RUSSIAN FORCE GENERATION AND TECHNOLOGICAL ADAPTATIONS

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Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to prioritize leveraging migrants to mitigate ongoing labor shortages, despite ongoing complaints from Russian ultranationalists advocating for the Kremlin to impose harsher restrictions on migrants. Putin on April 28 extended the deadline for migrants who entered Russia illegally to apply for legal status or leave Russia from April 30 to September 10, 2025. Putin initially signed the decree setting the deadline on December 30, 2024.[1] Migrants can obtain legal status by submitting to a series of health screenings; passing a Russian language, history, and legal exams; and paying off all debts, or by signing a military service contract with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Russia is reportedly suffering a labor shortage of 1.5 million people due to its war in Ukraine.[2] Putin likely does not want to exacerbate ongoing labor shortages with arbitrarily imposed deadlines that will further restrict migrants from contributing to the Russian economy, given that a significant number of migrants work in consumer services, construction, delivery, and other low-skilled industries.[3] Putin's migrant policies notably contradict his efforts to appease the ultranationalist crowd that has been increasingly calling for Putin to take harsher measures against migrants in Russia.

Russia has also increasingly targeted migrant communities to support force generation efforts as the Russian military continues to rapidly deploy low-quality troops to frontline units. Russian authorities have threatened to revoke naturalized Russian citizenship to impress migrants into the Russian military and have leveraged the prospect of obtaining Russian citizenship to recruit migrants into joining the Russian military.[4] The Russian law enforcement launches raids on migrant workplaces and detains migrants to coerce them into Russian military service and advertise Russian military contract service in Central Asian languages.[5] Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) announced in February 2025 that it has created a registry to monitor migrants who are illegally residing in Russia and prohibit individuals included in the registry from leaving the Russian federal subject in which they reside.[6] Russia likely intends to use this registry to strictly monitor migrants and build out a list of vulnerable individuals to coerce into joining the Russian military.

Ukraine's "I Want to Live" project reported that Russia has been recruiting foreign citizens to the Russian military since the first quarter of 2023 and specifically targeted

people from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan during the initial stages of the recruitment campaign.[7] The "I Want to Live" project reported in April and May 2025 that it confirmed the identities of at least 1,110 Uzbek, 931 Tajik, 661 Kazakh, 360 Kyrgyz, and 170 Turkmen citizens serving in the Russian military against Ukraine.[8] Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin stated on May 20 that the committee's military investigative department has detained 80,000 naturalized Russian citizens who do not want to register for military service, presumably since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.[9] Bastrykin claimed that 20,000 of these detainees — who are mainly from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan — are now serving on the frontline in Ukraine. **Russia likely seeks to continue to leverage migrant populations in the immediate term to support force generation efforts as the Russian military increasingly suffers higher casualties for a lower rate of advance across the theater.[10]**

Putin remains willing to acquiesce to select ultranationalist demands for forceful assimilation of migrants, likely as part of longstanding Kremlin efforts to combat Russian demographic decline. Putin and other Russian officials have repeatedly expressed support for the incorporation of migrants into Russian society, although they have supported efforts to Russify these migrants.[11] The Russian Ministry of Education developed a procedure in January 2025 to test foreign children's Russian language proficiency as a condition for attending a Russian school.[12] The Russian Federal Service for Supervision in Education and Science (Rosobrnadzor) reported on May 13 that it rejected 81 percent of applications to take a Russian language exam, citing incomplete applications and a lack of vacancies in schools, however.[13] Russia has also considered increasing the minimum Russian history and law exam score for foreigners interested in a Russian residence permit or Russian citizenship.[14] The Kremlin consistently supports establishing Russian and Russian language schools and universities in Central Asia.[15] Russian authorities also reportedly began developing a system to legalize the status of Russia's so-called "compatriots abroad" - whom Putin has previously defined as anyone with historical, cultural, or linguistic ties to Russia - that would allow these individuals to access unspecified government services, visit and work in Russia, and even apply for Russian citizenship in the future.[16] Putin likely intends to utilize migration — especially from post-Soviet countries with closer economic, political, and cultural ties to Russia — to counter Russia's demographic decline in the long term. Putin likely supports these assimilation efforts in order to ease relations between migrants and local inhabitants and to generate a docile population susceptible to ongoing Kremlin efforts to promote civic Russian nationalism.

Putin's continued efforts to establish a civic Russian identity that includes ethnic and religious minorities are at odds with Russian ultranationalist efforts to promote ethno-religious nationalism predicated on a Russian state mainly led by and comprised of ethnic Russians. Putin has commended Central Asian contributions to Russia and publicly supported efforts to leverage migrants to offset labor shortages and incorporate migrants into Russian society at high-profile events such as the December 2024 annual Direct Line televised press conference and May 2025 Victory Day celebrations.[17] Putin's choice to promote multiculturalism at Russia's largest national holiday, Victory Day, demonstrates that Putin continues to support an

informal state ideology of Russian civic nationalism over an ethno-religious-based nationalism.

Putin's manifestation of Russian nationalism is at odds with the informal ideology of pro-war Russian ultranationalists, which is based on an ethnic Russian identity and promotes Russian Orthodoxy.[18] Pro-war Russian ultranationalist milbloggers have routinely advocated for harsher restrictions against migrants entering and living in Russia and called for increased deportations.[19] Select milbloggers have also directly criticized Putin's and the Russian government's perceived lenient attitude toward Central Asian migrants.[20] The "Russian Community," a Russian far-right pro-war ultranationalist online community with ties to affiliates of Russian *Tsargrad* outlet founder and Russian Orthodox nationalist Konstantin Malofeev, organizes demonstrations against migrants and has garnered over half a million followers on its Telegram.[21] The "Russian Community" routinely posts instances of alleged migrant violence on Telegram. These ultranationalist communities are one of the key constituencies that Putin is trying to leverage to boost domestic support for the war and long-term militarization of Russian society.[22] Malofeev is also a key figure in Russia's force generation efforts.[23] Senior Russian officials such as Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin, Russian MVD Head Vladimir Kolokoltsev, and head of the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP), Patriarch Kirill, have routinely appeared more interested an ideology predicated on a Russian state mainly led by and comprised of ethnic Russians that defends and platforms Russian Orthodoxy.[24]

Putin has to balance his civic nationalism ideology, force generation and labor needs, and ultranationalists' demands for a Russian ethno-state to sustain his war effort in Ukraine and support his economy. Russian ultranationalist communities such as Cossacks and the Union of Donbas Volunteers, who avidly promote ethnic Russian identity and promote Russian Orthodoxy, have proven to be essential in Russia's force generation efforts.[25] The Kremlin also relies on migrants and ethnic minority groups to generate forces and support the economy.[26] Putin is likely hesitant to fully commit to the ultranationalist ideology as it risks fragmenting Russia's multiethnic and religiously diverse population, jeopardizing Russia's war effort in Ukraine, and threatening his regime's stability. Putin will likely continue to struggle to balance placating the increasingly influential ultranationalist community and their champions in key Kremlin institutions with the need to leverage migrants to offset immediate economic and force generation issues and long-term demographic decline.

Key Takeaways:

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to prioritize leveraging migrants to mitigate ongoing labor shortages, despite ongoing complaints from Russian ultranationalists advocating for the Kremlin to impose harsher restrictions on migrants.**

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin once again reaffirmed the Kremlin's commitment to avoiding declaring an involuntary mobilization call-up.**

- **The Russian Airborne Forces continue recruiting volunteers to staff the BARS-Sarmat Unmanned Systems Special Purpose Center.**

- **Putin reportedly signed an amendment that allows for the demobilization of a limited number of Russian servicemen who were illegally mobilized in September 2022.**

- **The Russian MoD recently intensified recruitment into the state-controlled Africa Corps, likely to finally replace remaining Wagner Group personnel in Africa and the Middle East.**

- **Russian milbloggers argued that Russia needs to form private military companies (PMCs) like the Wagner Group to retain Russian officers and professional servicemen in military service.**

- **The Russian Navy is forming at least five unmanned systems regiments within the Russian regional fleets.**

- **The Kremlin is actively co-opting Russian veterans to participate in the 2025 regional and 2026 State Duma elections as part of an ongoing coordinated campaign aimed at raising a loyal, pro-war elite in Russia.**

- **The Kremlin has evolved its use of veterans in election campaigns since last nominating Russian veterans in the 2024 elections.**

- **The Kremlin introduced quotas to ensure that federal subjects integrate enough veterans into the Russian government via the "Time of Heroes" program likely because Russian regional officials are failing to or are deliberately sabotaging Putin's efforts to install new officials recruited from the Russian veteran class.**

- **Russian officials are continuing to introduce financial compensations and social benefits to Russian veterans and their families to integrate veterans into Russian society and alleviate the risk of societal backlash against the regime.**

- **Putin established an interdepartmental working group for raising Russian children and youth on May 19 under the leadership of the Kremlin's main propaganda curator.**

- **Russia has introduced several initiatives in schools aimed at militarizing children and preparing them for future military service.**

- **Russian occupation officials reportedly formed 102 Yunarmiya (Young Army Cadets National Movement) units in occupied Luhansk Oblast to militarize Ukrainian children and prepare them for future Russian military service.**

- **Russian federal subjects and occupation officials are trying to scale up Russia's drone development and production.**

- **The Russian MoD is failing to distribute state orders and funding to some Russian defense industrial base (DIB) enterprises.**

- **Satellite imagery indicates that the Kremlin has depleted another Soviet-era Russian armored vehicle storage facility in Omsk Oblast to support its war effort in Ukraine.**
- **The Russian government is establishing the state-controlled Center for the Development of Artificial Intelligence.**
- **Russian forces reportedly developed a smaller variant of the Shahed drone that can be used along the frontlines and modified Shahed strike drones to overcome Ukraine's anti-drone measures.**
- **Russian developers continued to introduce new anti-drone adaptations and interceptors and belatedly modernized the two-seater Yakovlev Yak-52 training aircraft into Yak-52B2 anti-drone aircraft.**
- **Russian developers presented a new large cargo drone reportedly capable of facilitating logistics.**
- **The Russian MoD reportedly equipped Russian mobile fire groups with mobile radars from the latest Pantsir-SMD-E surface-to-air missile system.**
- **Putin awarded the state Marshal Georgy Zhukov prize to the developers of unguided rockets for TOS-1A "Solntsepek" and TOS-2 "Tosochka" heavy flamethrower systems on May 15.**

Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts (Assessed Russian objective: Expand combat power without conducting general mobilization and undermining regime stability)

Russian President Vladimir Putin once again reaffirmed the Kremlin's commitment to avoiding declaring an involuntary mobilization call-up. Putin claimed on May 13 that 50,000 to 60,000 recruits join the Russian war effort every month on an entirely voluntary basis.[27] Putin falsely implied that Russia's recruitment for the war effort in Ukraine is entirely voluntary and attempted to criticize the Ukrainian government for continuing general mobilization in Ukraine. Putin, however, did not acknowledge that Russian recruiters often mislead and coerce Russian, Ukrainian, and foreign men into signing voluntary military service contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Tatar-Bashkir Service *Idel Realii,* for example, reported on May 18 that the Russian MoD has been purchasing men from human traffickers and signing them up for military service in Ukraine.[28] Putin's attacks on Ukraine's conscription are notable as they indicate that the Kremlin is not actively setting information conditions that would be necessary to prepare Russian society for another involuntary reserve call-up. The Kremlin has been increasingly introducing dynamic pricing measures for one-time enlistment bonuses in an effort to lure more recruits since late 2024 and early 2025, which further indicates that the Kremlin is doubling down on its efforts to recruit forces without conducting a general mobilization.

The Russian Airborne Forces continue recruiting volunteers to staff the BARS-Sarmat Unmanned Systems Special Purpose Center. The official

Telegram channel of the BARS-Sarmat Unmanned Systems Special Purpose Center claimed on May 14 that the center received over 7,000 enlistment applications.[29] BARS-Sarmat center implied that the recruitment process is highly selective. Former Roscosmos (Russian space agency) head and head of the BARS-Sarmat Center, Dmitry Rogozin, attributed the BARS-Sarmat Center's recruitment numbers to the fact that Russian recruits are realizing the importance of technology in modern warfare and argued for the Kremlin to decentralize the Russian defense industrial base (DIB).[30] Rogozin announced on May 18 that the BARS-Sarmat Center recruited around 100 servicemen to fight as part of a "military technical battalion" and combat testing detachments.[31] It is plausible that the BARS-Sarmat center may be seeing the claimed influx of volunteers, given that prospective Russian recruits may be more interested in serving in drone detachments than in assault units. ISW cannot independently verify these recruitment numbers. Prospective Russian recruits may also be drawn in due to the claimed elite status of the Russian VDV. BARS-Sarmat appears to be acting independently of the newly established Russian Unmanned Systems Force (USF) under the oversight of Rogozin.[32]

Force Retention (Assessed Russian objective: Set conditions that would allow the Russian military to retain its mobilized personnel, contract soldiers, and irregular forces over the long term)

Putin reportedly signed an amendment that allows for the demobilization of a limited number of Russian servicemen who were illegally mobilized in September 2022. A Russian law firm published an alleged copy of Putin's amendment from April 17 that reportedly changed two sections of Putin's August 3, 2023, decree on the legal terms for dismissal from military service.[33] The amendment expands the legal framework for the dismissal of Russian mobilized personnel to two new categories—single fathers of minors and men whom the medical commission recognized as partially fit for military service. Russian lawyers told Russian opposition outlet *Vazhnye Istorii* (*iStories*) that current Russian legislation already precludes single fathers from involuntary mobilization call-ups, although Russian military recruiters repeatedly violated the law and mobilized single fathers to fight in Ukraine.[34] A group of Russian lawyers stated that the amendment guarantees single fathers the right to quit military service, but that the dismissal of partially fit servicemen is still contingent on the decision of Russian military commanders. The Kremlin notably did not officially publish the decree, likely in an attempt to forestall other mobilized personnel from calling for similar demobilization efforts.

Russian Force Centralization (Assessed Russian objective: Centralize the state's control over informal volunteer-based units that emerged in early 2022 after the Kremlin failed to declare general mobilization)

The Russian MoD recently intensified recruitment into the state-controlled Africa Corps, likely to finally replace remaining Wagner Group personnel in

Africa and the Middle East. A Russian insider source claimed on May 14 that Russian authorities informed Wagner Group mercenaries stationed in Africa that their deployments to Africa will end in June-July 2025.[35] The Russian insider source claimed that Wagner mercenaries previously withdrew from Syria. The Russian insider source claimed that the Russian MoD interspersed Wagner units in Central Africa and Mali with MoD-controlled Africa Corps recruits. ISW previously observed that the Russian MoD has intensified recruitment efforts into the Africa Corps since February 2025 to expand Russia's military presence in Africa and possibly in Ukraine.[36]

Russian milbloggers argued that Russia needs to form private military companies (PMCs) like the Wagner Group to retain Russian officers and professional servicemen in military service.[37] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russia's war in Ukraine showed that the Russian military is "sluggish" and is incapable of quickly responding to the changes in combat tactics. The milblogger claimed that the number of disillusioned professional servicemen is increasing in all Russian security agencies and argued that the Kremlin should form special purpose detachments with officers and combat-experienced men outside of the Russian Armed Forces structure. The milblogger argued that the Kremlin should allow these detachments to elect their leaders. The milblogger acknowledged that Russia has significant problems with interdepartmental communication and claimed that Russia needs to form mobile units with advanced combat and technological experience. The milblogger argued that the Kremlin must allow these units the highest level of independence to ensure that these units are attractive to Russian professional servicemen and officers, who are increasingly disillusioned with the military bureaucracy. The Kremlin is unlikely to recreate PMCs with a high level of independence because it had launched a vast force centralization campaign in late 2022 and early 2023 to eradicate the regime threat posed by the increasing independence and influence of the Wagner Group.

<u>Russian Military Reforms and Force Restructuring: (Assessed Russian objective: Restructure the Russian military to maintain the war in Ukraine while preparing for a potential large-scale conventional war with NATO)</u>

The Russian Navy is forming at least five unmanned systems regiments within the Russian regional fleets. Unnamed sources in the Russian Navy told Russian state media outlet *Izvestia* on May 13 that the Russian Navy Main Command is forming at least five regiments of unmanned systems within Russian regional fleets – the Northern Fleet, the Pacific Fleet, the Baltic Fleet, the Black Sea Fleet, and the Caspian Flotilla.[38] The new regiments will operate unmanned aerial systems (UAVs), unmanned ground systems (UGS), unmanned surface vehicles (USV), and underwater unmanned vehicles (UUVs). The regiments will perform reconnaissance and strike missions, repel adversary drones and unmanned boats, and eliminate sea mines. A Russian military expert claimed that the newly formed regiments will likely operate medium- and long-range UAVs, including "Orlan" and "Forpost" drones and "Lancet" loitering munitions. The military expert added that the Russian Navy will need to centralize the command of electronic warfare (EW) elements alongside the new

unmanned systems regiments to ensure the effectiveness of such units. Russian Defense Minister Andrey Belousov announced in December 2024 that the Russian Armed Forces would establish the Unmanned Systems Forces (USF) branch by the third quarter of 2025.[39] ISW previously assessed that the Russian MoD launched efforts to establish a centralized USF branch as early as August 2024 by reorganizing informal specialized drone detachments and increasingly centralizing procurement of unmanned systems.[40] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger, however, complained on May 15 that the Russian Armed Forces is behind on creating USF companies and regiments, resulting in many drone operators fighting in infantry assault operations.[41]

Integration of Veterans into Russian Society (Assessed Russian objective: Mitigate the risk of veterans emerging as a political group in a way that could erode the stability of the Russian state)

The Kremlin is actively co-opting Russian veterans to participate in the 2025 regional and 2026 State Duma elections as part of an ongoing coordinated campaign aimed at raising a loyal, pro-war elite in Russia. Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* reported on May 14 that the Russian ruling party United Russia nominated 418 Russian veterans for regional elections in September 2025.[42] *Verstka* reported that 50 of the veterans are trying to become regional deputies in the Russian State Duma, of which seven are affiliated with the Association of "Special Military Operation" ("SVO" — a Kremlin term for its 2022 invasion of Ukraine) Veterans. An unnamed regional election official told *Verstka* that the Kremlin established the association as the main veteran organization in Russia, and ISW assessed that the Kremlin established the Association of "SVO" Veterans in November 2023 to replace other existing veteran civil societies that have been critical of Russia's conduct of the war in Ukraine but essential for supporting Russian training and recruitment capabilities.[43] Russian state business outlet *Kommersant* reported on May 19, citing a high-ranking official in the United Russia Party, that United Russia Party is nominating Russian veterans to run for positions in the regional and municipal governments in hopes of distributing 10 percent of the mandates to veterans in the September 2026 parliamentary elections.[44] *Kommersant* reported that 940 veterans out of 21,400 people applied for primary elections to United Russia scheduled for May 19 through May 25, 2026. *Kommersant* noted that most of the veterans are running for municipal governments and that 54 veterans are running for regional governments in 10 federal subjects. First Deputy Chairman of the Russian Communist Party Yuri Afonin told *Kommersant* that the Russian Communist Party is also preparing to nominate veterans for the upcoming elections. *Kommersant's* source in the Russian Presidential Administration denied the Kremlin's involvement in establishing the desired percentage for veteran mandates likely in an effort to portray veteran participation in elections and appointments as organic.

The Kremlin has evolved its use of veterans in election campaigns since last nominating Russian veterans in the 2024 elections. *Verstka* reported that the United Russia Party tried to nominate veterans to the State Duma in 2024, resulting in 342 veterans participating in the election. *Verstka* reported that the United Russia Party

largely used veterans' reputations to promote the election, rather than appointing them to positions of power or having them represent a veteran organization. *Verstka* reported that the failure of the United Russia Party to have more veterans win the 2024 primaries cost former United Russia Secretary Andrey Turchak his position in the Kremlin. *Verstka* reported that the Kremlin changed its selection process from nominating actual combat veterans in 2024 to nominating public figures tied to state-affiliated organizations. *Verstka* noted that veterans elected in 2024 often used their positions of power to advocate for veterans and their families, or were too "flashy" and attention-grabbing for the United Russia Party. *Verstka* reported that the Kremlin deliberately refrained from nominating combat veterans or former proxy militia force members who operated in occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts before 2022. One veteran and member of the Association of "SVO" Veterans told *Verstka* that veterans do not receive any political power if they are elected to the Russian government because the State Duma does not have any meaningful authority in Russia. The veteran stated that the election instead allows the Kremlin to keep veterans "in check."

The Kremlin introduced quotas to ensure that federal subjects integrate enough veterans into the Russian government via the "Time of Heroes." Russian state media outlet *RBC* reported on May 13, citing sources in the United Russia Party and regional and presidential administrations, that the Kremlin set quotas to track the Russian federal subjects' efforts to install veterans in regional and local positions of power.[45] *RBC* reported that federal subjects have to provide government and professional training to 30 to 60 "Time of Heroes" participants per year and that the quotas vary based on the region's population size. *RBC* reported that the Kremlin also instructed federal subjects to intensify the civil service employment of "Time of Heroes" graduates. *RBC* reported that the Kremlin intends to use "Time of Heroes" participants to connect with returning military personnel and to address any issues emerging within the veteran society. The Kremlin likely seeks to use veterans selected via the "Time of Heroes" program to co-opt a larger veteran community and prevent Russian veterans from forming their anti-regime movements.[46] A Kremlin insider source claimed that the Kremlin's objective behind the "Time of Heroes" program is to integrate veterans into the Russian government and establish them as trusted political figures.[47] The insider source implied that the Kremlin assesses that veterans will be able to effectively communicate the regime's objectives because these veterans fought in Ukraine and shared the society's war traumas. The insider source characterized the "Time of Heroes" program as a "reboot" of Russia's bureaucracy through "patriotic subjectivity."

The Kremlin may be introducing quotas and other performance assessment measures because Russian regional officials are failing to or are deliberately sabotaging Putin's efforts to install new officials recruited from the Russian veteran class. The insider source claimed that some regional officials consider "Time of Heroes" participants a threat to established human networks and to their control.[48] The insider source claimed that Russian regional officials are sabotaging the program by slowing down selection processes for the "Time of Heroes" program and introducing artificial barriers to entry. The insider source claimed that the Kremlin "made it clear" to Russian federal subjects that it will view the failure to implement the "Time of Heroes" program as "political inertia," but did not specify how the Kremlin conveyed this message. ISW previously reported that the Kremlin appeared to have demoted Turchak at least in

part due to his failure to execute a program that would integrate Russian veterans into the Russian government in early 2024.[49]

Russian officials are continuing to introduce financial compensations and social benefits to Russian veterans and their families to integrate veterans into Russian society and alleviate the risk of societal backlash against the regime. Chairman of the state-owned public joint-stock company "Bank PSB" Petr Fradkov told Putin on May 15 that the bank provided 260,000 Russian veterans with social benefits via the Kremlin-controlled "Defenders of the Fatherland State Fund."[50] Russian Deputy Defense Minister Anna Tsivileva reportedly held a meeting on May 14 with acting commander of the Leningrad Military District (LMD) Lieutenant General Rustam Minnekaev at the LMD headquarters, during which she stated that the Kremlin's expansion of social benefits for Russian servicemen and veterans is putting additional pressure on Russia's administrative capacity.[51] Tsivileva also met with Saint Peterburg Governor Alexander Beglov on May 15 and claimed that Saint Petersburg officials resolved 94 percent of 43,000 veteran appeals via the local branch of the "Defenders of the Fatherland State Fund."[52] Russian Commissioner for Human Rights Tatyana Moskalkova called on the Kremlin to increase monthly payments to Russian combat veterans, claiming that veterans only receive 4,500 rubles ($56) per month.[53] The Russian MoD has reportedly prepared a bill allowing Russian soldiers to choose a place of residence, which would significantly speed up the bureaucratic process for housing assistance.[54] The Russian State Duma adopted a bill in the second and third readings establishing an extrajudicial bankruptcy procedure for Russian veterans for up to one million rubles.[55] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is committing itself to long-term financial burdens by continuing to expand its compensations to Russian servicemen and veterans and maintaining its war effort in Ukraine.

Militarization of Society and Youth: (Assessed Russian objective: Condition Russian society and youth for military service and raise societal support for Russian war efforts)

Putin established an interdepartmental working group for raising Russian children and youth on May 19 under the leadership of the Kremlin's main propaganda curator. Putin signed a decree on May 19 establishing the working group and appointed Russian Presidential Administration Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko to head the group.[56] The US Justice Department named Kiriyenko as Putin's propaganda chief in September 2024, and ISW has observed Kiriyenko assume a leading role in the militarization of Russian society since early 2023.[57] Putin is forming the interdepartmental working group as part of the Kremlin's ongoing effort to indoctrinate Russian youth into supporting the Kremlin's long-term war efforts via an extensive military-patriotic education system.

The Kremlin is increasingly conditioning children to support Russia's war efforts. Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov launched a new children's TV studio, "SolovyovKids," on May 14 intended to educate young children on "geopolitical realities"

and impose Russian patriotism and "analytical thinking" from an early age.[58] Solovyov emphasized that political programming for children will allow children to develop "analytical thinking" before they even start school. The Kremlin is likely launching these children's TV programs to indoctrinate children and raise a new generation of Russians who support Russia's war efforts against Ukraine and the West. Russian independent investigative outlet *The Insider* published a series of interviews with Russian school children and their parents on May 12 about the influence of the mandatory pro-war school course "Discussions About Important Things," which the Kremlin introduced in September 2022.[59] Children recounted to *The Insider* that their teachers show propaganda videos, encourage students to join military-patriotic movements, promote support for Russian combat veterans, and teach propagandized versions of Russian history. Some children recalled making posters with slogans, "Russia will stand until the end, [Russia] cannot be defeated."

Russia has introduced several initiatives in schools aimed at militarizing children and preparing them for future military service. The Russian MoD posted footage on May 18 showing elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet) holding tactical medicine classes with schoolchildren in Kursk Oblast, designed to prepare children to treat battlefield injuries.[60]

Russian occupation officials reportedly formed 102 Yunarmiya (Young Army Cadets National Movement) units in occupied Luhansk Oblast to militarize Ukrainian children and prepare them for future Russian military service. Luhansk Oblast Military Administration Head Oleksiy Kharchenko reported on May 14 that Russian occupation officials have formed 102 Yunarmiya units with more than 6,000 children in occupied Luhansk Oblast since launching the local Yunarmiya branch in 2022.[61] Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Head Leonid Pasechnik previously signed a cooperation agreement with Yunarmiya Chief of the General Staff Vladislav Golovin on May 12 to further develop military-patriotic programming in the region.[62] Donetsk Oblast occupation authorities similarly signed cooperation agreements with Yunarmiya on May 11.[63] The expansion of these military-patriotic youth organizations is part of the Kremlin's long-term efforts to support Russia's force generation efforts and build the next generation of military servicemen in both Russia and occupied Ukraine, as ISW has previously reported.[64]

<u>Russian Defense Industrial Base (Assessed Russian objective: Increase Russia's defense industrial base production to support Russian war efforts)</u>

Russian federal subjects and occupation officials are trying to scale up Russia's drone development and production. Beglov claimed on May 14 that Saint Petersburg enterprises are producing 30 percent of all Russian unmanned aerial systems (UAVs) in Russia in support of Putin's campaign to expedite the development of Russian UAVs.[65] Beglov stated that Saint Petersburg's "Technopark" research and development

company received appropriate accreditation to develop UAVs and that Saint Petersburg is planning to launch a UAV development project in the territory of the Special Economic Zone. Saint Petersburg Administration reported that there are more than 20 companies that develop and manufacture drones in Saint Petersburg and that over 27,000 people are studying in universities to design and produce drones.[66] Ukraine's Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Oleksiy Kharchenko reported that Russian occupation officials converted an industrial site at a local diesel locomotive plant to produce UAVs in occupied Luhansk Oblast.[67] Putin on January 28, 2025 ordered Russian federal subjects to open 48 UAV production centers across Russia by 2035.[68] Putin stated that Russia already has opened 15 UAV production centers in Moscow and Saint Petersburg cities; Novgorod, Ryazan, Sakhalin, Samara, and Tomsk oblasts; Primorsky Krai; and the republics of Udmurtia and Tatarstan.

The Kremlin is increasingly investing in drone development companies and start-ups. *The Insider* reported on May 16 that 407 companies specializing in aircraft production registered in Russia since 2023 and that at least 140 of these companies are producing drones that Russian forces are actively using in Ukraine.[69] *The Insider* reported that at least 60 companies are supplying drone components, reselling drones, or offering drone training services. *The Insider* reported that these drone companies received 243 billion rubles (three billion dollars) in investments between 2023 and 2024. The Kremlin, in comparison, plans to allocate 277 billion rubles ($3.1 billion) over a six-year period for the development of nuclear energy.[70] *The Insider* reported that many companies that produce drones for the Russian military falsely portray themselves as producing drones for civilian and agricultural needs. *The Insider,* citing Russian state media, reported that Russian drone manufacturers failed to satisfy a state order for 3,000 civilian-use drones because these manufacturers prioritized the production of military-purpose drones.[71]

The Russian MoD is failing to distribute state orders and funding to some Russian defense industrial base (DIB) enterprises. Russian State Duma Deputy Viktor Pinsky appealed on May 16 to Russian First Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov, requesting help to save the only aircraft repair plant in the Far Eastern Federal District.[72] Pinsky stated that insufficient state orders have forced the 322nd Aircraft Repair Plant in Vozdvizhenka, Primorsky Krai, to cut staff hours and lose valuable specialists. The plant specializes in the repair of the Su-24, Su-25, Su-27, and MiG-31 aircraft, and Ka-27 and Ka-29 helicopters.[73] Pinsky previously appealed to the Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec's subsidiary United Aircraft Corporation (UAC) in March 2025 regarding the state of the 322nd Aircraft Repair Plant.[74] This deprioritization of the plant may be part of Russia's efforts to scale up drone production, Russia's focus on mobilizing enterprises that directly support combat realities in Ukraine, or a direct result of international sanctions.

Satellite imagery indicates that the Kremlin has depleted another Soviet-era Russian armored vehicle storage facility in Omsk Oblast to support its war effort in Ukraine. An OSINT analyst published satellite imagery captured between May 2021 and April 2025, which shows that Russian forces have removed nearly all armored vehicles from the Novaya Stanitsa Arsenal near the Omsk Higher Tank Engineering

School, Omsk City.[75] The analyst assessed that the arsenal stored 120 main battle tanks, 89 armored personnel carriers, 41 infantry tracked vehicles, and 54 MT-12 anti-tank guns in May 2021.[76] The analyst noted that a few BAT-2 engineering vehicles and trucks remained at the storage facility as of April 2025.[77] ISW continues to assess that Russian forces have suffered vehicle and artillery system losses on the battlefield that are unsustainable in the medium- to long-term, given the limitations of Russia's defense industrial capacity and Soviet-era weapons and equipment stocks.[78]

The Russian government is establishing the state-controlled Center for the Development of Artificial Intelligence (AI). *Kommersant* reported on May 12 that the Center for the Development of AI will build end-to-end operational coordination between government agencies, regions, and businesses, and provide analytical support for the government's high-priority AI objectives.[79] The center will be responsible for digitalizing and modernizing government systems, as Russia's use of technology varies greatly at both the federal and regional levels. Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Chernyshenko emphasized on May 15 the need for Russia to be at the forefront of the global AI development race and announced intentions for funding research programs that fall under this purview.[80] The Kremlin will likely use this center to advance AI use for military purposes and for the development of AI-based drones.

Russian Technological Adaptations (Assessed Russian objective: Introduce technological innovations to optimize systems for use in Ukraine)

Russian forces reportedly developed a smaller variant of the Shahed drone that can be used along the frontlines. *Izvestia* reported on May 14 that Russia is producing the Tyuvik strike UAV, which is a smaller version of the Shahed drone that is designed to operate along the frontlines and destroy armored vehicles.[81] The Tyuvik drones reportedly have the same Shahed "flying wing" aerodynamic structure with a flight range of 30 kilometers and a flight time of 25 minutes. The Tyuvik drone can accelerate to speeds of up to 180 kilometers per hour and can carry an adjustable payload of two kilograms. *Izvestia* claimed that Russian drone operators operate the Tyuvik drones using new communications technology "pozemka" that can withstand Ukrainian electronic warfare (EW) interference. *Izvestia* claimed the drone also features an AI-based, autopilot function that does not use satellite navigation systems or require communication with the operator, allowing the drone to evade EW systems and jamming. Tyuvik drone developers at the "Stratum" design bureau told *Izvestia* that Russian forces had already tested the drone on the battlefield and that Russia had begun serial production of the drone.

Ukrainian EW and radio technology expert, Serhiy Beskrestnov, reported on May 16 that Russian forces have increased the usage of newly developed, unspecified drones with AI capabilities along the frontline in Ukraine.[82] Beskrestnov stated that Russians fly these drones 30 to 50 times daily in three frontline directions and that Russian forces are constantly modernizing AI systems within these drones. Beskrestnov stated that Russian AI drones learned to maneuver in dangerous areas just over the past week, impeding the

operations of Ukrainian interceptor drones. Beskrestnov added that Russian AI-based drones can freely fly over highways and detect Ukrainian military vehicles because Ukrainian EW systems cannot counteract them at this time. A Russian milblogger claimed on May 18 that Russian drones with AI systems could recognize each other by the unique drone wing coloring.[83] It is unclear if Beskrestnov is referring to Tyuvik strike UAVs or other AI drones.

Russian developers reportedly modified Shahed strike drones to overcome Ukraine's anti-drone measures. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian developers improved the engine of the Shahed drones, enabling these drones to fly at an altitude of three kilometers at a speed of over 200 kilometers per hour.[84] Russian milbloggers claimed that improvements to the engines impede Ukrainian forces' ability to use mobile fire groups and helicopters, forcing Ukrainian forces to use F-16 aircraft to shoot down Shahed drones. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces have improved Shahed gliders, which enabled Shahed drones to dive from a height of two kilometers at a speed of 400 kilometers per hour and overcome Ukrainian air defense systems. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces adapted the microelectronic components of the Shahed drone to resist US-provided EW systems. Russian forces reportedly developed an anti-spoofing algorithm for Shahed drones and increased the warhead size from 50 kilograms to 90 kilograms. The Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) assessed on May 12 that Russia's overall rate of striking a target with a Shahed drone improved since March 2025, from nine percent in March 2025 to 18 percent in early May 2025.[85] The ISIS concluded that Russia's overall Shahed hit rate was 12.5 percent over the last two and a half months.

Russian developers continued to introduce new anti-drone adaptations and interceptors. A Russian milblogger published footage on May 14 claiming that Russian developers have introduced and tested a new modification to the Molot-Britva portable kinetic complex designed to combat large multi-rotor and fixed-wing UAVs with wingspan of two to five meters.[86] The milblogger claimed the complex can hit targets at altitudes up to two kilometers at speeds of up to 200 kilometers per hour and has a maximum range of three kilometers when chasing a drone. The milblogger claimed the complex's portable version is equipped with a thermal imaging homing head and "3.4-kilogram kinetic ammunition of 100 mm caliber," and can accelerate up to 265 kilometers per hour. The milblogger claimed that the complex also has stationary variants with radio command or laser guidance. The stationary variants have an improved firing range of up to 3.5 meters, a rate of fire of 360 kilometers per hour, and a weight of 3.5 kilograms. Russian milbloggers also claimed that Russian forces used the Yelka drone interceptor to protect the "Victory Day" parade in Moscow City on May 9 and claimed that Russian forces have been intercepting Ukrainian loitering munitions with these interceptors since at least September 2024.[87] Russian drone developer VEKTOR announced on May 15 that Russian forces tested a new anti-drone MANPADS system that has a sighting range of 1.5 to two kilometers, a strike radius of 10 meters, a maximum speed of 450 kilometers per hour, and a 1.2-kilogram weight.[88] VEKTOR claimed that the new MANPADS system is inexpensive and lightweight, implying that it could be distributed en masse to Russian forces.

Russian developers belatedly modernized the two-seater Yakovlev Yak-52 training aircraft into Yak-52B2 anti-drone aircraft.[89] Russian developers

claimed that Russia has many Yak-52 aircraft available for modernization and that the aircraft can carry a payload of 90 kilograms under each wing. Russian developers noted that the Yak-52B2 aircraft is equipped with an onboard computer with targeting information and navigation. Yak-52B2 is reportedly operational during day and nighttime and in difficult weather conditions. Russian developers noted that Yak-52B2 can target fixed-wing UAVs of aircraft type and light-engine aircraft-type UAVs. A Russian milblogger published footage on May 18 claiming to show a Yak-52B2 complete its first flight.[90] A Russian aviation expert stated in July 2024 that Ukrainian forces pioneered the use of light aircraft to repel drones with Yak-52 trainer aircraft.[91] The expert also noted that the Russian Volunteer Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation, and Navy of Russia (DOSAAF) and its private owners have around 25 Yak-52 aircraft, and that Russia's aviation sector has approximately the same number of A-22s and the A-32 variant. Russian officials announced the modernization of the Yak-52 aircraft in August 2024.[92]

Russian developers presented a new large cargo drone reportedly capable of facilitating logistics. Rostec reported on May 15 that the Sukhoi United Aircraft Corporation Design Bureau presented a new S-76 large cargo drone during the International Exhibition of Helicopter Industry and UAVs in Moscow City. Rostec claimed that S-76 drones will allow Russia to establish a fully automated and unmanned transportation system in Russia.[93] Ukrainian defense outlet *Militarnyi* reported on May 16 that the S-76 can take off at a maximum weight of 1,500 kilograms, carry a payload of up to 300 kilograms, and fly at 4,000 meters altitudes at a speed of 180 kilometers per hour.[94] *Militarnyi* reported that the drone is 7.2 meters in length with a wingspan of 11 meters. *Militarnyi* reported that the drone can take off and land without prepared infrastructure, allowing it to perform logistics tasks in the most inaccessible places. *Militarnyi* reported that the S-76 drone has passed the first stage of flight testing, which focused on vertical takeoff and landing. *Militarnyi* stated that S-76 can perform both civilian and military tasks, and that Russia could use the drone to supply ammunition to Russian forces in Ukraine.

The Russian MoD reportedly equipped Russian mobile fire groups with mobile radars from the latest Pantsir-SMD-E surface-to-air missile system. *Militarnyi,* citing footage published by Russian milbloggers, reported that Russian forces are using vehicles with radars mounted on the chassis, which enables Russian forces to monitor nearby airspace without the need for mechanical rotation.[95] *Militarnyi* reported that Russian forces can view radar data on the computer inside the vehicle and that this information allows Russian operators to estimate the size and the type of a target. *Militarnyi* reported that the radar can cover a 90-degree sector and can detect targets with a radar cross section of one square meter at a distance of 45 kilometers.

Russian State Recognition of Officers and Military Units: (Assessed Russian objective: Honor specific Russian units for service, achievements, and hardships in Ukraine and incentivize service in distinguished units

Putin awarded the state Marshal Georgy Zhukov prize to the developers of unguided rockets for TOS-1A "Solntsepek" and TOS-2 "Tosochka" heavy flamethrower systems on May 15.[96] The Kremlin awards the Marshal Georgy Zhukov Prize to individuals involved in the creation of military equipment, weapons, and art.[97] Putin awarded employees of the "Splav" research and production association, which is part of the Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec.

Note: ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.

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