



# Putin's Patriotic Agenda at War

Guns, God, Sport, and Roubles

Pär Gustafsson Kurki

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Bild/Cover: TT-bildbank, Ria Novosti / Sputnik , 16.04.2024 Cadets of the "Voin" Military-Patriotic Sports Centre take part in a military and sports training in Volgograd region. Kirill Braga / Sputnik

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## Summary

THE REPORT examines the Russian independent ethnographer Alexandra Arkhipova's metaphor concerning Putin's patriotic agenda. Arkhipova suggests that Putin aims to achieve "patriotic stasis," where a set of predefined values remains unchanged. To pursue this goal, the Russian state has created a number of lavishly funded patriotic programmes. The research question is: To what extent is Arkhipova's metaphor mirrored in existing patriotic programmes, such as the Military-patriotic Sports Centre (MPSC) and Time of Heroes (ToH) educational and mentorship programmes? To address this question, the report provides a detailed examination of the selected programmes, MPSC and ToH. The author argues that these initiatives function as nodes within a regime network that encompasses people, interests, and values. However, there are deviations from Arkhipova's metaphor. Perhaps the most significant of these deviations can be termed a patriotic paradox. The paradox of public patriotism in Russia is that, while the goal is a static society – Arkhipova's patriotic stasis – the condition deemed most beneficial to achieving it is one of turbulent wartime change.

Keywords: Patriotism; Putin's regime; Russia; Military-patriotic Sports Centre; Time of Heroes.

## Sammanfattning

RAPPORTEN UNDERSÖKER den ryska oberoende etnografen Alexandra Arkhipovas metafor om Putins patriotiska agenda, vars mål hon beskriver som "patriotisk stasis," där en fast uppsättning värderingar förblir oförändrade. För att uppnå detta finansierar den ryska staten olika patriotiska program. Forskningsfrågan utforskar i vilken utsträckning Arkhipovas metafor återspeglas i befintliga patriotiska initiativ, såsom det militär-patriotiska sportcentret (i engelskspråkig förkortning, MPSC) och utbildnings- och mentorsprogrammet Hjältarnas tid (i engelskspråkig förkortning, ToH). Rapporten beskriver dessa program i detalj och argumenterar för att de fungerar som noder inom ett regimnätverk av människor, intressen och värderingar. En central motsägelse, eller "patriotisk paradox," framträder: medan målet är ett statiskt samhälle där värderingarna förblir oförändrade — Arkhipovas "patriotiska stasis" — strävar staten efter detta mål genom krigstida förhållanden som i sig är turbulenta.

Nyckelord: Hjältarnas tid; Patriotism; Putins regim; Ryssland; Militär-patriotiska sportcentret.

## Acknowledgements

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In the report, I used the AI tools DeepL and ChatGPT to translate brief passages of Russian text. I believe it is fair to say that these AI apps have served as a force multiplier in my work, without replacing my own language skills.

I used the Library of Congress system for transcribing Cyrillic letters and the Oxford Reference System, both in slightly adapted forms.

The PDF version has active hyperlinks in the footnotes and bibliography.

Pär Gustafsson Kurki  
Stockholm, Sweden, 7 November 2024.



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## List of organisations

DOSAAF – The Voluntary Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation, and Navy	The largest and oldest military-patriotic organisation in the Russian Federation. It was founded in 1927 during the Soviet era.
FSB – The Federal Security Service	The domestic security service in the Russian Federation, which is the main inheritor of the Soviet era KGB's legacy.
MPSC – The Military-patriotic Sports Centre	A patriotic organisation founded in 2023 based on the ideas of Sergei Kirienko and Yurii Trutnev; supported by Vladimir Putin (also see list of people, below).
RSBI – The Russian Union of Martial Arts	A Kremlin-affiliated sports federation founded in 2005 that brings together martial artists in Russia.
<i>Soiuz</i>	A military volunteer unit within the RSBI; Ramil Gabbasov (see the list of people, below) was its assistant commander for some time.
ToH – The Time of Heroes	A two-year educational and mentorship programme for ex-combatants from Russia's war against Ukraine; an attempt by the Putin regime to cultivate a patriotic elite.
Warrior (or in Russian, <i>Voin</i> )	The semi-informal name of the Military-patriotic Sports Centre.

## Key people

The following are the key individuals mentioned in the report.

Gabbasov, Ramil	Executive Director of the Russian Union of Martial Arts; assistant commander of the military volunteer company, "Soiuz."
Kazarezov, Igor	Managing Director of the Military-patriotic Sports Centre
Kirienko, Sergei	First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration; co-chairman of the Russian Union of Martial Arts.
Kliuchko, Andrei	Putin's trusted representative; the Military-patriotic Sports Centre's regional branch in Pskov.
Martynov, Danil	Member of the Presidium of the Russian Union of Martial Arts.
Putin, Vladimir	President of the Russian Federation.
Shevchenko, Dmitrii	Assistant to the Managing Director of the Military-patriotic Sports Centre.
Stepyko, Dmitrii	Director of Studies at the Military-patriotic Sports Centre.
Trutnev, Yurii	Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation and Plenipotentiary Representative of the President of the Russian Federation in the Far Eastern Federal District; co-chairman of the Russian Union of Martial Arts.
Vodolatskii, Vladimir	Chair of the Military-patriotic Sports Centre's management.

# 1. Introduction: Arkhipova's metaphor

THE METAPHOR “frozen like a fly in amber” is used by the Russian independent ethnographer Aleksandra Arkhipova, whom the Russian authorities label a foreign agent, to represent Vladimir Putin's patriotic vision for Russia. In a 2024 Telegram post, she describes how Putin has become increasingly millenarian and apocalyptic in recent years, thinking that the world is being destroyed by dark forces and that there is something that must be saved by the actions of special leaders (like himself). In other words, his vision of a Russia protected in “patriotic isolation” from the rest of the decaying world is of a country “frozen like a fly in amber.” Putin's patriotic vision, according to Arkhipova, is based on Soviet values from the Brezhnev period and the Orthodox Rus, which explains why he wants to bring back Soviet-style youth organisations as well as send youth to attend Orthodox church services.<sup>1</sup> His overt purpose is to create a patriotic stasis of the “correct” traditional and spiritual values that will never change or transform into something else. The vision is of a Russia forever preserved in its presumed pristine beauty.

I have chosen Arkhipova's metaphor because I believe it is a fruitful starting point for an empirically informed discussion of the programmes comprising Putin's patriotic agenda. To transform Russia into a country of patriots, the current regime has created a number of patriotic programmes, often with a military aspect. We should not assume that Arkhipova's metaphor is an accurate description of reality. Therefore, the principal research question I address in this report (and explained in more detail below) is:

To what extent is Arkhipova's metaphor mirrored in existing patriotic programmes?

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1 Aleksandra Arkhipova, “Mukha v iantare: osobennosti rossiiskogo patriotizma,” Telegram Channel (Ne)zanimatelnaia antropologiya, 11 April 2024, accessed 10 June 2024, Telegram: Contact @anthro\_fun. RBK – Obshchestvo, “Putin predlozhil podumat o ‘pionerakh’ v nazvanii detskogo dvizheniya,” rbc.ru, 19 April 2023, accessed 14 May 2024, Путин предложил подумать о «пионерах» в названии детского движения — РБК (rbc.ru). The Movement of the First is essentially the same as the Soviet Pioneer Movement. See Dvizhenie pervykh, accessed 5 August 2024, Движение Первых (xn--90acagbhgpca7c8c7f.xn--p1ai).

In the purpose of delimitation, I examine two cases of patriotic programmes:

1. The Military-patriotic Sports Centres (MPSC); and
2. The Time of Heroes (ToH) educational and mentorship programme.

Why have I selected the above-mentioned programmes? I believe that the MPSC is in many ways a case in point of the recent surge in the patriotic agenda and represents measures aimed broadly at the preparation of Russia's youth for military service (and keeping the slightly older reservists' skills up to date). ToH is more selective and aims to create a new patriotic managerial cadre based on ex-combatants from the so-called Special Military Operation in Ukraine. Such people supposedly had their loyalty tested in battle. Both programmes were created since 2023, and the data surveyed in this report stems from the years 2023 and 2024.

## 1.1 What is Russian patriotism?

Patriotism is both an empirical phenomenon and a theoretical concept. Scholars of patriotism classically distinguish between constructive patriotism and so-called blind patriotism. The former is an expression of benign patriotism, where one expresses one's own views even when they go against the official narratives.<sup>2</sup> The latter is more closely linked to concepts such as nationalism and militarism. The majority of studies on Russian patriotism are qualitative case studies. There have been very few cross-national comparative studies on Russian patriotism, though some exceptions exist. In a rigorous cross-national comparative attitudinal survey study, Michael Alexeev and William Pyle conclude that, in fact, what distinguishes Russians from other populations is their "starkly blind and militant patriotism."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, they add, this did not begin with Putin's top-down patriotic agenda after the year 2000 but is also evident in survey data from the 1990s. Finally, blind and militant patriotism is not limited to the older generations.<sup>4</sup>

Jade McGlynn examines the role of "historical framing" in the transformation of events in Ukraine 2014 (when Russia illegally annexed Crimea and fuelled the war in Eastern Ukraine) "from a question of political position to one of national belonging." She concludes that "correct remembering" of the past equals loyalty to

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2 See, e.g., Anna Georgievna Sanina (2016) "Patriotizm i patrioticheskoe vospitanie v sovremennoi Rossii," *Sotsiologicheskoe issledovaniia* 5; Michael Alexeev and William Pyle (2023) "A blind and militant attachment: Russian patriotism in comparative perspective," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39, no. 5, 324–325.

3 Michael Alexeev and William Pyle (2023) "A blind and militant attachment: Russian patriotism in comparative perspective," 324.

4 Ibid, 324–325.

Russian state policy. Insightfully, she argues that while state media did not inspire the audience to emulate the heroism of the Great Patriotic War, it did create the impression “that many other people were performing their patriotism within [such a context].”<sup>5</sup> This suggests a gap between what Russians believe others are doing as patriots and what they themselves are actually doing.

According to a focus-group study by J. Paul Goode, Russians “compartmentalise” their patriotic preferences rather than falsify them. He argues that “individual and group identities are established simultaneously in relation to official patriotic tropes and idioms, but private patriotism is personal, apolitical, and lacking a competing political project.”<sup>6</sup> Goode also describes that Russians tend to state, often mechanically, that patriotism is “love for the Motherland” (*liubov k rodine*) but, interestingly, find it difficult to concretise what this actually means. *How* shall one love the Motherland as a patriot? *What* should one do to be a patriot?<sup>7</sup> It appears that the Russian state has also identified this as a problem. On the website Russian Patriot, *Rospatriot* (a programme by the government agency Russian Youth, *Rosmolodezh*<sup>8</sup>), Vladimir Putin is quoted:

Every year more and more citizens perceive patriotism not just as love for the Motherland, but as direct actions for the benefit of their country.<sup>9</sup>

However, we should not take the regime's hopes at face value. In fact, the aim of this report is, in part, to assess how successful two specific patriotic programmes are, or could be, in fostering patriotic sentiments and actions. I conclude the report with a discussion of this.

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5 All quotes in this paragraph from Jade McGlynn, “Historical framing of the Ukraine crisis through the Great Patriotic War: Performativity, cultural consciousness and shared remembering,” *Memory Studies* 13, no. 6, 1074.

6 J. Paul Goode, “Humming along: Public and private patriotism in Putin's Russia,” in *Everyday Nationhood: Theorising Culture, Identity and Belonging after Banal Nationalism*, eds. Michael Skey and Marco Antonisch (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2017), 124.

7 Ibid, 127, 137.

8 Russian youth (government agency), official website, Росмолодёжь (fadm.gov.ru), accessed 16 August 2024.

9 Vladimir Putin, *Rospatriot*, accessed 5 August 2024, Проект «Патриотическое воспитание» - Роспатриот (rospatriotcentr.ru).

## 1.2 Research questions

The principal research question that I address in this report is:

To what extent is Arkhipova's metaphor (as described above) mirrored in existing patriotic programmes, such as the MPSC and ToH?

I use a number of guiding research questions to support the investigation of the main question about Arkhipova's metaphor. They are:

1. How much has been invested in the internal patriotic propaganda in Russia during the Putin era?
2. How unique is Russia's patriotic policy in an international context?
3. What is the MPSC, and what are its branches and their functions?
4. Who are the key figures behind the MPSC?
5. What connections do they have to the regime?
6. Is there a link between the RSBI and the MPSC?

RSBI is the Russian abbreviation of the Russian Union of Martial Arts. See also the list of organisations at the beginning of the report. Questions 1–6 pertain to Case One, which focuses on the MPSC. Case Two, concerning the ToH, is also detailed, though less extensively than Case One, partly because it was initiated in spring 2024, while work on this report was still underway:

1. What is the ToH?
2. What is the composition of the External Advisory Board?
3. Who are the members of the first cohort of students?
4. What are the plans for expansion?

## 1.3 Methodology

In this report, I have gathered data on two cases of patriotic programmes in Russia from 2023 to 2024. As a result, I describe and compare the cases and discuss them in the light of Arkhipova's metaphor about Putin's patriotic vision for Russia.

The first case concerns the MPSC in Moscow with branches in 21 regions. I selected the MPSC as a case for several reasons: it exemplifies current patriotic programmes, it is recent (founded in 2023), it targets teenagers and adults (ages 14 to 35, covering the age bracket following the Movement of the First, 6 to 18-year-olds), and it has extensive geographical coverage, with branches across many Russian regions.

The second case is the Time of Heroes (ToH; *Vremia geroev*) educational and mentorship programme. This programme is aimed at the top graduates, so to speak, of the current war against Ukraine. Ex-combatants can apply for a mentoring programme that is supposed to lead to key roles in state enterprises and the civil service. The overt purpose is to create a new class of patriotic managers, a new elite. It is also a way for the Russian authorities to say to those who sign up as contract soldiers that there are attractive pay-offs after the war in the form of a prestigious career.

Russian state media and official sources of information almost unanimously claim that "everything is great." This proclivity toward public optimism is typical of authoritarian regimes with a lack of critical investigative journalism. In fact, some news stories are repeated ad nauseam, sometimes even verbatim, across multiple news sites. Although this introduces a bias in the report, it is unlikely that the facts and figures are entirely false. However, it is crucial to carefully consider their interpretation, as one should not accept the state propagandists' interpretations at face value.

## 1.4 Structure of the report

Chapter 2, titled "The scope of Putin's patriotic agenda," offers a point of entry to the report's topic by presenting quantitative data on the increase in investments in patriotic education during the Putin era from 2000 to 2020. A comparative content analysis of patriotic policy documents from the United States, China, and Russia reveals that Russia stands out in its emphasis on basic military training as part of its patriotic agenda.

Chapter 3, "Case One: The 'Warrior' Military-patriotic Sports Centre for Russia's youth," examines the MPSC in detail and argues that it should be viewed as a node in a network of people, interests, and values rather than a separate



phenomenon. According to its legal status, the MPSC is an “autonomous” entity, but the chapter demonstrates that it is anything but separate from the Russian state.

Chapter 4, “Case Two: The ‘Time of Heroes’ (ToH) educational and mentorship programme,” examines the birth of the programme and its first cohort of students, ex-combatants from the war against Ukraine. In particular, it maps the External Advisory Board and discusses its composition and meaning.

Chapter 5, “Concluding remarks,” discusses the results of the previous chapters and in specifically addresses the principal research questions. The two patriotic programmes examined in the report exhibit both similarities and differences in relation to Arkhipova’s metaphor.

## 2. The scope of Putin's patriotic agenda

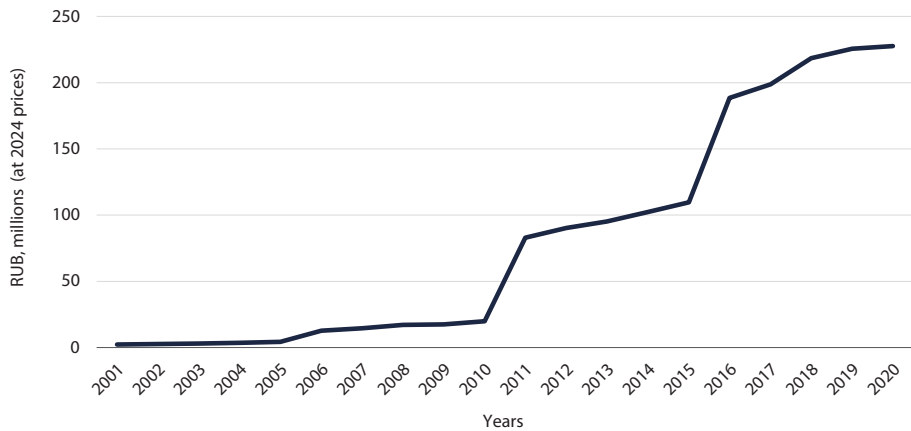
ESSENTIALLY, PATRIOTIC programmes are about propaganda directed at the population of one's own country. In brief, the Russian propaganda landscape is like a kitchen cupboard; all ingredients are available through media to pick and choose from, which lends a degree of agency to the individual, who can mix their own military-patriotic cocktail.<sup>10</sup> However, the patriotic programmes are also institutions that an increasing number of people must pass through or at least have some contact with in order to live normal lives in Russia. Therefore, there is a considerable potential for coercion, despite a voluntary aspect. The space for independently formed opinions is diminishing in Russia. Independent thought will increasingly be confined to the private sphere of a few trusted friends, and many may turn inwards and remain silent about their genuine opinions, views, and ideas.

How much has Russia invested in the aforementioned internal patriotic propaganda during the Putin period? How unique is the patriotic policy in Russia from an international perspective?

The figure on the following page provides an easy answer to the first question.

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<sup>10</sup> This way of describing the Russian propaganda landscape was probably first used by Samuel Greene (on Twitter), which I mention in my report *Apostles of violence: The Russian Orthodox Church's role in Russian militarism*, from 2024. See Pär Gustafsson Kurki, *Apostles of violence: The Russian Orthodox Church's role in Russian militarism* (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency – FOI, FOI-R--5514--SE, February 2024).

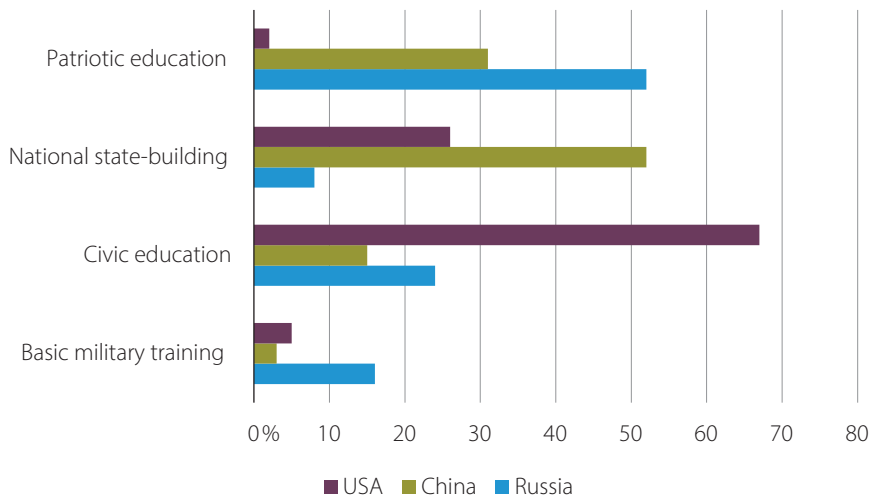


**Figure 1** Investments in State Patriotic Programs (mln roubles)

**Remark** The investment data has been adjusted using the GDP deflator from the International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook Database of April 2024.

**Source:** Data compiled by the author from J. Paul Goode, "Everyday patriotism and Putin's foreign policy," PONARS Memo No. 432, accessed 6 August 2024, [Pepm432\\_Goode\\_July2016\(2\)\\_2.pdf](#) ([ponarseurasia.org](#)); The investment data has been adjusted using the GDP deflator from the International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook Database of April 2024.

Figure 1 shows that the investment rate in the patriotic programmes has increased dramatically between 2001 and 2020, with an almost threefold increase since the state patriotic programme of 2016–2020.



**Figure 2** Summary table of content analysis of patriotic policy documents from the United States, China, and Russia (percent)

**Source:** Anna Georgievna, Sanina, "Patriotizm i patrioticheskoe vospitanie v sovremennoi Rossii," *Sotsiologicheskoe issledovaniia*, 5, (2016): 44–53.

Figure 2 (above) is from a study that analysed the content of patriotic policy documents in the United States, China, and Russia.<sup>11</sup> The study coded the content and divided it into four main categories. The figure shows the percentage of each category that dominated in the patriotic policy documents of each country.

It is remarkable that Russia stands out in two parameters: patriotic education and, most notably, basic military training. Therefore, it can be said that Russia's state patriotic agenda is, relative to comparable cases, militarised.

A quick look at the 2010 Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation reveals that "improving pre-draft training and the military-patriotic education of citizens" is one of the goals.<sup>12</sup> The 2014 Military Doctrine, the latest Russian military doctrine available to the public at the time of writing, shares an identical goal. It is reasonable to assume that a new doctrine should have been published by now. The absence of a new doctrine indicates that it is a difficult task for the Russian side to rewrite it under the current circumstances of the ongoing large-scale war.

11 Russia: Russia – State programme "Patriotic education of citizens of the Russian Federation for 2011 to 2015; Russia – State programme "Patriotic education of citizens of the Russian Federation for 2016 to 2020." China: Action Plan for Patriotic Education (1994); Action Plan for the Development of Civic Morality (2001); Some Opinions on Further Strengthening and Improving the Development of Ideology and Morality among Minors (2004). USA: National Standards for Civics and Government; Anna Georgievna, Sanina, "Patriotizm i patrioticheskoe vospitanie v sovremennoi Rossii," *Sotsiologicheskoe issledovaniia*, 5, (2016): 44–53.

12 Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation – Approved by Russian Federation presidential edict of 5 February 2010."

### 3. Case One: The “Warrior” Military-patriotic Sports Centre for Russia’s youth

IN THIS chapter, I scrutinise the so-called Military-patriotic Sports Centre, the MPSC, also known as *Voin* or Warrior in English, which was launched in May 2023, a full fourteen months following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. At the time of writing, there are 21 regional branches of the MPSC, excluding the Centre in Moscow.<sup>13</sup> See Map 1 for an overview of the geographical coverage.

It is noteworthy that the illegally annexed Ukrainian regions, which the Russians call *Khersonskaia oblast*, *Zaporozhskaia oblast*, Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR), and Lugansk People’s Republic (LNR), have regional branches of the MPSC. By



**Map 1** The MPSC's regional branches in the Russian Federation

**Source:** Per Wikström, FOI.

<sup>13</sup> Belgorodskaya oblast, Khabarovskaya oblast, Respublika Buriatiya, Sverdlovskaya oblast, Respublika Tatarstan, Pskovskaya oblast, Respublika Kalmykiya, Kemerovskaya oblast, IaNAO, Tyumenskaya oblast, Chechenskaya Respublika, Volgogradskaya oblast, Murmanskaya oblast, Chuvashskaya oblast, Sakhalinskaya oblast, Kamchatskiy krai, Respublika Sakha-Iakutiya, DNR, LNR, Khersonskaia oblast, Zaporozhskaia oblast. Military-patriotic Sport Centre, “Regionalnye otdeleniia,” accessed 1 July 2024, Воин | Региональные отделения (crvsp.ru).

December 2023, almost 17,000 people had been trained by the MPSC; the vast majority were youths aged 14 to 18.<sup>14</sup>

I argue that we should view the MPSC and its branches as nodes in a network of people, interests, and values. In fact, the MPSC is a case in point for Russia’s military-patriotic agenda. Put differently, the MPSC is a platform for military training, patriotic education and, thus, for the Russian state’s militaristic propaganda.

To fully understand the MPSC’s significance, its role, and the network context in which it operates, I address the following questions in this chapter:

- What is the MPSC and its branches, and what do they do?
- Who are the people behind the MPSC?
- What ties do they have to the regime?
- Is there a link between the RSBI and the MPSC?

### 3.1 The MPSC’s legal foundation

The MPSC (See Map 1 for an overview of the geographical coverage) is a so-called “autonomous non-commercial organisation” or *Avtonomnaia nekommercheskaia organizatsiia* (ANO) in Russian, but in the course of this study I demonstrate that it is everything but autonomous. Its full name is “Autonomous non-commercial organisation for supplementary professional education ‘Youth Military-patriotic Sports Training Development Centre.’” It is worth noting that, despite its widespread use in Russian media, the name *Voin* (Warrior), appears to hold a semi-official status, as the organisation’s Statutes do not mention it.<sup>15</sup> This is probably explained by the informal proclivities of Russian society, in which informality often trumps formal rules, policies, and statutes. The *Voin* Centre is most likely how the organisation is known to its participants and organisers, while the lengthy formal name is intended for the bureaucratic world of paperwork. In fact, I demonstrate below that it

14 Yevgenii Kuzmichev, “Pochti 17 tysiach chelovek podgotovil Tsentr ‘VOIN’ v 2023 godu,” Rossiiskaia gazeta, 12 December 2023, accessed 8 August 2024, Почти 17 тысяч человек подготовил Центр “ВОИН” в 2023 году - Российская газета (rg.ru).

15 *Avtonomnaia nekommercheskaia organizatsiia dopolnitelnogo professionalnogo obrazovaniia “Tsentre razvitiia voenno-sportivnoi podgotovki i patrioticheskogo vospitaniia molodezhi.”* See: Military-patriotic Sport Centre, “Statutes of the Autonomous non-commercial organisation for supplementary professional education ‘Youth Military-patriotic Sports Training Development Center,’” 20 March 2024, accessed 1 August, 2024, Устав АНО ДПО ЦРВСЦ 01.08.2024.pdf (crvsp.ru).

is only possible to grasp fully the nature of the MPSC if we, as mentioned above, perceive the organisation as a node in a network of people, interests, and values. In other words, the MPSC is part of Vladimir Putin's current state-controlling regime. By "regime," I mean a social network of people, economic interests, and values that is governed by both formal and informal principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures.<sup>16</sup>

## 3.2 The founders and mission of the MPSC

The initiative to create the MPSC came from Sergei Kirienko and Yurii Trutnev, two high-ranking members of the current regime. Sergei Kirienko (First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration) and Yurii Trutnev (Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation and Plenipotentiary Representative of the President of the Russian Federation in the Far Eastern Federal District) are both co-chairmen of the RSBI (see list of organisations). Vladimir Putin, as not only President of Russia but also a well-known judo expert, supported the idea of the MPSC. In September 2022, he instructed that it be established with the objective of bringing up "a new generation of people who love the Motherland and are able to protect it."<sup>17</sup> In short, the goal is to train well-motivated Russian patriots in the use of military arms. The MPSC is aimed at "children and youths" aged 14 to 35 and targets both schoolchildren and students. As a result, it effectively includes adults among its members.

To achieve its stated objective, the MPSC adheres to the state policy of strengthening the "traditional Russian spiritual-moral values and patriotic upbringing of Russian citizens."<sup>18</sup> In other words, although the MPSC's base is sports, its organisers envision links to spirituality and traditional Russian religious associations, such as the Orthodox Church. A clearly stated priority is to prepare youths for military service.<sup>19</sup>

At the time of writing, Igor Kazarezov is the MPSC's managing director.<sup>20</sup>

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16 Encyclopedia Britannica, "Regime," accessed 12 May 2024, Regime | Autocratic, Democratic & Totalitarian | Britannica.

17 Military-patriotic Sports Centre, "Svedeniia ob obrazovatelnoi organizatsii," accessed 2 August 2024, Сведения об образовательной организации | Воин (crvsp.ru); TASS, "Vodolatskii stal predsedatelem pravleniia tsentra 'Voin,'" 1 September 2024, accessed 12 May 2024, Водолацкий стал председателем правления центра "Воин" (tass.ru).

18 Military-patriotic Sports Centre, "Svedeniia ob obrazovatelnoi organizatsii."

19 Ibid.

20 Military-patriotic Sports Centre, "Rukovodstvo," accessed 1 June 2024, Руководство | Воин (crvsp.ru).

### 3.3 The MPSC as the RSBI’s younger sibling

The MPSC’s 21 regional branches emerged fast, but did not emerge out of thin air. In fact, some of the key organisational resources of the Russian Union of Martial Arts, *Rossiiskii soiuz boievyykh iskusstv* or RSBI, closely mirror the MPSC, which can be seen as the younger sibling of the two. The reason is simple: the initiative to create the MPSC originated from two RSBI leaders, Sergei Kirienko and Yurii Trutnev. The RSBI was created in 2005 as a response to the growing athletic and social importance of martial arts in post-Soviet Russia. Currently, it has a presence in 82 regions (of Russia’s 84, not counting the five illegally annexed Ukrainian regions). The two co-chairmen, Sergei Kirienko and Yurii Trutnev, highlight the close connection of the RSBI to the Kremlin.<sup>21</sup> The Presidium of the RSBI (as of June 2024, listed in the same order as on the RSBI website) consists of:

**Yurii Trutnev**, co-chairman, 7 Dan, Kyoshinkai karate;

**Sergei Kirienko**, co-chairman, 6 Dan, Aikido Aikikai;

**Aleksei Shturmin**, merited coach, 9 Dan, karate;

**Gleb Muzrukov**, merited coach, President of the Wushu Federation of Russian Federation, 8 Duan, Wushu;

**Danil Martynov**, Adviser to the Minister of Emergency Situations;

**Ramil Gabbasov**, Executive Director, 5 Dan, Kyoshinkai karate.

To unpack the Presidium’s clout within the current Russian regime, I have further analysed the backgrounds of its members. The most obvious informal link among them is martial arts, connecting to the well-known fact that President Putin enjoys sports and practices judo.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Trutnev and Kirienko, as mentioned above, hold well-advertised positions within or near the highest echelons of power. But what about the others? What signs of being well-integrated into the regime do they display?

Being the recipient of state awards is a sign of status and acknowledgement of one’s work. In other words, it signifies close links to the regime. Aleksei Shturmin

21 The Russian Union of Martial Arts, accessed 28 July 2024, РОССИЙСКИЙ СОЮЗ БОЕВЫХ ИСКУССТВ (rsbi.ru).

22 He is Master of Sports in Judo and Sambo (a Russian system of self-defence). He has also received honorary titles, such as 9 Dan in Taekwondo, and a Ph.D. in Judo awarded by a South Korean university. TASS, “Vladimiru Putinu prisvoen vosmoi dan po karate,” 21 November 2014, accessed 1 August 2024, Владимиру Путину присвоен восьмой дан по каратэ - ТАСС (tass.ru).



received the Order of Honour (*Orden Pocheta*) in 2011, which the regime considers a noble recognition of his high achievements.<sup>23</sup> In 2013, Gleb Muzrukov was awarded the Order “For Merit to the Fatherland” (*Za zaslugi pered otechestvom*).<sup>24</sup> This is the data available on Shturmin and Muzrukov. Being the recipient of state awards is one sign of close links to the regime; there are other, even more prominent signs.

Danil Martynov is a clear-cut *silovik* (i.e., member of the ruling class of “strong-men”) as he graduated from the Golitsyn Border Institute of the Federal Security Service<sup>25</sup> outside Moscow and is a former member of the Federal Security Service, FSB, special unit, Alpha. Martynov is a Master of Sports in hand-to-hand combat. Although not a Chechen, Martynov worked as an aide to the Head of Chechnia, Ramzan Kadyrov, overseeing security matters. Kadyrov reportedly treats him as a close friend. On 1 February 2017, he was appointed Deputy Head of the National Guard Directorate for Chechnia. He has fought in the so-called Special Military Operation in Ukraine.<sup>26</sup> His religious affiliation appears to be Orthodox, since he personally participated in both the ceremony of laying the foundation and opening of a Russian Orthodox Church in the village of Shelkovskaia.<sup>27</sup>

Ramil Gabbasov has been serving as the executive director of RSBI since 2013, having previously held the position of deputy director. Like Martynov, Gabbasov began his military career in the KGB border guards, where he served from 1987 to 1989 in the city of Khabarovsk in the Russian Far East.<sup>28</sup> Gabbasov, as a result, also displays signs of being a *silovik*.

Is there a link between the RSBI and the MPSC? Let us look first at the circumstantial evidence. A journalist at Amur Media recorded a long interview

23 My rodnom iz sambo, “Shturmin, Aleksei Borisovich,” accessed 6 August 2024, Штурмин Алексей Борисович - Мы Родом Из Самбо (izsambo.ru).

24 Dzen – Boievye iskusstva mira, “Gleb Muzrukov – zasluzhennyj trener, doktor nauk i osnovopolozhnik razvitiia ushu v SSSR i Rossii,” accessed 6 August 2024, Глеб Музруков-заслуженный тренер, доктор наук и основоположник развития ушу в СССР и России | БОЕВЫЕ ИСКУССТВА МИРА | Дзен (dzen.ru).

25 See, Golitsynskii pogranchnyi institute Federalnoi sluzhby bezopasnoti, “Spravochnaia informatsiia”: Справочная информация (fsb.ru).

26 Daria Erozbek, “RBK – Byvshego pomoshchnika Kadyrova po silovomu bloku mogut naznachit samministra MChS,” *Kommersant*, 1 June 2022, accessed 6 August 2024, РБК: бывшего помощника Кадырова по силовому блоку могут назначить замминистра МЧС – Коммерсантъ (kommersant.ru); 24Smi, “Danil Martynov – biografiia, lichnaia zhizn, foto, novosti, sovetnik ministra MChS, pomoshchnik Kadyrova,” accessed 6 August 2024, Даниил Мартынов — биография, личная жизнь, фото, новости, советник министра МЧС, помощник Кадырова 2024 - 24СМИ (24smi.org).

27 24Smi, “Danil Martynov – biografiia, lichnaia zhizn, foto, novosti, sovetnik ministra MChS, pomoshchnik Kadyrova.”

28 Federal Press, “Gabbasov, Ramil Gabdraufovich,” accessed 6 August 2024, Габбасов Рамиль Габдрауфович | биография и последние новости (fedpress.ru).

with Gabbasov of the RSBI on 4 April 2024.<sup>29</sup> The YouTube clip shows Gabbasov and the journalist sitting in front of a wall with the text, "WARRIOR. Regional branch of the military-sport preparation centre for the patriotic education of the youth in Khabarovsk krai." Given the scarcity of truly free media in Russia, we can describe the journalist who interviewed Gabbasov as a propagandist. Thus, the context in which he and Gabbasov were positioned can be interpreted as a way for the prestige of the RSBI to rub off on the newly minted military sport centre MPSC. It also gives the impression of unity within the regime.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the interview's purpose seems to have been to support the prevailing official propaganda narrative, in which unity is a key value.<sup>31</sup>

The close links between the two organisations are also evidenced by the press release on the MPSC website on 26 March 2024, which reports that Gabbasov visited the MPSC to discuss further cooperation between the two organisations. The article mentions that the instructors from both organisations "work on similar tasks." Photographs show Gabbasov and MPSC representatives donning camouflage uniforms.<sup>32</sup> The co-chairman of the RSBI, Yurii Trutnev, has also visited the MPSC in person.<sup>33</sup> One source describes the link between the RSBI and the MPSC as one between the creator and the created.<sup>34</sup> None of this is surprising, given that the MPSC is the brainchild of Trutnev and Kirienko with Putin's support.<sup>35</sup>

29 Andrei Shvetsov, "Ramil Gabbasov ob uchastii v SVO, obuchenii u legendy i sekrete razbivaniia lediannykh glyb," YouTube, 3 April 2024, accessed 6 August 2024, *Рамиль Габбасов об участии в СВО, обучении у легенды и секрете разбивания ледяных глыб* (youtube.com).

30 In addition, the RSBI publishes news about the MPSC on their website. See, for instance, The Russian Union of Martial Arts, "Tsentr 'Voin' v 2024 godu rasshiril perechen obuchaiushchikh programm," 6 February 2024, accessed 5 August 2024, Центр «ВОИН» в 2024 году расширил перечень обучающих программ (rsbi.ru).

31 In the interview, the journalist ticked several boxes of the official narrative, e.g., religion, the war against Ukraine (the "Special Military Operation") and the aim to be victorious.

32 Military-patriotic sports centre, "Rukovoditel RSBI posetil Tsentr 'VOIN'," 26 March 2024, accessed 2 June 2024, Руководитель РСБИ посетил Центр «ВОИН» | Воин - Волгоградская область (crvsp.ru).

33 UssurMedia, "Trutnev posetil tsentr 'Voin' i osmotrel uchebno-trenirovochnyi tsentr v Khabarovske," 9 November 2023, accessed 6 August 2024, Трутнев посетил центр "Воин" и осмотрал учебно-тренировочный центр в Хабаровске - UssurMedia.ru.

34 Iakutiia Daily, "Direktor Rossiiskogo soiuza boevikh iskusstv vstretilsia s voynami otriada 'Soiuz-Kaskad,'" 4 February 2024, accessed 6 August 2024, Директор Российского союза боевых искусств встретился с воинами отряда «Союз-Каскад» — Yakutia-daily.ru.

35 The Russian Union of Martial Arts, "Tsentre 'Voin', sozdannyi po initsiative Sopredsedatelei RSBI S.V. Kirienko i Yu.P. Trutneva, zapuskaet letnie patrioticheskie smeny v 11 regionakh," 25 May 2023, accessed 4 August 2024, Центр «Воин», созданный по инициативе Сопредседателей РСБИ С.В. Кириенко и Ю.П. Трутнева, запускает летние патриотические смены в 11 регионах (rsbi.ru).

### 3.4 The MPSC's management

The MPSC was launched on 11 May 2023.<sup>36</sup> Since September 2023, the chair of the MPSC's management team has been a Member of Parliament, Vladimir Vodolatskii (b. 1957). Though not among the most prominent figures in the corridors of power, Vodolatskii is far from being a minor military-political figure. He is the First Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Committee for the Commonwealth of Independent States (and deals with Eurasian Integration and Relations with Compatriots). He is also a Hero of the Lugansk People's Republic and Cossack General. Vodolatskii currently works with development of the system of military-patriotic education and predraft military training of civilians and the strengthening of the military's prestige among the youth. In a press release of 2 September 2023, the MPSC explains that he works with the formation of "patriotic values" and "respect for the cultural, historical and military past of the country." In his role as chair of the MPSC's management team, he focuses on the relations between the MPSC and the Cossack associations with the purpose of sharing expertise to create a new generation of defenders of Russia.<sup>37</sup>

Another sign of Vodolatskii's strong ties to the Russian regime is that, according to available sources, he has received more than twenty awards from the government, societal organisations, and religious institutions. The two most recent awards include being named a Hero of the Lugansk People's Republic (*Geroi Luganskoi Narodnoi Respubliki*, 2022)<sup>38</sup> and receiving the Order of Courage (*Orden Muzhestva*, 2022).<sup>39</sup> Both stem from his involvement as a combatant in the so-called Special Military Operation against Ukraine.

His long-standing religious affiliations are evident through his awards from the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. Of these, I have been able to verify one: the Order of the Venerable Seraphim of Sarov, III degree (*Orden Prepodobnogo Serafima Saravskogo, III stepen*), awarded in 2018.<sup>40</sup> A journalist

36 Oleg Karpov, "Predsedatelem pravleniia Tsentra 'VOIN' naznacheni kazachii general, Geroi LNR Viktor Vodolatskii," *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, 2 September 2023, accessed 5 August 2024, Председателем правления Центра «ВОИН» назначен казачий генерал, Герой ЛНР Виктор Водолацкий - KP.RU.

37 Military-patriotic Sports Centre, "Predsedatelem pravleniia Tsentra 'VOIN' naznacheni kazachii general, Geroi LNR Viktor Vodolatskii," 2 September 2023, accessed 5 August 2024, Председателем правления Центра «ВОИН» назначен казачий генерал, Герой ЛНР Виктор Водолацкий | Воин (crvsp.ru).

38 Bolshaia igra. Chast 3., Geopolitical TV show, 3 October 2022, accessed 6 August 2024, Большая игра. Часть 3. Выпуск от 03.10.2022 (Itv.ru).

39 TASS, "Putin nagradil Vodolatskogo ordenom Muzhestva," 7 October 2022, accessed 5 August 2024, Путин награбил Водолацкого орденом Мужества (tass.ru).

40 KIATs, "Ataman SKVRiZ Viktor Vodolatskii nagrazhden ordenom Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi," 16 February 2018, accessed 6 August 2024, Атаман СКВРiЗ Виктор Водолацкий награжден орденом Русской Православной Церкви - Наиболее важные новости казачества - Новости КИАЦ - Каталог статей (kazak-center.ru).

reporting on the ceremony in the Christ Saviour Cathedral in Moscow, where Vodolatskii received the award, noted that this “is not the first [award] for the Ataman [Vodolatskii] for his great personal contribution to the patriotic and spiritual and moral education of the youth of modern Russia, as well as for his very significant assistance in the restoration of Orthodox churches in the Donbass.”<sup>41</sup>

In the hierarchy of the MPSC, beneath the chair, Vodolatskii, we find the Managing Director and his associates. Compared with the chair’s curriculum vitae and that of the RSBI presidium, the MPSC’s operations are currently managed by a considerably less distinguished team. Furthermore, there appears to have been a significant turnover of Managing Directors since the centre’s inauguration in 2023. At the time of writing, Igor Kazarezov holds the position, succeeding Nikolai Iazynina.

**Igor Kazarezov**, Managing Director.

**Dmitrii Shevchenko**, Deputy Managing Director.

**Dmitrii Stepyko**, Director of studies.

**Svetlana Danilova**, Chief Financial Officer.

**Olga Illarionova**, Human Resources Director.<sup>42</sup>

Kazarezov, just like the chair, Vodolatskii, has roots in the Cossack community and has long experience in military-patriotic work with youth. From 2005 to 2024, he was the director of the Department for Cossack Affairs and Cadet Educational Institutions of the Rostov Region. Before he became the managing director of the MPSC, he was the assistant to the Ataman of the All-Russian Cossack Association. He is a war veteran of the Afghanistan campaign in the 1980s, and on 28 December 1988 was awarded a Diploma of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR “For courage and military valour shown in the performance of international duty in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan” (*Gramotoi Prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR “Za muzhestvo i voinskiu doblest, proiavlennye pri vypolnenii internatsionalnogo dolga v Demokraticheskoi Respublike Afganistan.”*). In recent years, he was awarded a personalised Cossack sabre “For Loyalty and Diligence” by the President of Russia.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Military-patriotic Sports Centre, “Rukovodstvo,” accessed 5 August 2024, Руководство | Воин (crvsp.ru).

<sup>43</sup> Komsomolskaia Pravda, “Igor Kazarezov vozglavil Tsentr ‘VOIN’,” 22 February 2024, accessed 10 May, 2024, Игорь Казарезов возглавил Центр «ВОИН» - KP.RU.

Dmitrii Shevchenko (f. 1984), Kazarezov's Deputy Managing Director, was appointed in the early summer of 2024. Before this, he was the First Deputy Minister of Education and Science of the Lugansk People's Republic. Shevchenko was born in the Astrakhan Region, has higher academic degrees and is working towards a doctorate in political science at the Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration under the President of the Russian Federation. He holds two minor awards: the Gratitude of the President of the Russian Federation and the Gratitude of the Head of the Lugansk People's Republic. At the MPSC he is responsible for the expansion of the centre's regional network of branches.<sup>44</sup>

Considerably less is publicly known about the director of studies, Dmitrii Stepyko. The only material I could find concerned a visit to Gamzatovskii University in Dagestan in May, 2024, a visit conducted in the purpose of discussing the use of university premises for a regional branch of MPSC.<sup>45</sup> During the same trip, Stepyko also visited the countryside base of another higher education institution, where a military field camp for youth training is planned to be established.<sup>46</sup> If Stepyko has received any awards or medals, no information is available about it.

There is no publicly available information about Svetlana Danilova, Chief Financial Officer, and Olga Illarionova, Human Resources Director.

### 3.5 Putin's "trusted representatives" in the MPSC

Since the early 1990s, candidates to the post of President of the Russian Federation have had the right to appoint "trusted representatives" (*doverennoe litsa*) who will agitate for the candidacy. Initially, the law allowed for the appointment of "up to one hundred" such representatives.<sup>47</sup> Essentially, this is an opportunity to appoint allies from one's network of friends and colleagues. Therefore, it may signal the relative political importance of informal social networks. The number of trusted representatives has more than tripled in the post-Soviet epoch,<sup>48</sup> and, in 2023,

44 Astrakhanskii listok, "Astrakhanets naznachен zamestitelem direktora federalnogo Tsentra 'VOIN,'" 11 June 2024, accessed 5 August 2024, Астраханец назначен заместителем директора федерального Центра «ВОИН» - Астраханский листок (astralist.info).

45 Sakhiv Alieva, "Voin," Dagestanskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii universitet im. R.Gamzatova, 5 May 2024, accessed 5 August 2024, «Воин» — федеральное государственное бюджетное образовательное учреждение высшего образования (dspru.ru).

46 Lenta novosti Dagestana, "Direktor po uchebnoi rabote Tsentra 'VOIN' posetil Gamzatovskii universitet," 6 May 2024, accessed 6 August 2024, Директор по учебной работе Центра «ВОИН» посетил Гамзатовский университет - Лента новостей Дагестана (dagestan-news.net).

47 See: The Law on Presidential Elections in the Russian Federation, 24 April 1991, accessed 6 August 2024, Закон РСФСР от 24.04.1991 № 1096-I — Викитека (wikisource.org).

48 Aleksander Golovin, "Doverennye litsa Putina — kto oni? My izuchili vsekh i nashli samykh predannykh," *Sports.ru*, 12 January 2024, accessed 6 August 2024, Доверенные лица Путина — кто они? Мы изучили всех и нашли самых преданных - Всеум Головин - Блоги Sports.ru.

Vladimir Putin appointed 346 trusted representatives in the run-up to the 2024 Presidential Election. Among them were famous societal figures, including musicians such as the pro-war pop musician Shaman<sup>49</sup> and sportsmen such as Ramil Gabbasov<sup>50</sup> (RSBI) and Andrei Kliuchko<sup>51</sup> (the MPSC in Pskov and a veteran of the Special Military Operation in Ukraine). Being appointed as a trusted representative of Vladimir Putin is not only a prestigious position in the Russian system; it also appears to correlate with the economic success of those appointed.<sup>52</sup>

### 3.6 The MPSC's regional expansion

As mentioned above in the section on the MPSC's management, the issue of expanding the regional branches is a top priority. The expectation is that the MPSC's branches will expand to every region in the Russian Federation and become a key node in the patriotic education of the citizenry.<sup>53</sup> Shevchenko, the deputy to the MPSC's director, and the director of studies, Stepyko, are reportedly working on the issue. In addition, they have support from the absolute top, as Sergei Kirienko of the Presidential Administration is taking an active part in the search for premises.<sup>54</sup> In an interview, Kazarezov explained that "[Kirienko] constantly keeps his finger on the pulse, staying informed about all the preparatory work. He regularly visits the sites to personally check on the progress of the room renovations and the candidates for instructors."<sup>55</sup> This type of micromanagement is typical of Russian

49 Lenta.ru, "Navka, Pliushchenko, SHAMAN. Doverennymi litsami Putina na vyborah stali 346 chelovek. Kto oni?" 28 December 2023, accessed 6 August 2024, Доверенные лица Путина на выборах президента 2024: список: Общество: Россия: Lenta.ru.

50 ZOV – LNR, "V konferents-zale 'Stadiona 'Avangarda'" sostoialos soveshchanie s Ramil Gabbasovym, doverennym litsom Vladimira Putina, ispolnitelnym direktorom Rossiiskogo Soiuza Boevykh Iskusstv, Prezidentom Federatsii vvestilevogo karate Rossii," 15 March 2024, accessed 6 August, 2024, В конференц-зале «Стадиона «Авангард» состоялось совещание с Рамилем Габбасовым, доверенным лицом Владимира Путина, исполнительным директором Российского Союза Боевых Искусств, Президентом Федерации - Лента новостей ЛНР (lnr-news.ru).

51 Dzen, "Sotrudnik pskovskogo Tsentra 'Voin' stal doverennym listom Putina," 19 January 2024, accessed 5 August 2024, Сотрудник псковского Центра «Воин» стал доверенным лицом Путина | АиФ-Псков | Дзен (dzen.ru).

52 Elena Rykovtseva, "Litsom k sobytiyu. Kreml platit za loialnost," 13 October 2017, accessed 15 June 2024, Лицом к событию. Кремль платит за лояльность (svoboda.org).

53 TASS, "Kirienko: tsentry 'Voin' dolzhny stat vazhnoi chastiu sistemy vospitatelnoi raboty v RF," 26 March 2024, accessed 6 August 2024, Кириенко: центры "Воин" должны стать важной частью системы воспитательной работы в РФ (tass.ru).

54 This may also be a way for Kirienko to show himself as useful to Putin. He is involved in a number of activities, including youth camps, and visits the occupied areas and so on.

55 Komsomolskaia Pravda, "Igor Kazarezov, direktor Tsentra 'VOIN': 'My planiruem obuchat uchitelei OBZR voenno-prikladnym navykam,'" 7 March 2024, accessed 6 August 2024, Игорь Казарезов, директор Центра «ВОИН»: «Мы планируем обучать учителей ОБЗР военно-прикладным навыкам» - KPRU.

bosses who wish to make things happen. It may signal distrust in lower-level managers' ability to run operations, but it may also simply be a necessity in a system that is not a bureaucracy in the Weberian sense, but runs on social status and charisma in personal informal networks.

### 3.7 The MPSC's military training programme and the links to the RSBI volunteer unit, Soiuz

A key task of the MPSC is to prepare 14 to 18-year-olds for military service, through a course that aims to strengthen both their physical status, morale, and willingness to fight. Although the participation is supposed to be voluntary, parents and teachers have reported instances of coercion.<sup>56</sup> In addition, when the programme is rolled out, parents may fear withholding their child from participation due to negative sanctions from peers and the state in the future.

The basic course is three months long, and more than three thousand participants were admitted in the very first round. Another task of the MPSC is to prepare citizens aged 18 to 35 for participation in the army reserve. The MPSC's aim is to help them refresh their skills and competencies, as well as to provide them with new information based on the specifics of the frontline in Ukraine.<sup>57</sup> It is claimed that more than 75 percent of the more than 200 instructors served in the war against Ukraine.<sup>58</sup> In addition, the MPSC organises military-patriotic summer camps for youths aged 14 to 17. The main purpose of the camps is to prepare the youths "psychologically and morally" for war.<sup>59</sup>

During the three-month military training course mentioned above, the MPSC provides youths with applied military training in eight areas:<sup>60</sup>

- the foundations of national security of the Russian Federation;
- firearms training;

56 Vazhnye Istorii, "Kak detei v Rossii uchat voevat. I pochemu ikh roditeli eto podderzhivaiut," 14 September 2024, accessed: 16 September 2024, [Важные истории \(istories.media\)](https://istories.media).

57 Oleg Karpov, "Predsedatelem pravleniia Tsentra 'Voin' naznacheni kazachii general, Geroi LNR Viktor Vodolatskii."

58 TASS, "Vodolatskii: bolee 75% instruktorov tsentra 'Voin' uchastvovali v SVO," 30 May 2024, accessed 6 August 2024, [Водолацкий: более 75% инструкторов центра "Воин" участвовали в СВО \(tass.ru\)](https://tass.ru).

59 Oleg Karpov, "Predsedatelem pravleniia Tsentra 'Voin' naznacheni kazachii general, Geroi LNR Viktor Vodolatskii."

60 Military-patriotic Sports Centre, official website, accessed 6 August 2024, [Центр военно-спортивной подготовки и патриотического воспитания молодежи | Воин \(cstvsp.ru\)](https://cstvsp.ru).



- tactical training;
- engineering training;
- basic communications procedures;
- basic unmanned aerial-vehicle piloting;
- tactical medicine;
- tactical sports games.

On 21 November 2022, it was revealed that the RSBI was recruiting soldiers to its own military unit, called *Soiuz*,<sup>61</sup> for participation in the war against Ukraine. Later that autumn, 98 volunteers began basic military training in Gudermes, Chechnia. The volunteers were elite sportsmen from a number of places, among them Moscow and the Moscow region and Saint Petersburg and the Leningrad region. However, most of the volunteers apparently originated in other areas.<sup>62</sup> By December 2023, approximately 145 volunteers had joined the unit.<sup>63</sup>

The news about *Soiuz* was announced in Khabarovsk at a meeting of RSBI executives. Plans to create a military-patriotic sports centre, which was later to become the MPSC, were also mentioned.<sup>64</sup> This suggests that the MPSC, RSBI, and *Soiuz* should be viewed as network nodes, rather than as separate phenomena.

The movers and shakers behind *Soiuz* were Sergei Kirienko and Yurii Trutnev, the same people who created the MPSC, and also co-chairs of the RSBI.<sup>65</sup> Russian media describes Ramil Gabbasov, the director of the RSBI, as the "direct commander" of the unit,<sup>66</sup> but in addition has clarified that he was the assistant commander until April 2024, when his contract expired and he returned home. Apparently, the

61 *Soiuz* means "union" in Russian. See, also, the unit's recruitment page on the RSBI website, accessed 6 August 2024, ОТРЯД РСБИ "СОЮЗ" (rsbi.ru).

62 Maria Fedotova, "Rossiiskii soiuz boevykh iskusstv sformiroval otriad dobrovol'tsev dlia spetsoperatsii na Ukraine," *Kommersant*, 2 December 2022, accessed 6 August 2024, Российский союз боевых искусств сформировал отряд добровольцев для участия в спецоперации на Украине – Коммерсантъ (kommersant.ru).

63 Roman Romanovskii, "Kirienko i Trutnev sozdali dlia voyny otriad iz sportsmenov 'Soiuz.' 'Vazhnye istorii' nashli ego sponsorov," *Vazhnye istorii*, 20 February 2024, accessed 18 May 2024, Кириенко и Трутнев создали для войны отряд из спортсменов «Союз». «Важные истории» нашли его спонсоров (istories.media)

64 AmurMedia, "Okolo sotni chlenov Rossiiskogo soiuz boevykh iskusstv otravitsia na spetsoperatsiiu," 21 November 2022, accessed 6 August 2024, Около сотни членов Российского союза боевых искусств отправятся на спецоперацию - AmurMedia.ru.

65 UssurMedia, "Trutnev posetil tsentr 'Voin' i osmotrel uchebno-trenirovochnyi tsentr v Khabarovske."

66 See e.g. Iakutiia daily, "Direktor Rossiiskogo soiuz boevykh iskusstv vstretilsia s voynami otriada 'Soiuz-Kaskad.'"



unit continues to fight in Ukraine.<sup>67</sup> Few details have emerged about the activities of *Soiuz* at the frontline, but there have been casualties.<sup>68</sup>

### 3.8 The DOSAAF and MPSC joint agreement

DOSAAF and the MPSC are cooperating closely in the area of patriotic education. DOSAAF, a well-known abbreviation in Russia, stands for *Dobrovolnoe Obshchestvo Sodeistviia Armii, Aviatsii i Flotu*. The English translation is Voluntary Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation, and Navy. DOSAAF was founded in 1927, during the early years of the Soviet Union, and thrived throughout the Soviet period, surviving both the Soviet dissolution and the turbulent 1990s. Today, DOSAAF, now subordinated to the Ministry of Defence, remains a behemoth in the areas of sport, aviation, and military-patriotic education in Russia. The organisation has ten programmes, including shooting, driving classes, parachuting, and aviation and space.<sup>69</sup> In particular, its sister organisation the Youth Army (*Yunarmiya*), which was founded by the then Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu, in 2015, has gained attention for its military activities for children and youth.

However, the milieu of military-patriotic education has become fragmented due to the recent rapid expansion of the patriotic agenda in Russia, with federal investments increasing elevenfold between 2010 and 2020.<sup>70</sup> DOSAAF and the MPSC recently reached a joint agreement to fix this problem: “Our goal is to collaboratively create a continuous system of patriotic education for Russian youth,” said Vodolatskii, the chair of the MPSC’s management, to the TASS News Agency on 28 March 2024. The joint agreement was signed by the MPSC’s director, Igor Kazarezov, and the chair of DOSAAF, General Alexandr Dvornikov.<sup>71</sup>

The MPSC already benefits from close ties to DOSAAF since some of its educational activities take place on DOSAAF’s premises. For instance, this is the case in Kalmykia, where initial training in the use of First-Person-View (FPV) drones<sup>72</sup>

67 Andrei Shvetsov, “Ramil Gabbasov ob uchastii v SVO, obuchenii u legendy I secrete razbivaniia lediannykh glyb.”

68 See e.g. Andrei Shvetsov, “Ramil Gabbasov ob uchastii v SVO, obuchenii u legendy I secrete razbivaniia lediannykh glyb,” and UssurMedia, “Trutnev posetil tsentr ‘Voin’ i osmotrel uchebno-trenirovochnyi tsentr v Khabarovske.”

69 Dobrovolnoe Obshchestvo Sodeistviia armii, aviatsii i flotu Rossii, official website, accessed 6 August 2024, Основные направления ДОСААФ России | ДОСААФ России | Официальный сайт (dosaaf.ru).

70 See Figure 1 on page 18.

71 TASS, “DOSAAF i tsentr ‘Voin’ sozdatut sistemu patrioticheskogo vospitaniia molodezhi,” 28 May 2024, accessed 28 June 2024, ДОСААФ и центр “Воин” создадут систему патриотического воспитания молодежи (tass.ru).

72 FPV drones are small, remotely controlled flying apparatuses that can be used for reconnaissance and, when armed, for attacks.

was conducted in the autumn of 2023 at the DOSAAF Russia aviation and sports training centre named after Hero of the Soviet Union, D. V. Kaprin.<sup>73</sup> In addition, a DOSAAF-owned building in Khabarovsk had been empty and unused, and thus in dismal condition, until the MPSC took out a long-term lease and funded its complete renovation.<sup>74</sup>

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73 Liudmila Sarangova, "Tsentr 'Voin' v Kalmykii pervym iz vseh filialov poluchil znamia," *Stepnye vesti*, 26 September 2023, Центр «Воин» в Калмыкии первым из всех филиалов получил знамя - Степные вести (tegrk.ru).

74 UssurMedia, "Trutnev posetil tsentr 'Voin' i osmotrel uchebno-trenirovochnyi tsentr v Khabarovske."

## 4. Case Two: The “Time of heroes” educational and mentorship programme for Russian ex-combatants

“TIME OF Heroes” (ToH; *Vremia geroev* in Russian) may not be the most original name of a patriotic programme,<sup>75</sup> but its goals are unmistakably ambitious. It is claimed that Vladimir Putin came up with the idea to create ToH when he met with young war veterans who were university students in Saint Petersburg at the time.<sup>76</sup> According to the programme’s website, the goal is to train “highly qualified, competent leaders from among the participants of the Special Military Operation for subsequent work in state and municipal government bodies, as well as in state-owned companies.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, the aim is to populate managerial teams of state corporations and government bodies at both city and national levels with specifically selected and trained veterans from the war against Ukraine. The regime’s assumption is that they will constitute a new patriotic elite.

Highlighting the significance of the ToH programme, Vladimir Putin, not only its initiator but also Russia’s President, personally held a public “meet and greet” with the first cohort of students in June 2024.<sup>78</sup>

### 4.1 The place of ToH in Putin’s vision

In an interview, Vladimir Putin described the ToH as a response to the issue of social mobility in today’s Russia, a country still marked by rapid change “in the technological sphere, in social life, and in the managerial sphere.” But this is also

75 “Time of Heroes” is at the same time the name of the summer camps that the MPSC organises for teenagers.

76 Krymskoe informatsionnoe agenstvo, “Programma ‘Vremia geroev’ rasschitana na karernyi rost v samom khoroshem smysle etogo slova, — Putin,” 17 June 2024, Программа «Время героев» рассчитана на карьерный рост в самом хорошем смысле этого слова, — Путин (kianews24.ru).

77 Vremia geroev, official website, accessed 6 August 2024, Программа «Время героев» (xn--b1aach-ba0csne6n.xn--p1ai).

78 Aisel Gereikhanova, “Putin vstretilsia s uchastnikami programmy ‘Vremia geroev,’” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 16 June 2024, Путин встретился с участниками программы “Время героев” - Российская газета (rg.ru).

a key task for the state: to cultivate suitably competent personnel. Beyond these objectives, which one might reasonably expect in any country, Putin also invokes metaphysical arguments regarding the role of suffering: "In all history of Russia," claims Putin, "our country has always strengthened its position through hardship, and always found people loyal to the Motherland ready to protect it."<sup>79</sup>

## 4.2 The composition of the External Advisory Board

Although the mere existence of an External Advisory Board may not be significant, its composition may be. In any organisation that chooses to appoint a group of external advisors, they can function at a general level as sensory appendages or antennae. The kinds of networks, organisations, and fields the organisation values are reflected in its choice of members for the External Advisory Board. To illustrate, I have compiled a complete list of ToH's external advisors.

**Table 1** External Advisory Board of Time of Heroes

No	Name	Title / position(s)
1	Yuliia Belekova	Member of the Civil Society and Human Rights Council in the Presidential Administration Manager of the ANO "Committee of Families of the Soldiers of the Fatherland"
2	Sergei Bogachev	Deputy Chief of the Main Personnel Directorate of the Ministry of Defence
3	Viacheslav Bocharov	First Deputy Secretary of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation Vice President of the Russian Paralympic Committee.
4	Viktor Goremykin	Deputy Minister of Defence Head of the Main Military Political Directorate of the Armed Forces
5	Viktor Yermakov	Chief Inspector of the Office of the General Inspectors of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, Chairman of the Council of the All-Russian Public Organisation of Veterans of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation
6	Denis Yermakov	Chief of the Main Military-political Directorate of the Federal National Guard
7	Olga Yermakova	Head of the Moscow Region Branch of the State Fund for Supporting Participants of the Special Military Operation "Defenders of the Fatherland"

<sup>79</sup> Krymskoe informatsionnoe agenstvo, "Programma 'Vremia geroev' rasschitana na karernyi rost v samom khoroshem smysle etogo slova, — Putin."

8	Svetlana Zhurova	First Deputy Chairman of the Committee on International Affairs of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation
9	Aleksandr Karelin	Senator of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation
10	Olga Kormukhina	Singer, Honoured Artist of the Russian Federation
11	Alexei Kostylev	Main Editor of the online news portal "Readovka"
12	Andrei Krasov	First Deputy Chairman of the Committee on Defence of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation
13	Irina Kuksenkova	Special Correspondent in the Correspondents' Department of the Chief Producer's Office of the Information Programmes Directorate at Channel One Russia
14	Aleksei Naumets	Senator of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation Co-Chairman of the Coordination Council of the Association of Veterans of the Special Military Operation
15	Aleksei Poddubnyi	Singer
16	Yevgenii Poddubnyi	Head of the RTR (The Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Company) Bureau in the Middle East and North Africa. Host of the programme War, on the Russia-24 TV Channel
17	Call-sign "Baikot"	Commander of the 9th Separate Guards Motor Rifle Brigade
18	Call-sign "Ziat"	Commander of the 60th Assault Battalion "Somali"
19	Call-sign "Morpekh"	Commander of the 2nd Volunteer Reconnaissance Assault Brigade "Veterany"
20	Dmitrii Sablin	Deputy Chairman of the Committee on Defence of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation First Deputy Chairman of the All-Russian Public Organisation of Veterans "Combat Brotherhood"
21	Aleksandr Sladkov	Special correspondent of RTR
22	Vladimir Soloviev	Host of a programme of the Creative and Production Association "Russia-1" branch of RTR
23	Yurii Khabrov	Head of the Department for Social Support at the State Fund for Supporting Participants of the Special Military Operation "Defenders of the Fatherland"
24	Yelena Tsunaieva	First Deputy Chairman of the Committee on Labour, Social Policy, and Veterans' Affairs of the State Duma
25	Sergei Chuikov	Honoured Artist of the Lugansk People's Republic Soloist in the Lugansk Academic Philharmonic
26	Vladimir Shamanov	Member of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation
27	Mikhail Shvydkoi	Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation for International Cultural Cooperation

**Source:** ToH's External Advisory Board, accessed 2 August 2024, [Общественный совет \(xn--b1aachba0cs-ne6n.xn--p1ai\)](#).

Table 1 shows the complete list of the ToH's external advisors per August 2024. It is a heady mix. The most remarkable, not to say puzzling, observation is that three singers are on the list (nos. 10, 15, and 25). I must admit that the exact role and purpose of their expertise eludes me. It is also noteworthy that 22 percent of the advisors (6 of 27) are women, which is relatively high for a patriarchal society such as Russia. This may call into question the ability of a significant share of the advisors to help the students via mentoring and professional networking. What speaks against this sceptical assessment is the fact that the women on the list tend to be managers. Much less surprising are the members of the State Duma and the Federation Council and the advisors employed by the Ministry of Defence. Among the 27 advisors, only a handful are widely known in society, such as Aleksandr Karelin, a senator on the Federation Council and former wrestler, and Vladimir Soloviev, a famous TV anchor and pro-war propagandist. The celebrated war correspondent, Yevgenii Poddubnyi (no. 16), sustained injuries on the frontline in Ukraine in 2024.<sup>80</sup>

### 4.3 The programme

ToH is based on a pre-existing master's programme in public administration at the Higher School of Public Administration of the Presidential Academy.<sup>81</sup> The programme's selection criteria are:<sup>82</sup>

- nationality of the Russian Federation;
- participation in the war against Ukraine;
- university-level degree;
- managerial experience and test results;<sup>83</sup>
- no criminal record.

80 At the time of writing, it is unclear whether he will survive or not. See: The Insider, "Z-blogery i deputat Gosdumy pishut, chto 'voenkor' Poddubnyi vse zhe ne pogib," 7 August 2024, accessed 8 August 2024, Z-блогеры и депутат Госдумы пишут, что «военкор» Поддубный все же не погиб (theins.ru).

81 Vyshaia shkola gosudarstvennogo upravleniia (VShGU) — Institut Prezidentskoi akademii, accessed 6 August 2024, ВШГУ (ranepa.ru).

82 Elizaveta Kholotova, "Vremia geroev": Chto izvestno o novoi programme dlia uchastnikov SVO," *Iamal Media*, 16 April 2024, accessed 5 August 2024, «Время героев» — 2024: суть программы, кто может участвовать и зачем это нужно | Ямал-Медиа (yamal-media.ru); Vremia geroev, "Porядok otbora," accessed 6 August 2024, Порядок отбора (xn--b1aachba0csne6n.xn--p1ai).

83 Interfaks, "Pervye uchastniki SVO poidut obuchenie v ramkakh programmy 'Vremia geroev,'" 16 May 2024, accessed 6 August 2024, Первые участники СВО пройдут обучение в рамках программы "Время героев" - Россия || Интерфакс Россия (interfax-russia.ru).

Oddly enough, the no-criminal-record criterion reported in Russian state media is not mentioned in the formal description of the selection criteria on the ToH website.<sup>84</sup> This raises troubling questions about eligibility for inclusion in Russia's new patriotic elite. Indeed, *Novaia gazeta Evropa* claims to have identified several war criminals in the first batch of students. Among them is an officer from the unit responsible for the massacre in Bucha in 2022.<sup>85</sup> The selection process for the first cohort in 2024 required the creation of an infrastructure of mobile assessment stations near the frontline. Six such stations were created in five regions: Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics and Khersonskaia, Belgorodskaia, and Voronezhskaia oblasts.<sup>86</sup>

Those who were admitted were to receive:<sup>87</sup>

- two years of master's-level online education;
- personal mentors and coaches from the start of the programme.

The main thrust of ToH is to develop the managerial and psychological competence of participants with military leadership experience.<sup>88</sup> In order to achieve this, the programme is composed of four 30-day modules and three internships.

## 4.4 The first cohort of students

The first cohort of students was selected in 2024 from among 21,000 applicants.<sup>89</sup> It consists of 83 students, of whom 65 are regular military personnel, 14 are volunteers mobilised during the so-called partial mobilisation in the autumn of 2022, three are regular personnel in the National Guard (*Rosgvardia*), and one belongs to the Ministry of Interior Affairs (*Ministerstvo vnutrennykh del*).<sup>90</sup> Most of them (n=53) are senior officers, but there are also lower-ranking officers and a handful of privates (n=3). A large number (n=20) hold the Hero of Russia award, while

84 See the Rules of admission on the official webpage, *Vremia geroev*, "Poriadok otbora."

85 Mira Livadina, "'Liudi s pravilnoi zhiznennoi pozitsiei.' Iz kogo kuetsia rossiiskaia elita vremen voiny," *Novaia gazeta Evropa*, 21 August 2024, accessed 22 August 2024, «Люди с правильной жизненной позицией». Из кого куется российская элита времен войны — Новая газета Европа (novayagazeta.eu).

86 Interfaks, "Pervye uchastniki SVO poidut obuchenie v ramkakh programmy 'Vremia geroev.'"

87 Elizaveta Kholotova, "Vremia geroev": Chto izvestno o novoi programme dlia uchastnikov SVO"; *Vremia geroev*, "Poriadok otbora"; Aisel Gereikhanova, "Putin vstretilsia s uchastnikami programmy 'Vremia geroev.'"

88 Interfaks, "Pervye uchastniki SVO poidut obuchenie v ramkakh programmy 'Vremia geroev.'"

89 Mira Livadina, "'Liudi s pravilnoi zhiznennoi pozitsiei.' Iz kogo kuetsia rossiiskaia elita vremen voiny."

90 Aisel Gereikhanova, "Putin vstretilsia s uchastnikami programmy 'Vremia geroev.'"

the remaining students have been awarded the Order of Courage at least once. The students come from 46 different regions and belong to 11 ethnic groups. Most of them are between the ages of 30 and 40.<sup>91</sup>

## 4.5 Plans for expansion

Little has so far been made public about the future of ToH. However, Vladimir Putin has taken a personal interest in ToH and stated that the "number of selected [ex-combatants] to the first cohort wasn't great, but this is just the first step. Later, we will increase the number of people." A related development is the creation of "regional analogues to the programme," a statement made by the Head of Dagestan, Sergei Melikov.<sup>92</sup> It is unclear how these regional copies of ToH will relate to the original programme, or indeed, whether they will emerge at all.

## 4.6 Will it succeed?

Vladimir Putin has iterated that veterans of the so-called Special Military Operation in Ukraine shall take up leading roles in government and state corporations. This would create a patriotic class of managers and civil servants. However, the independent online newspaper, *Bumaga*, reports that in Saint Petersburg, only ten to twenty veterans attempted to register for the low-level municipal elections in 2024, and some were even denied registration.<sup>93</sup> Thus, there appears to be a discrepancy between the goals that have been set by the President and his ruling party, United Russia, and the willingness of the lower echelons of power to integrate veterans into their ranks.

However, this need not indicate a complete failure of the vision to create a new patriotic elite. It is still too early to assess the fruits of the Time of Heroes mentorship programme, which was launched in late Spring 2024. Although it can be argued that there is a limited number of managerial positions in state corporations, that it is a zero-sum game, and that it is hard to envision where the new managers will enter, it is also possible that new deputy positions are created. This would make it possible for graduates of ToH to gain further experience and move

91 Interfaks, "Pervye uchastniki SVO proidut obuchenie v ramkakh programmy 'Vremia geroev.'"

92 Timur Aliev, "Magomed Baachilov: 'Vremia geroev' pomozhet veteranam SVO naiti sebja v mirnoi zhizni," 9 April 2024, accessed 5 August 2024, Магомед Баачилов: «Время героев» поможет ветеранам СВО найти себя в мирной жизни - Российская газета (rg.ru).

93 Yekaterina Barkalova, "Desiatki uchastnikov voyny vydvinulis na munitsipalnye vybore v Peterburge. Kto eti liudy i pochemu nekotorykh iz nikh ne prinimaiut v sistemnuiu politiku," 17 July 2024, accessed 8 August 2024, Десятки участников войны выдвинулись на муниципальные выборы в Петербурге.. «Бумага» (paperpaper.io).



up a notch when the time is ripe. The decisive point is whether there is a welcoming attitude within the managements of the enterprises or not. Here, it makes sense to conclude that the External Advisory Board plays a pivotal role. If the 27 advisors can vouch for the ToH graduates, then there is a chance for them to establish managerial careers within existing state structures and, perhaps, succeed in creating their own informal networks.

## 5. Concluding remarks

I BEGAN this report with a description of Aleksandra Arkhipova's metaphor of Putin's patriotic vision for Russia: "frozen like a fly in amber." To what extent is Arkhipova's metaphor mirrored in the two patriotic programmes I describe and examine in this report?

As Alexeev and Pyle describe, Russians' patriotism is starkly blind and militant and this has been a stable phenomenon since, at least, the 1990s. They write: "the two biggest month-to-month jumps [in the Levada Centre survey variable 'is Russia heading in the right direction?' The author's comment] occurred between February and March 2014 and between the same two months in 2022. In other words, these two increases in patriotism coincided with Russian forces invading Ukraine; it is difficult to view this as a mere coincidence. Nothing seems to give a jolt to Russians' sense of their country's trajectory as much as military aggression in their 'Near Abroad.'"<sup>94</sup> Against this backdrop, we should view the MPSC and ToH as conduits of existing Russian patriotism, rather than its top-down creators. It is possible that the creation of patriotism occurs earlier in the individual's life, making organisations for children such as The Movement of the First pivotal.

The MPSC works as a node in a network of people, interests, and values. The key people in the social network behind the MPSC are Vladimir Putin, Sergei Kirienko, and Yuri Trutnev, tied together by their interest in martial arts, which is construed as patriotism. However, there are also obvious economic interests involved: the MPSC hires approximately 200 instructors at various levels, in other words, people who get their income and career opportunities within the MPSC patriotic programme. To this, we could also add those who provide goods and services to the MPSC, such as construction companies and drone producers.

The values that can be discerned from the analysis of the MPSC include 1) martial values, 2) unity of the regime, and 3) Orthodox faith among the movers and shakers behind the MPSC (but, perhaps, less so among the rank and file.) The Orthodox faith serves as a unifying cultural factor within the regime's elite.

To some extent, the programmes mirror the metaphor. The MPSC is an ambitious attempt to build on the patriotic education of children that is conducted in The Movement of the First and extend it up to the age of 35. As such, the MPSC may contribute to the creation of "patriotic stasis" in Russia, at least on paper. We know little of the actual transfer of values from the instructors to the youth

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94 Michael Alexeev and William Pyle (2023) "A blind and militant attachment: Russian patriotism in comparative perspective," 324.

in the programmes because there are no opportunities to explore it empirically, for example through interviews of the participants or distribution of survey questionnaires. ToH is an attempt to build patriotic opportunities for those who have already followed the “patriotic” path to war.

Perhaps the greatest apparent deviation from Arkhipova's metaphor can be summed up as a patriotic paradox. The paradox of public patriotism in Russia is that the aim is a static society in which values do not change — Putin's patriotic stasis — while the conditions perceived to be beneficial for achieving it are war-time turbulent change. As mentioned above, Putin's aim for Russia is patriotic stasis — in other words, a high degree of social cohesion and unity. His means are, among others, a set of extensive patriotic programmes. At the time of writing, the context in which these programmes exist seems to be a long hot war with Ukraine and a protracted cold war with the West. For Russia, this means facing severe international sanctions on its economy, witnessing the destruction of massive amounts of military hardware, and suffering a staggering amount of casualties. However, in Russia, the perception of war as a phenomenon is that it benefits the growth of spirituality and patriotism.<sup>95</sup> Although this proposition is not empirically proven, it remains a recurring idea in Russia.<sup>96</sup>

Again: Does it work? As Sanin argues, Russia distinguishes itself by investing heavily in basic military training within its patriotic agenda, but relatively few citizens (compared to countries with less emphasis on basic military training) are willing to fight for Russia in a war. This, coupled with Alexeev and Pyle's findings that Russians already exhibit a high level of militant patriotism, suggests that the intrinsic meaning of the massive investments in Putin's patriotic agenda is something other than merely creating patriotic and militarily effective soldiers. One possible interpretation is that Putin's regime relies on the war (initially not intended to be protracted but currently deeply mired in) as a catalyst for patriotic sentiments and behaviours, ready to be harnessed by patriotic programmes.

The latter interpretation leads to another burning question. Are those who fight in the war against Ukraine doing so for the “right” reasons from the regime's perspective? Are they driven by patriotic sentiments, or are they responding to the state's massive economic incentives to those who enlist, and to their families if they do not survive?<sup>97</sup>

95 Pär Gustafsson Kurki, *The Russian understanding of soldier morale: Essentials of key ideas from the 1990s to 2022*, FOI-R--5481--SE, (Swedish Defence Research Agency, Stockholm, 2023), 16.

96 For yet another example of the idea that war triggers a belief in God among its participants, see: Aleksandra Pavlova, “Imenno na voine liudy chashche vsego prikhodiat k vere v Boga,” no date, accessed 5 August 2024, «Именно на войне люди чаще всего приходят к вере в Бога» | Читать статьи по истории РФ для школьников и студентов (histrf.ru).

97 To answer these questions, it would likely be necessary to use qualitative interview data (or at least attitudinal survey data), which are impossible to collect due to the current war.

## 5.1 Future research

In the course of researching the report, and especially in conjunction with the suggestions from the external reviewer, Dr. Jade McGlynn of King's College London, I have identified three valuable venues for future studies:

- What are the workings of the networks of Patriotism? Further exploration is needed to learn how non-state actors, such as patriotic entrepreneurs, Z bloggers, and media outlets, interact with the patriotic programmes. This may shed light on how the patriotism paradox works in practice. Is it possible to promote both militarism and apolitical values?
- What is the role of the MPSC in the broader patriotic trend also evident in the traditional education system? It would be valuable to examine the formalisation of the MPSC and the broader trend in the education system, where the so-called New Education Philosophy calls for mandatory patriotic education and introduces new mentors to oversee this initiative within the schooling system and advise the headteacher. Kirienko was heavily involved in this as well.
- What is the role of the Patriotic Entrepreneurs? It would be valuable to expand on the discussion or even track the patriotic entrepreneurs who financially benefit from their alignment with the state's agenda. This would be particularly interesting with regard to those whose wealth and status are made through such engagement. It would also be valuable to explore the nexus of money, Orthodox faith, and other connections to the regime among the "movers and shakers," the key players, of the patriotic agenda.

The above-mentioned areas for future research would contribute to our understanding of the workings of the current Russian regime, in addition to adding to our knowledge of the role and functions of Putin's patriotic agenda.

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Does Putin's patriotic agenda achieve its objectives? To this end, the Russian state has implemented several well-funded patriotic initiatives, including the Military-Patriotic Sports Centre and the *Time of Heroes* educational and mentorship programmes. This report provides an in-depth analysis of these selected initiatives, arguing that they operate as interconnected nodes within a regime network that unites individuals, interests, and values. A significant finding is the emergence of a "patriotic paradox." In Russia, while the goal of public patriotism is to create a stable society, the state views the conditions of wartime turbulence as the most conducive to achieving this aim.