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## COMMENTARY

## Can War Be Normalized?

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Russia's troubles with its invasion of Ukraine are not related solely to the military situation in the battlefields. They also stem from the collision of two radically incompatible strategies of "selling" the war to domestic audiences: normalization and exceptionalization. Their conflation creates a situation of strategic undecidability and confusion as to which endgame scenario the Kremlin would prefer.

On the one hand, Putin's military interventionism is an endless series of multiple exceptions—from the obvious over-fixation on Ukraine in the Russian mainstream media to the previously unseen practice of recruiting convicts to fight in Ukraine. Sergei Kirienko's appeal to transform the so-called "special military operation" into a "people's war" is one of the clearest illustrations of exceptionalist thinking among the Russian elites. The parallels with the Second World War so ubiquitous in Russian narratives and imagery are also meant to detach the war from normal politics and underline its extraordinary qualities.

This year's cancellation of the traditional march of commemoration known as the "Immortal Regiment" adds new colors to the panoply of exceptions. The decision signifies de facto acceptance of the state of emergency, which implies a deviation from the highly symbolic ceremonies memorializing the Great Patriotic War as the core of today's Russian identity.

On the other hand, this logic is counter-balanced by a tendency to normalize the war. This normalization takes three forms. One is an attempt to confine the war to a media event visible on TV screens and disregard its malicious effects on the entire society, the majority of which continues to live regular lives. Another is the routinization of war's consequences and their implicit acceptance as a "new normal"—for example, recruitment to the occupying army is advertised as a lucrative job. Similarly, the reactions of local authorities to the spill-over of military activities to such Russian territories as Belgorod oblast have mostly been technical and managerial—for example, evacuation of some parts of the population from the most vulnerable areas. The third is Russia's performative normalization of its foreign policy by debunking the narrative of its isolation in the world and demonstrating the vitality of its relations

with countries of the global South, named "the global majority" in today's mainstream discourse.

Putin's reference to the recent drone attack on the Kremlin as "nothing extraordinary" (*Radio Svoboda* 2023) is illustrative in this regard. The logic behind this surprisingly calm reaction goes beyond the therapeutic tranquilization of society. What Putin implied might be interpreted in two different ways: either as an indication of a lack of resources—both material and discursive—for further escalation or as an attempt to get people to accept the war and its effects as routine parts of their daily lives.

Putin's intention of normalizing the war resonates with domestic depoliticization, a major trend characterizing Russian society, which prefers to refrain from engaging with issues of political salience. This phenomenal combination of societal atomization and pragmatic adaptation to any state policy has been conducive to passive justification of the war in Ukraine by most of the population. Immersion in the private sphere, indifference to normative matters, and ignorance of how the world functions beyond Russia are fertile grounds for implicit routinization of the war.

The same goes for different narratives that seek to either rationalize Russia's military intervention or marginalize its importance in international affairs, including "Putin's understanders" and Westsplainers. They use different language tools—for example, whataboutism, biased historical analogies, and parallels—to find an "alternative logic" in the war against Ukraine or even to blame the West for its eruption. In all cases, the war is seen as an unfortunate yet ordinary event that does not require an exceptional response.

Of course, this is not the first time that Russian official discourse has tried to combine incompatible or inconsistent arguments. Since the start of the military intervention against Ukraine, Putin has sought to both exceptionalize and normalize it. This only increases a sense of disorientation and frustration in society, which seems to be ready to support the war without necessarily understanding the reasons for it—exactly as they would most likely be ready to support any change in Russian strategy, from further escalation to peace talks with Ukraine.

### *About the Author*

Andrey Makarychev is Professor of Government and Politics at the University of Tartu.

### *Further Reading*

- *Radio Svoboda*. 2023. "Putin na vstreche s redaktorami SMI prokommentiroval ataku Kremlya bespilotnikami." May 10, 2023. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/putin-na-vstreche-s-redaktorami-smi-prokommentiroval-ataku-kremlya-bespilotnikami/32404372.html>