



From Regional Incentives to Federal Control: The Evolution of Russia's Mobilisation Model

The mobilization logic in Russia is not stopping and is not being rolled back. What is changing is not the objective but the architecture: the system is moving from a “regional recruitment market” (where federal subjects competed through payments and assumed part of the recruitment costs) to a more centralized, less transparent, and more administrative model, in which financial flows and management are concentrated at the federal level. This conclusion does not rest on a single figure but on the convergence of several independent lines of evidence: the structure of the federal budget and its priorities, the observed dynamics of regional payments and budget deficits, as well as public assessments pointing to declining budget transparency and the “dissolution” of military expenditures across adjacent budget lines.

The first supporting fact is that the federal center continues to treat the war as the main budgetary priority. SIPRI estimates Russia's total planned military spending in 2025 at approximately 15.5 trillion rubles (about 7.2% of GDP) and emphasizes that an increasing share of military expenditures falls outside the “National Defence” budget chapter, making a simple reading of a single budget line an incorrect method for assessing the real scale of militarization. OSW, analyzing the 2025 budget, notes that “defence + internal security” account for more than 43% of officially planned expenditures and separately highlights the concealment of part of military spending in other sections (for example, within “the economy” through financing the defense industry and R&D). This structure is important for understanding the logic: even if cosmetic reallocations between budget chapters can be observed in individual documents, the overall coercive/security bloc remains a priority, while transparency declines—something typical of a protracted war and centralized resource management. In addition, the Bank of Finland (BOFIT) draws attention to the 2026–2028 budget framework: alongside a formal reduction of defence in one category, an increase in “national security” is envisaged, which supports the thesis of a shift and re-labeling of expenditures within the security bloc rather than a change of course.

The second supporting fact is that regions are losing their role as the “wallet” of recruitment. There is a visible rollback of regional competition for contract soldiers: reductions and standardization of enlistment bonuses, a return of payments to the federal minimum, and the freezing or curtailment of additional regional programs. RFE/RL describes concrete cases in which regions sharply reduce bonuses, explaining this by budgetary strain and changing priorities; The Moscow Times records similar decisions at the level of regional regulations (including cases where payments are cut from millions to the federal minimum). Euronews reported in December 2025 that in more than 10 regions payments were reduced due to shortages of local funding and that a significant share of regions are operating with deficits—this is no longer a set of isolated stories but a systemic background. At the same time, it is important to stress that a reduction in regional payments by itself does not prove that “fewer people are needed” and is not a sign of the end of mobilization logic. Against the backdrop of continued federal militarization, this more likely indicates that the previous model of mass incentives financed by regional money has become too expensive, inefficient, or administratively inconvenient, and is therefore being dismantled and centralized.

The third supporting fact is that regions face an объективный financial ceiling. The thesis of “depleted local coffers” is confirmed not only by media reports but also by the logic of regional budgets: spending on one-time payments and related obligations (compensation, social measures, family support) is the easiest to cut by administrative decision, especially when deficits grow and fiscal flexibility declines. In parallel, analytical materials have appeared highlighting precisely the problem of “effective contracts” and regional competition for recruits, where recruitment is ensured by only 20–25 regions with the highest payments, and their composition changes over time in order to distribute the burden; this describes a mechanism that in itself points to the instability and high cost of the regional approach.

From this follows the central conclusion: the mobilization logic continues, but the instruments are changing. With high probability, the system is seeking to move away from a “regional market” (a bonus race) toward a more centralized scheme: less variation across federal subjects, less publicity, more administrative mechanisms, and more direct federal funding channels. This allows recruitment to continue without dependence on the condition of individual regional budgets and without “overpayment” caused by competition among governors. The signs of precisely such a restructuring include the disappearance of price competition, the unification of payments, a growing share of closed or adjacent budget lines, and the concentration of priorities within the security bloc.

A separate block concerns the assessment of the probability of further expansion of military activity and the risk of transferring confrontation onto the European theater. The correct formulation here is not “this will happen,” but rather “what signals and assessments indicate an increased risk under certain conditions.” In European and transatlantic assessments, the thesis is increasingly voiced that Russia is building an economy and society capable of sustaining a long confrontation, and that a pause or reduction in intensity in Ukraine could give it a window to restore forces and reorient the threat toward the western flank. This view appears in CER analyses of European security and in warnings by European military and intelligence officials about Russia’s capacity for further military projection in the coming years. Reuters in 2024 recorded public warnings by senior officials of European defense ministries that Russia could theoretically be ready to “test” NATO within a time horizon of several years (3–5 years)—this is not a prediction of an event, but an assessment of potential under the continuation of the current course of militarization. In 2025, the French National Strategic Review 2025 explicitly proceeds from a deterioration of the strategic environment and the need to strengthen the defense of France and Europe through 2030, which institutionally reflects a perceived long-term threat. RUSI discusses scenarios of how the Kremlin might “test” NATO’s collective defense (not necessarily through a classic invasion), which is important precisely as an analytical framework for escalation: hybrid incidents, peripheral provocations, pressure on vulnerable areas. Finally, separate public discussions of the risk of a “window in 2029” and 3–5 year horizons appear in European media and expert discourse as reflections of assessments by certain agencies and observations of production and recruitment tempos, but these materials should be used cautiously—as indicators of debate and threat perception, not as proof of the inevitability of a scenario.

Integrating this block into the overall picture looks as follows: the militarization of the federal budget, declining expenditure transparency, sustained redistribution in favor of defense and internal security, as well as the restructuring of recruitment and the centralization of financing—these are characteristics of a system oriented toward long-term confrontation and the ability to sustain large-scale use of force. By itself, this does not mean a “decision to attack the EU,” but it increases the risk that, if a political window opens or if Western deterrence is perceived as weak, Russia will be prepared to expand the spectrum of coercive pressure—from hybrid tests to more direct military scenarios on the periphery.

In sum: the current signs point to the continuation of mobilization logic alongside a weakening of the role of federal subjects and the centralization of military financing and management. Regional cuts in payments should be interpreted not as “mobilization is ending,” but as “regions can no longer carry the burden and/or are being removed from the financial model,” while the federal center retains and strengthens the priority of the security bloc. At the level of strategic perspective, this model increases Russia’s capacity for prolonged confrontation and, under certain conditions, raises the risk of an expansion of threats to the European space, which is reflected in official strategic documents and public assessments by European defense institutions and research centers.

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