Troika Read-Ahead for USAREUR-AF Staff Course

Russian Way of War (RWOW) Staff Course

7 to 10 April 2026

SUMMARY: The following readings are taken from the Troika Observations which are published thrice weekly and from the Troika Compendium book projects. This material covers many of the themes and key points that we will address in this upcoming course and will provide background and context to the discussion. The readings are grouped by topic and generally follow the sequence of the course. The table of contents is hyperlinked so that you can go directly to the article you seek.

As an additional reference, we recommend ***How Russia Fights: A Compendium of Troika Observations on Russia's Special Military Operation***

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-Strategic Context – Russia as an enduring, global threat

1) The Year Ahead. This is a special edition of the Troika Observations in which we make predictions for 2026. (7 Jan 2026)

On 24 February 2026, Russia's latest war against Ukraine entered its 13th year. On 24 February 2026, the Special Military Operation (SMO) entered its 5th year.

1. The duration of the SMO will exceed that of the Great Patriotic War (GPW). Russians refer to their participation in World War II (22 June 1941 until 9 May 1945) as "the Great Patriotic War." Veneration of the Great Patriotic War is a key tenet of Russian national culture. Vladimir Putin has sought repeatedly to portray the SMO as a continuation of the GPW, an opportunity for this generation of Russians to honor the sacrifices of their great-grandfathers. The GPW lasted 1417 days.

12 January 2026 marked Day # 1417 of the SMO. Pro-Kremlin milbloggers noted this upcoming milestone, and used it to criticize the RF MOD, Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov and RF AF leadership in general (but not Putin).

2. Russia will try but fail to capture the remainder of Donetsk Oblast. Having captured most of Pokrovsk by late 2025 after a 21-month campaign, the RF AF will now turn their focus to the remaining major fortifications in northwestern Donetsk Oblast and the Kostyantynivka - Kramatorsk - Sloviansk agglomeration ("the Fortress Cities"). Putin has claimed that the capture of this more than 4000-square-kilometer area is imminent. It is not. This could be a negotiating technique, or he could sincerely believe it based on false reports from his subordinates (see #10 below). Either way, the Troika does not believe him. Sloviansk and Kramatorsk are considerably larger and more fortified than Pokrovsk, which proved to be a considerable challenge for the RF AF in 2024 and 2025. In summer 2025, the Russians captured Chasiv Yar. That now rubbled town is just outside the fortified defenses described above but is considerably smaller. It was taken at a considerable cost to Russia.

3. The battlefield will be marked by more attritional warfare. As the Troika noted in our 2025 end-of-year assessment, there was very little movement and maneuver by either side in 2025. There will be even less in 2026 as UAVs continue to dominate the battlespace around the clock. Russia's grinding meat assaults have caused massive casualties, but they have been successful, if slow. Russian

leaders believe that time and resources are on their side. Russia has a much larger population, strong support from multiple allies – including manpower support, and strategic patience. Russians will accept high casualties in support of a noble cause.

4. A possible alternative Russian offensive. As discussed, a Russian attack on "the fortress cities" in northwest Donetsk Province will be very costly and is not likely to succeed in 2026. However, there is another option that Russian leaders have openly discussed which they may pursue in 2026.

In 2025, the RF AF confidently employed their new assault tactics at Pokrovsk, Mynohrad, Siversk, and Kupiansk. These infiltration assaults were costly but successful (except ultimately in Kupiansk, see #11 below). However, the RF AF seemed surprised by their success in Huliaipole in late December 2025.

Huliaipole is less than 80 km east of Zaporizhzhia city. There is little defensible terrain for the UAF between Huliaipole and Zaporizhzhia. Although Russian forces are attacking north less than 25 km south of Zaporizhzhia city, they are attacking around and through former Russian minefields and other obstacles from the 2023 UAF counteroffensive. The Troika would not be surprised to see a greater Russian push toward Zaporizhzhia city from Huliaipole in 2026, involving armored assaults and fires. If the RF AF could take Zaporizhzhia city, then all of eastern Dnipropetrovsk Oblast (east of Dnipro River) would be open from both the south (from Zaporizhzhia city) and from the east (from Pokrovsk). That would be a way for Russia to circumvent the fortress belt and partially encircle it from the southwest. As shown in recent RF MOD videos, this COA has been alluded to in discussions between Putin, Gerasimov and their commanders. No doubt, the Russians were looking to gauge the Ukrainians' response as part of their considerations.

5. Russia will increase its targeting of civilian infrastructure in Ukraine. While the Line of Combat Contact (LCC) in eastern and southern Ukraine will move slowly and in small increments, Russia will increase its targeting of civilian infrastructure. Russian defense industry is now producing multiple missile systems at well above replacement rates. Western and Ukrainian production of air defense systems is limited. The RF AF have also adapted technology and tactics, techniques, and procedures to make their air attacks more successful, especially in the area of long-range strike UAVs.

6. More Russia Indirect Actions against the West. Russia long ago identified Western support as Ukraine's center of gravity. Indeed, Vladimir Putin frequently refers to Ukraine as an artificial state, used by the U.S., NATO, and the West (which he considers to be largely synonymous) to attack Russia. For many years Russia has been conducting what it calls "Indirect Actions" against the West – non-attributional attacks designed to stay below Western thresholds for war but considered by Russians to be an integral part of the Russian way of war. These attacks increased in 2025 and will increase even more in 2026 – because they work. One European leader publicly admitted that he has made decisions beneficial to Russia because of Russian *Indirect Action*s that targeted him.

7. Ukraine will continue deep strikes against Russian energy infrastructure and defense production. Ukraine intensified its campaign against Russian energy in 2025, targeting refineries, ports, and Russia's shadow fleet of tankers that carry sanctioned Russian oil to customers around the world. By some estimates, around 40 percent of Russian Federation oil refining capacity was taken offline (some of it was eventually restored). These attacks will continue in 2026 – because they are effective, and because Ukrainian long-range strike capabilities continue to improve with new domestically produced systems. Russia's vast size allows it to disperse its military to facilities far from Ukraine. But it also stretches air defense. Russia does not have enough air defense systems to cover it forces fighting in the SMO, its military facilities inside of Russia, its defense industry, and its energy infrastructure.

8. Russia will continue to implement the 2022 Putin-Shoigu Plan but will not complete all items. On 17 December 2025, the Troika reported on Russian progress implementing this plan to increase the size and capabilities of the RF AF. Most items are in progress, many are complete. However, Russia sems unlikely to meet Shoigu's suspense of 2026. Most of the completed items focus on Russia's Ground Forces, VDV, and Naval Infantry, as one would expect in a Ground Forces-dominated military. Remaining items include new Aerospace Forces (VKS) capabilities, and greater VKS integration with RF GF. This is harder and will not be completed in the upcoming year. It is likely that the RF AF convert 1-2 naval infantry brigades into divisions and continue to improve their force generation systems.

9. New law on conscription will improve force generation. One thing that should help the stated goal of improving force generation is a new law on conscription that took effect 1 January 2026. This law permits *voenkomati* (military commissariats) to conduct conscription-related activities all year, and not just during the two designated conscription cycles (April 1 to July 15; and October 1 to December 31). The Troika does not believe that the RF AF will begin send conscripts to units year-round – their force generation model requires that new conscripts arrive in units *en masse* twice per year. Rather, the *voenkomati* will use the additional time to complete administrative requirements. For instance, young Ivan Ivanov might receive a draft summons on 15 January, ordering him to report to his local *voenkomat* on 1 February. They would register him (possibly confiscating his passport), and then Ivan would complete his medical exam and vocational testing, be issued his uniforms, and then be released. He would then be ordered to return on 1 April – Day One of the spring conscription cycle. In the interim, the *voenkomat* would assign him to a unit. When he returns on 1 April, he will board the bus or train to his unit. Under the old law, all these activities had to take place within the tight conscription windows. Spreading out the administrative activities should - in principle - improve the process It is also likely that young Ivan will be pressed hard to volunteer during his in-processing and while he is waiting to ship out. This already happens, but now recruiters will have more time to work on potential recruits. Remember, by Russian law, conscripts may not be deployed outside Russia absent a declaration of war. Although Russia has illegally annexed five Ukrainian oblasts where most of the fighting in the SMO is taking place, the RF AF has not deployed conscripts to the SMO since early 2022.

10. More guest workers will support Russia's economy and war effort. The Russian Federation has long attracted immigrants. Russian demographics and chronic alcoholism among the native population created lucrative work opportunities for hard-working, skilled, and sober migrants. Prior to the SMO, the RF was ranked #4 in the world for migrant destinations. Many of these came from within the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU – Russia's answer to the EU), particularly the Central Asian states. However, there were many African and South Asian workers in Russia as well. The SMO has reduced the native labor force even further, with SMO service, SMO casualties, and emigration all taking a toll. The factory in Alabuga, Tatarstan, where Russia produces its Geran family of UAS, has been increasingly staffed by young African women, supplemented in 2025 by North Koreans. In late 2025, Putin visited India. Among the outcomes of his meetings with Prime Minister Modi was reportedly an agreement for India to provide 700,000 guest workers to Russia. Details were not made public, but there are already reports of the first tranche of Indian workers arriving. Many of Russia's previous waves of guest workers found themselves fighting in the SMO. Some were tricked, coerced, or induced into signing contracts. Others were rounded up by press gangs and sent involuntarily. Given that the Indian guest workers are coming under a state-to-state agreement between allies, it seems unlikely that they will intentionally be sent to the SMO. But the Russian Federation is a large country, and mistakes are made. Meanwhile, in a war dripping with irony, perhaps this is perhaps the greatest example. A war waged in the name of Russian national greatness is increasingly supported by immigrants of color.

11. More Potemkinism. General Grigory Potemkin had a distinguished career in the Russian Imperial Army. However, he is most famous for filing false reports to his civilian leadership and then using an elaborate ruse to cover up his lies. Potemkin led the 18th Century military expeditions that captured territory in what is now eastern and southern Ukraine from the Ottoman Turks. He told his empress, Tsarina Catherine II (aka Catherine the Great) that he had developed the captured territory, and it was thriving. He had not, and it was not. When Catherine decided to visit to observe the prosperity for herself, Potemkin created the villages that now bear his name. "Potemkin villages" were Hollywood-style facades – false fronts that appeared impressive from a distance but had no substance. Remember – Potemkin was a Russian general.

This tradition of Potemkinism lives on in the modern RF AF. There are many examples, but the most recent was in Kupiansk at the end of 2025. On 20 November 2025, during a visit to his HQ by Vladimir Putin, Commander of RF Western Group of Forces, GEN-COL Sergey Kuzovlev reported that his command had seized Kupiansk. Videos of Russian soldiers raising flags amidst rubbled buildings were presented as proof. Chief of the General Staff GEN Gerasimov then proudly pronounced Kupiansk fully liberated. Putin made several public addresses in the following weeks announcing the liberation of Kupiansk by the RF AF. On 9 December 2025, Vladimir Putin personally awarded Kuzovlev the Hero of Russia for this victory. Three days later, on 12 December, Volodymyr Zelensky released a selfie of himself standing in front of the Kupiansk sign, with Ukrainian soldiers. Putin doubled down – Zelensky's photo was supposedly fake, staged at another location. Russia

controlled Kupiansk. This proved too much even for pro-Kremlin milbloggers, who reported that while some Russian units had successfully infiltrated into Kupiansk, the RF AF had never seized Kupiansk. Meanwhile, a Ukrainian counterattack severed supply lines and encircled the Russian infiltrators. While fighting around Kupiansk remains fierce, Pro-Kremlin milbloggers brutally criticized Kuzovlev and Gerasimov (but not Putin). In a 29 December 2025 meeting with Putin, Kuzovlev revised his report on Kupiansk, reporting that UAF units in the town would be destroyed in January – February 2026. This has not satisfied Kuzovlev's critics. In late December 2025, Russian milbloggers were still in touch with contacts who were encircled in Kupiansk. The lie has become harder and harder to conceal, as the encircled soldiers are from RF GF 27th Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade / 1st GTA which is garrisoned in south Moscow and manned by soldiers from Moscow and the surrounding oblast.

These events happened in late 2025, but the Troika believes that we will see more of this in 2026. As victories on the battlefield become more and more elusive, RF AF commanders will invent their own successes. While this method worked well for Potemkin in the 18th Century, it is much more difficult in the 21st with cell phones and social media being ubiquitous. The Troika wonders what Putin really knows, and how much of his subordinates' reporting he actually believes. He is a product of the same system, so he is surely aware of the culture of institutionalized lying up the chain of command. He may have even told a few lies to his own bosses earlier in his career. Regardless, he went all-in on the Kupiansk charade, suggesting that he believed it.

12. Continued adaptations. The Russian military is a thinking, learning, and adaptive organization. This will continue in 2026. Russia will continue to adapt its equipment and its tactics, techniques, and procedures.

13. Surprises. Even in its 5th year, the SMO will provide surprises, things that we were not expecting.

-Intro to Placemat/Order of Battle

Please see the RWOW Troika Placemat, provided separately.

-The Way Forward: the Putin-Shoigu Plan

2) The Putin-Shoigu Plan: An Update at the Three-year Mark (17 Dec 2025).
Many Westerners believe that when Russia's Special Military Operation (SMO) ends, the Russian military will enter a prolonged period of reconstitution, during which the Russia will rebuild its battered armed forces. Some have even speculated that the Russian Armed Forces (RF AF) reconstitution could take as long as 9 years. This is incorrect. Russia is transforming its military in contact. This includes expanding its size, rebuilding attritted units, creating new units, and incorporating SMO adaptations into their *taktika* (doctrine), weapons development, and modified tables of organization and

equipment (MTOEs). This is all occurring during the SMO, not just to win the current war, but the next one as well. There will be no "grace period" when the SMO ends. The blueprint for the Russian future force is the Putin-Shoigu Plan, unveiled 3 years ago this week. There is no need to speculate about the future force – Putin and Shoigu laid out their plans in late 2022 and are implementing them. Over the past 3 years they have made significant progress. In this annual special edition Troika Insight, we will update Russia's substantial progress on the Putin-Shoigu Plan.

Background. On 21 December 2022, Vladimir Putin and his then-Minister of Defense (now Secretary of the Security Council) Sergei Shoigu addressed the Collegium of the RF Defense Ministry. They revealed an ambitious plan to expand Russia's armed forces with new commands, new units, and new equipment. These new formations would be manned by both *kontraktniki* (enlisted volunteers) and conscripts, but the rules governing both categories of enlisted soldiers would change. This plan represents a return to the past for the RF AF and can be considered the final "nail in the coffin" for the 2008 New Look Reforms which had been steadily dismantled since 2012. While effusively praising the performance of the RF AF in Ukraine, there was some implied criticism of Russia's military organization and its military industrial complex, as the Shoigu Plan addresses some shortcomings revealed in the SMO. This plan will be expensive; however, Putin emphasized in his remarks, "***We have no limits in financing [these steps]***." He has repeated this statement since then. Putin's Russia, like the Soviet Union previously, has always prioritized defense spending even in difficult economic times, so there is good precedent for taking Putin at his word.

STATUS: In November 2025, Putin signed the 2026 Russian Federation budget which allocates 12.9 trillion rubles (approximately $162.2 B) to "National Defense." This is *four times greater* than the pre-SMO 2021 National Defense budget. This represents about 7 percent of Russia's GDP, and about 30 percent of the entire federal budget. This is a slight drop from 2025's record budget of 13.5 trillion rubles (approximately $169.8 B), but it is offset by an increase in spending on "National Security," which includes the non-MOD parts of the "military organization," such as *Rosgvardiya*, the FSB, the SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service), the Interior Ministry, and others. It is clear that Putin is putting Russia's money behind his rhetoric. Total spending on National Defense and Security is 17 trillion rubles (approximately $213.8 B), nearly 40 percent of Russia's total budget.

Summary of speeches. In their 2022 remarks, both Putin and Shoigu began by making clear that Russia is fighting the U.S., West, and NATO, which they consider to be largely synonymous. Putin also evoked historic themes of defense of the motherland against invaders, and heroic, patriotic sacrifice saying, "(Russian fighters are) fighting – you know, I'm not afraid to make this comparison, it's not an exaggeration – exactly like the heroes of the War of 1812, the First World War, or the Great Patriotic War."

Putin's 6 main points, with status as of December 2025. Putin stayed at the strategic level and provided general direction:

1. Russia has acquired tremendous combat experience in the SMO (and Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh); MoD must incorporate that experience into training and weapons development.
STATUS: SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS. After a typically slow start, the RF MOD has made significant adaptations, changing *taktika* (doctrine), training, organizations, and weapons development to reflect lessons learned in the SMO. This claim that "***Russia has acquired tremendous combat experience...***" is one that Putin regularly repeats in speeches, and which includes civil society and industry—how Russia fights as a nation at war. This now includes practice in how Russia can incorporate allies' capabilities, like North Korea's.

2. The Presidential Administration, MOD leadership, and leadership of other agencies must work closely with one another within the framework of the specially created "Coordination Council." This will include the regional authorities and heads of military industrial entities.
STATUS: COMPLETED. This was an immediate "win" for Russia's war efforts in 2023. Led by Dmitri Medvedev, by mid-2023 Russian defense industry and civil society became unquestionably responsive to RF MOD and the RF AF and their immediate and future warfighting needs. The appointment of civilian economist Andrey Belousov as Minister of Defense in May 2024 also made a big impact and led to greater efficiency including less output loss to corruption. Internal Kremlin political intrigue is difficult to observe using open-source information. However, interagency work on defense issues seems far more efficient than in 2022.

3. Support the development and combat readiness of the nuclear triad.
STATUS: MODERATE PROGRESS. After firing an *Oreshnik* IRBM at Ukraine in November 2024, in 2025 Russia test-fired the *Burevestnik* nuclear-powered and nuclear-capable cruise missile and the *Poseidon* nuclear torpedo. However, an apparent test launch of the Sarmat ICBM on 28 November 2025 failed rather spectacularly. Some analysts are now seriously questioning Russia's ability to modernize one of its key current components of nuclear deterrence (heavy ICBMs), and leaving Russia vulnerable as its SS-18 fleet continues to age well beyond its reasonable life span.

4. Raise the capabilities of the Aerospace Forces, including fighters and bombers, as well as unmanned aerial vehicles.
STATUS: SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS. A success story of the RF defense industry has been its increased, sustained production of Su-34 and Su-35 fighter-bombers, cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and UAVs. In 2022 many Western observers predicted that Russia would run out of missiles. They have not. Su-34 and Su-35 production rates rival or exceed new manufacturing pace of several types of armored vehicles.

5. Improve the system of command and control to make operational control more resilient. Increase the use of artificial intelligence (AI).

STATUS: SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS. When Russians say "improve" C2, they really mean "increase C2 structures," i.e. – HQs). This was completed in 2024, with the re-creation of the Leningrad and Moscow military districts. Russia is experimenting with AI in the RF General Staff's strategic command-and-control and logistics structures starting at the RF AF National Defense Management Center (NDMC, НЦУО) and probably within RF MOD. The state defense industrial conglomerate, *Rostec*, is reportedly also using AI tools for design and experimenting with their integration into various weapon systems.

6. Correct the system of mobilization to eliminate the problems experienced and modernize the system of recruiting and training conscripts and mobilized troops.
STATUS: MODERATE PROGRESS. Putin's speech came in the immediate aftermath of the September 2022 partial mobilization. That mobilization was ugly – disorganized, *mobiki* were sent into combat with limited equipment and training – but it worked. 300,000 personnel were mobilized in two months, with about half going directly into combat. Since then, Russia has increased authorized end strength to 1.5 million (up from just over 1 million in 2021), and increased volunteer recruiting and conscription totals. Although experiences vary by region and unit, most new recruits seem to be receiving far better-quality basic equipment and at least some training prior to deployment to the SMO. The RF MOD has begun modernizing its system of *voenkomati* – "one stop shop" military commissariats responsible for conscription, recruiting, and mobilization. It is a slow process – for the fall 2025 conscription cycle, only 4 of Russia's 89 regions sent exclusively electronic draft notices. The other 85 sent electronic and paper summonses. Fixing Russia's mobilization system, everything Russia needs to man, equip and train its forces to Russian standards for Russia's future wars is a big part of Putin's repeated claims that "***Russia has acquired tremendous combat experience in the SMO.***" Russia's Armed Forces and land warfighting capabilities are based on mobilization, not readiness. Russia is a land power that fights based on mass. Mobilization requires participation of the Russian government at all levels, society, and defense industry.

Shoigu's main points, with status as of December 2025. After Putin Spoke, Minister Shoigu addressed the MoD Collegium and dropped down into operational and tactical details:

1. Command & Control / New Headquarters.

- **Reestablish the Moscow (MOMD) and Leningrad (LEMD) Military Districts.** These two districts were disbanded as part of the 2008 New Look Reforms with their units and missions absorbed by the newly created Western Military District (WEMD), and eventually the Northern Fleet Military District (MD). Recall that Russian military districts have responsibilities for force generation AND warfighting.

STATUS: **COMPLETED.** The LEMD and MOMD were re-established on **1 March 2024**, according to their pre-2008 boundaries. Kaliningrad was assigned to LEMD. The Northern Fleet MD and the WEMD were abolished. The Northern Fleet (formerly a military district itself), and Russia's other fleets (formerly subordinate to military districts) are now subordinate directly to RF Navy HQ.

- **Create a new army corps in Karelia.** Karelia straddles the border between Finland and Russia. The Soviet Union annexed part of Finnish Karelia in 1940 after the Winter War. Russia threatened to deploy forces to the Finnish border if Finland joined NATO; this is clearly related.

  STATUS: COMPLETED. The RF GF 44th Army Corps was formed in April 2024, with a future home garrison in Petrozavodsk, Karelia. By late July 2024, the new 44th Army Corps was fighting in northeast Kharkiv Province near Vovchansk.

- ***Create 4 new Combined Arms Armies (CAA).** Shoigu did not mention creating 4 new CAAs in his plan. However, since the beginning of the SMO, the RF AF have created 4 new CAAs, for a total of 16 armies. The 18th CAA, 25th CAA, 51st GCAA, and 3rd GCAA were added.

2. New Maneuver Units.

- **Total: Add 17 new maneuver divisions (10 GF MRD, 2 VDV, 5 Naval Infantry):**

  - Transform 7 separate motorized rifle brigades (MRB) into 7 motorized rifle divisions (MRD).

  Background: The 2008 New Look Reforms abolished divisions, which were often understrength or hollow, and replaced them with separate maneuver ("combat arms") brigades which were intended to be fully manned and maintained at a higher state of readiness. In 2012, soon after Minister Shoigu and GEN Valery Gerasimov were appointed, they immediately began to reverse the reforms and re-create divisions. However, many of these new divisions were divisions in name only – they were severely understrength, with only 1 or 2 regiments, vs the standard 3 or 4. Also most RF AF maneuver units (divisions, brigades, and regiments) began the SMO at 80% strength or less, and their MTOEs were already very lean.

  STATUS: FULFILLED / POSSIBLY EXCEEDED. It is not clear when the clock started for Shoigu's "seven new MRDs." In the two years before the SMO, four brigades became MRDs: 20th GMRD / 8th GCAA, 127th MRD / 5th GCAA, 18th GMRD / 11th AC, and 19th MRD / 58th GCAA. Since December 2022, the RF GF have created at least four new MRDs from MR brigades: the 27th GMRD / 2 GCAA, the 69th GMRD / 6th GCAA, 68th GMRD / 6th GCAA, and the 71st GMRD / 14th Army Corps for a total of at least eight new MRDs formed from motorized

rifle brigades since 2020. The Russians also made the 47th TD from a separate tank brigade and later added maneuver regiments to previously understrength MRDs: 47th TD / 1st GTA, 20th GMRD / 8th GCAA, 18th GMRD / 11th AC, 19th MRD / 58th GCAA. In any event, the Russians met and possibly exceeded this goal.

- <u>Form 3 motorized rifle divisions (MRDs) in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia "oblasts</u>." These Ukrainian provinces were annexed by Russia on 30 September 2022 and are partially occupied by RF AF. As most RF AF units are manned by local conscripts and volunteers, presumably the bulk of the soldiers for these new divisions would come from the illegally annexed territories.

STATUS: NOT OBSERVED. The Troika has seen no evidence of these MRDs yet. However, the RF AF did formally incorporate the former colonial militia from LPR and DPR into the Ground Forces. RF GF 1st Army Corps (LPR) became 3rd GCAA, and 2nd Army Corps (DPR) became 51st GCAA. Both commands still have several separate brigades each as their primary maneuver units. These brigades could eventually be expanded or consolidated to create 3 MRDs.

- <u>Form 2 new VDV divisions.</u> In December 2022, there were four VDV (Airborne Forces) divisions and three separate VDV brigades. The USSR had six VDV divisions.

- NOTE: All VDV units have taken substantial losses in personnel and equipment in the SMO, and *mobiki* now make up much of these units. No VDV units have conducted any air assault operations since February 2022, and the VDV has conducted zero airborne operations in the SMO.

STATUS: **COMPLETED.** In 2023, the RF AF formed two new VDV air assault divisions. The RF VDV 104th Guards Air Assault Division (GALD) was created in 2023, based on the 31st Guards Brigade, and the RF VDV 44th Air Assault Division (ALD) was created from two *mobik*-manned MRRs in 2023. They also added third regiments to the RF VDV 98th and 106th Guards Airborne Divisions, which previously had only two regiments each. The current total is six VDV divisions and two separate VDV air assault brigades. NOTE: while these new divisions have the lineage and *espirit de corps* of the RF AF VDV and may get "first choice" on new recruits, they are almost certainly not trained in airborne or air assault operations.

- <u>Form 5 naval infantry divisions</u>. Transform the 5 naval infantry brigades into divisions.

- NOTE: All naval infantry brigades have taken substantial losses in personnel and equipment in Ukraine. Most are fighting inland, and no amphibious operations (reinforcement from the sea) have been conducted since the first week of March 2022.

STATUS: MODERATE PROGRESS. On 1 December 2025**,** the RF 55th Naval Infantry Division was re-created from the RF 155th Guards Naval Infantry Brigade (SNIB), as was originally announced back in 2023. The RF 336th Guards SNIB from Kaliningrad was expanded to a division in early 2026. The other three pre-SMO naval infantry brigades remain brigades for now. Meanwhile, the RF 177th Guards Naval Infantry Regiment is expected to be expanded into the 77th Guards SNIB at some time in the future as well.

3. Aviation, Artillery, and Maintenance.

Total: Add 5 new artillery divisions, 3 aviation divisions; 3 new maintenance centers (MTO).

- <u>More artillery (of course!)</u> Form five new artillery divisions and five enhanced artillery brigades, one for each of the five military districts. These new artillery commands will serve as a strategic reserve and allow military districts to weight strategic directions ("axes of advance").

STATUS: **LIMITED PROGRESS.** In early 2025, the RF GF re-formed the 34th Guards Artillery Division in the Moscow Military District. Separately, in 2023, the VDV created the 52nd Artillery Brigade, the VDV's general support artillery brigade, something that RF VDV commanders have long desired. Thus far, the Troika has seen no evidence or claims of other RF GF artillery divisions being created.

- <u>More aviation units.</u> Form three aviation divisions, eight bomber regiments, one fighter regiment, and six brigades of army aviation (helicopters). It is unclear if the new regiments are meant to be subordinate to the new divisions, or separate.

STATUS: NOT OBSERVED. The Troika has seen no evidence of these new aviation units being formed. We do have a blind spot when it comes to Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) units – most are located far from Ukraine, and open-source reporting about them is limited.

- <u>Add combat aviation to combined arms armies and tank armies.</u> For every CAA/TA **(there were 12 in December 2022, as of December 2025 there are 16)** add a combined aviation division and brigade of army aviation with 80 - 100 combat helicopters. This would be a significant organizational change for the RF GF, especially the maintenance and training requirements. Currently, all aviation, including rotary-wing, is in the VKS or the RF Navy. There are no aircraft in the Ground Forces or VDV. Shoigu did not specify whether CAA/TA (i.e. – GF) would actually own the aircraft, or whether these would be somehow attached from the VKS.

STATUS: NOT OBSERVED. The Troika has seen no evidence of these combat aviation units being added to CAA/TA.

- <u>More maintenance.</u> Reverse the "outsourcing" of maintenance that took place from 2008 - 2012 by creating 3 new military repair factories and strengthening military repair units.

- NOTE: Here Shoigu called out the 2008 Reforms, which did in fact "outsource" many maintenance tasks to civilian contractors, although it was later largely reversed. He noted that these reforms had a "negative effect on readiness" which became evident during the SMO. Note that Russia is forming dozens of new combat units, but only three new maintenance facilities, reflecting Russia's traditional prioritization of shooters over sustainers.

STATUS: MODERATE PROGRESS. The previously idle Joint Stock Company (JSC) 261st Repair Plant in Veliky Novgorod, Russia resumed and expanded military equipment repair operations in September 2024. Russian Defense Minister Andrey Belousov announced in a yearly report to the MoD in December 2024 that additional repair units had been deployed near the front lines and more than 300 mobile teams of military industries are operating in combat areas. The Troika has seen more complicated repairs such as engine changes, swapping components and fixing hydraulics and suspensions increasingly conducted near the front lines without having to evac the equipment to the rear. Additionally, the process for pulling old equipment out of stocks and refurbishing it has become much more efficient.

<u>CONCLUSION</u>. Russia is building its future force now, *in contact*. The Putin-Shoigu Plan provides the blueprint. The RF MOD and AF made good overall progress implementing the plan throughout 2025, primarily with regards to Ground Forces and VDV, including new military districts, a new army corps, new RF GF and VDV divisions, and an artillery division. It stands to reason that a GF-dominated force would implement those parts of the plan first. However, in 2025 they began the expansion of naval infantry, tested several new nuclear systems, and began to institutionalize RF MOD and RF AF adaptations from the SMO including *Rubikon* and the RF Unmanned Systems Forces which further demonstrated what Putin means when he often repeats that "***Russia has acquired tremendous combat experience in the SMO.***" Russia even learned how to integrate an ally's warfighting and combat engineering capabilities into its efforts (albeit in a very Russian way with Norh Korea formations). The RF AF are now larger, more capable, more lethal, more efficient, and better adapted for modern warfare than they were in January 2022. Any notion of a long period of reconstitution when the SMO ends should be immediately rejected.

3) RF Fall 2025 Conscription Cycle began 1 October 2025 (1-3 Oct 2025)

Decree #690. On 29 September 2025, Vladimir Putin signed decree (*указ*) #690 proclaiming the beginning of the fall conscription cycle, which will run from 1 October – 31 December 2025. This decree is both expected and routine. This happens every year. It is not an indicator of a pending offensive. It is not the same as a "mobilization." This cycle's draft quota was 135,000 males aged 18 – 30. This number is slightly higher than last year's and follows a trend of gradual increases since the SMO began. The decree also releases those conscripts from service who have "completed their (1-year) term of service." Unlike the spring 2025 notice, this decree did not come with coordinating instructions from the Ministry of Defense.

RF Conscription. Russia has two conscription cycles per year, in the spring and in the fall. The fall quota is normally lower because the harsh northern climate limits fall and winter activities in many of Russia's remote regions. In March 2025, Putin signed decree #187 calling for the conscription of 160,000 during the spring cycle from 1 April - 15 July 2025. In **2025**, they will conscript **295,000** males total between both cycles. This is a gradual increase over recent years:

- **2025 total = 295,000** (160,000 spring + 135,000 fall)
- **2024 = 283,000** (150,000 spring + 133,000 fall):
- **2023 = 277,000** (147,000 spring + 130,000 fall):
- **2022* = 254,500** (134,500 spring + 120,000):
- **2021 (pre-SMO)** = **262,150** (134,650 spring + 127,500 fall).

*NOTE: Both 2022 conscription cycles took place during the first year of the SMO. The 2022 fall cycle occurred during the partial mobilization (a separate event but executed by the same RF institutions).

Numbers are slowly trending upwards. Conscription is a routine event, but the 2025 annual quota is the highest since 2016. It is 12,000 more than last year, and 32,850 more than in 2021, the last full year prior to the SMO. There does appear to be a gradual upward trend. There are several possible reasons for this:

1. End strength increase. Since 2022, the RF AF has increased its authorized end strength from 1,000,000 personnel to 1,500,000 without an equivalent increase in conscription. They have maintained end strength through mobilization, stop-loss, and high enlistment bonuses for new *kontraktniki* (volunteers). However, after the SMO, stop loss will end at some point, and bonuses will likely drop. A future, post-SMO force will require more conscripts.

2. RF AF personnel systems have adapted to the demands of the SMO. The SMO has severely taxed RF AF personnel systems. RF *voenkomati* (military commissariats) are responsible for conscription, contracted service, and mobilization. As conscripts cannot serve outside of Russia, they are of limited value in the SMO. In the spring of 2022, *voenkomati* prioritized volunteer service and recruiting. In September 2022, *voenkomati* had to implement an unplanned, un-resourced 320,000-man mobilization, only the third in Soviet and Russian

history. In 2023 and 2024, the focus shifted back to volunteer service. The gradually increasing conscription quotas could indicate that personnel systems have adjusted and are now capable of absorbing higher numbers of conscripts.

3. Expanded conscription age. A 2023 law expanded draft eligibility from 18-27 to 18-30, thus increasing the available pool of potential conscripts.

4. Increase the "peoples' reserve" pool of potential *mobiki*. While their training is minimal by Western standards, Russians consider conscript training to be reasonably sufficient. A demobilized conscript joins the "peoples' reserve" pool of potential *mobiki*, subject to be called up at any time. More conscripts = a larger peoples' reserve. The RF AF views conscripted service as one year of on-the-job training for future *mobiki,* who can then be called up for combat duty with little or no additional training.

5. Demographic Trends. Russia is starting to come out of a deep demographic hole of conscription-aged males, making for a larger conscription pool.

No MOD coordinating instructions this time? When Putin signed Decree #187 in March 2025, thus launching the spring conscription cycle, the RF MOD posted the full text on its official Telegram channel. The MOD then followed immediately with a post containing coordinating instructions explaining how conscription will be executed. It also included a disclaimer stating that "*This upcoming conscription campaign is in no way connected to the SMO in Ukraine," and* "*Conscripts will not be sent to the new regions of the RF – the LPR and DPR, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts, or to participate in the tasks of the SMO there.*" The was no such accompanying post this year. There was a link to the RF MOD's official page on "Max," the RF's new, mandatory messaging app. Perhaps the coordinating instructions are there.

Automation: A Partial Success? The spring cycle coordinating instructions noted that the draft would be carried out via electronic summons using the "State Information System," but that paper summons would still be sent by registered mail and still carried the force of law. During the fall 2025 conscription cycle, in Moscow and three other regions of Russia, (the Republic of Mari El, Ryazan, and Sakhalin) military commissariats will send out ***only*** electronic summons. All other regions will receive both electronic and paper summons. This was announced by Evgeny Burdinsky, the head of the Russian Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate of the General Staff, during a 30 September 2025 interview with the Russian newspaper "Krasnaya Zvezda." Burdinsky reminded those individuals receiving electronic summons that the summons will be considered delivered seven days after it appears in the MOD's "Summons Registry." If a conscript who received the summons does not appear at the military commissariat within 20 days, they will face an administrative fine of up to 30,000 rubles (~$360). They will also be prohibited from traveling abroad, driving vehicles, registering real estate, and taking out loans.

Automation has long been a Russian goal, however MOD has yet to fully automate the conscription process. Shortly before the SMO, then-MINDEF Shoigu

visited a *voenkomat* outside of Moscow and berated the staff for their paper records and the absence of computers. In December 2023, Putin directed that the conscription be conducted electronically beginning with the fall 2024 cycle. In August 2024, when UAF soldiers captured several RF AF military commissariats in Kursk Oblast, the offices records were all still on paper and automation was noticeably absent in the offices. The fact that Moscow (Russia's biggest city, by far) is utilizing electronic summons indicates that some progress has been made in automating the process. Still, 85 of Russia's 89 "federal subjects" will be sent paper summons, in addition to electronic ones. This indicates that automated conscription still has a long way to go.

Russian culture and conscription. In Russian culture, use of conscripts in combat is considered morally abhorrent. For this reason, Russia law prohibits conscripts from serving outside of Russia absent a declaration of war. Some RF Ground Forces units took their conscripts into combat in the early days of the Special Military Operation (SMO) in violation of Russian law. Many were KIA or captured and used by Ukraine for IO purposes. Vladimir Putin was forced to publicly address the situation, and the offending commanders were fired.

Centrally planned by the "Good Tsar" but regionally executed by the "Bad *Boyars.*" Russia's conscription system is ingenious. Through the Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate (*ГОМУ* or *GOMU*) of the General Staff, the RF MOD assigns conscription quotas to each of its 89 federal "subjects," including six that were recently and illegally annexed from Ukraine (the Republic of Crimea, the federal city of Sevastopol, "the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples' Republics," and Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts). Fulfilling the quotas is a shared responsibility between the governors of the 89 subjects, and the local "*voenkomati*" (*военкоматы*), or military commissariats. This arrangement allows Putin to exploit the traditional Russian notion of the "Good Tsar versus the Bad *Boyars*." "*Boyar*" is an old Russian term for the highest-ranking class of nobility. Although Peter the Great (one of Putin's idols) abolished the rank in the early 18th century, the word remains in common usage, now referring to regional leaders. In this uniquely Russian concept, the Tsar was fundamentally good, and any bad policies or outcomes were the result of bad *boyars* deceiving or disobeying the good Tsar. For centuries, "*If only the Tsar knew!*" was familiar lament of Russian peasants. The concept survived into the Soviet era, when victims of the Great Terror exclaimed, "*If only Stalin knew!*" In the modern context, complaints about conscription are directed at the bad *boyars* (regional governors and local *voenkomati*), while the good tsar (Putin) remains above the fray, occasionally intervening to answer the lament of an aggrieved mother or wife. Watch the Russian social media videos carefully – the family members complaining about conscription never mention Putin, who signed the decree, but rather local officials who implemented it.

What's the difference? Conscript versus *Kontraktnik* versus *Mobik*. This is a good time to review the 3 categories of enlisted soldiers in the RF AF. Western observers frequently confuse the types, or use the terms interchangeably, but the differences are important.

A Conscript (*призывник* or *срочник*) is an 18- to 30-year-old male Russian citizen. He must complete a mandatory service obligation in the Armed Forces or another part of the military organization (e.g. – *Rosgvardia*, Interior Ministry, FSB Border Troops, Ministry of Emergency Situations, etc.). All conscripts are eligible for mobilization (i.e. – involuntary call up) the day after their military obligation is completed.

In 2022 and 2023, the RF MOD lobbied to have the period of conscription returned to 2-years, as it was in the Soviet Union. Presumably, this was to increase the experience levels of enlisted soldiers. After months of unusually public political drama, in July 2023, the RF parliament passed a law restoring 2-year conscription. In the last days of August 2023, however the MoD arbitrarily restored the 1-year period, despite lobbying for 2-year conscription for almost a year. RF MoD claimed that under such short notice, they were "not ready" to extend the conscription cycle for the fall 2023 draft. More on this below.

A *Kontraktnik* is an 18 - 70-year-old male who voluntarily signs a contract directly with the RF MoD. He does not have to be a citizen – contracted service is open to legal and illegal residents, foreigners - anyone who will sign up . In fact, since the SMO began, Russia has offered many incentives, including "fast tracking" citizenship requests for foreign volunteers. Terms of service vary and have changed frequently throughout the SMO. A *kontraktnik* is different from a mercenary who contracts directly with a Private Military Company (PMC) such as Wagner (pre-2023) or PMC Redut. *Kontraktniki* can serve anywhere without a declaration of war.

"Voluntarily" is a relative term. Many *kontraktniki* signed their contracts under duress. Early in the SMO, the UAF captured Russian personnel documents that showed entire companies of conscripts who had signed enlistment contracts on 22 February 2022, less than 48 hours before the SMO. Perhaps they were motivated by patriotism? Many migrant workers in Russia are rounded up by police and forced to sign enlistment contracts. A 2024 law allows police and judges to offer "go to war or go to jail" choices to accused criminals, who can avoid trial and/or sentencing by signing up for military service. There are also often positive incentives promised, such as high pay, bonuses, veteran status, and other benefits.

A ***Mobik*** is a 19-70-year-old male Russian citizen who has completed mandatory military service (conscript or *kontraktnik*) and has been recalled to active duty (mobilized). They are subject to mobilization (recall) at any time, however, the 2022 partial mobilization of 320,000 was only the third mobilization in Russian and Soviet history. (1917 and 1941 were the other two.) *Mobiki* are often referred to by Westerners as "reservists." While this is technically not wrong, *mobiki* are not "reservists" in the U.S. sense of the word. They have had no formal contact with RF AF since their discharge s from service ("demobilization" in Russian terms). In Russian culture, use of *mobiki* in combat is considered morally acceptable, even if mobilization occurs the day after the conscription period ends. More conscripts mean more potential *mobiki* available sooner. Today's temporary one-year conscription, instead of two-years, means that more Russian males are eligible to be mobilized sooner, as soon as one day after their first demobilization (separation) from conscript service. Two-year conscript service will no doubt wait and start after the SMO.

-Russian Military Culture

4) The limits of friendly information operations: The Instructive Case of Colonel Andrei Demurenko (6 May 2024)

66-year-old Russian Federation Graduate of U.S. Army CGSC wounded in combat in Ukraine. Yes, you read that correctly. Andrei Demurenko, then a motor rifle lieutenant colonel in the RF Ground Forces, was the first officer from the Russian Federation to attend CGSC at Fort Leavenworth under the International Military Education and Training program (IMET) in 1992-1993. He was forced to retire in 1996 due to his ties to the U.S. military. In February 2023 he returned to military service and was deployed to Ukraine with the 1st Volunteer Recon-Sabotage Assault Brigade – the "Wolves" – which is affiliated with PMC Redut. He was wounded by mortar fire in May 2023 near Bakhmut and evacuated. While recovering in Moscow, he gave an interview to the Russian military journal Arms Export (Экспорт Вооружений), during which he described his "nonstandard" journey from rising military star to disgraced collaborator to civilian banker to railroad ops center manager to volunteer soldier to wounded warrior.

Demurenko explained that his military career had been fairly typical for a Russian officer until 1991. He had attended the Moscow Higher Combined Arms Command School (Московское Высшее Общевойсковое Командное Училище or МВОКУ - the famous "Kremlin Cadets") and was commissioned in the Motor Rifle Troops. He served in typical command track positions – recon platoon commander, company commander, deputy chief of division reconnaissance, all in the 20th Guards Motor Rifle Division under the Soviet Group of Forces Germany. He was then selected to attend the two-year Frunze Academy, after which he was assigned to Amur in the Eastern Military District, where he commanded a motor rifle battalion and then a regiment.

U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC). In 1991, "with the warming of relations with the U.S." (потеплением советско-американских отношений) Demurenko was selected to attend the U.S. Army CGSC at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas for academic year 1992-3, after first attending English language training. His sponsor was a Russian-speaking U.S. Army Foreign Area Officer (FAO). The IMET program only paid for the international officer himself, and he could only afford to bring his wife Dina. Upon learning this, Andrei's American classmates "passed the hat" to raise enough money for their young children, Kirill, and Katya, who had been staying with their grandparent in Russia, to join them in Kansas. His sponsor and another U.S. Army FAO traveled to Russia to assist with visas and customs, and to escort the family back, even receiving support from a Kansas Senator. Andrei's family stayed with his sponsor briefly until they could arrange housing.

U.S. officers who knew him at that time described Demurenko to the Troika as a "first-rate soldier" and a "take charge guy" who "seemed destined for general's stars." One of his American classmates noted that as a former regimental and battalion commander at CGSC, Andrei "stood out like a man among boys and girls" – most of his

American classmates had yet to serve as battalion S-3s or XOs. While he was there, he co-authored an article for Military Review (May 1993) comparing and contrasting officer education at the Frunze Academy, which he had previously attended, and CGSC, which he was currently attending. One of the biggest differences he noted immediately was the plethora of books assigned for the 9-month long CGSC, in contrast to the single volume used in the two-year Frunze course. (There is an old Russian proverb, «Это только много чтения, если ты это сделаешь» - "it's only a lot of reading if you do it." Or maybe that one is American).

In May of 1993, during a visit to the National Training Center (NTC) at Ft Irwin, Andrei assisted the OPFOR Regiment in planning an attack against the U.S. unit in training there. He then rode in the lead OPFOR vehicle during the actual attack, which the OPFOR won. The Commander of Russian Ground Forces also visited Ft Leavenworth while Demurenko was attending CGSC (probably not a coincidence). He was promoted to Colonel at the completion of CGSC. By then, the war in the former Yugoslavia had begun. Because of his status as an English-speaking officer educated in U.S. operations and tactics, he was sent to Bosnia, where he served as the Deputy Commander of the Sarajevo Sector and the senior officer of the Russian peacekeeping contingent.

"In the enemy camp." In 1996, he returned to Russia, only to find that "the situation had changed." Demurenko explained that he was involuntarily retired for being perceived as too close to the Americans. His time at CGSC and working with the UN & IFOR in Bosnia was held against him. As he puts it, "they explained to me that I was 'in the enemy camp'" («во вражеском стане»). He landed on his feet, going to work for the "negotiations unit" of a bank. The bank bought a shipyard in St Petersburg, and he soon found himself running the shipyard. Later he became the director of the operations center for the Russian Railroad, responsible for monitoring 380 rail stations countrywide.

Into the SMO. According to Demurenko, when the SMO began in February 2022, he tried to volunteer immediately but was denied due to his age (66). It took him nearly one year to work through the military commissariat bureaucracy and be accepted as a volunteer, in February 2023. In March 2023 he deployed to the SMO and was assigned as Chief of Staff and 1st Deputy Commander of 1st Volunteer Recon-Sabotage Storm Brigade.

- NOTE: The Troika is a little surprised by this part of the story. It is true that in February 2022, the maximum age for volunteers to sign a service contract was 37. However, this number was quickly raised multiple times throughout 2022, and it now sits at 70. The Troika observed many volunteers with the 3rd Army Corps (C2 HQ for volunteers at that point) in the summer of 2022 who appeared to be in the vicinity of age 66, although perhaps that was just a reflection of health and lifestyle. Some of these senior citizen volunteers even admitted that their age was a motivating factor – they were at the end of their natural life expectancy and had the opportunity to do something

for their families. Furthermore, in the spring and summer of 2022 the RF AF was desperate for volunteers, prior to the partial mobilization in September. It seems possible, that Russia's notoriously corrupt military commissariat system would have found a way to accept a volunteer with Demurenko's pedigree, even at his advanced age and even with his troubled past as a member of the "enemy camp."

Service with the Wolves Brigade during the battle of Bakhmut. Because of his experience, Demurenko was assigned as Chief of Staff and 1st Deputy Commander to "the Wolf", a Serbian national who commanded the brigade. The Wolf had previously served with PMC Wagner in Syria, according to Demurenko. The new Chief of Staff quickly took charge, attempting to establish standards and discipline. He asked about standard operating procedures, only to be told, "we have none." They also did not have maps, although they did have a tablet computer with satellite images, which Demurenko found inadequate (remember, he is 66 and first separated in 1996!). He was upset that there were no operational graphics on tablet images. Despite their lack of standards, maps, or graphics, he said that the Wolves fought very bravely. He described fighting in a small village called Zaliznyanskoye (Зализнянское) west of Soledar, defending a 2km wide section of PMC Wagner's northern flank during the battle of Bakhmut (he used the Russian name of Artyomovsk).

WIA. His brigade initially consisted of two battalions of volunteers but was late augmented with 600 mobiki from Novosibirsk (in Siberia) and Pskov (near the Latvian and Estonian borders), which brought their total strength to about 1800. They were equipped with 3 x T-62 tanks from long-term storage, but these were so hard to keep running the brigade wound up using them in fixed positions as fire support. Mortars and artillery were also old, 2 x D-20 and 2 x D-30 towed howitzers, 4 x 82mm mortars and 4 x 120mm. He described them as accurate, but too few in number. He was impressed by the Ukrainians' 60mm mortars "from abroad", which he described as numerous & effective. Ukrainian observation and FPV drones were also very effective as there was no concealment in the denuded landscape. Ultimately, a "Polish" 60mm mortar was his undoing. In May 2023, after less than two months in combat, an airburst mortar round exploded over him, smashing his head against a tree trunk. He received a concussion and intracranial hematoma. He was evacuated to Moscow and gave this interview during his recovery. Additionally, he has been a prolific writer, writing in support of the Special Military Operation.

So What? In addition to being an interesting story, Demurenko's tale reveals much about the RF AF in the SMO. Time from induction to combat was less than one month, and he received no substantial training before deploying to combat (at one point in the interview, he states that one week of training is sufficient for assault troops, provided training distractors are eliminated). However, because of his prior rank, he was assigned to a position of great authority, deputy brigade commander. This provides some insights into RF AF force generation – while Russia does not have an organized

reserve component, they do appear to take prior service into account. The kontraktniki brigade went into combat undermanned but was soon plussed up with a third battalion of mobiks. The brigade was woefully underequipped, light infantry with very limited fire support from a hodgepodge of available systems, most taken from long-term storage. This RF AF brigade (volunteer/mobik though it was) was actually a supporting effort for a private military company, i.e. – PMC Wagner. Like so many other RF AF soldiers, Demurenko's tenure in combat was very short – 1.5 months.

Maybe the 1990s weren't the Golden Age after all? Demurenko's tale reveals even more about Russian strategic thinking in the 1990s. In 1996, the U.S. still formally considered Russia to be a strategic partner as a matter of U.S. policy. Many U.S. military members of a certain age still fondly remember the 1990s as a sort of "golden age" of U.S. -Russian military cooperation, replete with joint patrols, peacekeeping exercises, vodka shots, back-slapping, hugging, and the singing of songs. As a matter of formal U.S. policy, the Russian Federation was a strategic partner. The U.S. and Russia were cooperating and working together as peacekeepers in the Balkans. Some of the Troika got their start as LNOs embedded with the Russian airborne brigade in Bosnia, or on the staff of the Russian Deputy SACEUR at SHAPE (yes, the Russian Federation had a GEN-LT (2-star) with full staff serving as Deputy SACEUR - the position included a U.S. Army FAO as military assistant). The PEACEKEEPER series of exercises brought Russian units to Fort Campbell and Fort Riley under the auspices of NATO's Partnership for Peace, of which Russia was a member, and a U.S. unit even made it to Russia for an exercise.

Predictably, many D.C.-based think tanks and other pundits blame the U.S. for spoiling this spirit of cooperation with misguided policies like NATO expansion. However, in 1996, in the middle of this "golden age of cooperation", the Russian Federation was already purging its ranks of officers they considered to be "in the enemy camp", i.e. – in the American camp. In 1996, before a single former Soviet state had appealed to NATO for protection, being too close to the Americans was enough to get a promising young Russian colonel fired, even though he was only executing missions his leaders had sent him on.

The limits of information operations. During his time at CGSC, Demurenko participated in the international students' acculturation program. He traveled around the U.S., meeting with all manner of Americans, including local, state, tribal, and federal officials, and military and civic leaders. He had classes on U.S. history and government. Informally, he likely attended dozens of barbecues, dinners, and happy hours hosted by his classmates and sponsors. He might have even caught a Kansas City Chiefs game. Americans would do well to heed his tale. Many U.S. military students attending RWOW courses advocate for information campaigns against Russia, believing that if Russians only knew "the truth," they would stop fighting and…well, it's never clear what they are supposed to do at that point, but at least they'll stop fighting. Andrei Demurenko was

exposed to more of America, Americans, and “the truth” than 99 percent of his countrymen. Yet in the end he remained loyal to his country, willing to fight and die for it even though his leaders treated him badly.

-Russian Adaptations

5) Russian Adaptations – An Evolving Process: How Russia Captures and Disseminates Lessons Learned from the Special Military Operation (17 Jan 2024)

Thinking, Learning, and Adaptive. Although it may not always appear so, the Russian military is a thinking, learning, and adaptive organization. However, it is also Russian, and the Russians are different. To Western observers their thinking often seems illogical, their learning often seems slow or nonexistent, and their adaptations are often incomprehensible or counterintuitive. Nonetheless, they think, learn, and adapt. The process for identifying lessons learned and then disseminating them throughout the force has long been elusive, however recent publications indicate that the Russian Armed Forces (RF AF) are doing this, but in their own uniquely Russian way.

No institutional training apparatus in the RF AF. In the U.S. Army, Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) formally links lessons learned, doctrine development, institutional training, and professional military education in one command. Training and Education Command (TECOM) performs a similar function for the U.S. Marine Corps. Lessons from the battlefield can quickly go from the field to the institutional training base and into doctrine. The RF AF have no equivalent command or organization. In the RF GF and VDV, even initial-entry individual training is done at the units. Still, RF AF commanders want to win, and Russian soldiers want to live. Both groups have figured out how to improve their chances of doing both and sought to share those lessons. In the first 18 months of the Special Military Operation (SMO), the process for capturing and disseminating lessons learned was ad hoc, chaotic, and often came from outside the RF AF.

PMC Wagner takes the lead. One of the earliest Russian “lessons learned” aggregators was PMC Wagner. During the partial mobilization that began in September 2022, PMC Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels hosted an “online academy” featuring lessons on basic fieldcraft and survival tips. This is the type of information that soldiers would normally receive during pre-deployment training, however, many *mobiks* were deployed to Ukraine in combat roles almost immediately, training was minimal at best, non-existent in many cases. The comments sections of these channels included profuse thanks from *mobiks*, who credited the online academy with keeping them alive. (Of course, one must always exercise caution when taking social media postings at face value.) Later, in September 2022, the social media channel “Healer” appeared, which provided tactical field medicine lessons both to medics in RF AF units and lessons or

tips to *mobiks* on how to administer self- and buddy-aid with particular emphasis on the proper types and use of tourniquets.

Veterans' groups follow. Later, Russian veterans' groups got in on the act. In late 2022, the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan and Special Operations Russian published a handbook entitled, "I live, I fight, I win! Rules of Life at War." Three Soviet - Afghan war veterans were credited as the authors. This 64-page handbook combined tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) directed at soldiers and junior officers with political education and "why we fight"-type messaging. To the Troika, it gave the impression that the authors may have been trying to imitate the style of Sun Tzu's The Art of War, with aphorisms such as "an idiot with a mobile phone is his own enemy" The topics range from the simple – "Dig in well – live to tell" – to the complex – "What to do if locals get involved." It was published in the RF MoD-sponsored Journal of Military Education but was clearly presented as originating outside RF AF official channels.

RF MoD catches up. In November 2023, the Troika noticed a subtle shift towards official publication and promulgation of lessons learned TTPs by official RF MoD organs, although still in a decentralized manner. The origins of these publications varied, and some did not list the authors or dates of publication. One of the earliest documents that appeared online was the 2022 publication of the RF MoD Main Directorate of Combat Training of the RF Armed Forces' "Features of Combat Operations in a City (Town) and Forest Protection Belt as Part of an Assault Unit (company, platoon) – Guidelines." This 18-page document, including graphics and unit organizational charts, examined the UAF's conduct of defensive operations both in an urban environment and in forested areas. Another publication that appeared was an undated 15-page field guide with no listed author titled "Fighting Against UAF Storm Units, Tactics of the UAF During the Offensive." This publication examined the UAF 23rd Mech Brigade's offensive tactics in June - July 2023 in forests near Novodarivak and Levadnoe, Zaporizhzhia Province. As FPV UAV use became more prominent and effective against armored vehicles, the RF MoD Main Directorate for Armor published the pamphlet, "Methodological Recommendations for Protecting Military Vehicles from FPV Drones -Basic Provisions." This 15-page pamphlet follows its title closely, with pictures, graphics, and text for defeating Ukrainian FPV drones using various solutions from EW to the oft-derided "cope cages" or "barbecue grills," (both slang terms which describe the chain-link cages attached to turrets and sometimes over the entire vehicle.) The Troika is using this pamphlet to inform our new RWOW course curriculum on unmanned aerial systems (UAS).

Countering Enemy Armor. Also in 2023, the RF Joint Group of Forces, the Russians' higher headquarters for the SMO based in Rostov-on-Don, published a more substantial 50-page manual entitled, "Recommendations for Combatting Enemy Tank and Mechanized Columns." This is a very basic publication that provides exactly what the title promises. The research and writing for this publication were done by RF

Dnieper Group of Forces and the RF VDV's Ryazan Military Institute, under GEN-COL Mikhail Teplinsky's leadership, with participation and editing from the RF Joint Group of Forces. There is no publication month provided, only the year "2023," but the subject matter suggested that these lessons were gathered during the Ukrainian summer counteroffensive. There are frequent references to NATO doctrine, training, and TTPs. There are also graphics showing how the Ukrainians operate, and how to best respond.

So What? While these are only some of the data points, the Troika suspects there are other, similar publications out there, with more in the works. Russia's methods for collecting and disseminating battlefield lessons learned may be messy, and may not measure up to U.S. standards, however, their methods are still suitable for quickly disseminating valuable TTPs to their force. The RF Joint Group of Forces manual appears to have been turned out very quickly, and their methods are evolving and improving – the RF MOD and the RF General Staff have now stepped up to replace, or at least supplement, external groups like PMC Wagner and the Union of Soviet Afghan Veterans. The Russian military is a thinking, learning, and adaptive organization, albeit in ways much different than our own.

6) Russia's 2nd Oreshnik Attack on Ukraine (12 Jan 2026).

Late Thursday, 8 January 2026, the RF Strategic Rocket Forces launched an *Oreshnik* intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) from Kapustin Yar, Astrakhan Oblast. Less than 15 minutes later, at 2346 local time, the *Oreshnik's* six multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs) impacted more than 1600 km to the west, penetrating an underground natural gas storage facility at Stryi, 58 km south of Lviv. All six MIRVs struck the target area within six seconds - four MIRVs at one part of the site and two at another.

A Russian engineer explained that at speeds more than Mach 6, the energy reserve in the missiles' metal hypersonic penetrators is greater than any explosives that could be put into the MIRVs' warheads. The penetrator material heats up so much during rapid deceleration that it partially turns into plasma. The flashes seen in videos of the attack (like lightning) are plasma cocoons that form around the MIRV warheads' hypersonic penetrators. The explosive effects create a shrapnel field of very high-speed metal droplets that act as micro-cumulative jets focused along the direction of flight, providing enormous penetrating power at more than 12,000 km/h.

Damage at the target area was unclear, but that was not likely the point. This attack was more political than military in nature. As the Troika has described before, the *Oreshnik* is really a "sawed-off ICBM," a modified *Rubezh*, R-26 ballistic missile, which itself is a shortened Yars RS-24 ICBM. Ironically, Russian engineers and milbloggers more often refer to the missile as "the R-26 *Rubezh"* and sometimes the "so-called *Oreshnik*." This was only the second use of a MIRV in history and the RF Strategic Rocket Forces' second combat action ever. Firing the IRBM on a trajectory very close to NATO member Poland was also no doubt part of the Russia's political calculus.

Why did Russia choose to fire an Oreshnik on 8 January 2026? Long-time followers of this topic will recall that Vladimir Putin often resorts to nuclear saber-rattling

when he perceives events to be going poorly. Putin and his spokespersons were quick to emphasize that the *Oreshnik* is nuclear-capable and "unstoppable" by any Western air defenses (a claim that remains unproven). In recent weeks, Russia has faced several political and military setbacks. On 11 January 2026, the duration of the SMO officially surpassed that of the Great Patriotic War (GPW). While the Soviets reached Berlin and beyond in 1,417 days, the modern RF AF has struggled to capture Pokrovsk, a small city in eastern Ukraine near the 2015 Line of Combat Contact (LCC). Pro-Kremlin milbloggers cautiously acknowledged this milestone, while one Russian political social media account registered its discontent with a stark post: "1,418 days."

Throughout late December 2025, earlier RF claims of tactical success at Kupiansk and Pokrovsk unraveled. Russia and Russians were then rattled by the recent U.S. operation to capture Nicolas Maduro. Pro-Kremlin Russian commentators compared the speed and success of the U.S. operation to Russia's 3–10-day Special Military Operation that is about to enter its fifth year. Then the U.S. seized a Russian-flagged tanker in the North Atlantic, ignoring the presence of Russian warships nearby. Some Russian commentators claimed that the RF had lost the strategic initiative and need to reclaim it. Russians learned that RF MOD's reporting had been greatly exaggerated despite Vladimir Putin's end-of-year claims.

In Troika's assessment, the *Oreshnik* launch had two intended audiences. The first audience is always domestic. The launch was intended to reassure the Russia people that the Russian Federation is a still global power that still has some tricks up its sleeve. Internationally, the launch was an attempt to regain the strategic initiative by reminding the West that Russia is a nuclear power with the capability to strike NATO countries with an unstoppable weapon.

Additionally, as an agreement among the U.S., Ukraine, and Europe (namely France and the U.K.), comes closer to delivering European Coalition of the Willing forces to deploy into Ukraine as part of the security guarantees, Putin wants to remind all that regardless of how far west in Ukraine those forces deploy, they will be under constant, indefensible threat.

-Fires

7) Frustrations surrounding Russian Federation Ground Forces (RF GF) artillery in the early months of 2026 in three categories: heavy artillery, counterbattery operations, and the delayed deployment of the 2S35 *Koalitsiya-SV*. (March 2026)

Heavy ("High-Power") Artillery Brigades and Artillery Divisions. As part of the 21 December 2022 plan for the future of the RF AF -- referred to by the Troika as the "Putin–Shoigu Plan" -- five artillery divisions are to be established, one for each military district. Each artillery division is also slated to include its own heavy artillery brigade, equipped with 2S7M 203mm *Malka* guns and 2S4 2S40 *Tyulpan* mortars. The Russians refer to these formations as "high-power artillery brigades" (*артиллерийские бригады большой мощности, абр БМ*), while Americans would likely describe them as "heavy artillery." However, a Russian artillery expert recently confirmed that no new RF GF heavy artillery units have been formed since 2022 for the RF Central, Southern,

or Eastern Military Districts, and that only two such heavy artillery brigades currently exist within the RF GF.

Each of those RF GF heavy artillery brigade consists of two battalions of 2S7M guns and two battalions of 2S4 mortars, plus a recon battalion, a command-and-control battery, a logistics (MTO) company, a repair and maintenance platoon, a combat engineer platoon, and a CBRN platoon. This structure is an updated version of the Soviet army's Cold War-era heavy artillery brigade structure, or roughly equivalent to what the U.S. calls the "Tables of Organization and Equipment" (*таблица личного состава и военной техники*) which remained in effect until 2010.

Before the SMO, only one such heavy artillery brigade existed -- the RF GF 45th Guards Heavy Artillery Brigade, now subordinate to 34th Guards Artillery Division / Moscow Military District and currently fighting under RF Western Group of Forces. In summer 2022, the RF GF 17th Guards Heavy Artillery Brigade was formed as part of "the volunteer battalions" in RF GF 3rd Army Corps. As of late 2024 – early 2025, the 17th Guards Heavy Artillery Brigade was firing in support of the attack on Chasiv Yar. Eventually (probably after the SMO), the RF GF 17th Guards Heavy Artillery Brigade is supposed to be subordinated to the Leningrad Military District.

At various times in the SMO, the Troika has seen 2S7Ms and 2S4s firing in support of RF Central and Southern Groups of Forces, as well as 2S4s firing in support of the RF Dnepr Group of Forces. However, it appears those 2S7M or 2S4 batteries were more likely temporarily detached from RF GF 45th or 17th Guards Heavy Artillery Brigades. In any case, no new heavy artillery brigades were formed after summer 2022.

As discussed in the 23 January 2026 *Troika Observations*, the RF AF may have run out of 2S7M *Malka* guns, a weapon system Russia has been pulling out of storage areas since spring 2022 both to replace losses and build the RF GF 17th Heavy Artillery Brigade. Now only older, 1970s-era 2S7 *Pions* appear at 45th Guards High-Power Artillery Brigade positions. The presence of antiquated, unmodified 2S7 *Pions* suggests they were pulled from RF MOD long-term storage. At present, it is unlikely that the RF MOD has enough serviceable 2S7s and 2S4s remaining to field three additional heavy artillery brigades. Achieving this would require six more battalions, each equipped with 12 2S7Ms or 2S7s and 12 2S4s, organized into three batteries per battalion, with each battery consisting of only four 2S7s and four 2S4s.

In contrast to the lack of systems, as far as the Troika knows, the supply of 2S7 and 2S4 ammunition is not in question. RF GF artillerymen regularly mention that both are in abundance, although not without complaints that the stocks must be moved from storage sites in eastern Russia.

Note 1: Typical Russian artillery batteries are six guns, but 2S7M/2S7 batteries have only 4 guns per battery; similarly, 2S4 batteries have only four mortars per battery.
Note 2: According to *Oryx*, as of 4 March 2026, 37 RF GF 2S7M *Malka* and 2S7 *Pion* 203-mm guns, along with 61 2S4 *Tyulpan* 240-mm mortars have been destroyed or captured in Ukraine. *Oryx* data is confirmed by photos or videos, so reported losses are usually lower than actual losses. Some lost systems are never photographed, videoed, or found.

Note 3: 2S7 *Pions* were produced until 1985 and replaced by production of 2S7M *Malkas* starting in 1986. Some 2S7 *Pions* are able to be refurbished and upgraded to the 2S7M *Malka*.

Counterbattery Fire. Throughout the latter part of 2025, significant frustration emerged among Russian artillerymen and artillery enthusiasts regarding the state of RF GF counterbattery fire. One Russian artillery analyst summarized these concerns, claiming, "the superiority of NATO's 155-mm self-propelled artillery over our 152-mm guns in firing range" (emphasizing quality rather than quantity) and describing Russian 'counter-battery combat,' which is currently, to put it mildly, deplorable on the frontline." The underlying reasons for these criticisms only became clearer in recent months.

For Russian counterbattery operations, *Lancet* or *Molniya-2* strike UAVs have proven to be the artillery brigades' most agile and least detectable counterbattery tools. However, this reliance on UAVs has been a source of frustration for Russian artillerymen, who reportedly find it demeaning to depend on such systems.

The primary tactical artillery threat facing Russian forces is the German-made Panzerhaubitze 2000 (PzH 2000), noted for its precision and effective range of 30 to 40 kilometers. In response, the 2S7 *Pion* 203-mm guns have increasingly been tasked with counterbattery fire against PzH 2000s and other Western-supplied UAF howitzers, given the *Pion's* extended range of 40 kilometers (and up to 45–50 kilometers with rocket-assisted projectiles, or RAP). However, the 2S7 *Pion* is a cumbersome and slow artillery system, lacking the agility of Western self-propelled artillery capable of "shoot-and-scoot" tactics. Its deployment and redeployment are time-consuming, making it less effective in dynamic combat scenarios.

The Russians have also employed their newer 2S44 *Giatsint-K* for counterbattery fire, though with less success than anticipated. Russian artillery enthusiasts have not provided detailed explanations for this underperformance but have previously criticized the 2S44's limited survivability. Its large size and oversized wheels hinder its ability to utilize concealed positions in dense forests. During winter, the system's mobility and ability to evade detection were further compromised by snow-covered terrain, leaving it particularly vulnerable to enemy fire.

Meanwhile, Russian artillerymen have expressed growing dissatisfaction as counterbattery responsibilities increasingly shift to the RF GF's limited number of 220-mm *Uragan* and 300-mm *Smerch* multiple rocket launcher (MRL) systems, as well as to the artillery brigades' *Lancet* UAVs. Despite the reduced availability of MRL systems, Russian forces reportedly have ample stockpiles of 220-mm and 300-mm rockets. However, a Russian artillery expert noted, "Also, despite a significant increase in the production of *Lancets*, they are not yet available everywhere."

Note 1: In general, Russian artillerymen are more pragmatic, often erring on the side of pessimism – in contrast to their motorized rifle and tank counterparts, often known for frequently exaggerating their claims.

Note 2: The ample supply of 220-mm and 300-mm rockets was news to the Troika. As late as 2024, Russians have complained about limited supplies of 220-mm and 300-mm rockets.

Note 3: Despite Russian complaints about the 2S44 *Giatsint-K's* survivability, as of 4 March 2026, Oryx has no record of any RF GF 2S44 *Giatsint-K* losses. As a rule, Oryx

requires that its data be confirmed by photos or videos. For that reason, many Oryx reported losses are lower than actual losses. For obvious reasons, some circumstances preclude many lost systems from being photographed or videoed.
Note 4: The Troika finds it odd that Russian artillerymen rarely, if ever, discuss their North Korean-made M-1989 *Koksan* 170-mm guns, which they have used for counterbattery. According to Oryx, as of 4 March 2026, only 2 RF GF North Korean-made M-1989 *Koksan* guns were destroyed or captured in the SMO.

2S35 *Koalitsiya-SV,* "or the lack thereof." The bigger, gaping counterbattery problem is the 2S35 *Koalitsiya-SV* SP artillery piece, or as a Russian put it, "or the lack thereof." Since before 2014, the 2S35 152-mm *Koalitsiya-SV* self-propelled howitzer has been the centerpiece of Russian artillery's future. Russians intended for the 2S35 to be organic to the RF GF CAAs' and 1st GTA's artillery brigades and to be pushed down to divisions and brigades in contact in order to dominate the counterbattery fight. It was designed with a 52-caliber 2A88 cannon and 23-liter charge chamber. The goal was an 8-round simultaneous time-on-target fire mission at 30 km, and a sustained rate-of-fire of 16 rounds per minute. It was to carry 70 rounds on-hand and to be reloaded by the Russians' first-ever, specially designed 2S35 reload vehicle. Problems, however, started after the Russians' invasions of Crimea and Donbas in 2014, which caused their French partner to pull out of the joint project. The Russians were never able to replace the 2S35's French fire control computer which put the project's original goal out of reach.

Since 2018, the 2S35 was regularly promised to the RF GF. In 2022, RF MOD made the decision not to build more 2S19 *Msta-S* self-propelled howitzers because of the 2S35's impending delivery. In late January 2024, then-Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu visited UralTransMash's production facility in central Russia where he was told that 2S35s would be delivered shortly and that the first vehicles were in product testing. Russian state media showed several 2S35s on test ranges and test tracks. Vladimir Putin visited the facility a month later and was told the same lies.

Not only were no 2S35s delivered, but on 9 May 2025, the 2S35 did not even appear in the Victory Day Parade. Instead, the 2S44 *Malva* and its longer-ranged replacement, the 2S45 *Giatsint-K* - both designed and built as interim replacements for the 2S35 - were on display. As described above, neither 8-wheeled system was able to replace the 2S35's expected counterbattery role which, like the project's original goals, may have always been unrealistic.

Until very recently, the hole left by the undelivered 2S35 was not mentioned in Russian media. It was what the Russians call "a painful issue" (*больной вопрос*) or sore topic not to be mentioned aloud. That changed in February 2026 when the 2S35 question started appearing again in military social media, as Russian artillerymen complained about their worsening counterbattery challenges.
Note 1: According to Oryx, as of 4 March 2026, 258 RF GF 2S19 *Msta-S* 152-mm self-propelled howitzers were destroyed or captured in the SMO. The 2S19 was the self-propelled howitzer that the 2S35 was originally supposed to replace.
Note 2: According to Oryx, as of 4 March 2026, three RF GF 2S43 *Malva* 152-mm self-propelled howitzers were destroyed or captured in the SMO. Oryx has no record of any RF GF 2S44 *Giatsint-K* losses.

-Unmanned Systems

8) New Russian UAS Organizations – Unmanned Systems Forces, "Rubikon" and "Voentech"

The proliferation of UAS on the battlefield has required a shift in the organizational structure of the RF AF. They watched as the UAF formed their new branch, the Unmanned Systems Forces in February 2024 dedicated to using unmanned systems on land, at sea and in the air. The Russians followed suit with the announcement in August 2024 by RF Minister of Defense Andrey Belousov of the creation of the RF AF Unmanned Systems Forces. Also in August 2024, a new type of RF AF UAS organizational structure was created called the "*Rubikon* Center for Advanced Unmanned Technologies" designed to take advantage of adaptation and innovation in the field of UAS as well as create UAV crews to support the RF AF Groups of Forces. Supplying UAV crews with the most effective UAVs possible also generated a need for the RF MOD to change how they test and field UAS systems and in December 2024 Belousov announced the creation of "Voentech" to meet that need.

Russian Unmanned Systems Forces. In a mid-December 2024 Russian Defense Ministry Board meeting, RF Minister of Defense Andrey Belousov announced the implementation of the new organization to be completed in the third quarter of 2025. This means they will have dedicated training, sustainment, and representation in the General Staff (similar to U.S. DOTMLPF considerations.) The MOD announcement also mentioned other unmanned systems as well such as UGVs, USVs, and robotics in general. However, it seemed clear that the initial focus will be primarily on UAVs. According to one Russian milblogger, this idea had been discussed for several months, especially against the backdrop of the implementation of a similar idea in the UAF. (The UAF announced the creation of a similar structure in mid-June 2024.)

An ambitious leap from the previous RF Minister of Defense intent. In 2023, former RF Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu ordered UAVs to be incorporated into all formations in the RF AF, however it remains unclear how systematically that has progressed. While the integration of military grade UAVs in the RF AF artillery brigades has become more standardized and increasingly effective, the integration of UAVs into maneuver formations seems to continue more on an ad hoc basis. The Troika has seen some organizational charts showing standardized UAV units included down to the assault company level with Commercial Off the Shelf (COTS) DJI Mavic and Matrice UAVs along with FPV UAVs, however in reality various separate types and sizes of UAV units have been formed with their own support infrastructure to support maneuver formations.

Many of these units are manned "out of hide" with UAV personnel occupying positions coded for infantry, or other positions. The same is the case with the infrastructure for these units, including relying heavily on volunteer groups to supply COTS UAVs, spare parts, vehicles and other items to equip the UAV formations. Managing the thousands of UAV used daily in Ukraine will be a big challenge and one that Belousov has largely placed on RF Deputy Minister of Defense Alexei Krivoruchko who oversees planning for the development of weapons, and specialized military

equipment. For the technical part of the new branch, he will be responsible for overseeing improvements in tactical and technical characteristics of UAVs including increasing range, autonomy and noise immunity based on experience gained in the SMO, creating inter-service testing centers and then organizing serial production of the best models.

How will the new branch be integrated into the RF AF? The new initiative takes UAV integration to another level. According to the former commander of the RF Pacific Fleet ADM Sergei Avakyants, it has to be more than just a sign on an office door. A theoretical design of operational art will need to be created that can be implemented during military actions on an operational scale. This includes thinking through the training system for officers, sergeants, and soldiers. Changes in current military curricula will have to be implemented, including creating special faculties or educational institutions of secondary and higher education and making changes in current military schools, in particular the General Staff Academy. According to Avakyants, most likely units, platoons, and separate divisions will be created that will closely interact with other branches of the military and ensure the best use of UAVs.[i]

Where does the MoD stand in implementation? The suspense for creation of the new organization was third quarter 2025, however prior to November 2025, there were few details regarding the extent of its implementation other than the announcement of 7th Separate Regiment of the Unmanned Systems Forces and equipment displays in the 2024 Victory Day parade in Moscow along with some recruiting ads. and some recruiting ads. Models featured in the parade included the *Harpia-A1* and *Geran-2* strategic attack UAVs, the Orlan-10 and Orlan-30 reconnaissance UAVs, and the ZALA Lancet attack munitions in the Product 51 and Product 52 versions. The UAVs were mounted in the back of KamAZ-6350 trucks with armored K-5350 cabins. The 7th Regiment was later found to be part of the Central Group of Forces and Central Military District.

An ad appeared in Russian social media in May 2025 recruiting personnel for a separate battalion of the Unmanned Systems. The recruited positions included recon UAV operators (airplane-type), FPV UAV operators (copter- and airplane-types), UAV operators (Mavics), ground control station operators, engineers, technicians, and drivers as well as air defense UAV operators, and SIGINT specialists to fill positions in a counter-UAV company. Contract length was one year with no alcohol consumption for the duration.[ii]

November 2025 announcement - Russian *Unmanned Systems Forces* officially created. According to COL Sergey Ishtuganov, deputy commander of the new organization, the organizational structure has been established, a commander appointed, and the first regiments and battalions have been formed and deployed. The *Unmanned Systems Forces* include both ground-based robotic systems and sea-based systems along with aerial systems. COL Ishtuganov discussed the organization during a recent interview with the Russian state media journal *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. The emblem of the new organization has also been unveiled consisting of a crossed arrow and sword and a microchip on a pair of wings.

NOTE: COL Ishtuganov previously held the positions of deputy commander, 31st Guards Separate Airborne Brigade and commander of the 328th Guards Air Assault Regiment (GALR), 104th Guards Air Assault Division (GALD). He participated in the Hostomel operation and received the Hero of Russia award from Putin in December 2022.

According to COL Ishtuganov, the organization is growing while conducting combat operations In Ukraine. Units are conducting combat testing of both drones and EW systems while working closely with the systems manufacturers. Current subunits are being expanded, and new subunits are being created to be filled with operators, engineers, technicians and other support specialists. Personnel for the new organization are being trained at a variety of locations, including various universities and at manufacturing centers of unmanned systems. He added that work has begun to create a higher military educational institution for the *Unmanned Systems Forces*.

NOTE: Some of the future commanders of the organization will likely come from a new four-year UAV commander's course implemented this fall at the Moscow Higher Combined Arms Command School (MosVOKU). The first company of 80 cadets in three platoons includes 43 cadets with SMO experience of whom 20 have combat experience with UAVs. According to COL Evgeny Gudnikov the Deputy Head of academic and research work at MosVOKU, the course will graduate lieutenants who will lead UAV platoons that are being formed in Motorized Rifle Battalions.

As part of the interview, COL Ishtuganov discussed the achievements of the Russian *Rubikon Center for Advanced Unmanned Technologies* in operations in the Kursk region but made no mention of a connection between *Rubikon* and the *Unmanned Systems Forces* nor did he provide additional details on specific units or other organizational structure details.[iii]

The "*Rubikon* Center for Advanced Unmanned Technologies" (Испытательный Центр перспективных беспилотных технологий Рубикон)

A public-private partnership. In essence, it is a combination between a military unit and a startup tech company. It is subordinate to the RF AF, but exists outside the normal command structure, has significant autonomy, and has more of the culture of a startup. Although it is not a private military company (PMC), it has much in common with PMC Wagner. *Rubikon*'s position outside of normal RF AF bureaucracy has allowed it to adapt and innovate much more quickly than conventional RF AF units, as PMC Wagner once did. The Center was formed in August 2024 and is essentially filling the Unmanned Systems Forces' role. According to several Russian milbloggers, *Rubikon*'s success hinges on the lack of bureaucracy and inefficiencies they expect to see when the Unmanned Systems Forces finally come online.

The *Rubikon* model - Warfare 2.0? In addition to experienced UAV teams, the organization is staffed with engineers, research and development personnel, technicians, communications and logistics specialists, reconnaissance personnel, and an entire section devoted to analytics. Some estimates have the total personnel strength of *Rubikon* at up to several thousand**.**

The Center also trains instructors from among experienced RF AF units' UAV specialists and UAV operators and reportedly develops and tests advanced robotic systems and trains robotics operators. The Center's specialists interact with representatives of the national defense industry, test and apply new UAV developments, and conduct research on the study of artificial intelligence and methods of its application in robotics systems. Advanced UAVs are developed and tested at the Center and UAV units from the *Rubikon* Center are assigned to provide UAV support to the RF Groups of Forces in the Special Military Operation (SMO). Minister Belousov reportedly initially ordered five UAV units to be formed at the Center, one for each Group of Forces.

Initial Russian skepticism of *Rubikon* has disappeared. In November 2024, Russian milbloggers were initially skeptical that the *Rubikon* Center's newly formed UAV units would be able to effectively support RF AF maneuver units, citing the lack of a functional unified military communications system to facilitate that support. The milbloggers also questioned how long it would take to "debug" the interaction of these UAV units with RF GF maneuver units and how many soldiers would die during this time due to the lack of support and cover from the air. Russian unit commanders joined in the skepticism, grumbling about losing their experienced organic UAV operators and engineers to *Rubikon*. In some cases, RF maneuver commanders converted their UAV operators into assault infantry rather than give them up. Over time, however, *Rubikon* has dispelled this skepticism and has shown its effectiveness supporting all Groups of Forces across the Line of Combat Contact (LCC).

The perspective from *Rubikon* soldiers. During a February 2025 Russian media interview, two UAV operators assigned to the Center described some of the aspects of the work there. Both were experienced UAV operators recruited from RF AF combat units, and they stated that the Center employed many other personnel with similar backgrounds. While both soldiers confirmed that this was a military organization, the approach to managing the *Rubikon* Center's processes and people more resembled a startup technology company. There were tasks that had to be performed; however, there was a certain freedom in choosing the means used to execute tasks. This was to promote the development and testing of new ideas, approaches, and technologies. They added that a significant part of *Rubikon*'s technological developments and solutions grew out of interaction with the Russian "people's defense industry" and that one of the reasons for the creation of the Center was to find ways to scale "garage" solutions to the level of mass production.
NOTE: This approach is consistent with what the Troika has seen as the RF AF have been increasingly embracing commercial-off-the shelf (COTS) solutions and empowering military startup companies to develop advanced technologies at a pace that the Russian military industrial complex could not match. Prototype solutions are then given to the military industrial complex to produce at scale.

At first, in addition to flying the UAVs, *Rubikon* FPV UAV operators also had to conduct their own reconnaissance, as well as assemble and connect the munitions to the FPVs. That has all changed, as there are now additional personnel to conduct

reconnaissance, and engineers to prepare the UAVs and their munitions. The FPV UAV operators now focus only on flying.

The time from receiving information on targets from the reconnaissance UAV teams to engaging them has also been significantly reduced. According to one *Rubikon* detachment commander, he does not need to wait for a senior officer to communicate with higher headquarters to acquire permission to engage a target. He is empowered to work directly with the UAV reconnaissance teams "online," and is even able to watch the recon UAV feed live. He only needs the details for the target, in order to launch the appropriate attack UAV.

Early *Rubikon* successes. In October 2024, there were 38 recorded *Rubikon* UAV strikes against the UAF. Those numbers stayed relatively low until February 2025 when there was a sharp increase to over 500 strikes and the numbers continued to climb monthly from that point.

NOTE: RF AF operations in the Kursk direction contributed to the significant uptick in *Rubikon* UAV strikes beginning in February 2025.

Based on video footage and reporting from Telegram from November 2025 to March 2025, the Center's UAV units were operating successfully in the Pokrovsk, Kupiansk, Vuhledar, South Donetsk, and Kursk – Sudzha direction. Based on the video footage, there was an emphasis on using FPV UAVs flying on fiber-optic cables, which were ideal for reconnaissance, attack, and BDA (the whole process that the Russians call "*objective control*").

NOTE: The *Vandal* fiber-optic FPV made its combat testing debut in the Kursk-Sudzha direction with 200 initial FPVs sent to RF AF UAV teams for testing.

Several videos showed fiber-optic UAVs flying along road sections, slowing down to evaluate damaged and/or destroyed UAF vehicles, and then continuing along the road in search of additional targets. Along with successful attacks on UAF soldiers and their fighting positions, the UAV units successfully destroyed many types of UAF vehicles and equipment, including tanks, AIFVs, APCs, artillery and mortar systems, air defense, and bridge-laying equipment, along with other unarmored vehicles of various types, communications systems and antennas, and UAVs (including several Ukrainian heavy multicopters).

The UAV units were particularly effective in the Kursk - Sudzha direction with round-the-clock reconnaissance of key UAF MSRs, including the Yunakivka - Sudzha and Sudzha - Guyevo - Gornal MSRs, followed by attacks on UAF vehicles traveling along these MSRs. According to one *Rubikon* UAV operator, they did not attack UAF vehicles right away, but instead initially conducted pattern analysis of the vehicle routes, times, etc. The ensuing attacks, many of which were conducted at night, left a wake of destroyed UAF vehicles, especially when the UAF units were conducting withdrawals. The *Rubikon* UAV units placed FPV UAVs with fiber-optic cables in ambush positions along the MSRs to detect and attack UAF vehicle columns, then followed up with additional FPV UAVs to finish off remaining vehicles and personnel. For the ambushes, the Russian operators would sometimes rest their fiber-optic FPVs on older destroyed or abandoned UAF combat vehicles, presumably to save battery life while keeping the FPVs' cameras on to observe the ambush zone. The Center's UAV operators even

successfully navigated around or inside some of the UAF constructed anti-drone nets along these MSRs to conduct the attacks.

***Rubikon* UAVs of choice.** Supported by a full suite of Russian reconnaissance UAVs (ZALA 16 series, Supercam S350, etc.), and the Lancet attack munition, COTS strike FPV UAVs continue to be the UAVs of choice for *Rubikon* UAV operators. Currently, the UAVs used in individual tactical strikes are as follows:

- the radio frequency-controlled *VT-40* FPV UAV continues to dominate as the primary tactical strike UAV at 67 percent of UAV strike missions
- "Various air defense drones" (NFI): 12 percent
- *Vanda*l fiber-optic FPV UAV: 12 percent
- *Molniya* airplane-like FPV UAV: 7 percent
- The remaining 2 percent of strikes were executed by the *VT-40* FPV operating on fiber-optic cable, followed by the Lancet attack munition and the *Skvoretz* UAV.

NOTE: Russians typically use the term "FPV" for all smaller tactical quadcopter UAVs, whether they are actually "First Person View" or not.

This above listing of *Rubikon* UAVs of choice makes sense, as the *VT-40* remains the most widely produced Russian FPV UAV. The listing also showed that the Russians have made improvements to the *VT-40* to make it more effective while operating in the SMO's EW-saturated environment. In early 2024, Russian milbloggers had complained that the *VT-40* had become practically ineffective because the UAV had been mass-produced for such a long time without changing its operating frequency and the UAF was effectively employing EW against these FPV attack UAVs. Now, however, the *VT-40* is apparently the first choice of use.
NOTE: The *Skvoretz* ("Starling" in Russian) family of FPV UAVs is not as widely well-known as other Russian FPV UAVs. It is produced by the Moscow based Joint Stock Company (JSC) *Technodron*, and appeared in in the SMO in 2024 with the base model *Skvoretz*-10 carrying a 2.5-kg (5.5-lb.) munition to a range of 12 km. Later, more sophisticated *Skvoretz*-10 variants were introduced with advanced equipment and features such as thermal imagers, target capture (automatic target recognition), auto-guidance systems, etc.

More recent priority - targeting UAF heavy multicopters. The *Rubikon Center* (*Центр Рубикон*) Telegram channel regularly publishes videos of *Rubikon* UAV team strikes. On 20 October 2025, 115 videos were posted, of which almost 50 percent (54) were of strikes on UAF heavy multicopters. *Rubikon* strikes on Ukrainian heavy multicopters have increased monthly from 24 in April 2025 to 555 in September 2025 (an average of 18 multicopters downed per day in September 2025) and currently make up almost 25 percent of overall *Rubikon* strikes. According to one Ukrainian analyst, the lifespan of one heavy multicopter has drastically decreased. If previously some flew up to 100 sorties, now 10 - 15 sorties in the Pokrovsk direction is considered to be a success. The source added that the multicopters are even eliminated by Russian FPV drones on the launch site or immediately after taking off.

NOTE: The Russians typically lump all Ukrainian heavy multicopter models together under the term, *Baba Yaga*.

Rubikon UAV crews have also recently teamed up with guided aerial bomb targeteers from the *Smuglyanka Detachment* (*Отряд Смуглянки*), who use their UAVs to assist RF Aerospace Forces (VKS)-delivered FAB guided aerial bombs. The two have combined to strike various targets including targeting UAF UAV teams operating heavy multicopters in the Pokrovsk direction.

Blinding UAF reconnaissance efforts. According to Ukrainian sources, effective *Rubikon* strikes on UAF reconnaissance UAVs have blinded reconnaissance efforts. The *Rubikon* operators have reportedly moved more tactical radars (360 degree and directional doppler radars) up to 10 km from the Line of Combat Contact (LCC) and successfully coordinated these systems with EW assets to down UAF reconnaissance UAVs in large numbers. One Ukrainian source commented, *"You cannot engage targets 20 - 30 km beyond the line of sight if your wings are shot down 3 - 7 km from the line of sight. We started experiencing a "wing loss," and we simply do not have as many wings as the Russians do. The limitations on long-range reconnaissance have greatly affected us."*

On 21 October 2025, *Rubikon* posted videos of 41 air defense UAV strikes against UAF reconnaissance UAVs, with the largest number (17) conducted against the Leleka-100 and Leleka-100M models. Other models struck included Galka, Shark-M, Chaklun, DARTS, Furia, Domakha, Gor, Vector, FlyEye, GARA, and Forecaster. To the Troika, this demonstrates the Russians' continued priority of establishing UAV dominance over their own operational and tactical rear areas.

Expanding the *Rubikon* portfolio to the water. In a recent video produced by the *Rubikon* Center, *Rubikon* personnel announced that a new subunit formed in May 2025 is focused on maritime UAS operations. It reportedly consists of two groups, one using Russian USVs against Ukrainian maritime targets, including ships, platforms, and other critical infrastructure. The second group is focused on destroying Ukrainian USVs using ZALA 16 series reconnaissance UAVs coupled with ZALA Lancet attack UAVs. **NOTE:** It is possible that a variant of the *Skvoretz* FPV UAV mentioned earlier in this insight will also become part of *Rubikon*'s maritime UAS operations. In March 2025, the *Skvoretz-VMF* ("VMF" is a transliterated acronym for *ВМФ*, which means "the Navy" in Russian) model was transferred to the Russian Black Sea Fleet to be paired with the Russian USVs such as the Katran. The *Skvoretz-VMF* will operate from the USVs and will be used for reconnaissance and strike missions out to a maximum range of 10 km. This UAV has a maximum speed of 150 km/h, while carrying a 1.5-kg (3,3-lb.) munition. The UAV has reportedly been specially adapted to conditions of high humidity and salty sea air with a sealed hull and an anti-corrosion coating. The *Skvoretz-VMF* UAV is also reportedly equipped with vibration-resistant mounts that automatically disconnect upon takeoff from the USV.

Another example of Russian adaptation. The *Rubikon* Center is further proof that the Russian military is a thinking, learning, and adaptive organization. *Rubikon* has demonstrated the ability to think, learn, and adapt much faster than conventional units in

the RF AF. This has in turn made *Rubikon* a very effective force in the SMO, and a combat multiplier for the RF AF. This is likely due to its autonomy and position outside of the normal bureaucracy. The Troika believes that *Rubikon* will serve as the basis for the future RF AF Unmanned Systems Forces. In fact, the Center is essentially filling that role now. It remains to be seen whether it will be able to maintain its autonomy in Russia's future force. It is more likely that the RF AF will add layers of command and control, require the use of more conventional *taktika* (doctrine), and stifle *Rubikon*'s creativity. For now, though, it remains a formidable force.[iv]

Voentech (Военtех) – the accelerated development and implementation of Russian "garage-based" UAS solutions. In a video news report from the Russian series "Military Transmission" (*Военная приемка*) on *tvzvezda* (RF MOD's news channel), the commentator discussed how "garage-based" UAS solutions were developed and tested over time for use in the SMO, working through the Putin-established Russian People's Front (*Народный фронт*), the People's Defense Industry Complex (*Народный ВПК*), and other initiatives. These efforts have been consolidated under an MOD initiative called *Voentech* (Military Technological Initiative) with the MOD's Technical Council overseeing testing and evaluation. Ultimately some of these UAS solutions are placed into systematically accelerated development and production *at scale*. In terms of UAS initiatives, the video report focused primarily on FPV and other smaller UAVs, and *Geran-2* UAV development.

***Voentech* officially created**. In December 2024, at an extended annual MOD end-of-year board meeting, Russian Minister of Defense Andrey Belousov ordered that *Voentech* be formed, creating a new MOD-managed system of innovative research, development and implementation of weapons and equipment, which included at the forefront UAV research, development, and implementation.

Voentech was formed by consolidating the RF MOD's Technical Council, the People's Front, the People's Defense Industry Complex, the Military Innovative Technopolis "ERA," and the Russian MOD Commission on Innovative Projects and Technologies. It is designed to manage the testing of system samples in real combat conditions along with studying and implementing locally created technological initiatives and approving the most promising samples for use at the front lines as quickly as possible. The quality of the products selected in the process are intended to match the quality normally associated with larger established Russian defense industry companies without the bureaucratic baggage and extended development and production timelines. In regard to UAS development, *Voentech* takes advantage of a large-scale interaction of the MOD with the Russian civil scientific community, UAS developers, and production laboratories across Russia.

RF MOD Technical Council leads UAS testing and validation. The MOD's Technical Council invites companies who want to supply UAS products to the MOD to bring their products to a testing complex. At this complex, the council holds weekend events, organized like a sports competition, to test these products in action. At the end of the video, the commentator provided a bar code for interested companies to apply to participate. The invited competitors are provided with the MOD's requirements in

advance. All activities and results of the event are captured on video with council members acting as referees. In some cases, companies who do not meet the UAS technical and operational requirements are still invited by exception to the event. For example, a proposed UAS might have unique capabilities that warrant its testing. The MOD Technical Council's Presidium then reviews the results of the event, provides recommendations to UAS manufacturers for improvements, and selects promising projects for further implementation. Those companies receiving improvement recommendations are invited to participate in future council events after making adjustments and corrections.

In the video, the 42nd Technical Council event was held (no date indicated) at the testing complex. The commentator mentioned that several high-level deputy ministers of defense and RF AF commanders such as the RF VDV Commander have attended previous events. Minister of Defense Belousov participated in the 20th Council events in late 2024. Additional locations for these testing complexes for future Council events are being created across Russia.

According to the Technical Council's Secretariat, in the just over a year since the council was formed, over 600 different quadcopter models have been tested at the site. Parts of these models and parts of over 100 heavy quadcopters are reportedly scattered across the testing complex from crashes. According to the Secretariat, crashes are a normal part of testing. If the drone cannot fly effectively at the testing range, it doesn't go to the SMO. He added that more than 150 types of UAS-related products, including 97 types of drones, 30 types of EW systems, 10 types of electronic reconnaissance systems, 8 types of UGVs, 4 types of USVs and two types of radar stations have successfully passed the Technical Council's reviews for implementation.

Examples of UAVs evaluated at the 42nd Technical Council event. A couple of UAV examples were highlighted in the video report, although it was clear from the footage that there were many more participants at the event. One was the heavy multipurpose quadcopter *Shmel* (*Шмель*), (bumblebee in English), which is analogous to the Ukrainian *Baba Yaga* hexacopter. It is designed to drop munitions up to the weight of an anti-tank mine (TM-62 or equivalent) as well as deliver needed supplies and ammunition.

The second UAV featured was the *Svarog* (*Сварог*) produced by the Russian company F-Robotics, which is a large fiber-optic-cable quadcopter capable of carrying a larger munition than other fiber-optic drones such as the *Vandal*. The goal of this drone's test at the event was to successfully exceed a flight range of 20 km.

A third drone featured was the *Kometa* produced by the company "Step Forward" (*Шаг Вперед*). This drone has a unique construction with the quadcopter encased in a larger oval frame. The drone is designed to take off vertically and then rotate to fly like an airplane (roughly similar to the U.S. V-22 Osprey). The company presented two versions of the drone at the event, a smaller one for air defense and a larger kamikaze attack drone. In this case, the company did not meet some of RF MOD's technical requirements, including drone repeater and video frequency requirements, however because of the uniqueness and simplicity of the drone, the company was still invited to participate. The company's goal at the event was to validate the UAS's unique design which boasted a range of three times over a traditional quadcopter out to a maximum

range of 40 km.[v] In October 2025, UAVs resembling the unique design of the *Kometa* started appearing in the skies over Ukraine.

9) Manning the Russian Unmanned Systems Forces. (9 March 2026)

Based on recently discovered Russian MOD documents, the MOD plans to recruit 78,800 officers and soldiers for the RF Unmanned Systems Forces by the end of 2026 – 8,100 officers, 6,400 *praporshiki* (senior enlisted), and 64,300 soldiers. The officers and soldiers are needed to fill the ranks of planned RF Unmanned Systems Forces units consisting of 7 separate brigades, 15 regiments, 70 battalions, one separate battalion (listed in Russian simply as *дивизион*), 12 *Rubikon* units, 12 companies of heavy UAVs, and 12 companies of UGVs. Recruits must be 18 to 45 years old (18 to 35 for UAV operators.)

How will the personnel vacancies be filled? According to the documents, the following sourcing scheme will be used:

- Converting conscripts to contract soldiers – 10,800.
- Pulling contract soldiers from other units – 10,000.
- The remaining 58,000 slots will be filled from volunteer units in the BARS system and from the following recruitment sources:
    - Young people from DOSAAF or other regionally sponsored unmanned systems training programs
    - Individuals with previous military experience in RF AF aviation units
    - Cadets from military institutes or military departments of universities
    - Students from civilian universities
    - Women with appropriate educational background or previous completion of a regionally sponsored unmanned systems course

Note: DOSAAF is a Russian military-patriotic organization designed to prepare young Russians for future service in the Russian military organizational structure.

Building Toward 2026: RF MOD's 2025 Recruitment Goals. By the end of 2025, the RF MOD planned to recruit 3,500 people to outfit one unmanned systems battalion for each military district plus two *Rubikon* battalions. Of this number, 600 were to be converted from conscripts, 300 were to be pulled from other units, and the remaining 2,600 were to be filled by the other various recruitment sources listed above.

UAS training centers in Russia. One Russian chart showed 32 universities in Russia with UAS-related courses in the military departments across the country, with a total pool of 323,698 male students studying across these universities. Another chart showed a total of 63 UAS training centers in Russia, which included 12 in the RF-occupied Ukrainian oblasts. One of the training centers listed on the chart (A.V. Suvorov "PROROYV") recently posted a recruitment ad on Telegram for their next 30-day training course scheduled to begin on 23 March 2026.

Recruiting campaigns at Russian universities. At the end of 2025, the MOD began a large-scale recruitment campaign to attract students from universities into the RF Unmanned Systems Forces. According to Russian human rights activists, this recruiting campaign has spread across the country from Kaliningrad in the west (Baltic Federal University) to Vladivostok in the east (Far Eastern Federal University). The campaign includes at least 83 universities and 24 secondary educational institutions in 36 regions of Russia, as well as in annexed Crimea.

Students are promised that they will only serve one year, that their service will be away from the front lines, that they will be paid well, and that following their service they can return to continue their studies. Russian lawyers that try to help young Russians avoid military service are skeptical, stating that there is no specific wording to that effect in these contracts, nor is there an expiration date to the contract. Lawyers also pointed out that the Russian MOD reserves the right to transfer a new contract soldier to another kind or type of troops if he is not suitable for a position working with unmanned systems. In the end, the command will ultimately determine in what role the student will serve, not before signing the contract, but after, when it is impossible to terminate the contract.

Pressure tactics to sign a military contract. Tactics varied from university to university but seemed to focus heavily on students with financial debts and those potentially failing out of the university. For example, students with debts were invited to meetings where a military recruiter from the *Voenkomat* pressured them to sign a contract. Some students reported laptops at these meetings showing videos of drones blowing people up and opportunities to fly drone simulators. In other cases, students who were at risk of failing out of the university because of performance on final university exams were also pressured to sign, including being told that there would be no “second chance” retake opportunities for failed final exams.

University staff also reported being under pressure to convince the students to sign a contract, claiming they were told that since they work for state institutions, they must comply with instructions “from above.” In one case a professor was told, “if it doesn’t correspond to your moral principles, quit.”

Note: According to Russian education law, students must be provided two attempts to pass their final exams.

Expanding recruitment of women. The Troika has observed a few instances of Russian women working in UAS-related positions in the SMO. These have been mostly concentrated in the volunteer units under the PMC *Redut* umbrella or *Dobrokorps* (the RF MOD Volunteer Corps). This is the first time the Troika has seen a larger-scale effort to recruit women into the RF Unmanned Systems Forces.

Over the weekend of 8 March 2026, as part of International Women’s Day events in Russia, several news programs aired on Russian television focusing on Russian women who serve in the Russian volunteer UAS regiment *Burevestnik*, including in roles as UAV operators and UAS instructors. A photo of 16 women serving in the regiment was also posted online, accompanied by a note of congratulations from the regiment to the recent female graduates of UAS training who would soon be joining its ranks.

10) Using a mesh network to control Geran-2 long-range UAVs.

In addition to terrorizing Ukrainian civilians in nightly attacks in cities across Ukraine, Russian *Geran-2*s are increasingly being used to more accurately strike Ukrainian energy and transportation infrastructure as well as other point targets at operational ranges. In additional to the TTP of striking one target with multiples *Gerans*, in some cases, they are now teamed up with other RF AF fires assets, including Iskander-M ballistic missiles and UMPK guided aerial bombs in "combined attacks." They are also used for reconnaissance and objective control (a Russian term meaning target confirmation, attack observation, and BDA.) The sophistication of these previously "dumb systems" has increased with the help of testing new technologies for them initially on *Gerbera* long-range decoy UAVs. *Geran-2*s now can fly on a mesh network using modems that allow them to form communication channels with each other and back to the operators, who not only receive the information from the *Gerans*, but can also manage the UAVs in real time.

Mesh network modems. According to one Ukrainian EW expert, the Russians have been using Chinese produced mesh network modems in *Geran-2*s. The expert cited the Mesh Network XK-F358 modem produced by the XINGKAI TECH company as an example. The online price for this modem is ~$8,000. These mesh network modems are very powerful transmitters that can communicate at ranges exceeding 100 km and are equipped with AES 128/256 encryption and frequency hopping to protect against EW attempts. The expert added that the transmission speed of the mesh network using these modems could be up to 50 MB/s, with the speed depending on various factors, including the range of the transmission and any EW mitigating effects. This would be enough to adequately transmit optimized 4k video back to the operator even if the transmission speed was degraded down to 2 MB/s.

In addition to Chinese-produced radio modems operating in the 1300 to 1500 MHz range, Geran-2s have been found to be equipped with modems operating both in the 2700 to 2900 MHz and 3200 to 3400 MHz ranges. These modems enable mesh network communication channels, allowing reconnaissance data from the Geran-2 drones to be transmitted back to the operator while also facilitating operator control of the drones. Using multiple frequency ranges provides redundancy in the mesh network, making EW suppression attempts extremely difficult.[vi]

*Geran-2*s equipped with a mesh network modem of this type can communicate with each other and act as repeaters. If one or several of the UAVs with the modems are downed, those that remain can still transmit the information. Adding additional ground antennas with modems as land-based repeaters, for example on balcony or a roof of a house further improves the mesh network.

According to the EW expert, the technology was initially tested over the course of a year on the cheaper *Gerbera* decoy UAVs, which flew over Kyiv and even deeper to the rear, conducted reconnaissance and passed information back through a mesh network chain back to Russia. Some *Gerbera* UAVs downed in summer 2025 were equipped with these modems.

Likely good enough for some moving targets. Besides improving the accuracy on pinpoint stationary targets, these mesh networked *Gerans* could conceivably be used against some moving targets. The flight characteristics of the *Geran-2* do not allow for sophisticated maneuvering; however, they could be successful attacking targets that have a predictable speed and direction of movement like Ukrainian moving trains. The operator of the remote-controlled *Geran* could "chase the train" by flying the UAV from the back of the train in the direction of the train's travel and striking the locomotive or other train cars. In October 2025, the Russians used *Geran-2*s to attack a stationary Ukrainian train at a train station in Shostka, Sumy Province, 40 km from the Russian border.

11) SBU remote UAV attacks on RF Aerospace Forces airbases (Operation Spider Web) (2 Jun 2025).

On Sunday afternoon, 1 June 2025, the Ukrainian SBU (Security Service of Ukraine) launched Operation Spider Web (*Паутина*) – remote FPV UAV attacks on RF Aerospace Forces (VKS) airbases all across Russia, from the Murmansk region in the Arctic to the Russian Far East. According to Ukrainian claims, the operation was organized inside Russia and took 18 months of preparation. By Sunday night, 1 June, Russian investigators believed that the SBU operation was organized in a warehouse in Chelyabinsk, southwest Siberia, just north of Kazakhstan. Ukrainians installed concealed wooden compartments built just below the roofs of at least 10 containers. The secret compartments allegedly were assembled and loaded in the warehouse, with a total of 117 SBU-controlled attack FPV UAVs distributed among the containers. Each of the containers had a retractable roof that opened upon the SBU's remote command. The tractor trailers were allegedly loaded inside the warehouse in Chelyabinsk by a particular ceiling-mounted crane that Russian investigators believed they had identified from SBU photos. The containers, two to a trailer, were then hauled to sites near RF VKS airbases all over Russia by unwitting contracted Russian truckdrivers, some of whom were killed during the attacks either while investigating their loads or while trying to stop the Ukrainian operation.

Surprise! As shown in videos, on Sunday near Olenya Airbase (30 km north-northeast of Murmansk, northwestern-most Russia) and near Belaya Airbase (85 km northwest of Irkutsk, southern Siberia), the container doors on the trucks' flatbeds suddenly opened, startling the drivers and causing them (and other bystanders) to video the events. One witness counted eleven FPVs emerging from a container. One surprised driver counted at least six FPVs emerging from the containers on his trailer. The containers were apparently programmed to explode or were remotely detonated at the end of the operation. At least four containers on two trailers exploded on videos. Some attacks failed. Near Ukrainka Airbase in Amur Oblast in the Russian Far East, 100 km from the Chinese border, a tractor trailer in transit in the vicinity of the base, caught fire causing the driver to pull over. On video, the driver was shown investigating the fire when the containers suddenly exploded, likely killing the driver.

Another truckdriver at an unidentified location realized what was happening, so he and another man climbed on top and into the open containers where they started destroying SBU FPV UAVs with their bare hands. Other drivers then tossed rocks to the two men on top of the containers to help them smash the UAVs as they tried to take off. At another site, a truckdriver was killed but the circumstances of his death were unclear. The RF Ministry of Defense reported that attacks were repelled at Serverny Airbase (near Ivanovo, 255 km northeast of Moscow), Dyagilevo Airbase (northwest of Ryazan, 180 km southeast of Moscow), and at Ukrainka Airbase. However, as explained above, the attack on Ukrainka Airbase was not repelled. It failed due to a mishap. Actual results from attacks on Severny Airbase and Dyagilevo Airbase will need to wait until imagery is available.

Some attacks succeeded. At a minimum, attacks appeared to have succeeded at two bases: Olenya Airbase in the Arctic and at Belaya Airbase in southern Siberia. One SBU FPV footage from Olenya clearly showed at least two burning Tu-95MS bombers, as well as another burning aircraft. Late Sunday, there was no confirmed BDA from Olenya, but it appeared at least two Tu-95MS bombers were destroyed along with one Tu-22M3 bomber and one An-12 transport aircraft. From satellite imagery and other information from Belaya Airbase, Russian sources confirmed that no fewer than three Tu-95MS bombers were destroyed; one Tu-95MS was likely damaged, and one Tu-22M3 bomber was destroyed. At one point during the attack on Belaya Airbase, a RF VKS airman took a selfie that showed behind him no fewer than four large aircraft burning uncontrollably. There were no fire trucks on the scene yet at either of the burning aircraft.

Why these aircraft? Tu-95MS, Tu-160, and Tu-22M3 bombers are the RF VKS' means of launching air-launched cruise-missile attacks on Ukraine. Due to repeated Ukrainian long-range UAV attacks on Engels-2 Airbase near Samara, the RF VKS had been stationing their bombers beyond the ranges of Ukrainian long-range attack UAVs in northern and eastern Russia. For large-scale cruise missile attacks on Ukraine, some aircraft would temporarily move to Engels-2 and arm there before attacks. They would then join other bombers enroute that had armed at smaller RF VKS airbases and smaller depots.

Follow-up. The 1 June afternoon attacks were later followed by Ukrainian long-range UAV attacks in western Russia and USV attacks on the Black Sea.

12) The Expanding Use and Roles of Russian Unmanned Ground Vehicles (UGVs) (20 March 2026)

The Troika has seen an ongoing push in the RF MOD and RF AF for UGVs to take on greater roles – fire support for assault infantry from onboard weapons systems, kamikaze attacks against defensive positions, remote mining and demining, mobile fire team support to air defense operations against UAVs, laying obstacles, creating smoke screens, deploying and operating electronic warfare systems, and conducting supply/resupply and CASEVAC support.

The UAF is currently dominating in the area of UGVs as they did early on in the SMO with the FPVs, however, both sides have been deploying UGVs in greater numbers in the SMO zone in 2025 and early 2026. The trend is away from fewer larger, more expensive military-grade UGVs to smaller, less expensive, often volunteer sponsored "do-it-yourself" (DIY) -type UGVs that are modular in design to execute a variety of missions and, at the same time, "disposable." In a recent Russian video posted on Telegram from the Konstantinovka direction, five destroyed or disabled Ukrainian UGVs of various types were visible at one road intersection. A local villager stated that these UGVs had been moving up and down the roads in the area mostly at night.

Like UAVs, UGV delivery and assembly is normally done in stages as part of distribution so that large numbers of stock are not destroyed all at once. Similarly, lethal systems, ammunitions, and sensitive equipment (like EW systems or communications retransmission stations) are not normally installed onto the UGVs until they are closer in time and distance to the units using them.

Russian UGVs delivered to the RF GF are often further modified at the CAA level, typically by soldiers from the combat engineer brigades but also in the maneuver units themselves based on input and recommendations from soldiers on the Line of Combat Contact (LCC). The same goes for UGVs delivered to the RF VDV and Naval Infantry units.

Note 1: The Russians refer to all UGVs as ground-based robotic complexes (*наземный робототехнический комплекс – НРТК*, sometimes just *НРК*).

Note 2: According to recently discovered RF MOD documents, there are plans for 12 companies of UGVs in the Unmanned Systems Forces. See "**Manning the Unmanned Systems Forces"** in the 9 March 2026 *TROIKA Observations*.

***Courier* (*НРТК «Курьер»*) – the backbone of the RF AF UGV fleet**. This battle-tested, multi-role tracked UGV has a modular design which allows it to be equipped with multiple platforms including heavy machine guns, thermobaric munitions, mine emplacement system, EW packages, and others. It appears to be "the *VT-40* of Russian UGVs" and will anchor the UGV fleet of the RF Unmanned Systems Forces. It has been joined by various other UGV models for testing and use in the SMO zone.

Note 1: The *VT-40* is the most widely produced and used Russian FPV in the inventory.

Note 2: For additional details on the Russian *Courier* UGV, please see "**The *Courier* UGV: Russia's Multi-Mission UGV**" in the 8 December 2025 *TROIKA Observations* and "**RF EW systems mounted on *Courier* UGVs**" in the 23 January 2026 *TROIKA Observations*.

Other UGVs of note – *Omich-2, Bogomol-V3,* and *Chelnok*. The RF AF are testing several additional models of Russian UGVs for use in "the SMO zone" (RF-occupied Ukraine), however these three UGVs have been showcased prominently in recent videos and news reports posted on Russian television and Telegram. These UGVs in particular have been seen in use with RF VDV and Naval Infantry units, and volunteer units. Like *Courier*, the *Omich-2* and *Bogomol-V3* are modular in design with

the ability to mount different platforms and weapons systems for different missions. The *Chelnok* is primarily used for towing large loads.

- *Omich-2*. The Omich-2 is a large optionally piloted, tracked UGV weighing about 650 kg with a payload capacity of 350 kg.
- *Bogomol-V3*. This is a much smaller, tracked UGV designed to carry various cargos and is part of the *Bogomol* family of UGVs, which also includes a larger cargo carrier *Bogomol* V5 and the *Bogomol* B5TR3, equipped with a machine gun and an RPG-30 antitank grenade launcher.
- *Chelnok* (Shuttle - Челнок). This is a large, wheeled UGV capable of towing in excess of 3.5 tons and is designed primarily to transport heavy pieces of equipment, like artillery pieces. In one video, the UGV was seen towing a 122-mm D-30 howitzer.

UGV communications. Russian UGVs like *Courier* have been seen operating via satellite, radio signal, and fiber-optic communications. Satellite communication is preferred; however, it requires a secure, stable signal. One Russian soldier reported recently on Telegram that much of the success in operational range of their UGVs have been primarily because of secure communications enabled by Starlink terminals installed on the UGVs, to include on the *Courier* UGVs. The soldier commented that without Starlink, radio communication between the UGV operator and the UGV are less stable and significantly reduce the distance the operator can be from the UGV.

The Russians use UAVs in conjunction with the UGVs to assist in maneuvering the UGVs over longer distances and to provide a retrans capability for the radio signal. To boost the radio signal strength between the UGV and the UAV, an amplifier like the *Incubator (Инкубатор)* 2.0 or 3.0 is typically used.

The UAVs, however, are also subject to EW suppression. Additionally, the UGV's analog video signal back to the operator appears on spectrum analyzers and video interceptors. The Russians have been attempting to counter signal interception attempts by installing tech like *Tuman* (*Fog – Туман*) to "hide" the UGV's video signal by encrypting it. According to the *Tuman* developers, the enemy does not see the video from the UGV, and most drone detectors and automatic video interceptors simply ignore the signal.

The maximum operating range claimed by most Russian units for the *Courier* and other UGVs is typically 10 km. Claims of ranges up to 25 km (in one example below) without Starlink or using some kind of fiber optic system are met with tremendous skepticism.

Examples of UGV Usage. Some recent examples of various uses of Russian UGVs in the SMO across the various Russian groups of forces (GoF) follow in subsequent paragraphs below.

1. Remote minelaying. Several Russian UGVs operating in the SMO have the ability to be modified for remote minelaying with varying capacities to carry mines. The initial *Courier* mine laying system carried eight 8 anti-tank mines for remote mine laying, four released from the back of each side of the UGV. Combat engineer soldiers from the RF Unmanned Systems Forces assigned to RF Northern Group of Forces recently

created larger mine-laying trays using a two-level, conveyor system for each side, increasing the delivery capacity to 20 anti-tank mines (10 from each side).

2. Remote demining. In a recent news report aired on the Russian "Zvezda" TV channel, Russian deminers from the RF GF 12th Engineer Brigade / RF Central GoF operating in the Pokrovsk (Krasnoarmeysky)), and Myrnohrad directions used the *Courier* for remote demining of the most dangerous roads and critical MSRs.
Note: The news reporter used the term in Russian "cockroach roads" ("*тараканые дороги*") to emphasis the danger level of these roads which was evident in the video based on the number of mines visible both on and along the road that the *Courier* was clearing.

Specific Deming Equipment onboard. The *Courier* was equipped with a dozer-type blade in the front and an electro-magnetic trawl that sent out impulses to a distance of six meters in front of the UGV. If a mine or other explosive device was equipped with a "Jonik"-type detonation device, the trawl will initiate the explosion. Numerous visible and unseen anti-tank and anti-personnel mines were detonated in the video including several *PMN-2* (*ПМН-2*) mines. According to the news reporter, this particular variant of the *Courier* was also equipped with an additional onboard generator, extra battery, and stable communications that gave it a 25-km operating range. The Russian UGV operator in the video snarkily commented that the disconnection of Starlink did not affect the operations of this UGV.
Note: The "Jonik" is a Ukrainian-developed, detonation device originally designed to enhance the effectiveness of mines. It has a magnetometer sensor which triggers the mine when a metallic object (like a tank, armored vehicle, or a weapons system) comes within proximity of the mine and an accelerometer which causes the mine to detonate if any attempt is made to move it.

Another more field-expedient modification for remote demining. Soldiers from the RF GF 4th Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade / 3rd GCAA, RF Southern GoF modified a *Courier* to conduct demining of anti-personnel mines by installing a homemade mine trawl roller on a lifting-lowering winch at the front of the UGV. They also encased the UGV with metal panels to protect against shrapnel and added two large sandbags at the rear of the UGV for additional weight.

3. Obstacle emplacement and creating smoke screens. In a Russian *NTV* news channel report, soldiers from the RF GF 37th Engineer Brigade / 36th GCAA / RF Eastern GoF modified a *Courier* UGV to remotely emplace concertina wire. Other videos in January and February 2026 showed soldiers using multiple *Courier*s equipped with smoke generators moving across an open training area and emplacing smoke screens alongside RF soldiers assaulting an objective. In another instance, a *Courier* used its remote mining capability to create smoke screens by emplacing smoke pots.

4. Air defense. In another video news report, volunteers of the 1st Assault Battalion of the Brigade *Nevsky* (Russian Volunteer Corps) have been using the *Courier* on the LCC armed with a PKT machine gun to provide cover for assault troops from UAV drone attacks. According to the unit's Chief of Staff, they have downed

several dozen FPVs and Mavic type drones as well as one larger UAV reconnaissance drone using the system. In the video, a unit spotter calls out flight information about the approaching drone to assist the UGV operator to orient and elevate the PKT on the UGV to engage the drone.

5. Fuel delivery. In one video news report, RF GF logistics soldiers in the RF GF 30th Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade / 2nd GCAA / RF Central GoF used a *Courier* to deliver fuel to units along the LCC. The *Courier* was modified locally with overhead protection added against attacking drones and modifications to the UGV's remote, mine-laying system to adapt it to carry and deliver large, plastic canisters of fuel. The UGV delivered the fuel canisters in a similar manner to delivering mines, with the operator releasing them at the required intervals from the rear of the UGV. According to the news reporter, in this manner 10 different unit positions received fuel in one delivery run with a total delivery of 200 liters of fuel delivered.

6. CASEVAC. Medical evacuation teams from the RF VDV 7th Guards Mountain Air Assault Division (7th GALD) recently received several models of UGVs for testing and use in operations in the Orikhiv direction in Zaporizhzhia Oblast. In addition to the *Courier*, *Omich-2* and *Bogomel-V3* UGVs, the teams tested other tracked and wheeled UGVs specifically for their capabilities to evacuate wounded from the LCC. Some were optionally piloted, with others equipped with onboard generators or pulled trailers. Russian soldiers training in Voronezh, Russia practiced self-evacuation techniques in the snow using the *Courier* by securing themselves with specialized straps and carabiners to a litter towed behind the UGV.

7. Radiation Detection and Reconnaissance. In a February 2026 video from a Russian military training area, a UGV operator wearing NBC protection equipment conducted reconnaissance using a *Courier* UGV equipped with an IMD-7 dosimeter-radiometer and flag emplacing system at the rear of the UGV to mark hazardous areas.

"Garage-based solutions" and MOD support for developing UGVs. Russian units in the field, volunteer organizations such as the "People's Front" and private companies have driven Russian UGV innovation for use in the SMO, particularly since 2024. These efforts have been supported by the RF MOD, primarily through *Voentech*.

In December 2024, Russian Minister of Defense Andrey Belousov ordered that *Voentech* be formed, which created a new MOD-managed system of innovative research, development, and implementation of weapons and equipment. Voentech became the RF MOD lead for UAV and UGV research, development, and implementation. In regard to unmanned systems development, *Voentech* takes advantage of a large-scale interaction of the MOD with the Russian civil scientific community, unmanned systems developers, and production laboratories across Russia.

GEN-COL Aleksandr Sanchik, who was appointed as the RF Deputy Minister of Defense for Material and Technical Support (MTO, RF MOD's logistics department) in November 2025 is a strong advocate for UGVs. He sponsored several UGV projects

while serving as the Acting Commander of both RF EAMD and RF Eastern GoF and then as the Commander SOMD and RF Southern GoF. UGVs are part of the new, SMO-influenced thinking that GEN-COL Sanchik is tasked to introduce into the Russian procurement system both to address current battlefield challenges and so that the future force reflects Russia's substantial adaptations developed in the SMO.

-Indirect Actions

13) Understanding Indirect Actions – an integral part of the Russian Way of War (18 Sep 2024)

Months of intelligence collection and sabotage against Polish rail and road networks. An attempt to poison the water supply at a German airbase. Reported threats against U.S. military facilities in Europe where Ukrainian forces are being trained. Assassination attempt against a German defense industry CEO. Numerous fires and accidents at Western defense factories. Information campaigns and election interference. While still underreported, events like these increased in 2024. While it is tempting to view them as isolated, unrelated incidents, we should resist that urge. In its first two years, Russia's Special Military Operation in Ukraine brought some tactical successes through large scale combat operations, but it also had setbacks and has become a grinding, attritional war. Against this backdrop in late 2022/early 2023, Russia revitalized its campaign of Indirect Actions targeting the West, and specifically Western materiel & political support for Ukraine.

Few Russian military concepts have confounded Americans as much as what the Russians refer to as "Indirect Actions" (*непрямые действия*). Most American observers first became aware of Indirect Actions (IA) during Russia's invasion of Crimea in February and March 2014, although perhaps not by that term. Through the judicious use of non-military means in addition to "little green men" (the Russians called them "polite men", they were actually RF AF personnel in sterilized uniforms), Russia was able to invade, seize, and annex the Ukraine's Autonomous Republic of Crimea in one month, with minimal use of traditional military means, and almost no casualties. To many, it appeared that the Russian Federation had invented a new and exotic type of warfare. Westerners were quick to label this effort "hybrid" or "grey zone" warfare, although the Russians do not use these terms, and in fact have rejected these labels.

In the aftermath of Crimea, Western observers took a great interest in an article published in February 2013 by Russia's then new Chief of the General Staff (CGS), General Valery Gerasimov. Appointed in November 2012, Gerasimov in short order published the article "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight" in the professional military journal, Military Industrial Courier. In his widely quoted but seldom read 2013 article, Gerasimov described what was later termed "Indirect Actions" by the RF General Staff, conducted to help Russia set conditions and shape the environment for traditional military operations (i.e., direct, kinetic actions, what we might term shaping operations)

and pursue their political goals. In some cases, Indirect Actions may be sufficient to achieve Russian objectives without ever resorting to kinetic actions, as was largely the case in 2014 Crimea. Unfortunately, this article was widely quoted, but seldom actually read in the West, leading pundits to incorrectly conclude that Russia now eschewed conventional warfare in favor of Indirect Actions. On the Russian side, however, Gerasimov's officers and military theorists followed his instructions, and continued to refine his concepts. Eight years later in 2022, the beginning of Russia's Special Military Operation (SMO) swung the pendulum back the other way, as commentators largely forgot about Indirect Actions in the face of the largest conventional war in Europe since WWII. Now, after nearly more than two years of kinetic military activity in the SMO, we again see a resurgence of Indirect Actions against the West, particularly NATO and the U.S. So, what is going on?

1. Indirect Actions are an integral part of the Russian Way of War (RWOW). From the Russian military perspective, Indirect Actions are nothing new. The are not "hybrid," nor do they take place in a "grey zone." Veterans of Soviet "wars of national liberation" would be quite familiar with Indirect Actions and the ways that they are employed today. Arguably, Soviet tradecraft was better and more effective than the often-clumsy modern Russian Federation attempts. Regardless, Indirect Actions are integral to how Russian intends to fight. Sometimes Indirect Actions alone are sufficient to achieve Russian objectives, other times more direct action will be required. Russian military planners are trained to apply the right tool to the right situation. After two years of fighting Ukraine largely to a draw on the conventional battlefield, Russia has identified Western support as Ukraine's center of gravity and is now targeting it through Indirect Actions.

2. Authorities Mismatch. A major reason that Westerners have trouble understanding Indirect Actions as an integral part of the RWOW is that the RF AF have authorities that the U.S. DoD lacks. The General Staff's GRU has the lead in the RF for Indirect Actions and has expansive authorities to conduct them in peace or war. In the U.S. system, many of these authorities would be Title 22 or Title 50, or even outright illegal for any agency of the U.S. government to conduct. Even among the Title 10 authorities that the DoD leaders and combatant commanders do possess, many of them are not granted during "Phase 0", but only after active hostilities have begun. While the GRU may employ "nonmilitary means," Indirect Actions are military activities, conducted by military forces.

3. The RWOW is not linear. Russians do not divide their wars into phases in the way that Americans do, nor do they draw as strong of a distinction between war and peacetime. Russian military planning is better visualized as a cloud, in which objectives and tools (military and non-military) are freely floating. General Staff planners select the right tools for the objective and then employ them when and where it makes sense. They rarely select a single tool or approach. Rather, they will employ multiple ways and

means, direct and indirect actions, traditional military as well as asymmetric means. Then they will reinforce the ones that work. Conditions are constantly changing, and the Russian approaches reflect that. This is why we see a re-emphasis on Indirect Actions directed at the Western Europe and the U.S. after more than two years of large-scale combat operations during the SMO.

4. Indirect Actions are well-suited to Russia's strategic patience. The current state of play in the Special Military Operation favors the Kremlin's position militarily, politically, economically, and socially. Russia is very comfortable playing the long game. An indefinite continuation of the SMO at its current levels would present problems for the Russian Federation. However, a "messy," unresolved but temporarily frozen conflict in Ukraine would suit Russian objectives very well. First, all "agreements" signed by Russia are temporary, and signal the start of preparation for the next round of military conflict using traditional means. In the interim, Indirect Actions would fill the void. If/when conventional fighting in Ukraine ends (again, temporarily), Russia would continue its Indirect Actions, targeted at Ukraine and the West. Their purpose would be twofold: 1) to further weaken Ukraine, perhaps rendering future conventional military means unnecessary; and 2) to weaken and ultimately sever/curtail Western materiel and political support for Ukraine. Russia has the will, stamina, and resources to maintain this cycle as long as needed to wear down Ukraine and the West physically and psychologically. Intense, multidomain kinetic actions beget even 'bigger, dumber, and uglier' use of brute force supplemented by more nuanced, and sometimes not so nuanced (though no less effective), use of Indirect Actions. Continued missile and drone attacks against Ukrainian infrastructure and population centers along with assault operations along the FLOT supported by artillery, attack drones, and gliding bombs will continue to create opportunities for the use of additional Indirect Actions, which in turn will set the conditions to facilitate further kinetic actions.

5. Assessing Indirect Actions. Russian Indirect Actions worked very well in Crimea in February 2014 but had mixed results in the Donbas a few months later. During Russian combat operations in Donbas after 2014, Russian Indirect Actions were expanded beyond Ukraine to disrupt potential international support to Ukraine. Information operations were employed to undermine the Kyiv government and their relations with NATO and EU members. A particularly successful campaign convinced many Westerners that Ukraine was rife with neo-Nazis, especially its military. Kinetic actions destroyed ammunition storage depots in Ukraine, Czechia, Bulgaria, and elsewhere in Europe and the former Soviet Union. These strikes destroyed stocks that could have been used by Ukraine in the SMO years later, and they intimidated Eastern European arms dealers. Few Europeans or Americans saw these events as part of a wider, concerted campaign by the GRU. Instead, these events were viewed as a series of unassociated, but interesting events. This is exactly how the Russians prefer that we perceive them.

In late 2021 and early 2022, Russia and the GRU ramped up their Indirect Actions against Ukraine, this time with middling results. Overall, Ukraine had become more resilient after eight years of dealing with Russian Indirect Actions. However, about a year into the SMO, Russia and the GRU adapted and started refocusing their Indirect Actions more against what they assessed to be Ukraine's center-of-gravity – its political and materiel support from the West. This approach began in 2023 with covert, purposefully confusing diplomatic entreaties about being open to a potential ceasefire. Since that time, the GRU has used Telegram App and other means to recruit spies and saboteurs to interfere with weapons and ammunition transit in Poland and elsewhere in Europe. The Kremlin attempted to assassinate Armin Papperger, CEO of Rheinmetall and a strong supporter of Ukraine. Russians likely engaged in sabotage against German defense companies which produce systems and ammunitions for Ukraine. There have also been other activities in Germany and Europe which were likely part of the GRU campaign of Indirect Actions designed to sever Ukraine from its Western supporter using the diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments to compel, induce, and deceive Western nations from continuing to provide military aid to Ukraine.

Conclusion. The Kremlin will continue to use a variety of ways and means to achieve its ends in what it considers to be its war with NATO. Indirect Actions will remain an integral part of the Russian Way of War and will increasingly be employed against the U.S. and other NATO countries.

-Medical

Please see the unpublished but USAREUR-AF approved Sustainment Chapter (focus on Medical) from Troika Compendium II, provided separately.

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[i] Troika Observations 10 January 2025, Troika Insights, RF AF plans to create Unmanned Systems Troops in 2025.

[ii] Troika Observations 23 May 2025, Key Observations, Recruitment began for the RF AF Unmanned Systems Forces' separate battalions.

[iii] Troika Observations 14 November 2025, Troika Insights, RF AF Unmanned Systems Forces officially created

[iv] Troika Observations 7 April 2025, Troika Insights, The Russian Rubicon Cener for Advanced Unmanned Technologies – Update, Troika Observations 9 July 2025, Troika Insights, Rubicon Operators – UAV operators at the Russian Rubicon Center for Advanced Unmanned Technologies, Troika Observations 10 September 2025, Troika Insights, Russian Rubicon Center one year anniversary – a look at some of the numbers

[v] Troika Observations 28 July 2025, Troika Insights, Voentech (Воентех) – the accelerated development and implementation of Russian "garage-based" UAS solutions. Part One

[vi] Troika Observations, 3 December 2025, Troika Insights, Three Recent Russian Geran-2 adaptations