty theft, though the metal had to be stolen anyway. Your social circle was all sporting Adidas tracksuits; a third had done jail time. Chances are, you knew someone who killed someone. You sure knew someone who drank themselves to death (maybe it was your dad). And in lieu of the older generation to look up to, you got dames with permed hair, bloated from their cheap macaroni diet, hunched and dead-eyed before they turn forty. Somewhere, people were driving Ferraris, but you stood as much chance of becoming them as hitching a ride on the SpaceX Dragon. Not that you know what it is".⁴⁹

This depressing portrait of small-town and rural life in Russia – corresponding with Natalia Zubarevich's "second and third Russia," where over 50 percent of the Russian population resides – is quite cliché and, therefore, somewhat charged. Yet, the dissident writer Viktor Yerofeyev confirms the observation, stating that the Russian military is recruiting most of its enlisted soldiers – contracted and conscripted – from the most deprived regions of Russia.⁵⁰ If true, and we refer to this later in our text, this would suggest that the official reports concerning the quality of the recruits are overstating the facts and that, consequently, the risk of violence and other kinds of deviant behaviour remains high in the military.

Another example of a known structural problem within the military may illustrate the blurred line between ambition and reality. Indeed, official announcements of the MoD do not mention issues related to the recruitment of ethnic minorities. In 2019, however, Marlene Laruelle had predicted that "in about 10 to 20 years, the majority of conscripts to the Russian army will be of Muslim background".⁵¹ Moreover, it is a well-known fact that youngsters residing in the Caucasus, especially Dagestan, are very eager to join the military.⁵² This has to do with their deprived socio-economic situation and traditional mentality, showing high esteem for martial and militaristic values.⁵³ Their eagerness to join the military was even curtailed in the period of increased threat of Muslim extremism. Yet, in times of manpower problems, such as Russia is currently facing, one cannot imagine that the military would refuse voluntary candidates to join the armed forces. In other words, contrary to the silence of the MoD, demographic and socio-economic data suggest that there must be many soldiers with a Muslim background in the barracks. What does this say about the problem of *gruppovshchina* or the treatment of these soldiers in an institution strongly affiliated with the Russian Orthodox church? Frankly, we do not know with certainty, and what remains are just (strong) conjectures.

However it may be, it is difficult to come to an unambiguous, firm conclusion on the conditions of life in the Russian barracks. As we have already noted, this has to do with the fact that the military has become an increasingly untransparent organization. In this context, it is essential to remark that the Soldiers' Mothers, an NGO focusing on the rights of conscript soldiers and one of the significant sources of information on life in the barracks, has lately been qualified as a "foreign agent".⁵⁴ As a result, democratic control of the Russian Armed Forces has been lost, civil-military relations have been disturbed, and information about the Russian military is severely censored. Russia's authoritarian reflex is also visible through the eyes of the Russian soldier.



In short, many observers assume that the Russian soldiers' social conditions have improved compared to the period 1990-2008. There are reasons to trust this opinion. Yet, counter-indications and anecdotal examples suggest that life in the barracks is still unnecessarily strenuous and challenging. We lack objective, independent, and organization-wide information about *dedovshchina* and *gruppovshchina*. As a result, life in the barracks remains an "unknown known".

Conscription and Russian society

The state using conscription to man its forces establishes a direct connection between the military and society. This should be good news in a situation where democratic control is allowed. Potentially, the mass army is considered a more democratic institution than an all-volunteer force.⁵⁵ Yet, in Russia, the problem is different: the democratic benefits and rights related to conscription are ignored, if not denied. Nevertheless, the way society thinks about its military might indicate the community's support for the military and its leadership.

Based on public opinion surveys, the following trends concerning the military, the perceived threats, and general worldview are noticed:⁵⁶

1. The military is the institution with the highest status in Russian society, comparable with the approval rates of president Putin. Besides, it is pretty revealing that political parties, NGOs, unions, etc. – organizations, that is, which give substance to a healthy democratic system – have the lowest status in Russian society.
2. There is also a high trust in the military, as, in May 2021, about 85 percent of the Russian population are convinced the armed forces could protect Russia in case of a real threat from other countries, while only 11 percent said it could not.
3. About 69 percent of the population subscribe to the statement that the breakup of the Soviet Union was a bad thing for Russia.
4. About 80 percent of the Russian people have (very) negative views of the United States and NATO.
5. The overwhelming majority of the Russian public supports Putin's foreign policy on China, the United States, Ukraine, and Europe. They believe Russia is an essential counterbalance to the West (85 percent), whose values clash with Russian values (73 percent).

In the specific context of the soldiers' problem, recent polls about conscription show the following results:⁵⁷

1. Conscription has received increased societal support. In May 2021, for example, 61 percent answered that *"every real man should serve in the army"*, and 23 percent said, *"Military service is a duty to the state, even if it doesn't meet personal interest"*. Thus, an overwhelming part of the Russian population (85 percent) has a favourable opinion of conscription. In contrast, only 12 percent of the Russian population confirmed that *"military service is pointless and it is necessary to try to avoid it by all means"*. (In 1997, this was 24, and in 2014, 15 percent).
2. If one asks Russian society about the all-volunteer force, then it shows that 34 percent support this type of armed force. In contrast, almost half (48 percent) of Russian society supports the mixed force-in-being model, and only a small minority support the mass conscript army like in the USSR (17 percent).

Public opinion about conscription may be surprising. However, based on our research in the 1990s and 2000s, this is not that surprising. Even when conscription was the subject of a critical societal debate and many cases of abuse in the military barracks were exposed, public opinion showed relatively high support for military conscription. In 1997, for example, 69 percent of the Russian population had a favourable idea of conscription.⁵⁸ However – and this is the point – there is a vast

difference between talking about conscription in the abstract and being selected to serve oneself. In practice, in Russia, draft-dodging is still a widespread practice. Once people receive their convocation letter for military service and they have to present themselves to the medical selection commission (*Voenkomat*), one may observe the application of a series of strategies to avoid military service. Familial, educational, and medical arguments are legal reasons for military service deferment. If these deferment reasons do not apply, physicians, psychiatrists, lawyers, even members of the *voenkomat*, and other network relations are addressed to get removed from active duty. As a result, only 20 percent of the draft cohort serves in the Russian army. In other words, about 80 percent of eligible men have some form of deferment or exemption from military service. (In 2001, this was about 88 percent). The military authorities try to counter draft-dodging with both charm and coercion. In the mid-2010s, several measures were taken to improve the communication between the *voenkomati* and the citizens. As such, telephone and internet lines have been installed to facilitate communication between the youngsters, their families, and the military authorities. The military has also announced to minimize the risks of COVID during military service. More recently, especially since the war in Ukraine, more repressive measures have been taken. As such, it is forbidden for lawyers to offer their service to young men to avoid military duty, a service that, until 2021, was widely advertised.

In general terms, one may conclude that Russian society is a conservative society that supports military values and a nationalistic worldview.⁵⁹ This reminds us of a sociological debate that has been ongoing in Russia since the mid-1990s and that, in 2019, was fired up once more. Indeed, in 2019, public opinion research showed that Stalin received the highest esteem in Russia among Russian/Soviet heroes since this opinion was investigated in the 1990s. As a result, some sociologists qualified the Russian mass person as both conformist and authoritarian. Disappointed with the failed democratic experiment in Russia, Yuri Levada, a renowned Russian sociologist and founder of the Levada public opinion centre, called his compatriots “*servile double-thinkers with no morality*”. Put less aggressively, he said, “[Russians] not only tolerate deception, but are willing to be deceived, and even require self-deception for their preservation”. These characterizations go back to his research in which he postulated the existence of “the wily man”, “Soviet man” (*Sovietsky chelovek*), “Red Man”, exposing what is called a “sovki” mindset.⁶⁰ This personality type is supposed to be imposed by the Soviet system that endures until today in Russian society. It is a latent mindset that in the Putin regime has been cultivated by a relentless indoctrination campaign supported by the state media, the school system with its revisionist curriculum, a specific narrative of elite politicians, and the military. It is also the mindset that Svetlana Alexievich, the Belarusian writer and 2014 Nobel prize winner, describes in her magisterial book *Second-Hand Time, the Last of the Soviets*.⁶¹ The Russian psychologist Aleksandr Asmolov confirms this view, claiming that Russians remain “Soviet people” based on three deep structures: “a cult of the Centre”, which gave rise to the cult of personality, a world defined as one of permanent crisis and conflict, and “a flight from freedom” and decision-making.⁶²

Suppose one subscribes to this “theory of the Soviet man”, it may explain the high and consistent societal support for military conscription, Putin and his worldview, and Russia’s “special operation in Ukraine” (*sic*). Indeed, contrary to what many in the West may wish for, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Russians seem to support Putin’s war with increased commitment.⁶³ It goes beyond the scope of our discussion to elaborate on this thought. Yet, it may be wise to consider these reflections:

- It is dangerous to take your wishes as a norm to forecast your opponent’s behaviour.
- Because they do not tolerate correction mechanisms (checks and balances), dictatorships endure until they collapse. Most often, this collapse is total, immediate, and unexpected. In this context, public opinion research is relative, as what people say might differ from what they think or do.



- The real art of forecasting is not to announce “the end of Putin”, but to determine the moment of collapse of the Russian regime and state system based on evidence rather than wishful thinking.
- The main difficulty is that the study of Russia is, in essence, the study of a stagnant system, a system on the brink of collapse that, against all odds, endures. In this case, the resulting research questions are: what are the (formal and informal) coping strategies of such a system, and what are the limits of these strategies?

The test of battle – Russian soldiers in Ukraine

We have mentioned that the study of conscription and the recruitment of Russian soldiers in the Russian armed forces is an increasingly difficult task, leaving us with many open questions and several conjectures about the state of the Russian armed forces. As mentioned, this mostly has to do with the closedness of the military organization and the “algorithm of lies”⁶⁴ imposed by the Russian state.

Studying the life and conduct of the Russian soldier on Ukrainian soil is even more difficult, as this imposes focusing on the tactical level. Unfortunately, on this level especially, open-source information is anecdotal, fragmented, and polluted by propaganda and misinformation. Nonetheless, we will discuss three relevant issues related to the Russian soldier in Ukraine: the number of conscripts used during the Russian operation in Ukraine, the number of soldiers lost during this campaign, and the phenomenon of brutality and other expressions of deviant conduct as shown by the Russian soldiers on campaign.

HOW MANY CONSCRIPTED SOLDIERS ARE THERE IN UKRAINE?

We assume that 22 to 24 percent of the Russian armed forces are conscripted soldiers. Most of them are in the land forces. This means that this percentage may be as high as 30 percent in this component. Moreover, the portion of soldiers in the units is uneven, meaning that some units may have only contract soldiers while others have more than 50 percent of conscripted soldiers. In short, it is tough, if not impossible, to determine precisely the number of conscripts active in Ukraine. Instead, here are a couple of thoughts on this issue.

Contrary to what is sometimes reported in the media, it is wrong to apply a linear extrapolation concerning the number of conscripts in Ukraine. Assuming a build-up of a force of about 190,000 soldiers around Ukraine, one cannot simply deduce that 57,000 (30%) of this force are conscripts.

It is undeniable that conscripts have been active on the ground in Ukraine. The embarrassing incident of 9 March, where the Russian Ministry of Defence publicly acknowledged this fact, contradicting the President’s claims of the day before, speaks for itself. Moreover, broadcasted testimonies of Russian conscripts captured by the Ukrainian forces provide evidence of this reality.

It is remarkable that after mid-March, the issue of conscripted soldiers became less prominent, if not absent from the daily situation reports in the media. What does this mean? Is the Russian conscripted soldier redrawn from the frontline? Have they been brought back to Russian territory as demanded by the Russian president? There may be arguments to believe this, as the president threatened legal prosecution for those responsible for sending conscripts to Ukraine. Yet, investigations of Russian journalists and volunteers – mentioned in more detail below – show that at least two conscripts have died on Ukraine territory in April 2022. One conscript came from Bashkiria and the other from the Altai Territory. They were drafted in November 2021 and, thus, had served barely three months when the war started.⁶⁵

However, the basic fact remains that the pool of conscript soldiers (220,000) remains an essential part of the human capital in the Russian military and the primary reservoir of “reserves” to reinforce the contingent deployed in Ukraine. Retired US Army General Kevin Ryan deduced that in the short term, the Russian military needed about 16 percent of the conscript pool, or about 35,000, to reinforce the operation in Ukraine.⁶⁶ (The question remains if this number can be covered by other sources, including *Kadyrovtsy*, mercenaries from the Middle East, and others.⁶⁷ Whatever the result of these efforts, it might be clear that this will not improve the cohesion and coordination within the Russian armed forces). Therefore, we anticipate the following:

- An increased pressure on conscripts to become contracted soldiers.
- An increased pressure from the military to escalate the conflict, urging the Kremlin to call for a general mobilization of the country. This allows deploying conscripts in Ukraine without legal constraints, under the condition that these draftees have received military training for three months. Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borgan have remarked on the first contours of this possible scenario. They claim that the military is very unhappy with the Kremlin’s decision to shift the strategic goals and enter a second campaign stage focusing on the Southern and Donbas regions. Instead, the military wanted to stay with the initial maximalist plan to conquer Kyiv.⁶⁸

Contrary to what we may expect, the manpower crisis of the Russian military in Ukraine is not necessarily a reason to de-escalate or find a diplomatic solution to the conflict. Quite contradictory, Russia’s lack of available soldiers may be an impetus to call for total war.

WHAT IS THE SOCIAL-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF RUSSIAN SOLDIERS IN UKRAINE?

As mentioned above, we assume that the soldiers in the Russian armed forces are in majority recruited in socially and economically deprived regions. Based on a data set collected by hackers collectives *Anonimus* and *Inform Napalm* and analyzed by the Ukrainian journalist collective *Texty* of 97,000 Russian soldiers belonging to the Eastern Military District we may have an indication of the social background of soldiers serving in Ukraine. Indeed, the analysis shows that about 20,000 of the hacked list are serving or have served in Ukraine.⁶⁹ This is about ten percent of the contingent deployed in Ukraine. It is important to note, though, that this analysis is not a representative study of the Russian armed forces active in Ukraine. It just provides some indications.

Based on the ethnic background of those who are or have been deployed in Ukraine, it is noted that Buryats, Udmurts, and Dagestanians are overrepresented in Ukraine. The regions from which these minorities come are known for their socio-economically deprivation. The author of this study has mentioned several aspects of this condition: high unemployment rates (for example, Dagestan has an unemployment rate of 13.9 percent and Buryatia 9.8 percent), low-income levels; many people living below the poverty line; lower standard of living than average; receiving high federal subsidies; and the lack of warm toilets in schools (In 2021, Dagestan, Buryatia, Khabarovsk Krai were mentioned among the regions where the largest number of schools do not have warm toilets with sewers.). In short, these data, indicative as they may be, confirm our conjectures as mentioned above.

What does this mean? Are soldiers coming from deprived regions determined to be bad soldiers? On the contrary, one would say. Under the right conditions, these people may be excellent (professional) soldiers fit for the hardship of the military profession. As in many states, the military may be considered an institution that promotes social mobility and provides shelter for those who need it the most. The question remains if the Russian armed forces provide the necessary institutional trust – this is leadership, training, and discipline - to safeguard this shelter. To ask this question is to answer it.

HOW MANY CONSCRIPTED SOLDIERS HAVE BEEN LOST IN UKRAINE?

For tactical and psychological reasons, the number of casualties and soldiers killed is an important indicator to claim success or suffer defeat in war. It is the ultimate manifestation of the drama of war. Therefore, it is a number that is easily subject to influence the population's mood and the military on all sides of the conflict. This is also apparent in the Ukrainian war. The Ukraine government claims that the Russian army has lost about 23,000 soldiers. Western sources estimate losses at some 15,000, although it is unclear if these figures represent only those killed in action or include the wounded and prisoners. Officially, the Russian military admits to 1,351 losses. Nobody can verify these numbers with any certainty.⁷⁰

The most interesting information on this issue has come from the Russian investigative journalists and volunteers who have examined the Russian losses in Ukraine based on publicly available information in Russia; this is from publications on social media, the media, and the websites of the state bodies. The cited numbers are not the total losses, yet they reveal interesting trends.⁷¹

The investigators examined 1,744 service members killed in action at the end of March. This is more than the Ministry of Defence had officially admitted. Not all losses are reported by the press, relatives, local authorities, or educational institutions. The actual number must be (much) higher.

The following table, deduced from the study mentioned above, represents the origin of the units in which the losses are suffered:

Type of Unit	Total number	officer	enlisted
Airborne	351	76	275
Motorized Rifle troops	308	62	246
Tank Troops	117	28	89
Marines	91	12	79
National Guard	78	13	65
Artillery	49	12	37
Special forces	45	14	31
Military pilots	27	22	5
Engineering troops	24	9	15
Sailors	15	3	12
Other troops	57	14	43
No data	582	52	530
Total	1,744	317	1,427

Table 3: Number of Russian personnel losses (end March)

Based on this table, the following remarks can be made:

- 317 officers have been killed, of which 44 have the rank of lieutenant colonel and above. (This is 18 percent of the losses). This number may be an overestimation since dead officers receive more attention in the media than enlisted men killed in action. It also shows that the Russian armed forces are an officers-led organization on a tactical level.

- Airborne forces, marines, and special forces, Russia's most combat-ready forces, have suffered the most losses. 351 airborne soldiers, of which 76 officers, have been killed, mainly in the Northern area nearby Kyiv. 91 marines have been killed, mainly in the Southern region, nearby Mariupol. And 45 special forces soldiers (of which 25 GRU) were killed.
- There are also registered losses that do not strictly belong to the Russian military. There are 5 policemen (OMON), 78 national guard members, 15 dead from the special forces of the internal troops belonging to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and six belonging to SOBR. The latter is a kind of SWAT-type unit that can be deployed at the discretion of the police.
- Most people killed in action come from poor regions, especially Dagestan and Buryatia. There are almost no casualties to mourn coming from St Petersburg or Moscow, although 12 percent of the Russian population live in these metropolises. This shows a seriously skewed trend of social-economic distortions in the country. Indeed, the median salary in Dagestan and Buryatia is around 20,000 Rubles. In Moscow, this is about 55,000, and in St-Petersburg about 45,000 (the Russian median income is about 35,000 Rubles). Despite this social-economic argument, one may not forget that traditional martial values prevail in these regions.⁷²
- Logically, most people killed in action are young, mostly between 21 and 23. 69 soldiers were under 20, and 13 had barely reached the age of majority. It is among the latter group that conscripted soldiers are most probably to be found.

Again, of the exact number of conscripts killed in action in Ukraine, we remain ignorant. However, another quite shocking aspect is that it exemplifies Russia's unprofessional military ethos. For example, Ukrainians have reported that the Russians sometimes refuse to recover the victims' bodies. Moreover, parents of conscripted soldiers are barely informed about the fate of their sons.⁷³ The latter has been the case with the sinking of the Moskva, the missile cruiser and flagship of the Black Sea Fleet, where many parents have been kept ignorant about the lot of their conscripted sons.⁷⁴ On another occasion, it was reported that about 400 Russian soldiers were exposed to radiation in the surroundings of Chernobyl. At the same time, their families are not informed about the state of their health.⁷⁵ In short, just as the experiences reported in other wars, Russian soldiers and their families have been abandoned by the state. And this latter phenomenon is nothing less than appalling.

Yet, what are the consequences of these observations? Is the body bag effect applicable in Russia?

IS THERE A BODY BAG EFFECT IN RUSSIA?

In the West, we assume that public opinion is fragile and easily turned, that mounting casualties suffered during a conflict, will turn it against the conflict. Differently put, the general enthusiasm for war declines as military deaths increase. Is this also the case in Russia? Are some analysts' predictions correct that as soon as the bodies of dead soldiers arrive at home, public opinion will shift against the Kremlin?

The body bag effect is related to a democratic system in which changes in public opinion may have an impact during elections. Politicians have to take care of public opinion changes to be re-elected. This is less the case in authoritarian regimes, especially when these regimes rigorously control the information stream within the country, influence the curriculum of schools, orchestrate propaganda campaigns, and, if necessary, intimidate and repress the opposition. Moreover, as mentioned above, one may not forget that Russia is a nationalist country that cherishes martial and conservative values. If the victims of war are framed within a context where the vital interests of Russia are threatened, the bodies that return home become heroes instead of victims. Finally, Russia is a tragic country where life is hard, grief

is handled privately, and acceptance of misfortune is high. Seldom may one see public actions motivated by casualties caused by disaster or war. This may also explain the lack of accountability, the absence of investigations, and the level of impunity for those responsible for the casualties. It may also explain why change to avoid future disasters is so slow.

Does this mean that the Russian authorities are not aware of the danger of public unrest caused by the returning body bags? Of course not. One may observe clumsy actions by the authorities to cover embarrassing situations in public. For instance, we recall the sinking of the Kursk submarine back in 2000, when the entire crew of 118 sailors perished. On this occasion, we saw that the mother of one of the crew members was given a tranquilizer in front of the cameras while she was expressing her grief emotionally to Putin in person. Moreover, we have witnessed how parents of a “peacetime dead” have been lied to concerning the cause of death. Instead of being a victim of brutal hazing, their parents were told he had suffered a heart attack. (In other cases, military authorities indicate suicide as a cause of death to avoid responsibility). We have also witnessed that the wrong body was brought to the parents of a peacetime dead soldier. In 2015, we read stories of parents of soldiers in the Southern Military District. They were only paid a pension for the loss of their son during military operations in the Donbas under the condition that they would not communicate about their loss in public and certainly not with the (foreign) media. Journalists who tried to visit graveyards to verify the stories of Russian soldiers fallen in the Donbas were intimidated, harassed, if not brutally beaten up.⁷⁶

Authoritarian regimes do not change or adapt their policy quickly. They instead persist in stagnation and suboptimal survival. Stagnation without change or reform can endure quite long, up to a moment when the system collapses. Usually, when it comes, collapse is unexpected, immediate, and total. It is only in this kind of moment where revolutionary changes occur that past traumas, including in the military sphere, find their outlet in public protest. As such, we have seen that the “limited Contingent” in Afghanistan was a subject of discussion during perestroika, that the veterans of this war played a significant role in the democratic aspirations of the country in 1991, and that the Soldiers’ Mothers as a grass-root organization took root.

The dynamic of the body bag effect is different in Russia compared to the West. Therefore it is premature to expect regime change or fundamental change in Russia’s war policy based on the number of body bags only. Russia’s history proves that the country knows how to die. In this sense, Russia is more resilient than we might expect, if not by manipulation, then by coercion.

THE CONDUCT OF RUSSIAN SOLDIERS IN UKRAINE

For Russian soldiers, the war in Ukraine didn’t start on 24 February 2022. For weeks, if not months, Russian soldiers were camping in the waiting zones before crossing the Ukrainian border. There are reports that they showed “unprofessional behaviour” during this period, characterized by theft, drunken brawls, harassment of the local population, and other kinds of undisciplined behaviour.⁷⁷

Moreover, once some units were defeated in the Kyiv region and were obliged to redeploy to Belarus, soldiers of these units showed erratic behaviour. Angry soldiers surrounded, harassed, and threatened residents in bars and stores. They acted as if they were masters of the universe. Coming from Central Russia and Siberia, they sold the diesel and tires of their vehicles and the goods they had looted in Ukraine, including refrigerators and household appliances.



*“They also stink a lot. You can tell by the smell when you go to the store that they are here. After all, I don’t think they bathe. The commanders live in normal conditions in the hotel ‘Pripyat’, soldiers in the woods in tents and even in barns. In the village of Prudok, they live in farm barns. They sleep on the mats there. Maybe that’s why they stink”.*⁷⁸

This citation illustrates the conditions under which the soldiers have to live; it also shows the different treatment between officers and enlisted soldiers.

These reports do not immediately demonstrate the behaviour of soldiers in Ukraine. Yet, we cannot imagine that the conduct of Russian soldiers in Ukraine would be fundamentally different from what has been reported in Belarus. We have enough illustrations of the deviant behaviour of Russian soldiers in Ukraine, including sprays of rape and looting, and brutal and criminal behaviour against the civilian population, which are nothing less than war crimes.

We consider this deviant and unprofessional behaviour the result of the low quality of the Russian soldier, the lack of training, and the lack of leadership and control of the enlisted men. The latter is a structural problem in the Russian armed forces. Uncontrolled bands of frustrated and angry soldiers are a problem for every military organization, but they become a danger if not supervised, managed, and led by their superiors. These superiors should live among them and suffer the same hardships as the enlisted soldiers. Only then can trust be built and discipline established.

Under these conditions, the question remains if the distinction between contract and conscript soldier is relevant. We assume that the Russian soldier only becomes a more effective, more professional soldier if instructed, trained, empowered, motivated, and disciplined by superiors who deserve their respect and trust. From this perspective, we consider Russia’s professionalization discussion and organizational reform irrelevant and doomed to fail. A faint imitation of a misunderstood organization model in the Russian armed forces remains.

Unfortunately, war is unforgiving and not necessarily a moral endeavour: the victory of “the good” is not guaranteed on purely moral grounds. Given enough time and means, also the brute force of the expendable unprofessional soldier may achieve victory in battle. Therefore, the Russian soldier is not only a victim of the system but also a potential perpetrator, if not a potential war criminal. And that is the real tragedy we are witnessing today.



Conclusions

Observing Russia's military conduct is, on several levels, a shocking experience. As if the collapse of the Soviet Union hasn't taken place, and as if reform and modernization has had no impact on the Russian military, we see Russian soldiers behaving in Ukraine as reported in the history books. Unable to undo itself from its history, the Russian armed forces seem to be stuck between the past and the future. The structural, systemic problems of the Russian military remain untouched, especially the lack of leadership and the lack of a moral compass on the level of the soldier. The perverse effects of this situation are truly perverse: brutal behaviour that goes beyond internationally accepted military conduct, all too often resulting in horrifying war crimes.

We doubt if this has only to do with the manpower problem that the Russian high command has been haunted by: the replacement of conscripts with contract soldiers or the professionalization of the Russian military. An inappropriately instructed, trained, fed, clothed, empowered, disciplined soldier – independent if he is paid a monthly salary or just receives a small allowance for his service – is dangerous; if he feels abandoned while in a life-threatening situation, the Russian soldier becomes nothing less than a risk.

We question whether the Russian soldiers' problem is just a military problem. The military is undoubtedly a specific organization with a peculiar culture. Yet it is still embedded in society. And this society has great esteem for and high trust in the military. Russia is nothing less than a nationalist state that supports conservative and martial values. Because these values are predominant among the less educated, the elderly, and the most socially deprived layers of society, they demonstrate some of the most distinctive developments in the country: the isolation of the liberal opposition; the uneven development of Russian society dividing the metropolises from the rest of the country; and the destructive impact of the propagandistic activities of the authoritarian state on society.

At the helm of the Russian state, one can find those responsible for what is happening in the Russian military and in Ukraine. Vladimir Putin and those who keep him in power are those who have ordered the Russian army to invade Ukraine. As such, Russia is not only fighting an unlawful war; it is also fighting the wrong battle with a military that is not prepared for this campaign. What is left are the methods of the past: mass over precision and firepower over manpower. This is not only a shame in itself; it also adds yet another chapter to Russia's already tragic history.



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