

RESILIENCE OF THE RUSSIAN STATE SYSTEM AND PROCESSES WITHIN THE RUSSIAN ELITE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

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The analytical paper examines the problem of Putin's regime stability amidst the ongoing war against Ukraine and preparations for the presidential elections in March 2024 in Russia.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine became part of the technology of patriotic mobilization adopted by Putin's team after the domestic political crisis of 2011-2012. This mobilization allowed the regime to consolidate and prevent opposition activities in modern Russia. The overthrow of central power in Kyiv and the establishment of a Moscow-loyal puppet government were intended to be the final act in the script of imperial revenge (alongside the annexation of Crimea and direct confrontation with the US and NATO), after which Putin would establish himself as a charismatic authoritarian leader with the prospect of lifelong rule.

The failure of the initial plan, the so-called Special Military Operation (SMO), prompted the Kremlin to adjust its plans. However, the transition to a protracted war was utilized by the regime to strengthen itself and prolong the state of patriotic mobilization against the backdrop of an "inevitable war with NATO". However, the mobilization potential gradually diminishes during the routinization of the war. Putin's task is to maintain its momentum until the voting in March 2024. After that, the regime will become significantly more vulnerable due to the impact of several macrosocial factors – war fatigue, fatigue from lies, and worsening living conditions.

Under these conditions, there is an opportunity for the deployment of opposition movements in Russia, which have a chance to spread, primarily in intellectual and private business circles. The success of these movements will depend on whether they can break through the information blockade and attract influential groups of security forces to their side.

The Stability of Putin's Regime

The stability of the state system of the Russian Federation is determined by the fundamental principle underlying the current Russian statehood. During Putin's rule, Russia reverted to **the imperial principle** of state organization that was characteristic of the 18th to 20th centuries. The brief attempt to build state institutions based on democratic principles in the 1990s was recognized by Russian society and the Russian elite as a failed political experiment. Since the early 2000s, Russia has been restoring the fundamental elements of the imperial model. Among these elements are:

- 1) A centralized system of administrative management headed by the President of the Russian Federation;
- 2) A repressive apparatus that ensures the protection of power from internal threats and prevents the emergence of opposition;
- 3) Ideological pressure and a propaganda apparatus that provides a favourable "picture of reality" for the authorities and creates symbols and narratives necessary for maintaining its legitimacy;
- 4) Unconditional authority of V. Putin as the leader of the state and the leader of the imperial community;
- 5) An expansionist foreign policy, which, in post-crisis conditions (after the dissolution of the USSR), is possible only as a policy of imperial revenge.

The restoration of the imperial model took place in Russia within the framework of a mobilization¹ political strategy adopted by the Putin regime after the political crisis of 2011-2012 (opposition protests on Bolotnaya Square). The political mobilization of the Russian masses was carried out through:

- A. A sense of existential threat from the demonized West (against the backdrop of the events of the Euromaidan in Kyiv).
- B. A sense of euphoria from the annexation of Crimea.
- C. A sense of "responsibility" for the population of Donbas, close to Russia, which supposedly has been under the threat of destruction by the "Kyiv junta" since 2014.

The result of such artificial mobilization has been an increase in the trust rating towards the government (V. Putin) and the elimination of any dissent in the Russian public space. Against this backdrop, there has been a final consolidation of Putin's regime as a hierarchical corporation of **a mafia type**.

The power in the Russian Federation belongs to a narrow corporation close to the center of power, which controls the country's major economic resources (oil and gas industry, military-industrial complex), as well as the power structures of the Russian Federation

¹ Here and further on, the concept of "mobilization" is used in a broad sense to denote a state of activity, motivation, and readiness for active actions.

(FSB, Rosgvardia, Armed Forces, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Investigative Committee, judicial system). This type of power organization is characterized by a rigid hierarchical structure and the prevention of any institutionalized competition.

The experience of the "color revolutions" in the 2000s shows that **the main threats** to authoritarian mafia-type regimes are:

- 1) The presence of a popular internal opposition.
- 2) The spread of an alternative perspective in the public space.
- 3) External pressure from the democratic world.
- 4) The presence of significant material resources that can be directed towards supporting a political alternative.

Over the past two decades, Putin's regime has pursued a consistent policy aimed at **neutralizing** all these threats in Russia, and has achieved significant success in this regard.

- 1) The internal opposition in Russia has been either eliminated or suppressed.
- 2) The information space of Russia is reliably controlled by the authorities.
- 3) A tiered immunity against external pressure has been formed in Russia, encompassing informational, psychological, political, and economic aspects.
- 4) Major material resources in Russia are monopolized by the state, and the regime firmly blocks their inflow from abroad for the needs of the opposition.

Thus, the regime's resilience against traditional internal and external threats, which typically lead to political crises in authoritarian systems, is **quite substantial today**.

Mobilization Scenario as a Means of Regime Consolidation

To ensure stability in the implementation of public policy, negative incentives (prohibitions and threats) are often insufficient. Therefore, the mafia-like method of organizing power is often complemented by signs of **authoritarianism**.

Authoritarian regimes are formed and maintained based on charismatic legitimacy of power (M. Weber). The charismatic leader (as portrayed by Putin and his circle) is occasionally required to have the ability to "perform miracles". It is this role of a positive stimulus for Putin's successive triumphant re-elections as the President of the Russian Federation that was assigned to the Kremlin corporation's "special military operation," initiated on February 22, 2022, by the decision to "recognize the independence of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic".

This operation was intended to confirm Russia's imperial ambitions, its claim to the role of a leader of anti-liberal global forces, Putin's success as a national leader and international

strategist, the offensive potential of the "Russian world" ideology, and finally, to conclusively eliminate the question of any political alternative to Putin within Russia.

The failure of the initial plan of the "special operation" forced the Kremlin to **adapt its strategy to new circumstances**.

In a sense, the war with Ukraine was even used by the regime to strengthen its stability. Specifically, the forced transition from Plan A ("quick and successful special operation in Ukraine") to Plan B ("inevitable prolonged war with the West") allowed the Russian government to:

- A. Create an atmosphere of "patriotic duty" and intolerance towards dissent in society;
- B. Stimulate hostility of the Russian population towards the outside world, encouraging isolation;
- C. Against the backdrop of national consolidation around the "leader," eliminate the question of necessary political competition and stop the search for "new faces" in politics;
- D. Find explanations and justifications for potential socio-economic difficulties and worsening living conditions for the population.

Furthermore, the source of potential dissatisfaction – the conscription into the active army – has been transformed into a kind of **social elevator** through the efforts of the propaganda machine and the directed allocation of significant budgetary funds. Participation in the war provided opportunities for various categories: a) freedom for prisoners, b) substantial earnings for contractors, c) large financial compensations for the families of the deceased and the injured.

It should be understood that, as a result of more than a decade of patriotic mobilization, a certain portion of Russian society wanted to go to war. This was not only the desire of some young men to fulfill certain fantasies shaped by the propagandist narrative ("grandfathers fought" and "we can repeat"), but also a conscious desire of some individuals to find themselves in a situation of legalized and incentivized violence, with the prospect of guaranteed financial rewards. Therefore, neither partial mobilization nor recruitment into contract service has become a problem for the Russian Armed Forces so far.

All of this together has practically created ideal conditions for conducting another presidential election in Russia as a **bureaucratic procedure² expressing trust in the current leader, Vladimir Putin**.

² <https://www.forbes.ru/society/494102-peskov-ob-asnil-slova-o-vyborah-kak-dorogostoasej-burokratii-i-pobede-putina-s-90>

Exhaustion of Mobilization Potential

The mobilization scenario requires the prior accumulation of significant **mobilization potential**, primarily consisting of the following factors:

- 1) Moral and psychological readiness of the population, motivation of certain social groups for active actions under the influence of existential threats or significant national goals;
- 2) Military potential, consisting of manpower, equipment, and armaments, and also including a high combat spirit of the army;
- 3) Resource potential, encompassing necessary material and technical means (fuel, logistics, equipment, medical supplies, etc.) as well as finances required to cover significantly increasing state expenditures.

All three of these potentials were systematically accumulated by the Putin regime prior to the invasion of Ukraine. However, the invasion scenario did not anticipate:

- A. A sharp and principled reaction from the West;
- B. The necessity to engage in a prolonged war;
- C. High levels of losses and expenses associated with military actions.

Simultaneously, it is noteworthy that the Putin regime anticipated a certain period of international isolation and significant external political and economic pressure on Russia following the annexation of Ukraine. Therefore, preventive measures were taken by the Kremlin to slow down the exhaustion of mobilization potential. These measures included introducing the concept of "civilizational confrontation with the West" into public discourse, implementing import substitution policies in the industrial sector, and reorienting technological and trade chains toward China, India, Iran, etc. However, even under these conditions, **the mobilization potential of the Russian Federation is approaching exhaustion.**

As of the end of 2023, the Russian population continues to support Putin and his course of imperial revenge; the Russian army possesses sufficient manpower, equipment, and armaments; and the financial system of Russia maintains relative stability, primarily meeting the needs of the population.

However, there are significant doubts that all three of these resources can withstand another year of war. The planned defense expenditures for 2024 (30% of the state budget) indicate the urgent need for the technical renewal of the Russian army's infrastructure. The loss of 90% of the personnel in the Russian military that began the war in 2022³ was partially

³ <https://www.slovoidilo.ua/2023/12/13/novyna/bezpeka/rosiya-vtratyla-ukrayini-maizhe-90-vijsk-nakopychenyx-pered-vtorhnennyam-amerykanska-rozvidka>

compensated for by the recruitment of contractors in the "Wagner" private military company and later through partial mobilization. However, this social reserve was the last and cannot be replenished, especially considering the demographic situation in Russia and the significant migration of young men abroad.

The financial-economic block of the Russian government managed to restrain inflation and the devaluation of the ruble in 2023. The volumes of oil exports (the main source of foreign currency inflows) remained at pre-war levels, and significant domestic demand for the defense industry's products stimulated the Russian industry. However, the impact of these factors depends on the economic situation, and even in relatively favorable circumstances, the Russian government is forced to spend national reserves.

Public sentiments are slowly but steadily evolving towards "war fatigue" and fatigue from the overall mobilization trend. According to the Russian sociological center "Levada", the majority of Russians support the cessation of the war (peaceful negotiations) and do not fully understand the motives for its initiation⁴. Age differences in attitudes towards the war are also significant, with the younger generation of Russians being mostly disinterested or disapproving of it.

Thus, Putin's regime will be compelled to respond to the exhaustion of the mobilization resource. The attempt to seize the initiative on the battlefield in the fall-winter of 2023 is an effort to secure a favorable position for exiting the state of war. Ending the war, even in local waves, but still victories, will allow:

- A. Explain what happened to the own people;
- B. Negotiate from a position of strength with the leadership of Ukraine;
- C. Encourage the West to make concessions in exchange for peace.

It can be assumed that the leak of information to German intelligence about Russia's readiness to wage war until 2026 and its plans to capture Kharkiv, Dnipro, and Zaporizhzhia⁵ is part of the bluff of the Russian leadership, which aligns with the strategic principles of Sun Tzu: if you are exhausted, show that you are full of strength; if you want peace, demonstrate readiness for war, and so on.

Exhaustion of mobilization potential leads to social depression, where dissatisfaction and social tension sharply increase. Although this is unlikely to result in mass uprisings or the emergence of influential opposition forces, economic and governance crises in Russia is most likely to lead to **a division among the elites**.

⁴ <https://www.levada.ru/2023/10/31/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-otsenki-oktyabrya2023-goda/>

⁵ https://t.me/BILD_Russian/13566

Position of Russian Elites

The course towards militarization and imperial revenge aligns with the interests of a portion of the Russian elite connected to the security structures and the military-industrial complex.

Within the environment of the security forces, there exists **intense competitive struggle**, and occasional sharp conflicts arise. The main line of confrontation lies between the FSB, National Guard of Russia (including formations subordinate to R. Kadyrov), and remnants of private military formations on one side, and the Ministry of Defense (including GRU), on the other. The sharpness of this conflict is evidenced, in particular, by the leadership of the Wagner PMC's demarche in June 2023.

Overall, the rivalry among the power elites is not a significant threat to the regime; on the contrary, it allows Putin to control lower hierarchical levels of power by balancing their group interests.

The consolidation of Putin's regime guarantees the stability of the positions of all these groups and their guaranteed access to the resource distribution system controlled by the Kremlin. Therefore, the loss of loyalty from the security structures can only be discussed if they

- A. are deprived of proper funding;
- B. reorient themselves toward an alternative center of power.

So far, neither the first nor the second condition is fulfilled.

The economic elites of the Russian Federation, primarily those associated with Western technologies, supplies, and markets, suffered the most significant losses from the course towards militarization and international isolation.

The mobilization strategy, from the very beginning (since 2014), was not positively received by the leaders of the economic bloc of the government (Ministry of Finance, National Bank) and major Russian private capital. The reputation of Russians in general and prominent Russian businessmen, in particular, suffered after the attack on Ukraine. Due to the imposed international sanctions, opportunities for technological development of production and attracting investments significantly decreased, and the business's dependence on state orders critically increased.

At a certain point after the start of the so-called Special Military Operation (SMO), significant representatives of Russian big capital (Abramovich, Fridman, Deripaska) distanced themselves from the Kremlin rhetoric and made certain anti-crisis efforts. However, after the failure of the "peace talks" in Istanbul in 2022 (where Roman Abramovich played a key role) and the nationalization of Fridman-Aven's assets in Ukraine,

Russian oligarchs, like the "liberal" financiers in the economic bloc of the Russian government, shifted to a position of clear loyalty to Kremlin policies. In the summer of 2023, R. Abramovich abandoned his previous intention to donate £2.3 billion to help Ukrainian refugees⁶. In October 2023, M. Fridman returned from the UK to Moscow⁷. Oleg Deripaska, after his sharp statements on the state and prospects of the Russian economy on Twitter⁸, was forced to make public statements about the critical condition of the American⁹, German¹⁰, and British¹¹ economies.

In this turn of events, the significant dependence of Russian "oligarchs" on the Putin regime is reflected, as Putin can "punish" defectors or "reward" the loyal ones. In the perspective of the next year, the technocratic elite that supported the mobilization technology of power is promised a reward in the form of participation in the distribution of the mobilization budget. The majority of this budget will be allocated to the army and security structures, as the main support for Putin (in 2024, almost 30% of the expenditure part of the Russian state budget is allocated under the article "national defense"). Technocrats from the circle of Kirienko-Gref-Sobyanin will receive their share of dividends from consolidating the regime through the financing mechanism of "major projects".

Meanwhile, a significant portion of private entrepreneurs in Russia took advantage of the increasing demand from the state for goods and services (including within the framework of the so-called "import substitution" programs) and the reduction of competition in the domestic market due to the exit of foreign companies.

Militarization, ideological fundamentalism, the dictatorship of official propaganda accompanying the mobilization transition to the imperial model in Russia also faced some resistance from **the liberal part of the Russian intelligentsia**. The position of popular pop singer Alla Pugacheva was particularly indicative in this regard.

However, the share of the middle class dissatisfied with the transition to an aggressive imperial model turned out to be very insignificant in Russian society, and in the conditions of the regime's total control over the information space, their opinion was quickly discredited and marginalized.

Accordingly, the part of the Russian elite that could resist the regime found itself **either abroad or in internal isolation**. Their place was quickly taken by other representatives of the entrepreneurial and intellectual environment who saw **additional opportunities for**

⁶ <https://podrobnosti.ua/2475265-abramovich-vdmovljatsja-pererahovuvati-ukran-viruchen-vd-prodazhu-chels-23-mlrd-funtv-zm.html>

⁷ <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/news/2023/10/09/21465121.shtml>

⁸ <https://t.me/olegderipaska/487>

⁹ https://rueconomics.ru/23956283-ne_viderzhit_kobilka_biznesmen_deripaska_opisal_perspektivi_amerikanskoi_ekonomiki?utm_medium=referral&utm_source=infox.sg&utm_campaign=exchange

¹⁰ <https://ria.ru/20231124/germaniya-1911498692.html>

¹¹ <https://ria.ru/20231127/britaniya-1912087818.html>

income and self-realization in the new conditions. In particular, a significant part of the Russian creative intelligentsia actively responded to the state-paid demand for ideology and propaganda.

However, in the conditions of the regime's resource base reduction, expenditures on ideological and propaganda services are expected to decrease primarily. The example of the master's program "Information and Hybrid Wars," introduced at Moscow State University in June 2022, can be illustrative. Already in November 2023, professors from this specialty began to publicly complain about low salaries (4,000 rubles per month) and their chronic non-payment for 14 months¹².

Risks of Destabilization and Threats to the State Structure of the Russian Federation

The post-election situation in Russia contains numerous threats of destabilization. Various factors and trends in the evolution of the regime could undermine the stability of the state structure of the Russian Federation in the near future. Two primary threats include:

- The risk of a significant deterioration in the socio-economic conditions of the majority of the population in Russia.
- The risk of the population losing understanding of the purpose of the war against Ukraine.

It is evident that these two threats are interconnected. If the living conditions of the population significantly worsen, and the substantial human and material losses inflicted by Russia in this war become apparent, the question will arise: why did Putin attack Ukraine? This question may become particularly acute if Russian foreign policy shifts towards improving relations with the West.

Propagandist claims about "Nazis" and "protecting the people of Donbas" as reasons for the war will lose their persuasiveness under these circumstances.

The moral responsibility for futile losses in the war against Ukraine poses the greatest risk to Putin and his team. Therefore, the Kremlin will do everything possible to avoid this question, at least until the presidential elections.

A more general threat arises from the vulnerability of the **course towards imperial revenge** that Putin has based his legitimacy on since 2014.

¹² <https://istories.media/stories/2023/11/13/infospetsnaz-za-4000-rublei/>

In the current conditions, Russia lacks the economic, demographic, and technological prerequisites for a real restoration of the imperial model. Therefore, the "reconstruction" of the USSR with its geopolitical ambitions and the claim to a "special path" is happening **in a simulated regime**. Through media programming, an illusion of imperial "greatness" is created, and specific political actions (such as the annexation of Crimea, ultimatums to NATO, and the so-called special military operation against Ukraine in 2022) aim to sustain this illusion.

In reality, on the world political map, Russia is rapidly losing economic prospects, political reputation, markets, sources of investment and technology, as well as opportunities for development and integration into global processes. Its capital is being expelled, its athletes and cultural figures are discriminated against, and the accumulated image and civilization capital, built up over centuries, is rapidly depreciating.

The blow to defensive capabilities inflicted by the war in Ukraine, along with the economic losses from imposed sanctions and disrupted trade and technological chains, will have significant long-term negative consequences for Russia's position in the world. Political losses from severed relations with leading European countries, NATO's proximity, and the distancing of former allies among the CIS countries (Armenia¹³, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan¹⁴) leave no chance for the realization of Putin's declared imperial ambitions.

The obvious fact that the attack on Ukraine has become **a grand geopolitical failure** for Russia will gradually become apparent to Russian society, following the completion of active hostilities and the realization of the socio-economic consequences of this adventure.

In the end, it will become clear that Putin's wrong decision has brought only hatred from Ukrainians, disdain from civilized nations, economic decline, the death of tens of thousands of young men on the front lines, the loss of positions in the post-Soviet space, and the strengthening of containment policies from the US and NATO to Russia. And this is the price that Russia will pay for one singular "achievement" – Putin's ability to smoothly be re-elected for a new presidential term and secure the regime from possible internal competition.

When this simple and obvious opinion gains significant traction in Russian society, the current regime will sharply lose its authority and support.

Such a crisis scenario is outlined for Russia in the perspective of the next 2-3 years. The regime can only prevent it if:

¹³ <https://toneto.net/news/kultura/u-v--rmen---prizupinili-d--valn--st-ros--yskogo-agentstva-Sputnik->

¹⁴ <https://ru.krymr.com/a/news-mid-uzbekistana-vyzvali-posla-rossii-slova-prilepina/32742243.html>

- A. There is a convincing military victory over Ukraine (at least with control over the administrative borders of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions and maintaining control over the land corridor to Crimea).
- B. Peace is established between Russia and the West on Putin's terms (with the main hope placed on Trump coming to power in the US).
- C. The continuation of the global security crisis and a demonstration of the West's helplessness in this context (the emergence of new conflict hotspots, particularly in Southeast Asia and the Middle East).

Political Forecast

It should be expected that Putin's regime will strive to maintain a favorable state of inertial patriotic mobilization in Russia for **as long as possible** and **secure well-defended positions** after the exhaustion of the mobilization trend. This implies the following:

1. Military actions of the Russian armed forces will not lose their intensity, at least until the spring of 2024.

The more intense the confrontation on the front, the fewer questions the Russian population will have for the authorities, as they instinctively "cheer for their own". Moreover, the military chronicle creates a natural eventfulness for Russia's domestic political agenda, which the government is interested in preserving until the end of the election campaign.

Continuation of active military actions is also advantageous for the command of the Russian Armed Forces because it allows: a) to "forget" about the failures of the first months of the war; b) to "forget" about regular humiliations of the army leadership by Y. Prigozhin and ultrapatriotic "war correspondents"; c) to justify the increasing expenses on defense needs from the state budget. In this context, relatively modest successes of the Russian army on the front will be justified by the narrative that "NATO is waging war against Russia".

2. At the same time, the Kremlin will be preparing the ground for a safe exit from the state of war favorable to itself.

During the pre-election period, Putin will create the appearance of complete control over the situation, both domestically and on the foreign policy arena. Putin's press conference on December 14, 2023, showed that the authorities have chosen the tone of "confident strength" for their political positioning at this stage.

To transition to a more stable position when the popularity of the war begins to significantly decline, the regime will prepare several political moves:

- A. Initiating a peaceful negotiation process from advantageous positions for Russia (predictably, by the end of 2024 – after the U.S. presidential elections).
 - B. Providing an ideological explanation for what happened to the Russian population (narrative on the "results of the campaign", starting from spring-summer 2024).
 - C. Targeted socio-economic programs to mitigate the impact on the income of the Russian population due to sanctions and significant budget expenditures on war and occupation (after the budget for 2024, i.e., the end of 2024 – beginning of 2025).
3. After the conclusion of active combat operations, socio-economic factors become of crucial importance.

Putin's attempt to shift the material burden of the consequences of war onto private capital (primarily large and medium-sized) – through increased tax pressure and other means of "deprivatizing" the middle class – may prompt some Russian elites to directly oppose the government. This opposition may manifest as a "strike" (business closures, moving assets abroad, and emigration) and could encourage the search for political instruments of resistance. The protest movement may be supported (explicitly or implicitly) by part of the power elites "deprived" during the distribution of the mobilization budget.

Recommendations for Ukraine

Ukraine, together with its strategic partners and allies, needs to focus efforts on the following directions:

1. Swift exhaustion of the Russian financial-resource base of the war, primarily by limiting the export capabilities of Russian oil through the blockade of accessible trade routes and the "gray fleet" of tankers.
2. Dissemination of the idea within Russian society about the catastrophic consequences of this war for Russia and its sole cause – Putin's attempt to stay in power.
3. Stimulating opposition sentiments among the Russian intelligentsia, journalists, as well as among representatives of the middle and large business. Identifying potential opponents of the regime within the power structures.
4. Preventing the implementation of Putin's plan to freeze the conflict and/or initiate a peace negotiation process from a strong position for Russia (against the backdrop of military successes of the Russian Armed Forces, "Europe's fatigue", and a shift in the political vector in the United States).

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