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War in Ukraine

The Ukrainian invasion: Implications for Putin's power

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In consolidated authoritarian regimes, according to Freedom House, “Elections serve to reinforce the rule of dictators who enjoy unlimited authority for prolonged periods of time;” “Power is highly centralized, and the country’s national and local governmental systems are neither democratic nor accountable to the public;” “Civil society faces excessive government restrictions and repression.” [1] The Russian case meets this definition. By February 2022, when the invasion of Ukraine began, Russia had been a consolidated personal authoritarian regime for about 15 years as described by Freedom House. However, the disastrous military campaign, unprecedented Western sanctions and the ensuing economic crisis tested the resilience of the regime. In this analysis, I argue that Putin’s political system withstood the test; and his grip on power is as strong as ever. His ability to solve Russia’s problems and achieve constructive goals is another matter; in this, Putin is quite powerless due to his own previous decisions.

The foundations of Putin’s Power

In 2000, when Putin first assumed office as president of Russia, the power of the presidency was quite limited. One important advantage available to Putin was the Russian constitution of 1993 that granted extensive powers to the president, giving him an edge in the event of a conflict with the Duma, the Russian parliament. While on the surface Russia is a semi-presidential republic with the parliament having some influence on the composition of the government, in reality, the system has practically no checks and balances, with the president enjoying almost unlimited authority. [2] (However, the objective reality of Putin’s power initially did not match the extensive prerogatives granted to him by the constitution. He presided over a weak bureaucratic apparatus that was only beginning to recover from the disintegration of the 1990s. His power was challenged by the oligarchs, a group of politically connected tycoons, as well as the regional governors, many of whom transformed their regions into patrimonial fiefdoms. Both the oligarchs and the governors created their own political machines and elected their candidates in the Duma. [3] Putin embarked on a path of centralising power in his hands.

The oligarchs were the easiest to co-opt. While some of them, such as Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky and Mikhail Khodorkovsky, became targets for persecution, the majority of business leaders gladly exchanged political independence for the chance to further enrich themselves, as the Kremlin was willing to provide favourable conditions for capital accumulation. As a result, the number of billionaires on the Forbes list soared from just eight in 2001 to 87 in 2008. [4] In the mid-2000s, Putin further entrenched his control over the economy by re-nationalising hundreds of enterprises and appointing his close associates as managers in the new state capitalist sector. Windfall profits from energy sales allowed the Kremlin to rebuild and strengthen administrative structures. The governors were also integrated into the regime with a series of steps that culminated in replacing direct gubernatorial elections with appointment by the president. With this move, Putin secured the governors’ loyalty and forced them to mobilise their political machines in federal elections. [5] As a result, since the mid-2000s the Kremlin has been in full control of the electoral process. (In 2013, direct elections were restored, but the position of the governors changed completely.) By controlling political parties and elections, legislatures across the country, major media and a significant part of the economy, Putin established himself as an undisputed leader, completing the process of authoritarian consolidation.

However, a new challenge to authoritarianism emerged in the 2010s, this time in the form of political protests. Moscow, Saint Petersburg and many other cities across the country saw major mobilisations against electoral fraud in 2011-2012. Since then, an opposition movement has always been a presence in Russian politics. Even now, after a decade of repression and propaganda, Russian society is more politically active than it was in the 2000s, when opposition rallies did not gather more than a few hundred participants. The regime’s response to the movement of

2011-2012 was two-pronged: on the one hand, the Kremlin launched an ideological offensive, emphasising conservative, nationalist and traditionalist themes; on the other hand, independent politicians, activists and NGOs suffered from a barrage of new repressive laws. In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and occupied parts of Eastern Ukraine, the opposition was isolated as 'fifth columnists' and 'national traitors,' although Alexei Navalny's investigations and activism have reinvigorated it since 2017-2018. [6] In 2020, Putin removed one final obstacle to his power: the constitutional limit of serving no more than two terms in a row.

A final bout of repression that followed Navalny's return to Russia, his imprisonment and the subsequent wave of protests in 2021 seemingly secured Putin's authoritarian rule, at least in the short and medium term. While the threat of political discontent was not completely extinguished, it was subdued with brute force. However, the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 put the very foundations of Putin's rule to test. Threats to authoritarianism can take three forms: (1) popular mobilisation, (2) elite defection; or (3) a combination of both. Below, I will examine each of these possibilities in turn.

Popular mobilisation

Several weeks into the war, one can witness a seemingly paradoxical picture. On the one hand, ordinary Russians feel the impact of the war and Western sanctions rather acutely. Inflation is rampant, there are local shortages of essential goods, unemployment is cascading into new sectors and industries with even bleaker prospects in the future. On the other hand, support for the government is soaring, according to the recent survey produced by Levada, an independent polling agency. The share of people who believe that the country is moving in the right direction jumped from 52% in February to 69% in March. Putin's approval rating increased from 71% to 83%. [7] Levada also indicates that support for the war (or 'special operation' in official parlance) is overwhelming: 81% of respondents support Russia's military action in Ukraine, while only 14% answered in the negative; another 6% were undecided. [8]

These results might indicate that the Russian people rallied around their leadership, as typically happens during military conflicts. The 'rally around the flag' effect could be strengthened by the dramatic outpouring of propaganda and the complete elimination of independent media, essentially amounting to unannounced martial law. Another interpretation, however, is that the survey results are mostly invalid. While opinion polls in authoritarian regimes are generally suspect, they are particularly questionable during war-time censorship and repression. Russian Field, a polling company, reported that the response rate in their surveys dedicated to the war has fallen by 50% in March. [9] People are afraid to share their anti-war opinion and thereby refuse to participate in the surveys, making the published results rather meaningless. Recently, researchers Philipp Chapkovski and Max Schaub produced concrete proof of this phenomenon. [10] They relied on a list experiment: a sociological technique used to gauge 'real' public opinion about sensitive topics. The results are quite revealing: when asked a direct question, 68% of respondents said they supported Russia's military action in Ukraine. However, when asked indirectly, in a way that allowed to hide one's answer to this particular question, the figure was down to 53%. In other words, fear of speaking the truth creates substantial bias in traditional surveys. At the same time, the 'real' support for the war is not clear even from Chapkovski and Schaub's experiment. Their poll sample is biased towards younger, more educated people who are more prone to oppose the war. On the other hand, many of those who are against the war probably decided not to participate even in this type of survey. It is safe to say that Levada's 81% figure is inflated; otherwise, valid survey results are simply unavailable.

Regardless of the polling numbers, vocal anti-war opposition does exist in Russia. Yet, it is unable to change the situation. In the first few weeks of the war, various groups and individuals including Alexei Navalny (whose statements from prison are made public by his lawyers) called for demonstrations against the invasion. Rallies in cities across the country did take place; however, they were met with overwhelming police presence that made Moscow and Saint Petersburg in particular look like occupied cities. In total, more than 15,000 people were arrested

for anti-war street activities. [11] Currently, the anti-war movement consists of individual actions such as sticker bombing, single-person pickets (that invariably result in arrests), removing pro-war agitation from the streets, etc. Many people inside Russia continue to voice their opposition to the war online and multiple new media outlets were launched from outside the country, staffed by recent émigrés. These activities are supremely important as they reveal the subterranean tension in Russian society. As sociologist Samuel Greene noted in early March, "Vladimir Putin is increasingly fighting two wars: one in Ukraine, and one at home." [12] However, the momentum on the domestic front is firmly on the side of the government.

Elite defection

The invasion of Ukraine sent a shockwave through the Russian elite. The final decision to invade was made in strict secrecy in the narrow group of military and national security leaders. Quite possibly, even Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin was not informed, let alone members of his cabinet. Nevertheless, only small cracks in the wall are visible at the moment. [13]

The business elite suffers the most from the ongoing war. For the biggest corporations, unprecedented Western sanctions against Russia mean the disruption of supply chains, the disappearance of export markets, lack of access to foreign finance and technology, and the possibility of corporate default. Attempts to adjust to the current situation by pivoting to friendly and neutral countries will bring partial results at best. Furthermore, many business owners face personal sanctions, with their yachts and luxury mansions being seized by the day. Nevertheless, the business elite does not have the means to influence the situation. The Russian regime is similar to that of Napoleon III in 19th century France, as it was described by Karl Marx in his essay, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte." Marx wrote: "[T]o preserve the social power [of the bourgeoisie] intact its political power must be broken... in order to save its purse it must forfeit the crown, and the sword that is to safeguard it must at the same time be hung over its own head as a sword of Damocles." [14] This sums up perfectly the state of the business elite in Putin's Russia. The Kremlin has consistently acted in the economic interests of capital holders, but completely deprived them of political influence. When geopolitics and violent nationalism trumped economic considerations among the members of the national security establishment, there was nothing the business elite could do. Their chief instrument – bribery – is ineffective since the key security personnel has already had fingers in the pie for two decades, enriching themselves through corrupt means. For the owners of the biggest companies, any attempt at conspiring against the Kremlin will result in imprisonment and seizure of their Russian assets. In a sense, they have now found themselves between the hammer and the anvil.

As for the political elite, there are signs that its members have rallied around the regime. Speaking anonymously to Russian journalist Farida Rustamova, public officials expressed defiance and understanding that they are now tied to this country forever. [15] There have been almost no resignations among the senior public officials since the start of the war. The two exceptions – climate envoy Anatoly Chubais and Chairman of the Skolkovo Foundation Arkady Dvorkovich – only prove the rule as both are notorious 'has-beens', members of the liberal camp who have long lost their influence. On the other hand, high-ranking politicians such as the deputy chairman of the Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, the chairman of the Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, and the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, not only do not display any signs of moderation, but, on the contrary, compete among themselves in making aggressive, jingoist statements. Expecting that such radicalism would please Putin, they engage in reckless war-mongering in an effort to improve their standing within the regime.

Rustamova's interviews do reveal fear and discontent among some of the younger, more competent members of the bureaucratic corps, but the latter have no means to protest or even flee the country. Finally, the possibility of a military coup is practically non-existent. The army has to bear the brunt of the war that is going catastrophically for Russia, but the military establishment is highly depoliticised and closely monitored by the security apparatus. In sum,

researcher Adam Casey's assessment that "Putin has coup-proofed his regime" appears to be correct. [16] There are no short-term and medium-term challenges to Putin's power.

Conclusion: 'power over' and 'power to'

While Putin's power over Russia seems to be secure, the question is: can he actually deploy it in a constructive way? In other words, does he have the power to achieve anything besides maintaining his role as Russia's autocrat? This question can only be answered in the negative. The Russian economy is decisively broken by Western sanctions. While the government has probably managed to prevent the most catastrophic scenario in the short and medium term, technological advancement and diversification away from hydrocarbons are simply impossible under the present sanctions. In effect, the technological gap with the rest of the world will only widen over time. Similarly, Russian science and culture cannot develop in isolation and in the stifling atmosphere of repression. Putin's stated geopolitical goals of stopping and reversing NATO expansion are not and cannot be achieved either. If anything, the opposite is true: Finland and Sweden will likely join NATO in the coming months, and the presence of the alliance in Eastern Europe will increase dramatically. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg put it rather succinctly: "If President Putin wants less NATO on his borders, he will get more NATO at his borders," a perfectly predictable and entirely inevitable outcome of Russia's aggression. [17]

In a recent article, Dmitry Trenin, one of Russia's most prominent foreign policy experts, described what amounts to a programme of positive change. It is worth quoting in full:

In this military situation, the 're-edition' of the Russian Federation is inevitable...The country needs fundamental changes: blocking the channels that feed corruption; reorientation of big business to national interests; a new personnel policy to significantly improve the quality of public administration at all levels; social solidarity; the return of fundamental – not monetary – values as the basis of life. These changes, in turn, are impossible without overcoming the remaining elements of offshore oligarchic capitalism, wide rotation and renewal of the ruling elite, state and administrative apparatuses, and, as a result, renegotiation of the social contract between the authorities and society on the basis of mutual trust and solidarity. [18]

For several reasons, this programme will not be implemented. There is a special Russian word for it: *manilovshchina*, a kind of ridiculously naïve daydreaming practiced by Manilov, a character from Nikolay Gogol's novel, *Dead Souls*. There are external constraints; but, even more importantly, there are internal political obstacles that are insurmountable in the framework of the current political system. The 'rotation of the ruling elite' is a non-starter since it could destabilise the regime. Putin would never allow it. The last month demonstrated that the 'stability of cadres' is still his preferred approach. The growth of social solidarity is equally impossible in the context of toxic, depraved propaganda and complete rejection of any grassroots activity by the regime, even of a loyalist kind. Consequently, no 're-edition' of Russia will happen either. Rather, the likely trajectory is the continuing economic, social and moral decay.

While things now seem rather hopeless for Russia's opposition movement, the future is not preordained. A lot depends on the situation on the battlefield. Further losses on the Russian side could increase political uncertainty within the country. Sanctions are also only beginning to affect the Russian population. Their effect will grow when inventories run out and hundreds of thousands of furloughed workers are dismissed. Currently, the infrastructure of the regime is still strong, while social and organisational bases of the opposition are weak. But there are many factors at play and the situation could change at any point in the future.

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Source: [Aljazeera Center for Studies](#).

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