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The Ukraine War Has Tied Russia's Elites Closer to the Kremlin

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Meeting of president Putin with members of the Government of the Russian Federation. **Vyacheslav Prokofyev / TASS**

It isn't difficult to identify the main beneficiary of the past two and a half decades of the Kremlin regime. The country's entire economy and society have been subordinated to the will of a small elite bent on enriching itself.

But the war has changed that elite, making it more vulnerable to a Kremlin that knows Russia's super-rich bureaucrats have fewer options.

A kleptocracy, by definition, cannot operate under the rule of law but depends on informal arrangements and a dense web of personal relationships.

This system primarily benefited the regime's upper tier. Most lower-level officials were content with incomes that significantly improved their standard of living but did not require

elaborate global money laundering networks.

Under such conditions, the idea of making elites overly reliant on the Kremlin was seen as a threat to the system itself. Surges of patriotic rhetoric typically triggered capital flight. Even encouraging or pressuring elites to relinquish formal ownership of foreign assets was unthinkable.

For years, officials, politicians and oligarchs alike earned their money in Russia but parked their wealth abroad. In the late 2010s, arrests of major figures came with lengthy lists of their overseas assets. The true scale of concealed holdings was anyone's guess.

The war changed the equation. Contrary to expectations, the main blow to Russian oligarchs and corrupt officials came from the West, not the Kremlin. Assets were frozen or subjected to visa restrictions. Yet during the early years of the war, the Kremlin did not significantly alter its treatment of entrepreneurs with foreign ties.

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Two new trends have since emerged.

The first — widely documented — involves the nationalization or confiscation of assets belonging to major business figures, transferring ownership either to the state or to individuals even closer to the Kremlin. In 2024-2025, some predicted this would fracture relations between business and the state. That concern was overstated. The Russian business ecosystem, like the broader population, has largely lost agency and poses little threat to the Kremlin. Moscow's campaign has recently slowed and the largest tycoons, the ones who could pose issues, have not been dispossessed.

The second trend is more intriguing. It involves a surge in corruption investigations targeting mid-level officials — individuals previously unassociated with business and not known as direct Kremlin proteges.

Recently, Audit Chamber official Andrey Baturkin told the State Duma that an unprecedented over 100 billion rubles ($1.3 billion) worth of assets had been confiscated in corruption cases. This may only be the beginning. Increasingly, the focus appears to be on the bribe-takers themselves.

Reports of confiscations now appear almost daily. These cases rarely involve Miami apartments or Swiss bank accounts, but assets inside Russia.

Just look at these cases from recent weeks. One hundred and twenty real estate assets and stakes in 27 companies belonging to United Russia lawmaker Andrei Doroshenko and former deputy Anatoly Voronovsky were seized; former Uraluprador official Alexei Borisov and his relatives were found to own dozens of properties, land plots and commercial premises; and former Sochi Mayor Alexei Kopaigorodsky and his wife were linked to 50 properties and multiple vehicles.

The supposed guardians of Russian law are no different. Former prosecutor Viktor Fomin was stripped of 52 properties registered in his mother's name. Assets worth 13 billion rubles ($169

million) were confiscated from former Krasnodar Regional Court chairman Alexander Chernov. Meanwhile, Aslan Trakhov, former head of Adygea's Supreme Court, acquired 114 land plots and numerous properties during his tenure.

Much of this supports my long-held view that corruption and bribery are subtly different in practice. Large-scale corruption required international networks. Mid-level bribery, by contrast, appears far simpler: relatives are used as proxies and income-generating property can be accumulated locally, making them easier targets for the security services.

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The key question is whether this campaign could weaken bureaucratic cohesion — or at least demoralize officials and erode the regime's foundation.

So far, the process has unfolded smoothly. Defendants confess and accept prison terms. Aside from a few high-profile suicides, there have been no dramatic confrontations. Nothing resembles the quasi-military arrest of Makhachkala Mayor Said Amirov more than a decade ago.

Perhaps this will continue. Stalin's purges thinned the Soviet bureaucracy for years without destroying its functionality or loyalty. Yet today's circumstances differ. If corrupt officials are motivated primarily by personal enrichment — and it is hard to argue otherwise — their willingness to become sacrificial victims of the Kremlin should not be overstated.

Much depends on how long and how aggressively the current anti-bribery campaign continues. The logic of Russia's power system suggests it may not be sustainable indefinitely. A bureaucratic class cannot function under permanent stress. At some point, it could fracture.

Another explanation is that the security services seek to reinforce their central position, no longer merely acting as instruments of the state but as its substitute.

Whatever the cause, the campaign introduces uncertainty. For now, the bureaucracy shifts from being the regime's cornerstone to one of its vulnerabilities.

Some argue that Putin's system rests on the loyalty of his inner circle. That may be true, but there is little evidence to say it is.

In a system governed by personal ties rather than formal rules, relationship networks are extensive and complex. Pressure on one node may reverberate unpredictably elsewhere. Alienating the bureaucracy carries risks. Officials do not need Donbas or Ukraine. They need stability — and the opportunity to continue extracting profits from the system.

For that reason, the authorities' offensive against the bureaucratic class should not be underestimated.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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