



By: Federico Fubini

Cracks in the foundation of Putin's regime



In the late 1970s, the Soviet Union launched a decade-long war in Afghanistan that would **cost** it 15,000 lives and contribute to its eventual implosion.

Nearly a half-century later, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched his own war, against Ukraine, and this one has **cost** his side at least 250,000 lives in the three years since the full-scale invasion began.

At this rate, if Putin's invasion lasts as long as Leonid Brezhnev's Soviet-Afghan War, Russian casualties will be over 55 times greater – and Russia's population **today** is just over half that of the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, with 45 countries across three continents maintaining sanctions against Russia, the consequences have not been confined to Russia and Ukraine.

We know that within Russia, the war has brought something resembling a 1930s-style fascist regime, though the Kremlin is relying on financial inducements, not just **conscription**, to feed the meat grinder.

In the Samara region, the signing bonus for anyone who agrees to fight **reached** a record \$40,000 in January.

Obviously, such a large **payments** for military service in Ukraine reflect growing reluctance on the part of would-be soldiers.

While former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev reports that 175,000 men have signed up for the army in the first five months of this year, Mediazona **estimates** that 51,000 Russian died on the battlefield just in the second half of 2024.

The costs are becoming unsustainable

Perhaps Putin will still be able to recruit more than 30,000 per month, or perhaps not. In Samara, the bonus hike was reminiscent of how some gyms market memberships: the best

perks were valid only for those who signed up by February 1.

Presumably, Putin has offered to reward regional governors for high recruitment figures. But if regional administrations are raising signing bonuses only to cut them soon thereafter, one can infer that the costs are becoming unsustainable.

The need to increase payments reflects Russians' growing recognition of the odds of dying in Ukraine

Since June 5, the bonus for "volunteers" in Bashkortostan, located between the Volga River and the Ural Mountains, has been **reduced** from \$20,400 to \$12,700; in the Belgorod Oblast near Ukraine, it was cut from \$38,200 to \$10,200 in January (after a three-month "promotion"). Throughout Russia, flat-rate federal signing bonuses for prison inmates were canceled in January.

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In provincial areas such as Kurgan, located where the Urals and Siberia meet, cemeteries are being expanded. Nationwide, the "exit" bonus for dead soldiers' families has nearly doubled, from the equivalent of about \$95,000 to \$176,000.

Putin will avoid another mobilization of conscripts

Again, the recent cuts in signing bonuses suggest that the system is under financial pressure. After all, Russia has been selling oil, its main revenue source, for roughly \$50 per barrel, or 25%, below the price originally **estimated** in its 2025 budget.

Still, Putin will likely avoid another mobilization of conscripts. When he tried that in September 2022, public support for his

“special military operation” seemed to take a hit.

He also undoubtedly remembers the Soviet misadventure in Afghanistan. The reason those 15,000 fallen soldiers mattered so much politically was that most of them had never chosen to go fight.

Moreover, they were drafted not only from the Soviet periphery but also from Moscow and St. Petersburg, where the losses affected cultural elites, undermining the system’s credibility.

Yakutia, located in the Russian far east, reportedly held a “Change Your Life” day to recruit local homeless men for the front lines

To avoid repeating these mistakes, Putin has relied on more subtle forms of coercion. For example, last month, Yakutia, located in the Russian far east, **reportedly** held a “Change Your Life” day to recruit local homeless men for the front lines.

The courts are also playing a role. “I have followed hundreds of interviews with prisoners of war, obituaries, stories of soldiers among my acquaintances and family,” the exiled dissident Maria Vyushkova told me. “In recent weeks, I have come across three similar cases: men who ended up on trial for minor offenses and were pushed by judges to join the army under the threat of heavy sentences.”

One of them, a 45-year-old from Ulan-Ude, south of Lake Baikal, was on trial last year for causing a traffic accident; the court offered to convert his sentence into a contract as a truck driver in Ukraine’s Russian-occupied Donbas region. He eventually ended up as a Ukrainian prisoner of war.

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Russia has long used similar tricks to lure Kazakh or Nepalese migrants to the front lines.

But now, it is Russians who are being targeted. Job vacancies for “drivers,” “security guards,” and “construction workers” in active combat zones have been cropping up everywhere – an obvious ruse to hide the war’s brutal reality.

Meanwhile, the average age of new recruits is rising, with men over 60 joining those on the front line. Even authorized media outlets report cases of wounded soldiers being savagely beaten if they refuse to return to the front before fully recovering.



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In May, Russian soldiers on Telegram reported that their commander had sent men on crutches into battle. Earlier in the war, Russia’s wounded at least got time to recover; no longer. With 23,000 armored vehicles **lost**, mules are now being used to transport materiel.

Despite the cracks that are beginning to show, Putin seems no closer to accepting a truce. On the contrary, his aggression is becoming even more indiscriminate and violent.

Most likely, he simply does not get it. Bad news does not necessarily reach him, since subordinates protect themselves by withholding it.

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Bent on revising the European order that

emerged after the Soviet Union's collapse, Putin has created a regime that is willing to make choices that appear senseless to democratic societies. His war of attrition is therefore bound to continue. With US support for Ukraine dwindling, Europe needs to do more to widen the cracks in the foundation of Putin's praetorian regime.

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