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From Authoritarianism to Totalitarianism: How the War Has Changed Russia

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Yuri Kochetkov / EPA / TASS

When Russian President Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine, he expected a quick victory. His failure transformed the Kremlin's main task from managing his re-election in 2024 to mobilizing Russia's human and material resources to win a major war of aggression. This fundamental policy shift has breached long-standing Kremlin agreements with both Russian society and Russia's elites. It is also straining the resources needed to fight the war and maintain domestic control.

Before the war, the regime struck a clear authoritarian bargain with the population: stay out of politics and the state will leave you alone. Despite a decade-long decline in real incomes, this remained a compelling proposition for most Russians, especially as repression grew more severe.

The war has led to even greater repression. Opposition politics and independent media are effectively outlawed. Laws criminalize even the mention of "war" with up to 15 years in prison. Online censorship and surveillance, including the use of software to identify those who post anonymously, have intensified.

But the biggest change is one not of degree but of kind: the regime now seeks not to demobilize the population from politics but to mobilize it behind the war. This demand for active support, not merely acquiescence, marks a fundamental shift from authoritarianism to totalitarianism. State media and the Orthodox Church now serve up a vitriolic and hysterical diet of wartime propaganda, while educational facilities inculcate such messaging in the nation's youth. The militarization of Russian society is underway.

But despite public (and sometimes shrilly performative) expressions of support, there are few signs of genuine mass enthusiasm for the war. Escalating repression suggests the Kremlin lacks confidence that the war is — or will remain — popular.

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The fact that the regime began the September 2022 "partial mobilization" of over 300,000 conscripts so late and kept it so short shows the state's sensitivity to public anxiety. Even in this repressive environment, the Kremlin's internal polling suggests that a majority of the population now favors peace talks.

Elite opinion matters more than public opinion in Russia. The regime needs the elites to fulfill essential functions, and the elites, in turn, are better placed to protect their interests than ordinary citizens. Their pre-war bargain was obedience in return for relative wealth and security, including the ability to travel and send their money and families to the West.

By decisively subordinating stability and prosperity to geopolitical obsession, the war has broken this agreement too. State control over the economy is growing as it moves toward a war footing and businesses come under pressure to produce materiel for the war effort. Sanctions are harming economic growth, disrupting supply chains, and have cut off Russia's elites from the West. The domestic business environment is becoming more unpredictable and violent. Armed crime has risen by 30%.

Some elites, notably the siloviki, have internalized Putin's justification for the invasion. Politicians express public support by visiting the front lines in order to advance their careers, but a large part of the elite has been unhappy with the war from the start despite continuing to work for the system that launched it.

More informed and less susceptible to propaganda than the general public, but also subjected to growing surveillance, Russia's elites continue to work for the regime out of fear and, in some cases, a conviction that they are serving the people rather than the regime.

The war has strained Russia's resources. Real incomes are falling; Russia has just recorded its second-highest budget deficit since the break-up of the Soviet Union; and nearly a million citizens, many highly educated, have fled the country.

At the same time, war-fuelled federal spending rose by 58.7% over the past year. Nearly one-third of the federal budget now goes on defense and domestic security. Reflecting these difficulties, much economic data has been classified.

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As the regime is more concerned about defeat in Ukraine than domestic instability, it will continue fighting the war by demanding even more of its people while offering them steadily less. But to avoid provoking a dangerous adverse reaction it will, where possible, calibrate resource mobilization — habituating the population to the war and preparing the ground for further escalation.

The war has made Russia more repressive, intrusive, secretive, and isolated from the West, as well as poorer. In all these ways, it increasingly resembles the Soviet Union. But three differences suggest that Russia will find it harder to manage the stresses that war imposes.

Firstly, for all its repression, the state is still less controlling than in Soviet times. There is no ruling party to penetrate and monitor every institution (though the Federal Security Service is a functional equivalent) and no coherent ideology to legitimate the regime. And while the state's role has deepened, private ownership remains the basis of the economy.

Secondly, for all its isolation, Russia is still more open to the outside world than the Soviet Union ever was. Russians can access the internet — including, with a VPN, blocked websites — and can for the most part leave the country without difficulty. Curtailing these freedoms would be the obvious next step. The war has also stoked unprecedented public infighting, albeit within limits defined by Putin, among silovik structures. Even state television propaganda shows occasionally air views critical of the war.

Thirdly, Russia is much weaker in relation to the West than the Soviet Union was during the Cold War. As former finance minister Mikhail Zadornov recently noted, the West's resources are "incomparable." If the West grants Ukraine the means to win the war, the contest will be very unequal.

In short, Russia's capacity to mobilize and indoctrinate its citizens is weaker, and the resources it needs are greater than those of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Against this background, Putin has launched the country's most costly aggression since the 1939–40 Winter War against Finland. There are no signs yet that the Kremlin's breaking of key social contracts is bringing the system close to crisis. But the strains it faces will deepen.

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