

PUTIN'S RUSSIA AGAINST PUTIN:

The War According to Z

By Ivan Philippov

Foreword

The start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was accompanied by the near-total destruction of the independent press inside Russia. Independent outlets such as Meduza, Mediazona, Kholod and the BBC Russian Service were forced either to shut down their operations in Russia or move their work abroad, while their staff had to leave the country. Some outlets were designated "undesirable organizations"; others were labelled "foreign agents." Criminal cases were opened against their employees, and some were even sentenced to years in prison, albeit in absentia.

The few independent media outlets that remain inside Russia today have to report on the war with extreme caution, mindful of the repressive laws introduced since the invasion. Chief among them is the so-called "fake news" law, which criminalizes "false information" about the Russian Armed Forces and carries prison sentences of up to fifteen years.

One might have expected that, after such a thorough purge of the media landscape, all that would remain were pro-government outlets dutifully following the talking points handed down by the Presidential Administration. Instead, a new form of life unexpectedly emerged from the ashes, one for which those ashes proved fertile soil. What came into being was the so-called **Z-space**: thousands of pro-war Telegram channels, large and small. Their authors enthusiastically support the Russian army, the goals of the war and Vladimir Putin personally. At the same time, however, the way they write about events on the frontline and back at home differs radically from official propaganda.

The Z-space emerged in response to a widespread demand among Russians who, by mid-spring 2022, as the Russian army retreated from Kyiv, suddenly discovered that state television had been lying to them. They discovered that Vladimir Putin, along with the now former defense minister Sergei Shoigu, the military's official spokesman Igor Konashenkov and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, were all either lying, withholding information, exaggerating or downplaying what was happening. Or, worse still, they had no idea what the real situation was. Ordinary Russians had no idea either. For decades, propaganda had taught them that the Russian army was invincible.

For years, patriotically minded Russians, Western politicians and ordinary people had believed that the Russian army represented a genuine threat. That myth only grew stronger after the bloodless annexation of Crimea. By March 2022, however, many had realized that there would be no quick victory and began looking for answers to urgent questions: What was wrong with the army? What was actually happening at the front?

They found those answers in the new Telegram channels united by their unconditional support for the war. They found them in the Z-space.

For the fifth year running, I have been closely reading hundreds of Z channels. I was drawn into this rather unpleasant corner of the internet by much the same logic as most of their other readers: I wanted to know what people on the other side of the barricades were writing about the course of the war, the situation at the front and Russian society.

I knew what I thought about the war. I knew what Emmanuel Macron thought about it, or what Alexei Navalny had thought. But what did supporters of the invasion think? What did those who sincerely believed that it was necessary and just have to say?

That is why I began studying the Z-space back in 2022. The foundation of this book is an archive I assembled containing 40,840 Z texts from 1,834 Z channels, a total of 31.5 million characters. My archive even preserves many posts that their authors later deleted in panic, fearing prosecution.

Systematic analysis makes it possible to separate what matters from the noise: to find confirmation from two or three other authors for something first spotted in a single channel; to notice which major stories these channels ignore altogether and which, by contrast, they cover in exhaustive detail; to identify which sources tend to exaggerate Russian successes and which lean instead toward alarmism and defeatism.

The war in Ukraine is the most thoroughly documented war in human history. Soldiers record combat with drones and smartphones. The war is captured by CCTV cameras, both official systems and cameras installed in private homes. Much of what we know about crimes committed during the war comes precisely from video recordings and photographs. It is frightening to imagine how many exabytes of this slaughter are already stored on servers. More frightening still is the thought of how much more disk space will yet be filled with these horrific images.

The war in Ukraine is unique for another reason. For the first time in history, we can read about a war virtually in real time. Not the frontline reporting of a journalist who has travelled to the line of contact, and not a veteran's memoir written after the event, but posts written by someone who is actually fighting, almost live. It is Z channels and their authors that give us access to this material. They are creating a unique archive of the war: not merely a body of facts, but a chronology of moods, attitudes and opinions.

Each individual post in each individual channel contains pieces of a puzzle from which it is possible to assemble a picture of this war that comes as close to the truth as possible.

Over four years, I learned enough from Z-authors to try to systematize all this material in a single book. And when describing the problems I will discuss here, I believe it is important to rely above all on the direct quotations I have collected. I want the war, the army, its problems and its failures to be described not by me, but by the Z-authors themselves.

After all, as a reminder, these authors do not merely depart from the talking points of official propaganda. They directly contradict them. Their argument, therefore, is not with me or with the liberal press. It is with Vladimir Putin, with Defense Minister Belousov, with Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov and, in effect, with the entire vast machinery of Russian propaganda.

All quotations from Z-authors are translated as written, preserving the spelling, punctuation and stylistic peculiarities of the originals wherever possible.

Chapter 6

“People Can’t Handle the Whole Truth”

As I wrote earlier, the Z community emerged first and foremost as a media space where Russians could learn the truth about the war that television would never tell them. Z channels wanted, and still want, to bring that truth to their fellow citizens and perhaps even to the country’s leadership, both military and civilian. Yet, paradoxically, those same Z authors have periodically written, and continue to write, that *“the country can’t handle the whole truth about the war.”*

It is actually hard to argue with that idea: incompetent commanders, horrific losses, arbitrary abuse and lawlessness... It seems reasonable to assume that if every Russian had access to information about how an army at war actually functions and what the war really looks like, attitudes across the country toward the so-called SVO would change quite substantially.

I mean a hypothetical situation in which Russians learned as much from television news about the invasion of Ukraine as they once learned about the First Chechen War. I would venture to suggest that, in such a situation, discontent with a war in which tens of thousands of lives are being squandered through incompetence would be far more visible.

Instead, Russian television has spoken, and continues to speak, about the war in the language of triumphalist Defense Ministry briefings that often don’t bear even a passing resemblance to reality. This is one reason why Russians who complied with the 2022 mobilization and reported to military enlistment offices rather than leaving the country generally had not the slightest idea what awaited them. They did not understand that mobilization was indefinite and that they would remain in service until the war ended. They knew nothing about “meat assaults” or the other realities of life in the modern Russian army. The same can be said of ideologically motivated volunteers who joined the military in 2023 and even in 2024.

By the fifth year of the military campaign, however, Russian society had learned quite a lot about the war. And it had drawn its conclusions. For many reasons, objective sociological research into attitudes toward the war is impossible in Russia today, but we can judge those attitudes from a variety of indirect indicators. One is the steady rise in payments for signing a military contract. If there were enough people willing to sign, the state would have no reason to keep raising the payments. But people are not exactly lining up, so the payments keep going up and up.

St. Petersburg and the surrounding Leningrad region provide a good example. At the beginning of 2024, the payment offered to a new contract soldier there was just 695,000 rubles. The authorities then raised it repeatedly: in March, in June, and twice in July. By August 2024, recruitment billboards bearing the slogan *“A Hero City Has Its SVO Heroes”* [a play on *svoi*, Russian for “its own,” incorporating the acronym SVO] advertised a one-

time payment of 2.1 million rubles. By early March 2026, the total payments available to contract soldiers signing up in St. Petersburg had reached 4.5 million rubles.

But even for sums this enormous by Russian standards, Russians are not particularly eager to sign contracts. Why? The Z-space itself provides a remarkably detailed and revealing answer.

In October 2025, the fairly prominent Z author Alexander Kartavykh published a post following a conversation with a civil servant. During their discussion, the official put into words a question that had been troubling him.

“So we got talking, right,” Kartavykh writes, “and he shared his pain. Again, not his own personal pain, technically, because this isn’t his area of responsibility. But at the same time, it kind of is. Because these days they’ll f..k whoever happens to be around over this. And if you boil the question down to one sentence, it would sound like this: ‘We’re already offering six million rubles for voluntary mobilization into the SVO. Soon it’ll be seven million, maybe even eight. And still the inflow isn’t exactly impressive. A teaspoonful a day, drip, drip. What the fuck is wrong with them? What else do we have to give them to make them go fight?’”

Having told this story, Kartavykh then addressed his subscribers directly: *“Why are YOU personally, despite these insanely generous terms (and they really are paying a lot in one lump sum), still in civilian life fixing your Primus stove [i.e. minding your own business]? What’s stopping you? Imagine the entire state apparatus has gathered to ask why you’re not in the SVO. Now answer the question properly. Recruitment ads are on every lamppost, and you’re still not storming Pokrovsk. Why? What’s putting you off?”*

He received more than five thousand comments. One of the most popular answers, expressed in various forms, was this: if I answer honestly, I can now be charged in Russia with “discrediting the armed forces.”

That is probably why Kartavykh disabled comments under the post the following day. Many of them, however, were preserved. Here are a few:

“I have absolutely no desire to trade my life for money, and this murky, vague concept of the SVO doesn’t stir anything in me at all.”

“Money isn’t a motivation at all. Offer me 20 million if you like. What am I supposed to do with that money if, in the best case, I end up disabled and, in the worst, in a coffin? Spend the whole amount on my funeral?”

“A guy I know ended up paying one million of his payout to a captain and another half-million to a senior lieutenant so he wouldn’t be sent into an assault unit. He’d been signed up for artillery. In the summer they sent him into an assault near Vovchansk. Missing in action. And these are the officers who would be sending me to slaughter.”

“As someone who has spent the last three years dreaming of nothing but demobilization, I can say that most people simply sense, subconsciously, that the Defense Ministry is a fucking circus run by degenerate clowns. People sense it subconsciously; consciously, from the outside, they don’t know even half of how fucked things really are. But people can at least see that getting in is easy and walking out on your own two feet is almost impossible, because there is simply no mechanism for leaving the Defense Ministry system. So who in their right mind would agree, in effect, to sell themselves into slavery for an indefinite period, even for good money? Only someone completely desperate. And all the desperate people were already swept up in 2023 and 2024.”

Other Z channels also responded to Kartavykh’s question. The collective conclusion reached by those taking part in the discussion was fairly simple: as the fourth year of the war drew to a close, Russians knew perfectly well that a Defense Ministry contract did not mean easy millions. It meant a quick and inglorious death.

“Since 2023, when wartime contract recruitment began on a mass scale, many thousands of these contract soldiers have already been deceived by their employer [the Defense Ministry] and brought what they learned back home with them, either while on leave or after being discharged as disabled. And they told the people around them, acquaintances, friends, or simply prospective recruits who wanted to know, how the whole thing actually works,” wrote the mobilized serviceman behind the channel Shelter No. 8.

So what, according to Z authors, both servicemen and military volunteers, awaits a new recruit at the front? A “meat assault.” Before the Kharkiv offensive began, in May 2024, new contract soldiers still had some chance of ending up somewhere other than an assault unit. By 2025, however, Z channels were reporting that all incoming replacements were being sent straight to assault units.

Vladimir Putin regularly points out in his speeches that the Russian army is advancing along the entire line of contact. The Russian president apparently believes this demonstrates Russia’s advantage on the battlefield. Not quite, military Z authors respond, correcting him without naming him. It is better to attack where the enemy’s defenses are weak. If you attack everywhere, including sectors where the defenses are effective, what you get is not so much an offensive as a meat grinder.

“The desire to maintain the strategic initiative in armed conflict is normal in itself. The question is whether the available materiel, manpower and time are sufficient to sustain that ambition. If the main driver of that ambition is instead the need to maintain appearances, regardless of the resources available, what you get is an offensive conducted for the sake of reporting to the very top that an offensive is underway. As a result, we make very modest gains at the cost of quite heavy losses. The whole approach needs to change,” wrote the author of the channel Philologist in Ambush in October 2025.

It is precisely this relentless pressure from commanders to keep the army attacking that Z authors see as the root of all the problems. Why? Because the army is taking very heavy

losses. But it has to attack, right? It does. So undertrained new contract soldiers are pulled off the training grounds and driven into poorly prepared offensives. Some contract soldiers die in their very first battle. But the army has to attack, right? It does. And round and round it goes.

Military volunteer Romanov explained it this way on his Romanov Light channel:

“So why are assault troops in such short supply? Because commanders treat them as expendable. They’ll be given more, while the General Staff demands advances. Advances earn bonuses. And then there are the ‘advances’ they still have to work off.

“Average life cycle of an assault soldier: 12 days. Day one: he signs a contract and arrives at the training ground; days two through eleven: training at the training ground; day twelve, the last: fed into the front-line positions.

“In the hottest sectors, only one of every two men even makes it to the position. At best.”

Even in 2024, the harsh realities of the war were not yet so widely understood. But as time went on, more and more Russians learned how the Russian army was actually fighting in the Donbas, and accordingly fewer and fewer people were willing to sign contracts.

For the state, which for the reasons described above is in acute need of new contract soldiers, the public’s growing awareness of these realities became a serious problem that needed to be solved quickly. The recruitment apparatus took the most obvious route: it began lying outright.

Vkontakte and the Russian-language internet are full of military recruitment ads saying things like:

“Second or third line. No assault units.”

“SVO service in the REAR.”

“ATTENTION! ONLY 5 PLACES LEFT. SECOND OR THIRD LINE. CONSTRUCTION WORKER URGENTLY NEEDED! SALARY from 260,000 rubles.”

“Service in the rear. Construction battalion. Repair battalion. Driver. Guard. No assault duty.”

“Contract service. We’ll help write off your debts. Not first or second line. No assault duty!”

At the same time, every such ad comes with promises of multimillion-ruble payments:

“Transparent enlistment process: 3,000,000 rubles immediately, up to 17,500,000 over one year.”

Z author Maxim Kalashnikov explained that ads like these are, of course, maximally cynical, but they do reflect the logic of the army: *“You signed a contract, and the Russian Defense Ministry can reassign you wherever it needs you. Right now, it needs you in the assault units.”*

And that logic is perfectly clear. New contract soldiers are used to plug the holes wherever the previous ones have been used up. And where are soldiers being “used up” fastest in today’s army? Exactly: in the assault units.

The channel Thirteenth explained the meaning of these military recruitment offers with exceptional clarity:

“The second you sign a contract, you instantly become a fucking amazing assault soldier! And your opinion that you were promised a rear-area job can immediately go fuck itself. Nobody is going to give a shit about your medical diagnoses or anybody’s promises of ‘rear work.’ Even if they promise you a job on the territory of the Russian Federation, bear in mind that the DPR and LPR, the Kherson region and the Zaporizhzhia region are all Russian territory as far as we’re concerned.

“Want to be a construction worker? Fucking great! You’ll dig some fucking great dugouts in between getting fucked up by khokhol drones [khokhol is a derogatory Russian term for Ukrainians]. A guard? We need those! Go storm an ukrop dugout [ukrop is another derogatory term for Ukrainians] and then stay there to hold it. Cargo delivery? Of course, brother! Grab that 30-kilo backpack, four TM anti-tank mines, and get your ass to the far tree line! Driver? Here’s a motorcycle! Hope you don’t get blown the fuck up on your first run. As for ‘military band musicians,’ I honestly don’t even know what to say.”

The author of the channel BCh 3 added some important details to this arrangement. In theory, a new contract soldier who had a useful military specialty and connections inside the active army really could avoid the assault units. But to do so, he would have to give up the multimillion-ruble payments that had attracted most Russians to sign a contract in the first place:

“Let’s say you’re an old hand. You know in advance where you want to go and where there’s a good commander. You’re a specialist in your field, and your friends have helped you get a letter from a unit requesting that you be assigned there. They’re waiting for you. But at the military enlistment office, before you leave, they’ll tell you that the one-time payments are only available if you give up that prearranged unit placement. Otherwise you won’t be paid.

“They need to send people where they’re needed most right now. For obvious reasons. They’ll tell you that you’re going as a radio operator, a signalman, or to an auto repair shop, and if you’re actually good at what you do, you probably will eventually end up working in your specialty. Just later, after a few assaults. So be mentally prepared for the front line, where you can smell the corpses from five kilometers away.”

The state’s objective of obtaining the manpower it needs may be cynical, but it is understandable. Yet the fact that, by the fifth year of the war, the methods being used to attract people into the army horrify the soldiers themselves says a great deal. A tiny Z channel called SHTAKET put the point particularly well:

"The fact is, military bloggers who advertise these contract-service meat-processing plants are fggots and ccksuckers who push the line for money without giving the slightest fuck what they are condemning people in their audience to."

Exactly that: *"the contract-service meat-processing plant."* Hard to put it more precisely than that.

Chapter 10

The War on Their Own Dime

[The Russian title, *Война за «СВОи»*, is a play on *за свои*, “out of one’s own pocket,” with the acronym SVO embedded in the word.]

By the fifth year of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the needs of the military are still being met primarily not by the Defense Ministry but by pro-war volunteers. Yes, state spending on the war continues to rise and will soon exceed 5.1 percent of the country’s GDP, yet money for the most basic things soldiers at the front need is still being raised from ordinary people. Or the soldiers simply buy them out of their own pockets.

Officially, of course, the picture looks very different. Vladimir Putin, his press secretary Dmitry Peskov, various senior military officials and members of the State Duma regularly insist that the army has everything it needs. The Russian president says so virtually every year. On December 22, 2022, for example, speaking at a meeting of the Defense Ministry Board, he said:

“I want to draw the attention of the defense minister, the chief of the General Staff and all the commanders represented at this meeting. We have no funding constraints whatsoever. The country, the government, gives the army everything it asks for. Everything! The corresponding results will be achieved.”

A year later, on December 19, 2023, Putin essentially repeated the same point. *“You have everything you need now. And the Motherland expects you to deliver,”* he told participants in an expanded meeting of the Russian Defense Ministry Board. And here is a quote from Putin’s annual televised call-in show in December 2025:

“We will be fully able to meet our social obligations to the public, pursue development under the national projects, achieve our technological development goals and, of course, meet the needs of the Armed Forces.”

And yet those “technological development goals” are being achieved primarily in garages near the front, while civilian volunteers do more, and do it better, to meet the “needs of the Armed Forces” than the enormous military bureaucracy does.

“One more thing I wanted to say to those back home: don’t believe the liars and TV shamans who tell you that our guys at the front don’t need anything. Some officials say that just to cover their own asses in case they get burned. The troops need everything. Believe me, nothing will go to waste. Especially modern military equipment,” Senator Dmitry Rogozin, who was fighting in the war, wrote on his Telegram channel in January 2025.

Most likely, when he referred to “liars,” the senator did not mean Vladimir Putin or Dmitry Peskov, but the Russian federal television channels that spend morning to night insisting

that the army has everything it needs. Still, you have to admit, the result was rather ambiguous.

Volunteers supply the front with reconnaissance drones and attack drones; generators; civilian vehicles used for evacuations, moving units and delivering weapons; body armor; helmets and, in general, every kind of personal protective equipment; thermal imagers; secure digital radios; diesel heaters for trenches and dugouts; gas burners and cylinders; rechargeable batteries; flashlights and disposable batteries; camping mats; sleeping bags; camouflage nets; thermal camouflage blankets; electronic warfare systems; medicines; tourniquets; bandages...

In more than three years of monitoring these channels, I have seen fundraisers for tank engine oil and for shovels so that personnel at military airfields could clear snow. For diesel fuel and drinking water. For laptops, power banks and all-season tires. Vehicles used all along the front are repaired with money raised by volunteers and with volunteer help; volunteers build dugouts as well. *"I recently visited an assault company in a very elite division. The assault troops were poor as church mice. Every drone they have was either bought with their own money or sent by volunteers,"* military volunteer Alexei Zhivov wrote on his Zhivov Z channel in June 2024.

There is a whole cluster of military problems behind this phenomenon. I have already written that in the modern Russian army, a soldier is worth nothing. Issued equipment, on the other hand, has an inventory number, a monetary value and, most importantly, an officer who can be held financially liable for it. As Z volunteers explain, this sometimes means that troops directly on the line of contact do not receive equipment they need simply because their superiors refuse to issue it: you'll burn it or lose it, and we'll be the ones held responsible.

In August 2024, the author of the channel Lawyer in the South wrote about the problem: *"...Once the equipment is entered on the unit's books, financial liability comes into play. We may be at war, but nobody has waived that requirement. This creates additional problems with servicing the equipment, because it is over and above the unit's authorized equipment and therefore no maintenance is provided for it. Then there are problems writing it off, although that applies to any equipment carried on the books."* As a result, even drones, or other essential equipment, produced or purchased centrally for the military can end up stuck indefinitely in warehouses and simply never make it to the front.

"The warehouses were full and they're still full. Thousands of Mavics, Matrices, kheratriks, Autels [Autel UAVs], perevertels are just lying around unused, including EW systems. Nobody wants to take responsibility for writing anything off, nobody wants to submit requests, nobody wants to check the requests, it's as though nobody wants to do anything... If you put in a request and then lose the fucking thing (say the bird gets knocked out by enemy EW), then to write it off you have to go through seven circles of hell..." wrote the author of the channel Call Sign OSETIN on December 1, 2023.

The Two Majors channel explained exactly what those “seven circles of hell” looked like:

“To write off a UAV, you need:

- 1. An internal investigation*
- 2. An extract from the relevant order*
- 3. An extract from the combat log*
- 4. Statements from the pilots*
- 5. Proof that the weather was normal (I’m serious)*
- 6. Proof that OUR EW systems were not operating at the time*
- 7. A copy of the certificate showing that the person completed a UAV training course.”*

The Russian military is also governed by tables of organization and equipment and by regulations that still have not been adapted to the realities of the war and simply make no provision for certain things at all. Evacuation vehicles, for example, or those same drones. And even when drones eventually do appear in the authorized structure, the allotted numbers bear little relation to the realities of the war.

“The UAVs the Army issues are issued to the UAV company according to the authorized crews and all that military bureaucratic crap. Except the khokhol [a derogatory Russian term for Ukrainians] doesn’t give a fuck about our tables of organization and, treacherously and contemptuously, with no respect whatsoever for the ranks and decorations of our military leaders, has the audacity to HAVE A NUMERICAL ADVANTAGE in small drones and to use several FPVs against a single Russian soldier!”

That was how military volunteer and Reporter Filatov author Andrei Filatov emotionally explained yet another fundraiser, this one for ten million rubles to buy drones for the military, in July 2024.

Third, the army is organized in such a way that when a problem is discovered, a commander’s first concern is not how to solve it but how to protect himself.

Nothing illustrates this more completely than a text published in August 2023 by the late Z author Andrei “Murz” Morozov on his channel They Write to Us from Yanina:

“There’s this volunteer, Lyosha Rodriguez, from the No Pasaran foundation. Since 2014 he has been helping the forces of the Republics [the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk ‘people’s republics’], to a significant extent with his own money, earned through his legal practice.

“When Rodriguez learned that large numbers of older T-72 and T-80 tanks were being pulled out of storage and sent to the troops ‘bald,’ without explosive reactive armor, he arranged to have Kontakt-1 ERA blocks manufactured out in the Kaluga countryside. The troops can get the the plastic explosive that go into the containers. What they can’t get are the containers themselves. Under modern battlefield conditions, the absence of even this kind of reactive armor, designed back in the 1980s, leaves a tank helpless against

even the enemy's most primitive anti-tank weapons, such as standard Soviet RPG-7 HEAT 'carrots' or their Eastern European clones.

"We have to sound the alarm! We have to appeal to the authorities! How can this be happening?' people cried, and Rodriguez did appeal to them. So what came of the parliamentary inquiries?

"July 31.

"I got a call from the military prosecutor's office. The short version of the conversation: they investigated my complaint, the facts were not confirmed. All tanks in the forces are equipped with explosive reactive armor...'

"August 6.

"Tank crews whose units have 'bald' tanks are being made to write explanatory reports. They tell me: Spaniard, what the hell have you started? A bunch of people from the Defense Ministry have descended on us because of some parliamentary inquiry, and we're all getting fucked...'

"And also:

"Got calls today from two brigades and one regiment. Sorry, Lyokha, they say, but officially we replied that we have no 'bald' tanks...'"

Rodriguez's case provides a perfect illustration of how the military system operates. The existence of a problem cannot be acknowledged, because then the people in charge would be punished. It is much easier to report that everything is available and there is no problem. After that, the servicemen themselves will secretly go to a volunteer, behind their commanders' backs, and obtain what they need.

That is exactly how the story above ended. The inspectors themselves told the people they were inspecting that volunteer Rodriguez could help them obtain reactive armor containers. The tank crews then contacted Rodriguez directly and received everything they needed. On paper, however, no volunteer aid had ever arrived, and every tank had already been fully equipped.

"As of August 16, volunteers have identified a total of 170 'bald' tanks in the forces and put them in line to receive ERA. In other words, 170 combat vehicles carrying our tank crews on the battlefield are easy targets for any enemy RPG gunner. And the only people who can do anything about it are volunteers. But on paper... EVERYTHING IS FINE. Because the children of the prosecutors carrying out the inspections will not climb into those 'bald' tanks and ride toward their deaths. And the children of the generals who demanded official confirmation that there were no 'bald' tanks will not end up in the crews of those 'bald' tanks either," Morozov concluded.

As a result, because of both the peculiar military conditions described above and the perfectly ordinary corruption, laziness and excessive bureaucratization of every process, the fighting army has now been supplied primarily by volunteers for the fifth year running.

“In practice, the Russian army resembles the band of Pan Ataman Gritsian Tavrichesky from the film Wedding in Malinovka [a popular 1967 Soviet musical comedy]. Every soldier is essentially self-supplied, from buying his own uniform and boots all the way to radios, drone detectors, night-vision devices and thermal imagers... Generators, shotguns and ammunition for them, EW systems, electrical cable and construction materials are also bought by the servicemen themselves. They also buy cars and motorcycles. Which means they also buy the spare parts and gasoline, not the state. If it weren't for the vehicles bought by volunteers and by the soldiers themselves, the front would simply grind to a halt,” the Roi-TV- Maxim Kalashnikov channel quoted a Russian soldier fighting in the war as saying in June 2025.

Civilians acting on their own initiative have effectively replaced the General Staff and the Defense Ministry, taking over functions the official institutions have failed to perform. Vladimir Putin has repeatedly thanked Russians who help the front, but there is no evidence that he understands the scale of that help, and therefore the scale of the supply problem.

“The volunteer movement was born and took shape without any help from the state. Quite often, to be honest, against the wishes of individual officials. Including those who foamed at the mouth insisting that ‘the army has everything’ and that volunteers only get in the way.

“And for three years volunteers and enthusiasts have been taking everything from food to equipment to the front, inventing EW systems and drone detectors, building drones and fiber-optic FPVs, assembling first-aid kits and making casualty evacuation carts, building robotic combat platforms, providing medical care, carrying letters, teaching tactical medicine. All paid for with money raised from the public,” VGTRK employee and Z author Andrei Medvedev wrote in September 2025.

That same month, the author of the channel Doctors, You Are Not Alone expressed the same idea from the perspective of someone who had *“organized a large-scale volunteer movement that was forced to supply the front with 220,000 (!) first-aid kits. Not counting medical backpacks, evacuation carts and individual consumables”*: *“Some volunteers have ceased to be volunteers in any meaningful sense, because they are no longer patching holes. They have been forced to create an entire parallel system for supplying the army, funded by public donations. They were forced to grow to that scale.”*

One might think that work so obviously useful to the “common victory” would receive nothing but support from both the state and the military. It does not. The state has already made several attempts to bring the volunteer movement under its control, while

the army, in the person of officers who are “financially accountable” for equipment, fiercely resists the volunteers and obstructs their work.

In May 2025, State Duma deputies proposed banning transfers of money to citizens’ personal bank cards under the pretext of charitable fundraising. The proposal was put forward by Olga Zanko, deputy chair of the Duma Committee on the Development of Civil Society and Public and Religious Associations. *“It is very difficult to determine what proportion of the money raised actually went to providing assistance,”* the newspaper Izvestia quoted Zanko as saying.

The deputies’ idea was to impose order and formal regulations on volunteer activity: instead of using personal bank cards, volunteers should establish charitable foundations and collect donations into dedicated accounts.

Predictably, the idea caused a genuine scandal and a wave of outrage among the volunteers. First and foremost because, as it turned out, registering a charitable foundation whose purpose was to help the front was virtually impossible.

“The Justice Ministry will not register a charitable foundation if it officially declares that it helps the army. They will find any pretext to refuse, but the real reason is: ‘the army has everything,’” military volunteer Romanov wrote on his Romanov Light channel. The author of Doctors, You Are Not Alone confirmed the same thing: *“The Justice Ministry is extremely reluctant to register nonprofit organizations whose charters specify assistance to the army. I personally tried twice to register such an organization. Then a lawyer tried. They told me directly: ‘Well, you understand, the army has everything.’ Those were the exact words. I heard them myself. This isn’t hearsay.”*

Presumably, if necessary, the deputies could have reached an understanding with the Justice Ministry. But even then their initiative would have run into the main problem: “the army has everything,” according to the military itself. Or, more precisely, according to those same officers who are financially accountable for equipment and have absolutely no desire to be reprimanded because something turned out not to be available.

“Does Olga Zanko know that it is now common practice for commanders to report up the chain that they have everything and need nothing, and that if the guys somewhere reveal the name of their unit, those guys will most likely be sent to an assault unit with a one-way ticket?”

“Well, then let’s expose all the dirty laundry. Let’s write that Regiment XXX has fuck-all, that Commander [full name] is an asshole who gets his men killed for asking for humanitarian aid. Or that in such-and-such sector FPV drones burned seven vehicles in one week, there were X dead, and out of X number of guys there are now X number of legs, X number of arms and X number of eyes left. Then let’s tell the truth. Or let’s say that out of X men who asked for help over the course of a month, only X are still alive. And here

is how much the guys chipped in from their own salaries because the volunteers couldn't cover it and the wounded still have to be transported somehow.

"Well, if we're going to start telling the truth and lifting the veil, let's go all the way," volunteer Roman Saponkov replied to the deputy.

His words are confirmed by another volunteer, the author of Romanov Light:

"Most of the volunteers I know who deliver aid directly to the fighters, rather than handing it over to senior commanders 'for resale,' have to hide exactly which unit the aid is going to. Otherwise their superiors immediately find them and start retaliating against them for turning to volunteers. It's completely f...ked, of course."

Commanders' unwillingness to acknowledge that a problem exists has been, and remains, one of the insurmountable difficulties facing pro-war volunteers. They write about it constantly. In April 2025, the million-subscriber channel Two Majors explained to its readers why many of its fundraisers do not identify the specific units they are helping:

"And the fucking reason we don't name all of them is the same as ever: 'the front has everything!' Very often, thank God not always, the moment the guys so much as name their division, which is a huge formation with thousands of soldiers, their own commanders start fucking with them, threatening them with charges of 'discrediting' the military, which is nonsense, or with being 'sent to the assault troops.'"

In addition, some commanders, and judging by Z-channel posts there are quite a few of them, simply steal aid delivered by volunteers and then resell it. Colonel Puzik, mentioned in an earlier chapter, was among those accused of doing exactly this.

Writing about cases like these, Komsomolskaya Pravda journalist Dmitry Steshin, who runs the Russian Tarantas channel, recounted a conversation he had with a serviceman:

"What do you expect from them? It's been like this in every war. Salaries are low in peacetime, so you have to make some money (steal it, correspondent's note) while you can, for a home, for the future, for the kids.

"Do you understand that a huge number of people have been killed because of this? Do you understand that you can lose even a regional conflict this way?"

"No, you're the one who doesn't understand. Salaries are low in peacetime, so you have to make money while there's a war. It's normal, it's always been like that, and so on and so forth. Abyrvalg! Abyrvalg!" [Abyrvalg is a nonsense word from Mikhail Bulgakov's *Heart of a Dog*.]

Naturally, the volunteer movement cannot exist without money. Aid for the front is purchased through grassroots crowdfunding, or what are known as "urgent fundraisers."

The people who organize them are sometimes referred to contemptuously as “urgent-fundraisers.”

Every day, Z channels that support the front publish detailed appeals to raise money for one piece of equipment or another that the military needs. The posts tend to look much the same. Sometimes they are simply dry lists of required items followed by the amount to be raised, but more often the authors appeal to emotion: our boys are over there, and nobody but you and us is going to help them.

This, for example, was how Archangel Spetsnaz, a channel with more than a million subscribers, appealed for donations to the front in June 2025:

“Dear subscribers, we all understand that prices are rising and that many of you are tired of these fundraisers. A lot of people unsubscribe because of them. But for the guys who are in position every single day, things aren’t getting better, they’re getting worse. A lot of people have become indifferent to the SVO. Some just walk past, some don’t want to part with their money, some have their own problems! But we, and the men who are over there, are asking you not to walk past. We can barely raise enough for drones...”

The fundraising system is opaque, and there are no reliable figures for exactly how much pro-war volunteers have managed to collect for the front over four years of war. But it is clear that the total runs into billions of rubles.

Large channels raise millions. Smaller channels raise hundreds or tens of thousands, depending on what they are trying to buy. Given the sums involved, there are countless rumors about the “urgent-fundraisers,” and accusations against them are common, above all accusations of fraud. Television host Vladimir Solovyov loudly and regularly accuses volunteers of exactly that, while ordinary people quite reasonably suspect that not all of the money reaches the front.

But even volunteers who cannot be called fraudsters are certainly “beneficiaries” of the war. Roman Saponkov, whom I mentioned above, sold gray-market Starlink terminals to Russian troops “in the SVO zone,” and subscribers also paid their monthly fees through him. Given the number and price of the terminals, it was presumably a substantial business.

By the fifth year of the war, Z authors say, official military supply has improved somewhat. Even so, the army remains dependent on deliveries from volunteers, not least because of the military’s apparently indestructible bureaucracy. In July 2025, Two Majors wrote:

“The supply of front-line units, not to be confused with rear-area warehouses, with vehicles and equipment, radios, drones, electronic warfare systems and other essential items still depends to a large extent on public support and the work of volunteers. By the fourth year of the war, an adequate system still has not been created for requesting and supplying replacements even for drones expended in combat, although the Defense

Ministry appears to have enough money. Logistics services simply cannot process requests fast enough and deliver equipment quickly to the units that need it most."

In the previous chapter I wrote about the concept of "two Russias," the "Russia at war" and the "sleeping Russia," and about the fact that the overwhelming majority of Russians neither support the war nor take any interest in it.

After reading a chapter about the volunteer movement, a reader might wonder: does this mean that a group of concerned citizens has been carrying the war on its shoulders for years, and paying for it out of its own pocket? Does that make this a people's war? The temptation to draw that conclusion is strong, but the conclusion is wrong. The volunteers themselves are the first to say so. In their posts, they write that what they encounter above all is indifference and that only a small number of enthusiasts help them. The most effective indicator of the true level of support is the trajectory of those same "urgent fundraisers," which have been declining for three years running, without exception, for every volunteer.

"The point is that after two and a half years of war, the people helping are mostly the same people who were helping one and two years ago. There is no influx of new people willing to support the army with their own rubles," volunteer Alexei Zhivov wrote in May 2024.

On the anniversary of the invasion, February 24, 2026, another volunteer, the author of Call Sign OSETIN, wrote exactly the same thing:

"Friends, it's the same people helping every time, which is why the fundraiser isn't moving. I know you're sick of me, but please understand me too. I'm not asking for myself. I'm embarrassed to keep asking, but the men are waiting for help. Things are very hard there right now (we mostly help the Zaporizhzhia sector and sometimes the Kherson sector), so let's try to dig a little deeper, even if it's just a hundred rubles at a time."

Yes, one part of Russian society really did mobilize itself in pursuit of victory in the war. But, as the past several years have shown, that group turned out to be a marginal part of society. There is also every reason to believe that while the authorities and security services tolerate the volunteers today, the situation could change radically once the war is over.

To conclude this chapter, I want to point to a paradox of Putin's Russia, where any form of independent civic activity arouses, at the very least, suspicion among those in charge. The point is that the volunteer movement is genuine **civil society** operating inside an authoritarian system. Literally the textbook definition. Civil society is a network of voluntary associations or nongovernmental organizations that are separate from the institutions of state power but subject to the rule of law. Existing within the state but outside its institutions, civil society constitutes a private sphere that serves the public good.

Over the course of more than four years, an effective civil society has formed around Putin's war, leaving aside for the moment the moral judgment of what it does. And it is effective not on paper but in reality. We can also leave aside the endless crooks who have made fortunes out of "volunteering" and bought themselves apartments and cars. If there were too many of them, there would be neither drones nor Bukhanka vans [UAZ "Loaf" vans] at the front.

The volunteers have established direct links with factories in China and an almost uninterrupted supply chain delivering everything the troops need straight to the line of contact, from drones to spools of fiber-optic cable and radios.

This is a civil society that knows perfectly well what is actually happening inside both the army and the state. More than that, it is a civil society with a very clear internal ideology and a genuinely grassroots patriotism. When people repeatedly risk their lives driving to the front line, knowing that at any moment their vehicle could be hit by either a "bird" [drone] or a shell, that really is grassroots patriotism rather than the state-issued variety. It is a civil society that understands military requirements and knows how to meet them in fields ranging from communications and weapons to protection.

And all of this, it seems to me, forms a remarkably precise picture, one that tells us less about the state of the army than about the fundamental workings of Putin's state. There is a problem: the army was not ready for the war and is unlikely to be able to fight it without the volunteers. But the existence of that problem cannot be acknowledged. First, Vladimir Putin personally said that "everything is available." Second, there is a very high probability that considerable amounts of state money were allocated to provide that very "everything." And if all that "everything" has somehow disappeared, someone would have to find out where it went. Then people would have to be sent to prison, so many of them that you would never finish jailing them all.

But the war still has to be fought, doesn't it? And since it is impossible to fix the army's supply system without mass purges, anti-corruption investigations and a fundamental reform of the military, the only remaining option is to tolerate the work of the volunteers. At least, I am convinced, that is how the officials at the Defense Ministry who are responsible for these matters and understand the situation reason.

This, it seems to me, also explains why after four full years of war there still have been no mass repressions against the authors of Z channels who allow themselves to write extraordinarily candid things. They criticize the General Staff, point out mistakes, expose abuses and try to tell Russian society the truth. Yes, the truth as they understand it, but nevertheless a version of reality far more accurate than the reports broadcast by Channel One.

At this stage, the Russian state needs the volunteers. For that reason, for now, it is prepared to turn a blind eye to a certain amount of independent thinking and to "abuses of freedom of speech." But the key words are **for now**. This is an alliance of convenience,

and a temporary one, which exists only for as long as the war continues. The Z community understands that perfectly well.

“If we call things by their proper names, pro-war volunteers are a threat to the state. These are self-starting, independent people with funding beyond the state’s control, a high level of information and a broad range of operational capabilities, exceeding those of some specialist operatives. And they act entirely at their own discretion. This is a very serious threat, and it will be dealt with. But later, after the war, and only with those who survive. At the ‘we never sent you there’ stage,” the author of Romanov Light wrote in May 2025.

And there is really nothing to argue with here. If we set aside the military aspect, the present volunteer movement most closely resembles Navalny’s regional headquarters, which were likewise built on horizontal connections spanning the entire country. They had a clear political objective and ideologically motivated people willing to work for free in pursuit of a common goal. As we know, Russia’s security services destroyed that structure root and branch, and did so with particular brutality. There is a high probability that the pro-war volunteer movement will eventually meet the same fate.

This, too, is one of the important characteristics of Putin’s system. Alexei Chadayev, head of the Ushkuynik drone center and a Z author, described it most precisely on his Telegram channel:

“Any form of mobilization, even one that is formally ultra-loyalist, carries potential risks, and the system tries in every possible way to avoid it.”