

Fischer, Sabine

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SWP Comment

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Russia on the Road to Dictatorship

Internal Political Repercussions of the Attack on Ukraine

Sabine Fischer

The invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has catapulted Russia from hard autocracy into dictatorship. The relationship between state and society is growing increasingly totalitarian. This is no bolt from the blue: Today's wartime censorship and repression are based on laws passed successively since the early 2010s. Vladimir Putin's decision to go to war has absolutised the Russian power vertical. The negation of rights has accelerated, propaganda is massive and the suppression of independent media, opposition and civil society comprehensive. This will not change as long as Putin remains in power. But in the medium term the immense pressure generated by the war and the Western sanctions could bring about domestic political change and see an end to Putin's regime. The conceivable scenarios, however, point to destabilisation rather than democratisation.

The meeting of the Security Council of the Russian Federation on 21 February 2022, shortly before the invasion of Ukraine, was staged to demonstrate the overwhelming power of the Russian President. In an opulent setting in the Kremlin, Vladimir Putin sat alone at a table to receive confirmation of his decision to recognise the "People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk" from the Council's permanent members. The gathering included the highest representatives of the Russian government, of the two chambers of parliament, and of the security services. Although some were visibly uneasy, they all backed Putin's decision and signalled their personal loyalty and the subordination of the institutions they represent to his will. It would be hard to find a clearer metaphor for the Russian power vertical.

Absolutising the Power Vertical

The power vertical is the structural backbone of the Russian political system, functioning to tie all political and economic institutions, structures and actors to the person of the president. Its origins lie in the early 2000s, when newly elected President Putin broke the power of the provincial governors and consolidated the predominance of the centre in Russia's federal system. As well as undermining the Russian state federalism, Putin gave Russia's oligarchs the choice between political subordination or persecution and exile.

The end of the oligarchy also changed the media landscape, which had been characterised by great freedom in the 1990s. Many oligarchs had influential media out-



lets in their business empires. Their dismantling in the early 2000s put an end to this “oligarchic media pluralism” and the state asserted increasing control over Russia’s information space.

The following years saw growing electoral fraud and manipulation, obstruction of the political opposition, the establishment of United Russia as the “party of power”, and growing restrictions on civil society. The influence of the security services expanded as Putin filled key political and economic positions with his confidants. A new layer of political/economic actors emerged, extracting profits from Russia’s resource exports and accumulating enormous wealth.

The presidency of Dmitry Medvedev (2008–2012) simulated a phase of greater political diversity – for the last time. Vladimir Putin’s return to the Kremlin in 2012, which was accompanied by mass protests against irregularities during the Duma election of December 2011 and a wave of harsh repression, finally cemented the power vertical into place. The process of autocratic centralisation and personalisation of the political system now became inexorable. “Conservative” values and nationalism increasingly served as the basis of legitimacy. Attempts to create political alternatives to the ruling elite, first and foremost by Alexei Navalny and his supporters, were suppressed with increasing rigor.

Since 2020 Russia has experienced another drastic round of autocratisation, with the constitutional reform in 2020 and the unprecedented wave of repression before and after the State Duma elections in September 2021. The new constitution enables Putin to remain in power long beyond the next presidential election in 2024. That certainty itself boosts his already omnipotent position. Institutional checks and balances have been swept away, the independent judiciary is no more. The business elites, for years intimately intertwined with the state, no longer represent a counterweight. Horizontal structures between state and society, such as political parties

and NGOs, have been systematically eliminated. Alexei Navalny nearly died in a poison attack in August 2020 and has been in prison since January 2021. His political organisations have been dismantled.

During the pandemic Vladimir Putin has become increasingly detached from the political system’s other institutions and actors. This distance and isolation contributed to consolidating the hierarchy of the power vertical. He made the decision to invade Ukraine in this isolation. Now it must be implemented, with all consequences, by the subordinate instances.

Negating Rights

The Russian autocracy has long employed legal instruments to successively restrict political liberties and participation. Over the course of a decade parliament and state have created a comprehensive body of repressive legislation. This includes the “foreign agent” law, legislation restricting freedom of information and assembly, and curbs on “extremist” and “undesirable” organisations. When the war began a legislative armoury was already available to crush opposition.

It was thus a simple matter to impose war censorship. On the first day of the “special military operation” in Ukraine, 24 February 2022, the media regulator Roskomnadzor ordered the Russian mass media to use only official Russian sources for their reporting. The terms “war”, “attack” and “invasion” were prohibited.

On 4 March the State Duma met in special session to drastically increase the punishments for three offences: Disseminating disinformation concerning the Russian armed forces now incurs fines of up to 700,000 roubles (roughly €8,100) and imprisonment for up to fifteen years if “serious consequences” are involved; discrediting the armed forces, including calling for unauthorised public manifestations, is punishable by fines of up to one million roubles (roughly €11,600) and imprisonment for up to three years. The same poten-

tial sentences apply to calls for sanctions against Russia.

More than 180 media outlets have been blocked, including the flagships of independent Russian journalism, the Echo of Moscow radio station and TV Rain. Echo of Moscow's frequency has already been transferred to the propaganda station Russia Today. TV Rain had already lost its terrestrial broadcasting licence in 2014 for its critical reporting of the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass, but had remained available on the internet. The prestigious *Novaya Gazeta*, whose editor-in-chief Dmitry Muratov received the Nobel peace prize in 2021, suspended publication for the duration of the "special operation" after two official warnings from Roskomnadzor. Western social media like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have been blocked, Facebook's owner Meta classed as an extremist organisation. Access to YouTube, which is used by many dissenting independent journalists, is also threatened. Without tools like VPN Russians have no access to information deviating from the state propaganda.

The outcome of this process is the complete destruction of independent media in Russia. Dozens of independent journalists have fled abroad. This goes beyond dismantling broadcasters, newspapers and internet media through blocking and bans. Under the present circumstances any attempt to engage in independent professional journalism represents an existential risk.

The ending of Russia's membership of the Council of Europe represents another step into lawlessness. On 25 February, the day after the invasion, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe decided to suspend the Russian Federation's rights of representation. That had already occurred once before, in 2014 after Russia's annexation of Crimea. In 2019 Russia's voting rights were restored. Now both sides made the separation permanent. On 15 March the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe declared that Russia could no longer be a member in view of its fundamental viola-

tion of the norms of peaceful coexistence, and Russia announced it was leaving the organisation.

After a six-month transition ending on 16 September 2022, Russian citizens will thus lose the possibility to apply to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). Currently there are still about 18,000 Russian cases pending at ECHR, including several from Alexei Navalny. It is questionable whether rulings will be issued in the short remaining period, or implemented by the Russian government. After leaving the Council of Europe Russia is no longer bound by the European Convention on Human Rights.

Ending membership also offers the Russian state the opportunity to reinstate the death penalty, which exists under the Russian legal system but has been suspended since the 1990s in association with accession to the Council of Europe in 1996 and the partnership and cooperation agreement with the EU. Depending on how the domestic political situation develops, the return of capital punishment in Russia cannot be excluded.

Propaganda, Ideology, History

Russia has further intensified its anti-Ukrainian propaganda in connection with the war. In the days leading up to the invasion Moscow repeatedly asserted that the "fascist junta in Kiev" was committing genocide against the Russian and Russian-speaking population in Donbas. Russian propaganda also exploited an argument that had hitherto been part of the Ukrainian and Western discourse: With the war and suffering in Donbas dragging on for eight years it was finally time to liberate the people there from the threat of the "fascists in Kiev".

The accusations of fascism weave the Russian "special operation" into another strand of state propaganda. The Soviet victory over fascism in the "Great Patriotic War" (as Russians call the Second World War) has become — at the latest since 2014 — a central pillar of the state's legitimacy

narrative. Its importance has increased still further since 2020. The propagandistic instrumentalisation of the 75th anniversary of the end of the war merged both with the constitutional reform (Putin had to remain president because only he could protect Russia from its enemies) and with the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic (where Putin declared victory in summer 2020 with the approval of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V). Martial representations of Soviet heroism are ubiquitous in public space, while nationalistic/militaristic content has penetrated ever further into the education system and other spheres of life.

The second pillar upon which this propaganda narrative rests is defence against Western aggression. Here Ukraine is seen not as an independent actor but as an instrument of Washington employed to force Russia into submission. In this reading Russia is not only “protecting” its own “compatriots” in Ukraine against the “fascist clique” in Kyiv, but also “defending” itself against the aggression of the United States and the “collective West”.

This basic Russian propaganda narrative validates the Russian war aims of “denazifying” and demilitarising Ukraine and features in speeches made by Vladimir Putin since February 2022. The state-controlled media sometimes go even further to call for “denazification” of the whole of Ukrainian society. Within Russia, Putin threatens opponents of the war openly, asserting that the Russian people will recognise this “fifth column” as “traitors” and “spit them out like an insect”. The language of Russian propaganda is increasingly characterised by fascistoid allusions to purity and cleansing of “harmful elements”. The letter “Z” (“Za pobedu!” — “For victory!”) became the main symbol for support of the “special operation” a few days after the war began and is now ubiquitous in public space.

War propaganda is everywhere. The state-controlled television stations are no longer broadcasting light entertainment. Instead the entire schedule is dominated by reporting on the progress of the “special operation” and propagandist political talk

shows. After the suppression of the independent media they form the only remaining information space that is easily accessible to Russian citizens. When the war began, schools received instructions from the education ministry about how to handle the “special operation” in class. Universities and other educational institutions are required to support “patriotic actions”. State employees are urged to display the “Z” symbol. The huge rally in Moscow’s Luzhniki Stadium on 18 March 2022 to celebrate the eighth anniversary of the annexation of Crimea emblemised the cult of personality being created around the Russian president.

Suppressing All Opposition

During the first days of the invasion there were signs of broad resistance in Russian society. The hashtag #нетвойне (#notowar) was widely shared in social media across the country. Internet petitions and other initiatives gathered hundreds of thousands of signatures.

Russia’s repressive legislation makes demonstrations almost impossible. Public gatherings have to be approved, giving the state the possibility to prevent them from occurring in the first place. Calling for or participating in unauthorised demonstrations can incur fines and even (for repeated offences) prison sentences of up to fifteen years. In 2021 thousands of Russians were prosecuted for participating in pro-Navalny protests. That in itself is enough to deter many citizens from taking to the streets. Even so public protests occurred in many Russian cities in the first days of the war, with the human rights organisation OVD-Info recording more than 15,400 detentions since 24 February 2022.

Many of those who participated in protests, expressed criticisms on the internet, in petitions or by other means, or attempted to avoid the new language rules in universities, schools cultural institutions and other contexts immediately felt the consequences. They were visited by the security

forces, given official warnings by employers, threatened, in some cases physically attacked. Performers, school and university teachers, journalists in the state-controlled media and others were dismissed or left of their own volition. The laws against “disinformation about the special operation” and “discrediting the armed forces” played their part in silencing dissent.

Shock, repression, censorship, and also the immediate economic repercussions of the Western sanctions led thousands of Russians to leave the country in the first weeks of the war. This exodus is unprecedented in the country’s post-Soviet history. To date it has principally involved political and civil society actors, independent journalists, as well as many politically unorganised individuals who see no future for themselves in the country and can afford to leave. Young men flee to avoid military service. Jewish people take the chance to emigrate to Israel. The number of applications for Israeli citizenship was already increasing before the war.

It must be assumed that many more will leave if and when they find the opportunity. Tipping into totalitarianism, the state has finally transgressed the line between public and private. Even those who are not politically active but hold different opinions find themselves exposed to massive hostility, defamation and denunciation. They can no longer withdraw into their private niches. Many will therefore seek to leave the country. Ever more professions will be affected. The post-invasion emigration has only just begun. It could assume dimensions comparable to the 1917–22 exodus triggered by revolution and civil war.

A Brittle Consolidation of Society

In barely a week — between 24 February and 4 March 2022 — the Russian state suppressed the anti-war mood in parts of society and forced hundreds of thousands into exile. That is important to remember when considering opinion polls showing continuously growing support for the war

and for the Russian political leadership. According to the state-affiliated polling institutes VTSIOM and FOM, support for the “special operation” grew from 65 to 73 percent between 27 February and late March. In roughly the same period support for the Russian president grew from 62 percent before the invasion to 82 percent in early April. The independent Levada Institute found an even clearer trend: In a survey published on 31 March 2022, 81 percent supported the actions of Russian armed forces in Ukraine and 83 percent supported the policies of the Russian president. These figures reflect a closing of ranks similar to that following the annexation of Crimea.

Three factors reinforce this effect. Many people believe the official version that Russia must defend itself against gratuitous, punitive and anti-Russian sanctions imposed by the West. The numbers who say they are affected by the Western sanctions are also increasing. And at the same time attitudes towards the West have deteriorated even further since the invasion.

So large parts of Russian society are turning even further away from the West and blaming the Western sanctions for their deteriorating standard of living. This even applies to groups that were previously not uncritical towards the political leadership. Stark isolation from the Western world is also likely to further strengthen conformism within Russia. Finally the societal trauma of the brutal war is liable to lead many people to deny Russia’s responsibility for its invasion.

Nevertheless, the survey findings should be treated with caution. A dictatorial political environment and massive propaganda place obvious caveats on the survey findings. In this environment pollsters are forced to avoid referring to “war”, which distorts the findings. Intimidation and fear of repression encourage affirmative responses and reduce the willingness to participate at all or to openly express critical opinions. Independent sociologists observe that large parts of the Russian population are in the first place politically apathetic and wish to avoid any conflict with the

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und
Politik
German Institute for
International and
Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3 – 4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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state. It is very likely that the ostensible consolidation of Russian society around Putin and his war of aggression against Ukraine will be more brittle than the cited survey findings would suggest.

Political Change in Russia – When and How?

In deciding to invade Ukraine, Vladimir Putin and his circle have taken their country from autocracy to dictatorship, and to the brink of the abyss. Russia faces enormous pressures, with the Western sanctions expected to trigger a deep economic recession in the coming months. The standard of living has been declining for ten years, and is set to deteriorate drastically. The profits from resource exports, whose informal redistribution has kept the Russian elites on board, will shrink dramatically. The longer the war drags on the more Russian families will be mourning fallen soldiers. To date the political leadership in Moscow has succeeded in delegating the war dead almost entirely to the local and regional levels. They in turn pressure the affected families not to create publicity. It remains to be seen how long that can function.

The same question arises in connection with the relationship between state, elites and society altogether. Violence, repression and totalitarian propaganda are the only tools left in the hands of the Russian regime to preserve stability. The war in Ukraine can be expected to drag on. Repression will sharpen. The past month and a half has shown that this can succeed in the short term. But in the medium term, every day the war continues places the Russian regime in greater danger.

If the invasion of Ukraine leads to political change in Russia, one must be prepared for different scenarios, of which the positive are not the most plausible. Three aspects must be considered:

1. If its pinnacle is destabilised the power vertical faces acute danger of collapse. And

if the Russian political system implodes a major destabilisation must be expected. Regional secessionism, violence, even civil war would not be excluded. The biggest risk in this context would be Ramzan Kadyrov's reign of terror in Chechnya.

2. Vladimir Putin's worldview is shared by an overwhelming majority of the Russian political elites. A political transition negotiated among elite groups would therefore offer scant prospect of substantive political change, especially with respect to foreign policy, Ukraine and the Russian neighbourhood.

3. The transition to dictatorship has enormously exacerbated the atomisation of Russian society. The kind of horizontal structures required for alternative currents to form and acquire political influence no longer exist. The capacity for self-organisation has hit rock bottom. There is therefore little prospect of Russian society playing a constructive role in a process of political transformation – less even than in the latter-day Soviet Union.

None of this is an argument against sanctions. Germany and its partners must do everything in their power to constrain Russia's ability to wage war on Ukraine. At the same time they must be prepared for political change in Russia, when it does occur, to create major new challenges. One way to prepare for those challenges will be to offer unbureaucratic support to democratic politicians, independent media and civil society actors who have left the country, and assist them in establishing exile structures.

Dr. Sabine Fischer is Senior Fellow in the Eastern Europe and Eurasia Research Division.