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Conclusion

In reconstructing the Russian decision to invade Ukraine, it is necessary to understand how it is inscribed in the logic of post-Bolotnaya authoritarian consolidation. To be clear, this by no means makes it a justifiable, or indeed inevitable, outcome of Russian politics under Putin. It does, however, make it difficult to envision a scenario in which the Kremlin backs down from the ongoing military aggression within the logic of post-Bolotnaya authoritarian consolidation and the drastic escalation of the latter occasioned

by the invasion. Even if a peace deal with concessions from both sides is reached, the genie has been let out of the bottle—as it was in 2014—in the form of the myth of the unredeemed reunification of the “Russian nation” and, this time around, its elevation to the status of *raison d'état*. Even in the hypothetical scenario of regime change within Russia leading to a halt in military aggression against Ukraine, the genie is likely to live on as a shadow haunting would-be future administrations and as a weapon in the hands of radical nationalists.

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ANALYSIS

The Fog of War and Power Dynamics in Russia's Elite: Defections and Purges, or Simply Wishful Thinking?

By Fabian Burkhardt (Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg)

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Collapse of the Putin Regime as Wishful Thinking?

“For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power,” President Joe Biden said during his speech on Saturday 27 March, 2022, in the Polish capital, Warsaw. The White House later sought to clarify that Biden's remarks referred to Putin's exercise of power in countries neighboring Russia, not to regime change. While the U.S. administration has made it clear on multiple occasions that it does not seek regime change in Rus-

sia, Biden's apparent slip of the tongue reflects widespread wishful thinking about a possible domestic effect of Russia's war on Ukraine: the eventual toppling of Putin.

In theory, this makes sense. Over the course of Russian history, major wars such as the Crimean War (1853–1856), the Russo-Japanese War (1904/05), and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979) have had a major impact on Russia domestically. Moreover, comparative research indicates that starting a war

is risky for authoritarian leaders if the proclaimed aims of the war are not achieved, as this increases the chances that regime outsiders—that is, elites outside the coalition responsible for launching the war—will attempt to stage a coup against the leader whose war is failing.

Certainly, one month into the war, it is far too soon to draw far-flung conclusions about domestic outcomes for the Putin regime. The war is definitely not going according to plan, and early monitoring of elite dynamics suggests that some behind-the-scenes turmoil and minor cracks in the elite can indeed be discerned. But as of the time of writing, there appears to be no indication of immediate danger either to Putin's rule or to the regime as a whole.

Swiftly Progressing Regime Personalization

Regime personalization has progressed rapidly since Vladimir Putin's fourth presidential term began in 2018. The 2020 constitutional amendment that would allow Putin to run again for president in 2024—as well as others further weakening the government, the judiciary, and federalism—went a long way toward eliminating the remaining formal constraints on the presidency. During the pandemic, Putin withdrew further from day-to-day domestic policymaking; personal meetings with key elites in government, as well as state and private enterprises, were significantly reduced and face-to-face interaction was limited to a select circle of military figures, security services personnel, and ideologists such as Iurii Kovalchuk. The most visible demonstration of this highly personalist authoritarian rule was the extended meeting of the Russian Security Council on 21 February, which was even broadcast on television. The formal topic of the meeting was Russia's recognition of the self-proclaimed "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states. In hindsight, however, it became obvious that Putin sought to demonstrate to Russia and the world that all of the 27 officials present supported—and were therefore complicit in—the war on Ukraine that would be declared on 24 February. The way Putin conducted the meeting illustrated that the Security Council was not, like the Soviet Politburo, a collective decision-making body; the decision to invade Ukraine had been clearly taken by Putin in advance, and only a minority of members had been informed what was expected of them. Some, such as chief of the Foreign Intelligence Service Sergei Naryshkin and presidential aide for Ukraine Dmitrii Kozak were even humiliated. Later reporting consistently indicated that Putin's inner circle for the decision to go to war consisted of Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, Chief of Staff of the Russian Army Valerii Gerasimov, and director of domestic intelligence Aleksandr

Bortnikov. Key pillars of the regime such as the economic bloc of the government, United Russia, state corporations and companies, oligarchs, and large swathes of the military and the National Guard were kept in the dark about the looming war. As the Russian elite was largely taken by surprise, initial discontent and despondence were widespread. The hermetic mode of decision-making was also conducive to engendering war optimism in Putin: personalist authoritarian rule gradually erodes feedback mechanisms from within and without the bureaucracy. The FSB and the military apparently provided Putin with heavily biased or even wrong information about Ukrainian military capabilities, statehood, and civic cohesion.

Minor Cracks at the Top, but No Elite Split

This element of surprise, as well as the scale and brutality of the Russian war effort in Ukraine, could have provided fertile ground for elite defections. One month into the war, defections have been limited and at best symbolic. The most prominent defector to date is Anatolii Chubais—the architect of Russia's privatization in the 1990s and the person who facilitated Putin's move from St. Petersburg to Moscow in 1997 by providing him with a position in the Presidential Administration. Chubais left Russia and was spotted in Istanbul, Putin having approved his dismissal by decree on 25 March. Chubais had been Putin's special envoy for climate and international cooperation but had long since ceased to be a power broker in the elite. Another notable critic of Russia's war, who even expressed empathy with the Ukrainian victims, is Arkadii Dvorkovich, the former deputy prime minister under Medvedev until 2018. As a result, Dvorkovich was forced to step down as chairman of the Skolkovo Foundation—once Medvedev's pet project for creating a Russian Silicon Valley—but while remaining in Russia, Dvorkovich retained an exit option outside the country as FIDE president.

These defections are certainly highly symbolic and demonstrate that the heuristic device of distinguishing between "systemic liberals" and "siloviki" appears to still be relevant: defection and covert dissent mainly stem from the economic bloc of government, and not from the military or security services. Notably, the war marked the culmination of Medvedev's move from the "systemic liberal" camp he championed as president from 2008 to 2012 to that of the "siloviki." As deputy chairman of the Security Council, he has employed war rhetoric so radical that even that of Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev, a noted hardliner, pales in comparison.

Yet even among the economic bloc, criticism is the exception to the rule. To counter the effects of Western sanctions, Putin has relied on cadre stability, reap-

pointing key officials and essentially freezing cadre reshuffles in the regions. Economic management has been entrusted to the government task force led by PM Mikhail Mishustin, deputy PM Andrei Belousov, and Moscow mayor Sergei Sobianin. The task force has essentially scaled up coordination mechanisms and policies already employed during the pandemic. Moreover, Putin renominated Elvira Nabiullina as governor of the Central Bank and Andrei Kostin as chairman of the state bank VTB for another five-year term. In his rant on 16 March about “national traitors” and the “fifth column” in Russia, Putin made it clear that a crack-down on “scum” working in the interests of the West was imminent. In this context, stepping down voluntarily or even defecting is interpreted by Putin as “treason.” The Russian leader has created a system of joint responsibility (*krugovaia poruka*) backed up by compromising material (*kompromat*) that is intended to prevent the leaking of state secrets to the broader public or even to secret services abroad. Moreover, given the context of wartime, Nabiullina—in contrast to Dvorkovich just a few years ago—does not have international exit options at such institutions as the IMF or the World Bank.

If one conceptualizes the Russian elite as a whole in concentric circles, then discontent or even—in rare cases—defection have mainly occurred in the outer circles. Beyond the federal executive, this pattern holds true for the economy: among the highest-ranking businessmen on Russia’s *Forbes* list, many have spoken out against the war, but it has been those business tycoons who either have most of their assets abroad or are resident outside Russia who have criticized the war most vocally (among them Oleg Tinkov, Pavel Durov, and the Bukhman brothers). Others have publicly spoken out in favor of a swift end to the war, a stance that appears to be motivated by having sustained huge losses due to the collapse of the Moscow stock exchange and sanctions; concern for their companies’ international reputation among investors; or both. Examples of this position are Lukoil’s Vagit Agitperov and Leonid Fedun, NLMK’s Vladimir Lisin, and Severstal’s Aleksei Mordashov. As highlighted by Alfa Group’s Mikhail Fridman—an early critic of the Russian war against Ukraine—any direct criticism of Putin would entail a direct threat to business operations and property rights in Russia. Hence, those tycoons who attended Putin’s meeting with members of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RSPP) on 24 February have largely refrained from public commentary.

State corporations and state companies have largely remained silent in public and, as a rule, have addressed employees to prepare them for the coming economic difficulties due to sanctions (Sberbank). Some key trustees of Putin, however, doubled down on their support for

the war: Gazprom’s Aleksei Miller called upon employees to rally around the president and Rostec’s Sergei Chemezov said in an interview that Russia was compelled to carry out the “special operation” in order to avert a future attack by Ukraine on the “People’s Republics” and even on Russia itself.

Overall, it has been those oligarchs with private businesses who have been the most critical of the war. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to conclude that they might conspire to topple Putin in the short term: they have learned to play by the rules, they are usually more competitive than cooperative, and they fear the Putin-controlled security services and law enforcement.

In contrast to the relative stability at the top, discontent at the rank-and-file level could turn out to be challenging in the medium to long term, as these will be the personnel on whom the Kremlin will have to rely to keep the Putin regime afloat. On 25 February, 12 officers of the Krasnodar branch of the National Guard refused to obey the order to move into Ukraine and are now on trial. According to the officers’ lawyers, a similar refusal to obey orders occurred in numerous units from other regions, too. In conjunction with heavy battle losses, this raises doubts about the morale of National Guard units to suppress protesters in the event of a hypothetical national crisis such as mass protests or a coup attempt. Similarly, according to media reports, a lot of staff at Russia’s Central Bank fell into a state of hopelessness after the war started, leading to the departure of a substantial number of qualified bankers. Even state propaganda outlets saw a number of defections after the symbolic protest on live TV of Channel One editor Marina Ovsinnikova (RT’s Russian and international services had already experienced a number of resignations). This high-visibility protest triggered a wave of resignations by journalists for such state media as the VGTRK holding, Gazprom’s NTV, or the news agency Itar-Tass. With a mix of carrots (such as bonuses) and sticks, however, state media managers managed to contain the resignations. Despite its limited scale, this wave nevertheless suggests that the feeling of despondence about the war is likely to be more widespread than previously assumed.

Alternative Explanations for Alleged Ukraine-Related Purges

As the Russian military has clearly failed to implement its initial plans to achieve a quick victory over Ukraine, it has raised expectations that Putin would punish those who misinformed him or botched the operation on the ground. Three cases have been widely discussed in this respect. First, it was widely reported by Ukrainian and Russian sources that the head of the FSB’s Fifth Service, Sergei Beseda, and his deputy,

Anatolii Boliukh, who had been responsible for intelligence operations in Ukraine in advance of the war, had been arrested for providing poor or even false information to Putin. The second case is the alleged arrest of Roman Gavrillov, the deputy chief of the National Guard, who was among those responsible for special forces operations of the National Guard in Ukraine. The third and most high-profile case is the temporary disappearance of Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, who was not seen in public from 11 to 25 March. While some media reports suggested that Shoigu was suffering from heart problems, his absence triggered speculations that Shoigu might be purged by Putin for misinforming the president, for corruption in the army, and for the botched military campaign in Ukraine as a whole. Others even surmised that Shoigu might have been plotting a coup himself.

While it might well turn out to be true that Putin is seeking to identify the culprits of the failures in Ukraine and is determined to purge officials, it appears that mainstream interpretations of these three cases often fail to account for inconsistencies and to address open questions, being driven instead by wishful thinking. But as long as the fog of war prevails, some caveats should be understood before premature conclusions about far-ranging purges are drawn.

First, due to the personalist nature of the regime, Putin's warped insider perspective differs considerably from that of outsiders in terms of what constitutes failure and what measures need to be taken to prevent such failures going forward.

Second, Putin has historically not fired individuals immediately following a misdemeanor. Instead, some time has usually passed and bureaucratic politics taken place before punitive action has been taken. If Putin changes this pattern of behavior now, during the war in Ukraine, it will be a serious sign of potential upheaval in the regime that goes far beyond the three individual cases discussed above.

About the Author

Dr *Fabian Burkhardt* is a research associate at the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies in Regensburg, Germany. Among his research interests are presidential and executive politics in authoritarian regimes, with a regional focus on the post-Soviet space, in particular Russia and Belarus.

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Third, assertions about ongoing purges usually omit the inconsistencies between various reports. With regard to the FSB's Fifth Service, some reports suggest that Beseda's deputy, Anatolii Boliukh, left the FSB a long time ago and can therefore not be "purged" over the ongoing war. Other inconsistencies relate to the state body that performed the alleged arrest of Beseda and Boliukh (the Presidential Protection Service, or the FSB's own security department) and whether an arrest took actually place or whether the FSB officials were merely questioned for unknown reasons.

Fourth, when assessing these alleged "purges," alternative explanations unrelated to Ukraine are usually omitted. In his previous position at the National Guard, Roman Gavrillov was responsible for rooting out corruption and misbehavior; his efforts led to the dismissal of almost a dozen high-ranking officials, meaning that he surely acquired powerful enemies within and beyond the National Guard. Moreover, more recent reporting has suggested that Gavrillov was not arrested, but simply dismissed.

Overall, it should be kept in mind that even if a number of Ukraine-related arrests and dismissals have occurred, this does not automatically amount to wholesale purges that would develop into elite dynamics relevant for overall regime stability. Putin, after all, has sacked hundreds of officials during his career, including close allies, and Shoigu has survived over three decades of elite infighting.

Outlook

In sum, the main question observers should be asking themselves as long as the fog of war persists is: Should we assess elite dynamics in Russia using the same criteria as we did before or is the war having such a fundamental impact on Russia domestically that we need to adapt our assumptions and criteria for assessing Putin's relationship with the elite accordingly?

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ANALYSIS

Protest and Opposition: Short-Term Depression, Long-Term Uncertainty

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Abstract

Protest and opposition in Russia have had a complex and at times conflictual relationship. But as elections have gradually lost their competitiveness, protest has become increasingly important. This article presents educated guesses about the future of the relationship between protest and opposition in light of Russia's war against Ukraine. In the short term, the regime's clearly signaled readiness to quell any form of resistance suggests that protest is unlikely. In the long term, however, changing socio-economic conditions have the potential to reshuffle the protest landscape and generate incentives among elites to address social grievances, perhaps even giving new life to the loyal opposition. Protest, therefore, might not only re-emerge, but also usher in a new phase of political opposition.

Introduction

Protest and opposition in Russia have had a complex and at times conflictual relationship. In the past, not all protesters saw themselves as opposition. Those who protected parks and squares or addressed social ills often abstained from asking questions on the distribution of power. Even participants in the "For Fair Elections" protests in 2011–13 often saw themselves as outside of politics because, after all, they merely wanted the authorities to respect the rules of the game. For their part, those who consider themselves part of the political opposition only gradually came to embrace protest as a serious tool in the repertoire of political action.

Professionalizing Protest

But as elections gradually lost their competitiveness, protest became increasingly important, with Aleksei Navalny famously professionalizing the strategic use of rallies to gain name recognition, motivate activists, and build his political organization. This process, in turn, put protest in authorities' spotlight: in proportion as it grew in importance for oppositional actors, it came to be treated as a threat in and of itself. Marking the pre-war climax of this spiral of escalation, the year 2021 saw

authorities crack down not only on demonstrators, but also on independent media and all other entities involved in organizing, facilitating or simply covering protest.

We do not know what impact Russia's war against Ukraine will have on the relationship between protest and opposition. But given the developments sketched above, we can make a few educated guesses, which can be roughly divided into short-term and longer-term outcomes.

Short-Term Scenario

In the coming weeks and months, the trend outlined above is likely to accelerate. Putin's recent talk of "cleaning society" of "national traitors" further frees authorities on all administrative levels to use repression against any form of public dissent (be it narrowly political or not), as long as its protagonists are successfully cast as treacherous elements. This will make the use of protest—a form of political engagement that is public by definition—yet more dangerous and therefore less likely. Moreover, the clampdown on all forms of organized non-systemic opposition means that hardly any actors are left to protest strategically. The systemic Communist Party (KPRF), which in the past has used protest to draw attention to its