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The Putin regime's façade begins to crack

The word 'stability' has been the motto of Putin's rule. But now he himself has become a source of instability

As the Russian army suffers one bloody defeat after another and withdraws from more and more Ukrainian territories, Vladimir Putin's regime is also caving in on itself. For years, the Russian autocracy worked on the unwritten rule that, if you stay out of politics, you'll be more or less left alone. Everyone could still think what they wanted and express it privately. But the government has now ripped up the rulebook. Men have been forced to fight in a war of conquest and expressions of opinion in private have become dangerous. As a result of that, as well as current social upheaval, Russian society has become more confused than ever since the final days of the Soviet Union. The latter ended abruptly – the same can happen to the Putin era.

According to numerous leaks in independent Russian media, most of which now have to operate from abroad due to strict censorship and repression, the military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February came as a shock to many – even Vladimir Putin's own circle. As soon as he had presented his plans to his confidants as a *fait accompli*, it became very dangerous to escape the sinking ship. They had no option but to rally around the decades-long leader. Initially, there was a sense of euphoria – a sort of nationalist high – at being able to achieve something as triumphant as Crimea in 2014. 'Now they'll have to buy roubles on the Moscow Exchange to buy gas from us. But that's just the beginning. Now we're going to f*ck them all,' Russian journalist Farida Rustamova quoted a senior official at the time. Rustamova credited Western sanctions with spurring the Russian elite on, rather than hampering them.

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But the war has dragged on and on since then, and Russia can hardly speak of success. Since being forced to withdraw from previously conquered Ukrainian territories, Putin's elite have lost their enthusiasm. Even Russia's own Ministry of Defence couldn't deny the fact that

its troops had to flee from the Kharkiv region. This has led to a change of opinion among many political leaders, believes political scientist Abbas Gallyamov, Putin's former speechwriter who knows his circle first-hand. 'Most members of the elite are pragmatists. They are determined to bring this all to an end as soon as possible. They weren't even enthusiastic about this war in the beginning. And without any wins, they are even more convinced that it's a bad idea,' says Gallyamov.

However, public support for the war is also an indicator of loyalty to the Kremlin leader. 'There is only one person in the Russian government who is really enthusiastic about the war, and that is Vladimir Putin. For everyone else, supporting the war is nothing more than a formal sign of loyalty to the leader,' believes Oleg Kashin, a prominent Russian journalist and publicist living in London.

A crumbling façade

Conflicts between different pro-government factions have been erupting ever since the defeats began. On 1 October, Chechen leader and Russian military officer Ramsan Kadyrov heavily criticised the commander of the Central Military District of Lapin, blaming him for pulling out of the strategically important city of Liman. The influential head of the private military company Wagner, Evgeni Prigoshin, swiftly followed with similarly harsh words. The Ministry of Defence simply took these attacks on the chin. 'It is becoming increasingly difficult for the Kremlin to maintain a single media space. All of this feels more and more like a kind of anarchy, almost like a civil war. The masses are sensing this too, and support for the war is breaking down – fear in society is growing,' Gallyamov is convinced.

The dissolution of the Russian 'social contract' weighs just as heavily as the shocks that these events have brought. For many years, it was generally agreed that, under Putin, most don't get involved in politics, that a pre-determined winner is elected, and in return the state provides security and stability. Putin's mobilisation has torn up that social contract. Suddenly, tacit approval is no longer enough. Now everyone is suddenly expected to publicly declare their support for the regime, many even with a weapon in hand and at risk of death. 'Vladimir Putin himself called social and economic stability in society his most important achievement after Boris Yeltsin. The word 'stability' has become the motto of his rule. But now Putin himself has become a source of

instability,' says Alexander Baunov, a Russian political scientist and expert at *Carnegie Endowment*. According to surveys carried out by the non-governmental *Lewada Center*, only 24 per cent of Russians approve of the war, with support for the Russian army's actions falling considerably from March to October.

The annexation of four new areas after apparent sham referenda also failed to generate any enthusiasm among the Russian population. The action has even had the opposite effect of the Crimea annexation, believes Gallyamov. 'Crimea was a symbol of victory, a symbol of Russia's independent foreign policy and its success. This was celebrated more in Russia than in Crimea itself. In Ukraine, though, there has been no victory. What's more, there is blood flowing in the rivers and streams. And the latest action is an additional escalation, which people don't want. They want everything to come to an end as soon as possible,' the political scientist notes.

There are potential sources of tension in the Russian provinces too.

During the first few weeks of the war, some observers and commentators reported that there was a plot in amongst Putin's circles by those, who were particularly unhappy with the aggression against Ukraine. For a while, there was often talk about Putin meeting the same fate as some of his predecessors. Paul I, for example, met his end after he was attacked with a snuff box. Josef Stalin was poisoned in 1953, as numerous historical documents prove. However, in the many years of his rule, Putin has chosen his personal entourage very carefully. At the beginning of the war, there was not a single person around him who would dare contradict him. Instead, as Farida Rustamova writes, a suicidal mood took hold in Kremlin circles.

But there are potential sources of tension in the Russian provinces too. Oleg Kashin refers to the North Caucasus, in particular Chechnya, which has always been the weakest link in Putin's chain. 'There is potential for a new war in the Caucasus. But I don't believe there will be anything like a civil war in Russia between Putin's supporters and opponents. The regional elites, weakened by Putin, are still able to negotiate and prevent wars, because they are rich and want to live in peace.'

Despite Kadyrov's loud mouth, enthusiasm for the war in Chechnya is low – and not only among the provincial lords there. The number of

ethnic Chechen volunteers was never high, writes Elena Milashina in the *Novaya Gazeta*; almost all of them were employed by local law enforcement agencies and forced to go to war. When this became public knowledge, the number of applications to join these authorities fell sharply, even though they had to pay bribes to get a position before. Kadyrov plugged the gaps in his Akhmat Special Forces with ethnic Russians, who now make up the majority of these troops by far.

Even if Putin's regime is still managing to maintain the façade, more and more cracks are emerging throughout the country – from right at the top, through the general population, to crisis-hit regions. Bestselling author Alexei Yurchak has intensively researched the collapse of the Soviet system. In his recent interview, he says that the collapse of the Putin system will come suddenly, and the façade will fall quickly: 'the key difference between the USSR and Putin's Russia is that until Perestroika, no-one believed that the Soviet system would collapse. But now there is a clear feeling that the end is nigh.'

In this debate, also read the article by Roland Bathon.



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