

# რეჟიმის სტაბილურობა და ომის აქტიურობა: რუსეთის პოლიტიკის განხილვა და სვდნობები ომის პირველი ექვსი თვის განხილვაში და ამ პერიოდის მიმართ

REGIME STABILITY AND WAGING WAR IN UKRAINE: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN  
RUSSIAN POLITICS IN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS AND BEYOND

მეთიუ ბლექბერნი

მკვლევარი, რუსეთის და ევრაზიის კვლევების ინსტიტუტი, უფსალას უნივერსიტეტი

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## რეზიუმე

ესეში ყურადღება გამახვილებულია რუსეთ-უკრაინის ომის პირველ ექვს თვეზე. ავტორი ცდილობს, შეაფასოს, რა მიმართულებით შეიცვალა, რა მხრივ შენარჩუნდა და რამდენად სტაბილურია რუსეთის შიდა პოლიტიკა. მეთიუ ბლექბერნის აზრით, სწორედ იქიდან გამომდინარე, რომ კრემლი აცნობიერებს პოლიტიკური რეჟიმის სტაბილურობის მნიშვნელობას, საკუთარ თავს გარკვეულ შეზღუდვებს უწესებს როგორც საგარეო პოლიტიკაში, ისე სამხედრო მოქმედებების შემდგომი ესკალაციის მხრივ. იგი ხაზს უსვამს, რომ მიუხედავად გამოცხადებული მობილიზაციისა, დიდი ალბათობით, ფრთხილი პოლიტიკა შენარჩუნდება: იმის ნაცვლად, რომ რუსეთმა იხელმძღვანელოს სარისკო სტრატეგიით — „ან ყველაფერი, ან არაფერი“, ის ეცდება, რომ შეასუსტოს უკრაინის წინააღმდეგობა „დამღლეი ომის“ მეშვეობით, გაანადგუროს ინფრასტრუქტურა და აქციოს უკრაინა შემდგომ სახელმწიფოდ.

პუტინის გადაწყვეტილებამ უკრაინაში სრულმასშტაბიანი ომის დაწყებასთან დაკავშირებით დიდი გავლენა იქონია მსოფლიო პოლიტიკასა და ეკონომიკაზე. მიუხედავად ამისა, ავტორს მიაჩნია, რომ, მსოფლიოსთან შედარებით, ომს რუსეთის საშინაო პოლიტიკაზე მკვეთრი გავლენა არ მოუხდენია. ესეის ავტორი ამის მიზეზად იმას ასახელებს, რომ ყველაზე დიდი ცვლილებები ელიტების ერთიანობის შესანარჩუნებლად, პოლიტიკური ოპოზიციის რეპრესიისა თუ იძულებით თანამშრომლობისთვის და საინფორმაციო ომის წარმოებისთვის 2022 წლის ომამდე განხორციელდა.

ესეიდან გამომდინარეობს, რომ რუსეთის პოლიტიკა დიდწილად არ შეცვლილა უკრაინასთან ომის პირველი ექვსი თვის განმავლობაში. თუმცა, იმავეს ვერ ვიტყვით მომდევნო ექვს თვეზე. მობილიზაცია და სამხედრო მოქმედებების ესკალაცია წინხად აწვება სხვადასხვა სახელისუფლებო ვერტიკალს. მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ ნაკლებ სავარაუდოა, პუტინმა სერიოზული ნაბიჯები გადადგას რუსეთის ნეო-სტალინისტურ სახელმწიფოდ გარდაქმნისკენ – წერს ავტორი – შესაძლოა, რომ ომის დროს ლოიალობის პოლიტიკამ გამოიწვიოს ელიტის არაპროგნოზირებადი გადაჯგუფება. საბოლოო ანალიზისას, ბლექბერნი ამტკიცებს, რომ როგორც არასდროს, გასული ოცი წლის განმავლობაში, პუტინის სისტემა დამოკიდებულია სამხედრო შედეგებსა და მაკრო-ეკონომიკური სტაბილურობის შენარჩუნებაზე. შესაძლოა, რომ სწორედამ ორმა ცვლადმა განსაზღვროს არსებული რეჟიმის მომავალი.

From the very start of war in Ukraine there have been persistent and recurrent predictions of systemic collapse in Russia. This includes military exhaustion (Sly 2022), economic meltdown,<sup>1</sup> mass protests<sup>2</sup> and, inter-elite splits (Stanovaya 2022), all of which was to spell the end of Vladimir Putin as president and bring about an end of the war. Such predictions of the ‘beginning of the end’ (Saradzhyan 2022) have proven to be premature and based on the view of pre-2022 foundations of regime stability as fragile. This essay offers an alternative viewpoint, examining factors of continuity and change in three key areas of regime stabilisation: (1) co-option and inter-elite unity; (2) macro-economic stability and state capacity in governance; (3) legitimisation narratives. All three areas have been invested in heavily by the Kremlin in the ten years prior to the launch of the Special Military Operation (SMO) in February 2022.

It is the contention of this essay that domestic political factors played a key role in determining the limited extent of the SMO in the first instance; Putin opted for caution and did not want to suddenly risk shaking these pillars with full mobilisation and all-out war. It is only with the failure of a strategy of ‘compellence’<sup>3</sup>, due to Ukrainian resistance, Western unity and Russia’s worse than expected military performance, that the Kremlin has been forced into partial mobilisation, annexation of territory and critical infrastructure strikes on Ukraine, all measures that were on the table but not used in February 2022.

The continuity in political groupings, governance, economic policy and legitimisation strategy in the first six months of the war is now under significant pressure: the economic pain predicted in March 2022 is surely coming on the horizon, making stability harder to deliver. The September mobilisation has demanded far more of Russia’s citizenry than any previous Putin government has demanded and caused a significant second outflow of people from the country.

The focus of this essay is on the first six months of the war, examining continuity and change in domestic politics with a focus on processes of stabilisation. It is argued the Kremlin’s own understanding of the need to stabilise politics acts as a constraint on foreign policy and military capacity.

1 Bloomberg news. 2022. Russia is in Topsy-Turvy World Where Belarus Tops German Exports. Bloomberg.com. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-08/russia-is-in-topsy-turvy-world-where-belarus-tops-german-exports?leadSource=uverify%20wall> (21.01.2023)

2 1news.co.nz. 2022. Protests ‘beginning of the end’ for Putin – Ukrainian MP. 29 September, 2022. <https://www.1news.co.nz/2022/09/29/protests-beginning-of-the-end-for-putin-ukrainian-mp/> (21.01.2023)

3 Compellence. Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/compellence> (21.01.2023)

It is likely that, even after mobilisation, this cautious approach will continue as the Kremlin, instead of risking an all or nothing general offensive, attempts to wear down Ukrainian resistance in a war of attrition, destroy infrastructure and turn Ukraine into a failed rump state.

## Regime stability and the nature of the Putin system 2018-2022

The political science literature has a degree of consensus in defining the Russian political system as electoral authoritarianism (Matovski 2021; Gel'man 2013), between the extremes of liberal democracies and firmly closed authoritarianism. In the Russia case, the system is highly centralised and personalised (Frye 2021; Burkhardt 2021). President Putin positions himself above official institutions, political groupings and ideological factions, concentrated increasing powers in an administrative regime (Sakwa 2020) (referred to henceforth as the Kremlin) that directs a power vertical made up of federal, regional, municipal and local structures. Following the framework of Johannes Gerschewski (2013), three main pillars stabilise the Putin system: (1) building coercive capacity for repression; (2) co-optation of opposition and securing elite unity; (3) legitimisation of the regime through advertising regime performance and mobilising identity politics. This essay argues the means of achieving stability shifted before the start of the Special Military Operation (SMO) when Russia moved into 'emergency mode' over 2020-22.

### Context: Emergency mode of 2020-2022 prior to the SMO

The shift to the emergency mode was a response to a number of unfavourable developments inside and outside Russia towards the end of 2019. This included economic stagnation<sup>4</sup>, stalling progress in development and modernisation plans (Aris 2019), sporadic outbursts of protests across diverse parts of the country (Solntseva 2020), and falling polling ratings for the President and the authorities (Logvinenko 2020). The move to emergency mode had three main components. The first came in January 2020 with plans for constitutional amendments to remove Putin's term limit and deepen hyper-centralization. The way these changes were implemented, without serious inter-elite dissent, demonstrated the discipline and obedience of the political elite. Already from 2017 regional authorities experienced high turnovers due to pressure or sackings from the political centre (Ivanov and Petrov 2021). Even suspicions of non-conformity or unreliability could lead to one's downfall, such as the governor of Khabarovsk Sergei Furgal, arrested without any public display of dissent, resulting in significant and sustained protests in the city.

The second component was repression. Against the backdrop of protests in Khabarovsk, Belarus and the Navalny poisoning incident, a variety of restrictive laws were passed in the Duma curtailing freedom of speech, assembly and association.<sup>5</sup> These were then deployed from January 2021, mainly

4 Ведомости. 2021. Минэкономразвития ухудшило прогноз по росту реальных доходов россиян. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/economics/news/2021/10/18/891614-minekonomrazvitiya-uhudshilo-prognoz-po-rostu-realnih-dohodov> (21.01.2023)

5 Meduza.io. 2020. В конце 2020 года Госдума вернулась в режим «бешеного принтера». Чтобы максимально усложнить жизнь оппозиции на выборах в 2021-м. Meduza.io. <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/12/26/v-kon>

against the ‘extremists’ of Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation but also including swathes of civil society designated as ‘foreign agents’ or ‘undesirable organizations’. The securitisation of Russian politics and society, was also ratcheted up several notches with State Duma committees on security and fighting foreign interference in Russian domestic affairs also very active.<sup>6</sup>

The third element was the embedding of securitized patriotic laws into the constitution. This showed new red lines of ideological compliance among elites and increased commitment to the identity politics that the Kremlin has been pushing with particular zeal since 2012. State media loyally showcased patriotic amendments of the constitutional amendments and new benefits to certain social groups. In informational terms, a sharp return to identity politics occurred in response to protests in Belarus, claimed foreign interference in Russian affairs over the Navalny poisoning and the election of Joe Biden, which sparked increased reporting on the threat of the ‘Collective West’ and the situation in Ukraine (Blackburn and Petersson 2021).

These ways of operating were already set before the announcement of the SMO in February 2022. It is worth pointing out the emergency mode of 2020-22 and the way Russia was run during the first six months of the SMO were very similar: both ways of operating did not demand the sacrifice, active participation or mobilization of the population. If citizens avoided sensitive topics and stayed away from certain groups, relatively normal life could continue. The regime was able to deliver basic state capacity and macro-economic stability if not growth, while constantly drumming home the message it was the only force able to protect Russian interests on the world stage. The key difference is that, if over 2020-22 such claims were made against a backdrop of geopolitical deadlock, cold peace and economic stagnation, after the SMO they were now done in a context of almost complete rupture with the West where the Kremlin’s pretensions to transform the world order and Russia’s place in it are now backed by a military operation. It is beyond the scope of this essay, however to elaborate on the deep motives for the invasion; more important to this analysis is the point that domestic politics helped determine the scope of the military operation.

## The nature of SMO and the centrality of domestic considerations to Putin’s plan

For the first six months, the SMO involved less than 200,000 troops, a force inadequate to storm cities or conduct encircling operations on a front line going over 1000 km. Russia fired only 600 missiles the first ten days<sup>7</sup>, modest in comparison to the 2000 strikes launched in the first four days of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Correll 2023). Why did Putin thought he could achieve the uncompromising goals of de-militarization, ‘de-Nazification’ and ‘liberating’ the Donbass with an expeditionary force of under 200,000, especially when faced by slightly larger and strongly motivated Ukrainian defenders? It is tempting to think he thought he could cheaply bully Kyiv or its Western

tse-2020-goda-gosduma-vernulas-v-rezhim-beshenogo-printera-chtoby-maksimalno-uslozhnit-zhizn-opozitsii-na-vyborah-v-2021-m (21.01.2023)

6 Duma.gov.ru. 2021. The State Duma Commission revealed new evidence of foreign interference in the election campaign in Russia. <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/52010/> (21.01.2023)

7 CNN.com. 2022. Russia has fired 600 missiles; 95% of amassed combat power now in Ukraine, senior US defense official says. [https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-03-06-22/h\\_9a75a46d4b-fa8041016b60472351f411](https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-03-06-22/h_9a75a46d4b-fa8041016b60472351f411) (21.01.2023)

allies into coming to terms; the mere entrance of Russian troops into the fray would cause panic and mayhem in Ukraine, forcing the Kyiv government to the negotiating table. A perhaps more nuanced way to view the Kremlin's strategy is in terms of 'compellence' (Lee 2022): with its diplomatic efforts with America ending in failure, Moscow decided to compel the Ukrainian government to come to its terms. The forces Russia deployed in February 2022 were nowhere near large enough to conquer and occupy Ukraine but they were enough to end what was seen as an unacceptable status quo, whereby Ukraine was arming and training more and more military units to NATO levels. As Rob Lee correctly predicted in January 2022, Russia's operations in Ukraine would not be full-scale invasion and occupation of Ukraine but inflicting an escalating number of material and manpower losses to Ukrainian forces, raising pressure and costs on Kiev.

Lacking air superiority and any manpower advantage, the SMO has been a total failure when we compare it to the German invasion of Poland (1939) or the US-led invasion of Iraq (2003). To make such a comparison is to totally fail to understand the SMO's limited nature and strategic foundation. Putin's SMO is a cheap and less risky way of achieving limited success with limited means while declaring the end of the arrangements established with the Minsk Agreements (2015-2022), which the Kremlin no longer believed could or would be fulfilled. In launching a limited SMO, Putin has been able to retain much of the previous configuration in domestic politics, make relatively minimal demands on the Russian population as a whole and prepare the country in ideological and informational terms by focusing attention on (1) the positive performance of the Russian state and economy in the face of the West's economic warfare and 'cancelling' of the country and (2) negative coverage of the West's Russophobia and Ukrainian fascism or Nazism which is united in a deadly desire to destroy the Russian state and have no desire for peace. This presents the SMO as an unavoidable step and the only choice available to Russia, who must now make her own way in world affairs. All of this shows more continuity than radical change in how the Kremlin legitimises itself to elites, the Russian population and even the wider world.

## Continuity and change in regime stabilisation processes

### *(1) Elite unity and the politics of loyalty*

Broadly speaking it is possible to talk of the following political groupings in Russian politics (Yakovlev 2021): (1) the top level of state bureaucracy; (2) the military-industrial complex and security apparatus (the voenni and the siloviki); (3) liberal economists, oligarchs, business elites; (4) neo-traditionalists, illiberal political groups and associations, and the ultra-patriots. Over the last two decades, Putin has used various means to manage these groupings, arguably to stop any of them from operating as solidaristic factions that could demand a shift to collective leadership style of Khrushchev's politburo. On the other hand, Putin does not want to emasculate key members of the ruling coalition or be seen to run roughshod over institutions; he is invested in presenting a version of modern governance to the populace that requires the working parts to perform in certain ways.

The techniques used by Putin to manage the political elite include: (1) depoliticising policy differences and managing contestation between and within groups (behind closed doors); (2) creating a system to monitor and control political and social processes (co-opting more than repressing); (3)

rejecting the more invasive form of classic authoritarian state (USSR, China) for neo-patronal looser system that is less ambitious in where it attempts to impose itself ; (4) maintaining relative ideological pluralism and policy diversity while Putin's brand of political centrism and patriotism is presented as unifying the country (Sakwa 2020).

Elite unity was already strong at the start of the SMO due to the co-opting and quiet repression of the various branches of Putin's power vertical. The outbreak of war in Ukraine has produced a particular version of the loyalist, hawk and dove triad that emerges in any country waging a limited military operation. When we look at the politics of loyalty during the first six months of the SMO, we find Putin consistently presented himself as more moderate than what can be termed the 'ultra-patriot' camp. This camp, which is too diverse and ill-assorted to be considered a single faction, embraces within it nationalist, imperialist, Eurasianist, illiberal, militaristic and conservative groups. Organisationally, they take diverse forms including: (1) systemic opposition parties (KPRF, LDPR, Fair Russia/For Truth), (2) political associations and NGOs (the International Eurasian Movement, Sorok Sorokov); (3) individual prominent actors inside and outside of the political system (Ramzdan Kadyrov, Igor Strelkov, Alexander Dugin, Zakhar Prelepin); (4) Businessmen political entrepreneurs (Konstantin Malofeev, Yevgeny Prigozhin) (5) ultra-patriotic media (Tsargrad, Zvezda).

Within this broad constellation of ultra-patriotic organisations and actors, there is no single script or ideology. What they have in common is the radical solutions they advocate in economics, social and cultural policy, and foreign affairs. In the first six months of the SMO, Putin resisted various calls for mass mobilisation, critical infrastructure strikes on Ukraine, nationalisation programmes and seizure of foreign assets, escalation of military operations to Transdniepr, Lithuania, Turkmenistan and, last but not least, demands for jailing, sanctioning, exiling or executing 'traitors' inside Russia. Putin has thus far refused to give his favour to any ideological faction within the ultra-patriotic camp. Putin has repeated the message that Defence Minister Shoigu is in charge of the SMO and all is going to plan, while allowing peace negotiations with Ukraine to be conducted right up to April 2022, when Kiev withdrew from the negotiations. Prominent advocates of harsh military action from 2014 such as Alexander Dugin or Igor Strelkov have been kept out of state media and political parties. The hardliner stances taken by Security Council Head Dmitri Medvedev and Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodyn are presented as private positions in their telegram channels. The decision to run referendums in Russian-held territories and launch partial mobilization in September did not involve consultation with any of the hawks; it was presented as a recommendation of the Ministry of Defence accepted by Putin.

In rejecting or ignoring such radical and extreme steps, Putin can again present himself as a moderate centrist at least relative to the hawks. The Kremlin legitimation strategy for the first six months has a very different orientation and focus than the radical hawks, as we will see below. In this context, the key insiders in the Russian political establishment behave as 'vocal loyalists': they reproduce the Kremlin central messaging and supplement it creatively without stepping beyond the boundaries. Included in this category are: (1) the heads of the key ministries (Lavrov, Shoigu); (2) key figures in the presidential administration (Peskov, Sergei Kirienko); (3) United Russia chief Andrey Turchak; (4) Dmitri Medvedev (Head of Security Council); (5) Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodyn.

There are also 'quiet loyalists'. This mainly refers to technocratic non-ideological politicians such as Prime Minister Mishustin and Moscow Mayor Sobyenin who are not expected to flaunt patriotic credentials. It also includes the so-called 'liberal block', which is made up of certain oligarchs

(Abramovich, and the Kavulchuk brothers), head of Sberbank German Graf, the ministry of finance and central bank 'liberals' and a number of politicians involved in the peace negotiations, including the usually ideologically hawkish Vladimir Medinsky, who unexpectedly toned down his anti-Ukraine rhetoric significantly as soon as SMO started and he became head of Russia's delegation in peace negotiations with Ukraine.

Over the course of the first six months of the SMO, it has become clear that the arguments of the hawk camp have gotten louder and more insistent. Within the context of the Kremlin's legitimization measures, the coverage of the SMO in the first six months has been ambiguous. While state media covers the bravery of the Russian forces and the righteousness of the cause, it also has to explain the reasons for its limited nature and, implicitly at least, its limited success. In general, it had to explain its slow progress in terms of the desire to limit losses for Russian forces and Ukrainian civilians according to a gradual plan that was proceeding as planned. Yet, as the negative legitimization of the West and Ukraine intensifies, and Ukraine's military successes accumulate, the demand to 'take off the gloves' becomes stronger and the voices of restraint even more hesitant.

Such is the dynamic in most wars, where the imperative to achieve victory brings 'mission creep' and military escalation. The appointment of Sergey Surovikin to head Russian forces, a move welcomed by the hawks, has oversaw a sudden escalation in infrastructure strikes on Ukraine, the deployment of mobilised troops into positions on the front and a substantial reorganisation of the command structure. Tellingly, his decision to withdraw from Kherson did not result in harsh criticism of Surovikin personally, which suggests his appointment has been largely welcomed in hawk circles. With the announcement of mobilisation and annexation, the task of unifying elites behind the war will surely be harder. The new scale of military operations increases the pressure on the various branches of the state in terms of what they must deliver with decreasing inputs. When it comes to structural stability, however, the most crucial component is macro-economic stability.

### *(1) Macro-economic stability and delivering in governance*

The first six months of the SMO saw a virtual copy of the ways of governing on display during the covid-19 epidemic, where Putin publicly sets the key tasks to the government, Duma, regional heads, and economic institutions, who then work out how to implement them, reporting back later on their results. Overall, it appears the various branches have coped with their respective jobs, although the relatively low demands and expectations of the Russian population means dissatisfaction is not as quickly expressed as in other countries. The Duma, Senate, Presidential Administration and United Russia Party have performed as expected without any serious issues. Regional authorities retained a degree of latitude in implementing the Kremlin's instructions. Called upon by Putin to mobilize local resources to help the Donbass, less than half of Russia's governors have participated in this effort up to September, citing lack of resources or giving no public reason. Other regions have witnessed more visible agitation for the SMO and larger numbers of contracted soldiers on the front. In contrast, Russia's most modern cities, St. Petersburg and Moscow, in the first six months of the SMO were largely encouraged to live life as normally as possible and leave military matters to the trained professionals at the front. This regional diversity reflects an understanding in the Kremlin that different measures and messages are needed in different contexts to retain stability. The opposite picture occurred when partial mobilisation was announced and the zeal of certain regional governors caused chaos and em-

barrassment due to the use of inaccurate lists of draftees and messy procedures that lead to social turmoil in many regions and an outflow of 200,000 from the country.

Surely the most important task of the Russian state relates to macro-economic stability. Predictions of a Western economic blitzkrieg smashing the Russian economy proved inaccurate. The maintenance of macro-economic stability demands the viability of the Rouble as an international currency, the management of inflation, as well as avoiding a massive contraction of GDP. Most of the credit for this goes to the Ministry of Finance, the Central Bank and key economic players in the banking and financial sector – what can be referred to as the liberal economic block. Putin has not only protected this block not only from hawks and conservatives pushing for nationalization and a war economy, but also against siloviki raiding. On March 5th Putin suspended all siloviki investigations into economic crimes to reduce raiding (raiderstvo) on private business and send a reassuring signal to Russian business elites.

The government under Mishustin has used a huge trade surplus to stabilize all sectors. This has included direct economic support for small and medium business lacking in the covid-19 pandemic. To ease the burden on the wider population, many tax payments have been suspended, requirements on paying back credit on cars frozen, social benefits, including minimum salary, have been increased in line with inflation and special ‘system-forming’ industries given special support. This has delivered a continuation of normality for the vast majority – although a well-educated and well-paid minority working for Western companies in Russia have been hit by the sanctions. Yet, overall, the Russian economy retained liquidity, avoided a run on the banks, stabilized the Russian stock market and brought inflation under control.

In rhetorical terms, Putin outlined his vision for Russia’s economic future at the June St. Petersburg Economic Forum. His message reassured Russia’s economic liberals that there would be no isolationism or autarky; Russia was in the process of reorientating East and South while committed to the free market, entrepreneurial enterprise and technological innovation. There was no mention of military Keynesianism; Russia would pursue fiscal discipline and balanced budgets while striving to reduce poverty and inequality. Later in the year news on the economic front brought reasons to be cheerful beyond Putin’s rhetorical flourishes. A bumper harvest saw Russia produce over 150 million tonnes of grain in 2022<sup>8</sup>, sanctions did nothing to stop crude oil prices rise and Russian revenues increase,<sup>9</sup> and Russian energy exports continued through the year (Miller 2022). Russia, compared to Saudi Arabia, had already significantly diversified its exports away from the West, a process that began in 2014 with the first sanctions.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, the flood of extra revenue available to the Russian state has ensured measures could be taken to manage inflation, achieve a degree of import substitution, and prevent the drastic GDP contraction predicted by many in March 2022.

8 AFP – Agence France Presse. 2022. Putin Expects ‘Record’ 150-million-tonne Grain Harvest In 2022. Barrons.com. 27 September, 2022. <https://www.barrons.com/news/putin-expects-record-150-million-tonne-grain-harvest-in-2022-01664276107> (21.01.2023)

9 The Economist. 2022. The West’s proposed price cap on Russian oil is no magic weapon. Economist.com. 30 November, 2022. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/11/30/the-wests-proposed-price-cap-on-russian-oil-is-no-magic-weapon> (21.01.2023)

10 The World Bank. Merchandise: Concentration and diversification indices of exports by country. [https://todata360.worldbank.org/indicators/conc.dvsct.idx.ex?country=RUS&indicator=3000&countries=SAU,USA&viz=bar\\_chart&years=2020&indicators=944](https://todata360.worldbank.org/indicators/conc.dvsct.idx.ex?country=RUS&indicator=3000&countries=SAU,USA&viz=bar_chart&years=2020&indicators=944) (21.01.2023)



Yet, beyond the rhetoric and recent economic successes (and good fortune), serious problems need to be resolved in the coming months to ensure continued macro-economic stability. Firstly, there is the huge problem of replacing the large numbers (estimated at around one million) of mostly educated and skilled workers from Russia in 2022. The sudden exodus of IT specialists is a particularly severe problem to the economy. Secondly, key sectors in transport, oil/gas services, metallurgy all depended on foreign technology and investment. Import substitutions must be found to keep a whole range of industries and transport services in operation.

While the expected 10-20% contraction of Russian GDP did not occur in 2022, there are still dark clouds looming and vital questions to be resolved. The state may have to intervene to compel companies into operating at a loss to stop unemployment increasing, budgets may not be balanced if energy revenues drop off, human capital of the quality lost in 2022 is not easily replaced and a whole range of economic channels and logistics must be invented to replace what has been disrupted in 2022. Russia's plan for integrating with Eurasia and the Global South is still not completely clear and no visible timetable exists. Perhaps the announced plans of a tripling of the state budget in 2023 with large increases in defence spending point the way to the military Keynesianism that will be deployed to stimulate much of the economy.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, even in the event of severe economic hardship, there are still prospects for the Putin system to survive: discipline and obedience to the master plan of the Kremlin and faith in the stability of this course could be enough to retain regime stability. In other words, the degree of collective belief in the moral and ideological reasons behind Putin's war in Ukraine ultimately holds together (or brings down) the whole enterprise. This brings us to a final vital pillar of regime stability in which there is significant continuity: the ideational realm of legitimation.

### *(3) Information war and winning the battle for hearts and minds*

An obvious initial point to make is that in the weeks running up to 24 February and the huge military build-up on the Ukrainian border, no serious state media agitation campaign in favor of a military operation was conducted. No prominent regime loyalists called for launching a war. Putin's announcement of the SMO caught most observers off guard inside and outside of Russia. Indeed, the first phase of the SMO did not require or attempt to mobilize mass support for the decision. The strategy of Kremlin messaging and state media propaganda on the SMO can be divided into positive and negative PR. The positive PR focused on the continuation of normality of life, macro-economic stability and state functionality in the face of unprecedented Western sanctions. State media shows Putin passing overarching instructions to various branches and heads of the Russian state. At various points they offer him televised reports on this implementation. Here credit is given not only to Putin but the system as a whole and the patriots that put in the hard work and sacrifice. Another big part of the positive PR goes to the bravery and professionalism of Russian armed forces and the patriotic actions of various members of Russian society to help the war effort and civilians from the war zone. Finally, positive PR also showcases Putin and Lavrov on the world stage with Russia now aspiring to even more ambitious goals in reordering the global order. In a sense the positive PR on world poli-

11 Nova.news. 2022. Russia: State Duma approves budget for 2023. Agenzianova.com. 24 November, 2022. <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/russia-the-state-duma-approves-the-budget-for-2023/> (21.01.2023)

tics turns attention to the Kremlin's grand transformative vision for Russia's future and the world to which, as is claimed, much of the non-Western world is sympathetic.

As for negative PR, there is again much continuity from pre-2022. Here the attention moves to the degeneracy and wickedness of the 'collective West' and their 'client state' Ukraine. Much of the material shown on state media is targeted at exposing the West's 'real' intention: weakening Russia in a proxy war with the ultimate aim of causing the collapse of the Russian Federation, the destruction of Russian culture and even the genocide of Russian people. The first six months of the SMO saw more and more reports leading simply with a reproduction of headlines from Western media that 'prove' the anti-Russian agenda in items including 'cancel culture' applied to Russia, the fanatical Russophobia of Poland and the Baltic States in ripping down monuments to the Soviet victory over Hitler and banning the entry of Russians, the atrocities of Ukrainian 'Nazis' and the hypocrisy of Western liberals who support any measure to break Russia even if it contradicts their 'supposed' values. Above all the message is made clear: against such enemies the only option available is brave and resolute resistance.

Announcing partial mobilisation, the annexation of more Ukrainian territory and changes to the military leadership has been presented as another necessary measure that the Russian government has been forced into by a devious warmonger West. With new military resources accumulated in the hands of newly appointed commander Sergey Surovkin, there is surely a real pressure to demonstrate military success against Ukrainian forces and change the slow pace and frustrating pattern the SMO has taken over the course of 2022. In next few months, the Kremlin is gambling on a patriotic consolidation around the need to defend Russian (annexed) land and inflict a decisive defeat on Kyiv and her Western allies. While the mobilisation has caused some damage to polling ratings and increased a desire for peace in some parts of society (Harshaw 2022; Volkov and Kolesnikov 2022), it is still hard to see how a majority will advocate the defeat of their own country, especially as the most oppositional people have left the country or been sent to prison.

## Conclusion

Putin's decision to invade Ukraine has certainly caused a huge impact on world politics and the global economy. However, it is this essay's contention that it has not impacted Russian domestic politics so starkly. This is because most of the significant shifts in managing elite unity, repressing or co-opting opposition and fighting the information war were well-established and in place prior to the war. Indeed, over 2020-2022 a number of measures moved the Putin system into emergency mode in such a way that meant Russian politics went on as before in many ways in the first six months of the SMO.

The Russian political system has proven far more resilient and adaptable than many expected. Rather than a mafia state collapsing at the application of pressure, it has operated as an embattled regime that has prepared itself and launched a military operation to end a status quo that was deemed by many inside the political establishment to be detrimental to the long-term survival of the Russian state. Ultimately, the gradual process of disentangling from the West economically and culturally, as well as reorientating East, tightening controls and coming to deeply believe in a very securitised patriotism, were all underway from 2014 onwards. 2022 shocked the world, but many inside the Russian

political system had been well prepared for such a development. They had, after all, presumably been taking Putin's words more seriously than many outsiders.

While this essay has argued there has been much continuity in Russian politics in the first six months of the SMO, this may not hold true over the next six months. Mobilization and the escalation of military operations will surely put unprecedented pressure on the various branches of the power vertical. While Putin is unlikely to initiate any serious move to transform Russia into some neo-Stalinist totalitarian or fanatical nationalist cauldron, the politics of loyalty in wartime are likely to bring about an unpredictable elite reconfiguration. In the final analysis, more than any other time in the last twenty years, the Putin system is now beholden to achieving military results and retaining macro-economic stability in new conditions. It can be expected that these two areas will determine the future stability and ultimate survival of the current regime.

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