

War dictatorship: power and society in Russia

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With the start of the war against Ukraine, the Putin regime is taking on more and more features of a totalitarian system. The authorities are aiming for a total information blockade and a 'rally around the flag', including through the use of a massive propaganda campaign that is demonising Ukraine and the West. The degree of repression against the disloyal elements of society is growing. The few anti-war protests occurring in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine have been nipped in the bud. One of the direct consequences of the invasion is the increase in emigration from Russia for political reasons. Although there is a lack of reliable sociological data on the real mood in Russian society, one can see a relatively high level of support for the 'special operation' in Ukraine or else passive acceptance of the Kremlin's policy. Although society is beginning to suffer from the effects of Western sanctions (they include rapidly rising prices of basic products and a shortage of goods), there is no reason to expect any mass protests on economic grounds in the near future. The situation within the ruling elite also appears stable, despite the deep frustration among many groups of influence caused by the sanctions. Western restrictive measures have significantly raised the cost of participation in the Putin regime. Anti-war calls from the representatives of the establishment are few and far between, and they usually avoid direct criticism of the Kremlin, which maintains the ability to discipline those who are discontented. The narrow circle of decision makers, which comprises mainly the heads of secret services and law enforcement bodies, seems to fully share the objectives and methods of war set out by the president.

From the onset of the Ukraine invasion, the Kremlin began to introduce elements of a war dictatorship into the Russian political system. The totalitarian ambitions of Putin's regime have been apparent since 2020, with increasing state interference in previously unregulated spheres of public and private activity of citizens, but this tendency has recently intensified, as have efforts to intimidate the Kremlin's opponents. The scale of lies and manipulations about the war, disseminated by the state media, is unprecedented. Active forms of protest against the Kremlin's policy are being quickly snuffed out.

Information blockade

One of the Kremlin's primary goals during wartime is to impose a complete information blockade on Russian society, so as to prevent criticism of the state's policies and suppress potential protests. Wartime censorship is accompanied by a campaign against 'traitors' who condemn the invasion.



On 24 February, the day the invasion began, Russian media regulator Roskomnadzor obliged the media operating in the country (under threat of penalties, including website blocking) to report on the events in Ukraine only on the basis of official Russian sources. A much harsher blow came soon after, with the amendment to the Criminal Code that entered into force on 4 March. It introduced severe penalties for “deliberate dissemination of false information about the activity of the Russian Armed Forces”. Under this law it is illegal to call the so-called special operation a war. This ‘crime’ is punishable with up to 15 years in prison.¹

As a direct result of these actions, a number of independent media outlets have been closed down or suspended, including the leading ones, such as *Dozhd* internet tel-

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evision (*TV Rain*) and *Ekho Moskvy* radio station. Some of the media critical of the Kremlin (like *Novaya Gazeta*) refrain from directly referring to the “war” in order to avoid repression. This restrictive legislation has also forced many Western editorial offices to leave Russia, including the *BBC Russian service*, *Radio Free Europe* and *Voice of America*. Nevertheless, they have stated their intention to continue covering the theme of war and the situation in Russia. Reliable information about the invasion is also being published by Russian media outlets operating from abroad (e.g. *Meduza*, *Radio Svoboda*). However, the websites of these media, both Western and Russian, have been blocked by the regime. According to available data, at least 150 journalists fled Russia during the first two weeks of the invasion.

Censorship of social media is intensifying as well.² This is largely due to the government’s concerns about sentiments among the youth. In recent years, support for the regime has been falling fastest among internet users and young people.³ Between 4 and 14 March, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were blocked in Russia – access to them is only possible using a VPN (bypassing the blockades is formally prohibited). On 21 March, a Moscow district court designated Meta Platforms Inc. (owner of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp) as an extremist organisation, which means a ban on its operation in Russia (the ban does not refer to WhatsApp). The fact that Meta allowed Ukrainian users to post calls for violence against Russian soldiers was cited as the reason.

At the same time the authorities are trying to make the public switch to using Russian social media and messenger services such as VKontakte or Odnoklassniki, which are obliged by law to cooperate with the secret services. In recent days the number of newly registered accounts in these state-controlled services has visibly increased.⁴

Currently, YouTube and Telegram remain the most important platforms for independent information, which is where the media blocked by the authorities are moving to. However, there is a risk that Roskomnadzor will try to throttle YouTube (some regime representatives have openly suggested it would be blocked), while similar intent against Telegram has not yet been expressed.

¹ On 16 March, the first three criminal cases were opened in connection with alleged fake news about a ‘special operation’ in Ukraine.

² See more widely ‘The Kremlin’s crackdown on Western social networks’, OSW, 15 March 2022, osw.waw.pl.

³ According to an August 2021 MediaScope study, 73% of Russians use social media, while the figure is over 90% in the 12–34 age group. 49% of Russians use the social media daily. According to Brand Analytics, a company that studies the activity of social media in Russia, in terms of active users, until recently Instagram was the most popular one with more than 38 million authors per month. In turn, according to the agency We Are Social, YouTube was the most popular service among all Russian users (85.4%).

⁴ VKontakte is the most popular network in Russia with an average monthly user base of around 72 million.

Kremlin's propaganda offensive

The Russian propaganda machine has been justifying the war since 24 February by utilising aggressive anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian content. It is based on lies and verbal aggression on a scale unseen since 2014. The creation of an 'alternative reality' is intended to boost social acceptance for increasingly brutal Russian actions in Ukraine. The patriotic hysteria whipped up by the propagandists and Russian officials is also meant to instil a fear of expressing views at variance with those officially promoted.

Russian state media and Kremlin-sponsored 'experts' deny Ukraine the right to its own national identity and sovereign choices. At the same time, they present Russia as the only continuation of historical Rus, and therefore as the state representing the whole community of eastern Slavs. They discredit Ukraine as a dysfunctional, Russophobic state ruled by a 'Nazi regime', and dehumanise both the Ukrainian government and all those who are fighting against the aggressor. The claim that the country needs to be 'denazified' is constantly repeated.

The propagandists also demonise the West and NATO. They keep pushing the false narrative that the 'special operation' in Ukraine is not only an 'effort to end the

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eight-year war' in Donbas and 'to protect the Russian-speaking population', but also a way of preventing a third world war. In this narrative, Ukraine's admission to NATO (this scenario is presented as a 100% certainty) could encourage Kyiv to retake Crimea with military force, which would inevitably lead to an armed (including nuclear) conflict between Russia and NATO. This thesis is accompanied by the message that the aim of the West is to destroy Russia, to liquidate its sovereignty and statehood. The attack on Ukraine is thus presented as part of the unavoidable conflict with the West – a conflict of a metaphysical nature, a struggle between good and evil, a battle with a 'global Russophobia'.

Following the information distributed by the Russian Ministry of Defence, the state media either skip over the number of casualties on the Russian side or significantly underestimate their extent, while emphasising the heroic attitude of the few fallen "defenders of the homeland". A significant portion of propaganda coverage is devoted to disavowing reports from the Ukrainian side as fake news. This may indicate that despite the government's efforts, realistic information about the war is still seeping into the country, which the Kremlin perceives as a significant threat.

For the Russian public, television remains the main source of information, although trust in it has fallen below 50% in recent years (according to a 2021 Levada Centre poll, 62% of Russians access information from television).⁵ The education system is also involved in the ideological offensive. In the first days of the invasion, schools were recommended to organise special lessons on the 'operation' in Ukraine, on the basis of detailed instructions and materials distributed by the authorities, including propaganda videos. Available data shows that Russian schools are implementing these recommendations to varying degrees, with some quietly ignoring them. Much depends on the individual approach of teachers and school principals. At the same time, cases of intimidation have been reported concerning schoolchildren who ask 'inconvenient' questions as well as their parents. In turn, university students who take part in peaceful anti-war protests are threatened not only with criminal or administrative liability, but also face possible expulsion (so far, such measures have been announced by, among others, St. Petersburg State University).

⁵ 'Российский медиаландшафт – 2021', Левада Центр, 5 August 2021, levada.ru.

Forcible suppression of anti-war protests

The military aggression against Ukraine did not trigger mass anti-war protests in Russia. Based on the available data, it can be estimated that none of the anti-war demonstrations, which – until recently – took place almost every day (the last major action was held on 13 March), gathered more than 10,000 people across the country. In spite of the low numbers of protesters, from the beginning the police have made every effort to nip in the bud even the smallest street demonstrations. At the same time, law enforcement bodies have been intimidating Russian citizens and discouraging them from taking part in the actions. The Russian Investigative Committee and the Prosecutor General's Office have warned Russians about their criminal responsibility for taking part in unauthorised demonstrations. Protesters are being detained on a larger scale than ever before. The independent media project OVD-Info, which monitors human rights violations, reports that a total of more than 15,000 people were detained between 24 February and 22 March. In proportional terms, this means that each time a significant portion, if not the majority of the protesters, are detained. Police are becoming increasingly brutal, and individual cases of torture in police stations have been reported.

So far, more than 6,500 administrative cases related to participation in unauthorised anti-war protests in Moscow have been

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brought to local courts. The punishments handed down are mainly fines (more than 1,100 people), and less frequently detentions (more than 220 people). The demonstrators are accused of, among other things, ‘discrediting’ the actions of the Russian armed forces (this offence was introduced into the administrative code on 4 March this year) and violating the law on public gatherings. According to Russian law, two administrative cases within a year can result in launching a criminal case, which potentially carries a prison sentence.

Russian society: poverty, fear and support for war

While unequivocal anti-war attitudes seem to dominate among the liberal intelligentsia, including the artistic community, there is still a lack of comprehensive, reliable data on the mood among the general public. Surveys carried out by state-run centres such as VTSIOM and FOM show a fairly high level of support for the ‘special operation’ and a clear increase in the president’s and government’s approval ratings,⁶ although opinions tend to be polarised depending on age, place of residence and sources of information (anti-war sentiments are much higher among young people, internet users, and in big cities). At first glance, these results seem plausible, although the views expressed in the surveys are certainly influenced by at least two factors. Firstly, the question itself is formulated in a biased way (it concerns ‘special operation’, not a ‘war’). Secondly, there is a growing fear of expressing one’s views frankly on issues referring to national security. Russians are aware of the reprisals that may be brought against them for their disloyalty.

Russians, fearing repression for taking part in street demonstrations, have been more likely to choose other forms of protest: financial support for Ukrainian victims of the war,⁷ and signing anti-war petitions and open letters on the Internet. Even in the very first days of the invasion, such petitions were published by, among others, the democratic Yabloko party, several hundred non-governmental organisations, several hundred municipal councillors, representatives of various professional groups

⁶ VTSIOM noted an increase in the percentage of those “rather supportive” of the “special operation” from 65% to 71% between 25 February and 3 March. It also reported that confidence in the Russian president has increased in recent weeks to 79.6% (up 11.4 pp.), as have positive assessments of his policies (from 64.3% to 77.2%). VTSIOM also notes an increase in support for the Prime Minister and the government.

⁷ ‘Нет войне. Как российские власти борются с антивоенными протестами’ ОВД-Инфо, 14 March 2022, reports.ovdinfo.org.

(including artists, scientists, IT workers), and thousands of students and lecturers, including current and former students and employees of MGIMO university, which is subordinate to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MGIMO's open letter has so far collected over 1500 signatures). Moreover, in social media, celebrities, writers, and musicians express their individual opposition to the war.⁸ Due to increasing surveillance and censorship, such activities also carry the risk of repression (including accusations of 'extremism'); the first cases of dismissal from work have already been reported.

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Its exact scale remains unknown,

but it can be estimated to be at least in the tens of thousands during the first two weeks of the war. The main destinations are Turkey, Armenia (estimates put it as high as 4,000 per day)⁹, Azerbaijan, Georgia (according to the Georgian authorities, 20,000–25,000 Russians went there in the first week of the invasion)¹⁰ and other post-Soviet countries.¹¹ These are mostly countries with a visa-free regime for Russians, where flight connections still operate, and those participating in the Russian MIR payment system (Visa and Mastercard cannot be used abroad by Russian citizens due to sanctions). Men are afraid of being called up to the army, and fears that martial law will be imposed in Russia are also alive. The most active part of society is leaving: it refers not only to opponents of the regime (civic activists, journalists, oppositionists), but also a lot of 'politically neutral' Russians: well-educated, relatively young and professionally active people, including entrepreneurs, IT workers and others.

In response to criticism from opinion leaders, the government mobilised 'patriotic' circles to publish their own petitions and statements supporting the war. Among them, an open letter from well over a hundred rectors of Russian universities echoed loudly. They expressed their full support for the president, the army, and the slogans of "demilitarisation" and "denazification" of Ukraine. The leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church have also spoken unequivocally in favour of the Kremlin (individual critical voices within the Church were immediately silenced). Public sector workers – especially those working in schools, universities and public administration – are required to publicly express their approval of the "special operation", e.g. to publish photos in social media marked with the 'Z' sign¹² – a new, top-down created symbol of 'patriotic' support for the war. According to the totalitarian logic, the state authorities are not content with the passive support of the public any more, but require ideological commitment and active demonstration of 'patriotism'.

The relatively small number of people speaking out against the war and the high level of declared support for aggression are a consequence of massive propaganda, the information blockade, and the increasingly repressive character of the Russian authoritarian regime in recent years, as well as the destruction of much of the fabric of civil society, which in 2021 fell victim to unprecedented persecution. This has led to a growing sense of frustration and a lack of agency on the part of citizens *vis-à-vis* the state. In addition, Russians have recently focused on serious material problems, as the effects of the eight-year economic stagnation have been aggravated by the initial consequences of Western sanctions.

Russian society has started to suffer acutely from the effects of sanctions and is trying to adapt to the new situation. Russian citizens, who have experienced four economic crises in the last 30 years, of which

⁸ See in more detail 'Public reactions in Russia to the invasion of Ukraine', OSW, 2 March 2022, osw.waw.pl.

⁹ Ю. Рокс, 'Российским мигрантам не очень-то рады в постсоветских странах', Независимая газета, 9 March 2022, ng.ru.

¹⁰ 'Минэкономики Грузии: границу пересекли 20–25 тысяч россиян', Медиазона, 7 March 2022, zona.media.

¹¹ According to independent media reports, many IT workers are moving to Kyrgyzstan.

¹² The 'Z' sign was painted on the military vehicles that invaded Ukraine.

the one related to the break-up of the USSR has been the most severe so far, adopt a passive attitude in such situations and focus on individual survival strategies. These consist primarily in providing their families with the necessary goods and adapting their supply to their financial possibilities (it means switching to cheaper and high calorie foods, purchasing goods in barter transactions etc.). Russians also traditionally use their allotments to grow basic vegetables and fruit or take on additional work if it is possible. At the same time, Russians distrust their government: lessons learnt from the past taught them that their savings may be confiscated and they may become deprived of their sources of income. This has led to the massive withdrawal of savings, including those held in roubles, from banks.

The situation on the labour market is becoming increasingly difficult. For the time being, only a small group of people have lost their jobs, mainly the self-employed or

those working under contract. Most western companies which have withdrawn from Russia are still paying their employees and have not terminated contracts with them. Only the next few months will show how much this crisis will reduce people's incomes.

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While the losses caused by sanctions to the richest Russians and even to the middle class are very high in absolute terms, the crisis is putting the poorest in a particularly grave situation: the prices of necessities such as foodstuffs and medicines, which account for the bulk of expenditure by this section of society, have risen significantly.

Attitudes within the ruling elite

Information on the mood of the Russian political and business elite is scant. On the basis of relatively few signals, including public statements, it must be concluded that the vast majority of the establishment has been taken completely by surprise by both the invasion of Ukraine and the unprecedented scale of Western economic and individual sanctions, and the country's international isolation. On the one hand, the mood within the broad elite is sombre, but no one dares to criticise the Kremlin publicly for fear of reprisals. On the other hand, a narrow circle of decision-makers (permanent members of the Security Council, including the heads of the law enforcement bodies), who have been privy to Vladimir Putin's plans, seem to fully share both the president's goals and the ideology behind them. Absolute loyalty is manifested by the majority of high-level officials, while business circles call for a cessation of military action or remain silent.

So far, several oligarchs (Oleg Deripaska, Mikhail Fridman, Vladimir Lisin), several State Duma deputies from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and from the pro-Kremlin liberal New People party, and former Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich, now president of the International Chess Federation (FIDE), have cautiously come out against the war. In doing so, Deripaska warned of the most serious economic crisis in post-Soviet Russia's history. Senator Lyudmila Narusova was quite bold in criticising the 'war censorship' in Russia and Russian actions in Ukraine. Natalia Poklonskaya, deputy head of the Rossotrudnichestvo agency, recorded an anti-war appeal, albeit in a spirit fully loyal to the Kremlin. The sanctioned Russian Direct Investment Fund called for peace between Russia and Ukraine to be restored as soon as possible. The board of directors of Lukoil (Russia's largest private oil company) has also called for a diplomatic solution to the conflict. According to reports from independent sources, employees of the state-controlled Yandex corporation are demanding that the management take a clear position on the war in Ukraine.

Journalists have started to be fired from the state media: it has not yet assumed any significant scale, and anti-war protest is generally not expressed in public.¹³

Both the small number of public anti-war speeches and their moderate, loyalist tone indicate that Putin maintains his ability to discipline the elite for the time being. While the establishment is increasingly aware that the risks and costs of their participation in Putin's system are beginning to outweigh the benefits to date, those most affected by sanctions and international isolation are still virtually devoid of political influence.

Outlook

Russia's deepening international isolation will be accompanied by a neo-totalitarian domestic policy aimed at a pre-emptive elimination of any real or potential threat to the regime. A further increase in repression, both targeted at society in general and the elite, is to be expected. This was in fact explicitly announced by Vladimir Putin in his speech on 16 March, in which Stalinist accents resounded: he called on Russian society to 'purge itself' of traitors and the 'fifth column' serving the West.¹⁴ This could potentially herald not only mass repression but also orchestrated acts of lynching the most vocal critics of the regime. The government also intends to create lists of disloyal people (in the form of a unified register of 'foreign agents') to facilitate repression.¹⁵ Attempts to disconnect the internet in selected areas, especially in large cities, cannot be ruled out.

In spite of this, intensified repression and a complete information blockade as a mechanism to stabilise the

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system may prove counterproductive in the long run. The Russian government has in fact deprived itself of sources of alternative information, and therefore of the ability to adequately assess real challenges and threats. The liquidation of free media, the intimidation of society and the ruling elite, and the turning of elections into a full-fledged forgery make the system extremely inflexible, and thus vulnerable to shocks.

Sociological surveys show that the public does not have a clear idea of the goals of the military operation in Ukraine, which in the longer term may weaken the 'rally around the flag' effect – all the more so as the actual course of war is increasingly at odds with the excessively optimistic message conveyed to television viewers. At the same time, it remains unclear how much information on the real number of deaths among Russian soldiers seeps down to the public and whether it can have a significant impact on their attitudes any time soon.

How public sentiment will be affected in the coming weeks and months by the consequences of Western economic sanctions also remains an open question. Current macroeconomic forecasts for Russia predict a deep recession in 2022. Most of them point to a possible decrease in GDP of around 10% and an increase in inflation of more than 20%. This will entail a serious decline in incomes. Due to the political nature of the crisis, any government response based on economic instruments (significantly limited by sanctions) may bring only limited effects. The consequences of sanctions in the form of price increases for goods and services will first affect the poorest, who spend

¹³ The only exception so far is Marina Ovsyannikova, a TV journalist from Pervyi kanal, who protested against the war during a live news broadcast. Ovsyannikova also recorded a harsh anti-war appeal in which she denounced the lies of the Kremlin propaganda. A case has been opened against her for "spreading fake news about the actions of the Russian army", for which she faces a prison sentence.

¹⁴ 'Совещание о мерах социально-экономической поддержки регионов', Президент России, 16 March 2022, kremlin.ru.

¹⁵ The relevant law entered into force on 14 March. The register is to include not only people already placed on the list of 'foreign agents', but also former and current staff of the media and NGOs designated as 'agents', including their founders and heads. In addition, it will include people who, according to the authorities, are involved in political activities and receive material support from abroad.

the largest part of their income on food. This is also the Kremlin's core electorate. This group includes 12% (around 18 million) of citizens living below the poverty line, as well as some families with children and numerous pensioners (in 2021, the number of pensioners in Russia was around 42 million). The mood in this group will depend on how the government will respond to their needs, including the scale of social assistance to be offered to the poorest. However, given the severe financial difficulties faced by the state, this assistance will not compensate for the impact of the recession.

In the longer term, the key question will be whether Russians will blame the Kremlin and the president in person for the crisis (potentially the most severe one since 1991), or whether they will swallow the state propaganda that accuses the West of seeking to 'destroy the Russian people'. In the first case, the mood observed by sociologists before the invasion may return with redoubled force: a decline in trust in the authorities, fatigue with Putin's rule, increase in social demands, and a deepening sense of injustice at Putin's model of government.

At the same time, neither a split in the ruling elite (the only factor that could lead to a change of political leadership) nor mass public protests should be expected in the foreseeable future, despite deepening frustration over economic problems and dissatisfaction with the Kremlin's policy. The fear of repression and the deep mutual distrust among the Russian elite and society will most likely prevent any collective action to force Putin to change course or remove him from power. On the other hand, 'preventive' purges of the elite cannot be ruled out, as failures of the Russian army in Ukraine may lead to a search for scapegoats.