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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Libman, A. (2023). Between Depoliticization and Nationalist Awakening: Russian Society and Regime in the Shadow of a Prolonged War. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 294, 9-10. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000612492>

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Between Depoliticization and Nationalist Awakening: Russian Society and Regime in the Shadow of a Prolonged War

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000612492

The war in Ukraine catapulted Russia into a new reality. From the point of view of the political ideas (or rather delusions) of Putin and his narrow circle, the war is a logical outcome of their long-term development. From the point of view of the functioning of the Russian regime, however, the highly personalized nature of Putin's authoritarianism, combined with enormous information problems in the bureaucratic hierarchy, made the war fundamentally possible but not inevitable. The war is an extreme example of the highly costly mistakes to which decision-making in this type of regime is prone, yet the bureaucracy and the elites were not prepared for a war. From the point of view of Russian society, finally, the war represents a fundamental break with the development trajectory of recent decades. Until 2022, Russian society was undergoing a transformation into a more European, modern society (leading to increasing contradictions between the society and the authoritarian regime). The war halted this transformation and inaugurated a complex process of adaptation on the part of both regime actors and the population. The future of Russian politics depends on the outcomes of this adaptation.

A year after the war began, some scope conditions for this development appear to be increasingly clear. To start with, the sanctions regime—contrary to what some expected at the beginning of the war—did not lead to a catastrophic collapse of the Russian economy. A combination of the adaptability of a market economy (which Russia is, unlike the USSR) and the unwillingness of China, India, and the countries of the Global South to join the sanctions regime ensured the resilience of the Russian economy. Russia did not become a new North Korea or Venezuela: for this to happen, the Russian central bank and the government would also have had to have made bad decisions in the sphere of economic policy that would have prevented markets from adapting. While the sanctions certainly make any long-term positive economic development impossible, they do not prevent the Russian economy from functioning and thus do not fundamentally limit the regime's ability to continue the war.

A much more important source of instability for the regime has turned out to be its own actions. A prolonged war creates a challenge for the Putin system. On the one hand, there is a permanent demand for new soldiers for the frontlines, which can be satisfied either through

coerced mass mobilization or by fomenting widespread nationalist sentiment that causes people to enlist voluntarily. On top of that, the war provides ample opportunity for those actors who would like to see the Russian regime become more ideological to openly express their rhetoric and to push for their agendas. These actors operate at all levels, from politicians and high-level bureaucrats devising new repressive measures to ordinary citizens denouncing their neighbors and colleagues for what they perceive as disloyalty. On the other hand, until the start of the war, the key element of regime stability in Russia was the depoliticization of the largest part of the population, which neither openly contested the regime's propaganda and claim to power nor engaged in any enthusiastic demonstrations of loyalty thereto, and was left to lead a private life. It is hardly possible to keep most Russians depoliticized while simultaneously implementing mass mobilization measures and allowing ultranationalist and imperialist rhetoric. The regime has not managed to solve this dilemma, reducing its credibility in the eyes of its supporters and opponents alike. It also poses a challenge for the bureaucracy, which simply does not know how to navigate this trade-off.

The escalatory logic of the war, which will sooner or later reach most Russians, seems to have kicked off the slow transformation of Russian society. Many in the West hope that disillusionment with the war will lead to growing disapproval of the regime. Unfortunately, there is an alternative (and highly realistic) scenario: the more Russians suffer directly from the war (due, for example, to their relatives dying on the frontlines), the more likely they are to change their perception of the war: "Putin's war" might become, in their eyes, the "war of every Russian." Despite recognizing that the war was an outcome of catastrophic miscalculations on the part of the regime, Russians would then believe that the growing costs of the war made some sort of victory absolutely necessary and that it was the duty of each and every member of the society to contribute to the war effort. Russian society would experience a nationalist awakening, with spontaneous self-organization leading to greater support of the military effort. The fact that Putin is successfully managing to "sell" the war to his subjects as one between Russia and the West (not Russia and Ukraine) might facilitate this process.

If Russian society continues to evolve along these lines, the results could be disastrous. Not only would it

be much more difficult to stop the war in the future, but Russia could turn into a country where most people have internalized strong anti-Western sentiments and believe that Russia should oppose the US and the EU at all costs in any situation possible. This type of resentment would be very difficult to eradicate and would make Russia much more dangerous in the long run than it is now.

This scenario becomes more likely with each day the war goes on. Stopping the conflict soon could halt Russians' nationalist awakening and push them back into a depoliticized state; under these conditions, anti-Westernism in Russia will remain superficial and able to be reversed (e.g., by Putin's successor, who will sooner or later come to power). But if Russian society becomes politicized, its strong anti-Western sentiments are likely to outlive the Putin regime and dictate the evolution of Russian politics in the long run.

About the Author

Alexander Libman is Professor of Russian and East European Politics at the Freie Universität Berlin. His research interests include Russian domestic and international politics and comparative research on authoritarianism. His books have been published by Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press and his articles by *American Political Science Review*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *World Politics*, and *Comparative Political Studies*, among others.

Those in the West who oppose the idea of freezing the conflict may underestimate the long-term risks of this societal evolution for Europe and for the world. Certainly, freezing the conflict is impossible without the agreement of Ukraine (which is unlikely now and cannot be forced from outside); furthermore, it is associated with risks (a ceasefire might be unstable and Russia might maintain control of some Ukrainian territory). However, the transformation of Russian society, if not stopped as soon as possible, might produce a much bigger risk: a nuclear power with large natural resources, economic ties to China and the Global South, and (and this is something that we have not seen in Russia/the Soviet Union since the 1960s) with a population and elites that share a deep aversion to Europe and the West. While a frozen conflict is certainly a suboptimal solution, the alternative could be much worse.

No Way Out? Why the West Should Offer an Exit Option to Russia's Elites and Population

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000612492

With Russia's high-intensity war against Ukraine entering its 15th month, both countries' futures look bleak. Ukraine has to fight for its survival against a foe that seems determined to fight on and still has ample reserves of manpower and natural resources. The West is supporting Ukraine with weaponry, but the war is fought on Ukraine's territory, and its economy and people are suffering heavily.

Russia's future looks similarly bleak, if not worse. The country's leadership has maneuvered itself into a grim impasse. The war is going badly for Russia, but having staked everything on one card, Putin and his cronies cannot end it without losing face. Even if offered such an option, it remains unclear if they would take it, as it seems increasingly likely that fighting this war is what they wanted all along (Courtois et al. 2023). In the meantime, Russia is bleeding soldiers at a rate likely much higher than Ukraine, as Ukraine is fighting with more modern weaponry and more advanced doctrine. The war has also deprived Russia of its economic future. The long-term costs of losing Europe's energy markets are severe (Babina et al. 2023). Moreover, hundreds of

thousands of highly qualified specialists, in particular from the IT sector, have left the country (Borak 2023). Many of them are unlikely to return, depriving Russia of the possibility to diversify its economy in preparation for a time after oil and gas. Meanwhile, Russia's shift toward a harsher form of authoritarianism is intensifying a problem with which the Russian economy has long struggled, namely the heavy-handed pressure on Russia's business community by the security services (Rochlitz 2022). Finally, the risk that Russia might break apart and descend into a new "time of troubles" is no longer completely unrealistic, with infighting between different factions becoming increasingly and openly visible (Rogov 2023).

The West Needs a Strategy for Russia's Future

For now, Western sanctions are mainly aimed at limiting Russia's economic ability to fight the war and signaling that continuing to do so would be very costly for the Russian economy. In this, they have been successful. Nevertheless, the economic or political collapse of