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The state that doesn't know its people

The war in Ukraine is threatening Russia's fragile social contract. The greatest danger for the Kremlin could thus come from its own population

Russian society does not enjoy a good reputation. Western politicians and academics accuse it of behaving passively towards the state – and has done so for centuries. According to them, Russian society does not represent a counterweight to the state, let alone resistance. Detractors in academia claim that it is easier to imagine Russia without a society than without a state. This view has its origins in the 18th century when Russian society was characterised as 'a state affair'. To this day, observers ascribe a peasant character to Russian society, and thus a certain fatalism.

This perception clashes with the images that have been glaring at the whole world since 24 February, but above all at Russian society. The Russian president, his government, and his state invaded Ukraine. The invasion is of course carried out by Russian society in the form of soldiers, prepared and administered by politicians and bureaucrats, and accompanied by a partly supportive, but also insecure and fearful population. But alongside them there is also civil society, which reacts differently: it is courageous, it protests publicly, it writes appeals on social media. These people are increasingly being prevented from spreading their messages, websites and portals are being shut down altogether, and demonstrations are violently suppressed.

That's no surprise. The state has understood that this war is not only being met with resistance in Ukraine and abroad but could also cause great unrest at home. Generally, war is not met with approval in Russia. The historical societal association with war is suffering. Therefore the Kremlin is avoiding the term 'war' and criminalising its use. In addition, the justification for this armed conflict turned out to be remarkably weak. Besides, how can an attack on a country be portrayed when its citizens are so closely linked to those of Russia? Even Russian propaganda was unable to produce video clips of smiling Ukrainians waving flowers and enthusiastically greeting Russian tanks and soldiers.

A changing social contract

Far more important than the lack of a coherent narrative for the war, however, is that Russian society fears for the future of the social contract that has long stabilised the country. Broadly speaking, it maintains that the state guarantees the population a decent livelihood, including health care, pensions, education, and infrastructure such as housing and public transportation, as well as a limited amount of prosperity. In return, Russian society leaves internal and external politics to the state. Criticism of the state is to be refrained from, and violations are punished.

The state has understood that this war is not only being met with resistance in Ukraine and abroad as a whole but could also cause great unrest at home.

This implicit agreement is not new, but has evolved: sometimes with defeats for the population – with the murderous Stalin era being one example – and sometimes for the state, such as the complete loss of statehood in 1917 and 1991. Under the government of Vladimir Putin, a revival of the social contract began, initially in favour of society. The growing economy generated enough money to meet the demands of the state, the oligarchs, and the population. Poverty decreased, and social upheaval caused by the collapse of Soviet statehood was reduced. At the same time, a small elite shamelessly enriched itself.

Despite all the authoritarian instruments of the Russian state, which increased in both quality and quantity, society was able to gain respect, at least in part – thanks to the Soviet dissidents and a civil society that has developed since the 1990s. These are people who are committed and have hopes for a better Russia, who have been able to acquire property or who believe in sustainable modernisation. It was them who took to the streets in 2011 to protest the results of the rigged parliamentary elections. Likewise, in 2012 they demonstrated against the cynical political move whereby – as if it were castling in a game of chess – Vladimir Putin was re-elected 'King of the Tsars' and the previous President Dmitry Medvedev demoted to 'Prime Minister of the Rook'.

According to a Russian analysis from 2011, the country's new middle class was estimated to be 40 per cent of the population and judged to be a veritable political power. It had generated its wealth from the private sector, but in no small part also as civil servants or those who profited from them. Their numbers increased significantly under Putin's presidency. But the protests – especially by young people because of the feeling of moral injustice – came to nothing, the 'castling' was not

revoked, the new-yet-old president took office.

Hardships await Russian society

Since then, the social contract has been shaky, but it has not fallen. Russia has still made good money from the export of raw materials. Despite the annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Ukraine's Donbas region, the state was able to deliver, at least partially. The state tried to compensate for the deficit by trying to rally society behind it through patriotism and enemy images. But all that may now be coming to an end. In these days of war, Russian society is facing enormous challenges.

Predictions of a possible popular uprising against the state in Russia are as old as the country itself.

The economic sanctions against the Russian state and its economic and political decision-makers will make it impossible for the state to continue to fulfil its responsibilities. In order to pay for the war and its consequences, citizens will have to accept cuts. Prosperity will be suspended, and social benefits frozen or cut. It does not necessarily follow that Russian society will take to the streets. But at least parts of the population have managed to leave the country. In particular, these are well-educated people who cannot see a future in an isolated and increasingly closed country – but perhaps others will leave too, in order to give their children a better future.

As a FES survey has shown, of all state institutions, the younger generation trusts the president and the army the most. But it is precisely these two entities that are acting contrary to the wishes of young people. In addition to social support, this younger group wants stability above all. A long-anticipated generational conflict could be set off. Meanwhile, things are also simmering on other fronts: the Russian Federation is a multinational state; its society is multifaceted. However, the armed conflict is justified purely on a rhetoric of 'Russianness'. This is a contradiction that could raise tensions within the country.

Predictions of a possible popular uprising against the state in Russia are as old as the country itself. Most of them have turned out to be wrong. And it is equally wrong to view the state and society as diametrically opposed. Of course, the two are intertwined. But if the state no longer delivers, and despite censorship the pictures from Ukraine hit the eye of Russian society, the anger will be enormous.

Thus after 24 February, Russian history could once again reach a point where the greatest threat to the state does not come from abroad but from within. The last time this situation arose was in 1983, when Yuri Andropov, General Secretary of the Communist Party and head of the Soviet Union's secret service, feared something similar – two years before perestroika and eight years before the collapse of the Soviet Union. He wrote that his state did not know its own people. Is it possible that in his KGB training, Vladimir Putin somehow overlooked this observation by his colleague from the intelligence community?



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