



Putin's Achilles' Heel Exposed: Now is Not the Time to Weaken Resolve¹

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For a quarter of a century, the main guarantor of the stability and sustainability of Russian statehood was an unspoken agreement between the government and society. The principle was simple: do not ask unnecessary questions and stay away from politics, leaving the elites with complete freedom of action. In exchange, the state offered its citizens visible stability, privacy in personal life, and sometimes even material well-being.

Putin precisely understood the public demand of the early 2000s. The fatigue from Soviet totalitarianism, with its harsh penetration into every corner of personal life, compelling each individual to participate outwardly in “politics”—from the classroom to the grave—drove deeply into the Russian consciousness a profound aversion to any form of civic activity. At the same time, the unstable period of the emerging Russian democracy in the 1990s, following the collapse of the USSR and plunging millions of citizens into poverty, led society to prefer more down-to-earth, material values. Supermarkets, trips abroad, and the ability to buy a car became symbols of well-being and desirable comforts that most chose over the ideals of democracy and freedom of speech.

It is no surprise then that, with the onset of a full-scale war, when the public was expected not merely to show passive loyalty, but actually to participate, sometimes at the cost of their own lives, many chose to remain on the sidelines. It would have been naïve to expect a sudden outburst of patriotism, a mass unification around the flag, or long queues at military recruitment offices from citizens who had been trained for years in political apathy and civil infantilism. But, for a regime accustomed to unquestionable “support” in falsified, fully controlled elections, it came as a shock that even 300,000 people—less than 0.3% of the population—could not be mobilized in the fall of 2022 for the war it had unleashed.

Moreover, the mobilization, intended to save the situation on the fronts, turned out to be an extremely challenging test for the entire system, triggering a surge in panic, local protests, and a mass wave of emigration. According to various estimates, between 500,000 and 1 million people, mostly highly qualified specialists, left the country within a couple of months, unwilling to participate in the war.

¹ A shorter version of this opinion piece will appear in POV International.

The worsening economic situation also played a significant role. The rapid rise in prices, the devaluation of the ruble, sanctions pressure, and the departure of major international companies deprived Russians of their accustomed level of comfort and stability. Even among the more loyal segments of the population, discontent began to awaken, directed not so much against the war itself, but against its destructive impact on daily life. The violation of the unspoken “social contract” between the authorities and the people—where the state ensured economic well-being in exchange for political indifference —became an additional source of public tension.

The personalized system of government, completely devoid of functioning institutions, turned out to be a trap for its creator. A system built on the pillars of hyper-control, elite loyalty, corruption, and an atomized society, constructed over decades by Putin with the goal of ensuring his “eternal” rule, began to crack under the weight of qualitatively different challenges. Trapped in the snare of his own political mechanisms, Putin, for the first time in years, canceled several traditional public appearances in 2022, signaling his deep shock in the face of this new reality.

In the late 2022, many experts predicted the imminent collapse of the Russian economy, and then the regime itself, drawing parallels with the collapse of the USSR. However, despite its significant share of the state sector, the economy of Putin’s Russia relied on market mechanisms and private business, which, in combination with Western technologies and investments, managed to give the system flexibility and resilience in times of crisis. Surprisingly quickly, new markets for energy resources were found, and alternative supply channels were established, while Russian and Chinese businesses, with state support, took the place of the departed Western companies.

A new unspoken agreement was offered to society and the elites, and a special political-economic formation—“necronomics”—was developed, in which death became the key factor of growth. Like military Keynesianism, necronomics relies on state budget injections into weapons production, the effectiveness of which is measured by the deaths of Ukrainian soldiers. Large payments are made for signing contracts with the army, and even larger sums for injuries or death on the front lines. This triggers a huge turnover of “free” funds in the economy, stimulating not only the military-industrial complex and related sectors, but also other industries. Thus, necronomics allowed the marginalized segments of society, who found themselves without purpose in peacetime, to quickly become wealthy by going to war, while others had the opportunity to earn well, staying behind and not putting themselves at risk. For instance, a former night watchman who dies in battle secures a luxurious house and a new car for his family, while a seamstress from a small provincial town significantly increases her income by fulfilling military orders.

Now, a thousand days after the beginning of the conflict, Putin has succeeded in normalizing the war—it no longer seems to society and the elites like a tragedy, a source of hardships and deprivation to be escaped as soon as possible. Necronomics has firmly established itself as the

new model, and the war itself has acquired the characteristics of a familiar backdrop, becoming not just acceptable, but an almost invisible element of daily life.

However, Russian society, which willingly accepted the new unspoken contract with the authorities, did not immediately notice the hidden terms of this deal. The colossal military expenditures, especially in the face of increasing isolation and potential declines in oil revenue, pose a serious threat to the budget in the coming years. They create only a temporary illusion of economic growth, unaccompanied by real development. In reality, this “military boom” serves as a transitional period, laying the groundwork for the creation of a neo-totalitarian regime, where a society, having forgotten the times of peaceful cooperation with the West, will be ready to follow any will of the authorities without demanding high returns. Putin’s strategy does not involve ending the war, which is serving as the new foundation of the regime’s stability; on the contrary, it aims to transform it into an ideologically driven, permanent confrontation with the Euro-Atlantic world, imposing a state of a “besieged fortress” on society.

Already today, disturbing features of totalitarianism are clearly emerging, enveloping the entire country. Against the backdrop of growing control over the information space, state propaganda has not only flooded television screens but also infiltrated media and entertainment sectors, striving by all means to impose the “correct” ideology. Military training and political ideology programs are being introduced in schools and universities, shaping loyalty to the authorities and actively militarizing youth.

Meanwhile, the brutal suppression of any deviation from the official propaganda line is intensifying, putting at risk not only freedom of speech but also freedom of thought. This repressive mechanism is gaining momentum, which has already led to a rapid increase in the number of political prisoners, now numbering over 1,000. Any independent and unsanctioned media outlets, organizations, and internet resources, including popular social networks, are being outlawed, entering numerous registers of undesirable and banned entities. Technologies are being developed to ensure near-complete control over citizens, and special services are increasingly expanding their powers, quietly transforming the country into a vast prison.

Understanding these processes is key to determining the correct scenario for achieving lasting peace in Europe. This transitional period in Russia is the Achilles’ heel of Putin’s power, a moment that the West can and should use to prevent the emergence of a new existential adversary near its borders, thus averting Russia’s final consolidation on the path of totalitarian isolation, akin to Iran and North Korea. Russia is only beginning this journey now: its industry is still dependent on Western technologies, the budget relies on energy exports, and most Russians are still interested in improving relations with the world and continue to see themselves as part of the Western cultural space.

Attempts to freeze the conflict through the establishment of a temporary ceasefire for the short-term gains of certain Western politicians will not lead to sustainable equilibrium in the region and may turn into a strategic blunder. Such agreements, if not backed by real military force from the Ukrainian side and reliable international guarantees, will not eliminate Putin’s incentives to violate them in the future. They will merely buy him time to strengthen his military

power and advance the country down the path of totalitarianism. Moreover, due to propaganda, such a ceasefire scenario will be presented to Russian society as a victory, which will only strengthen Putin's position within the country and increase the resilience of his regime.

At the same time, a ceasefire artificially maintained by the military presence of Western forces, such as NATO contingents along the front lines, carries equally serious risks. This scenario could contribute to long-term tension, giving Putin the opportunity to manipulate the escalation of the conflict, thus drawing the North Atlantic world into a new phase of the arms race and using economic attrition as a tool against the West — much like what was done to the USSR in the past. This will affect the economic well-being of European countries and their internal stability, while Russian propaganda will gain a new tool to justify repressive policies and the militarization of society.

A sustainable peace cannot be built on a compromise with a dictator and aggressor. The only long-term solution remains a change in Russia's political regime, coupled with the loss of Putin's image as a strong and invincible leader. Serious economic problems, the depletion of regime resources, and military defeats could become a catalyst for change, stripping Putin of support from the elites and society.

To bring this scenario closer, the West must demonstrate firmness and readiness for long-term, responsible decisions. Expanding sanctions targeting military infrastructure and the economic pillars of the regime, reducing revenues from energy exports, and intensifying the international isolation of Putin's regime are key steps in undermining its stability. At the same time, comprehensive support must be given to Russians suffering from the actions of their authorities and resisting them. Only firm and consistent actions from the international community, united around common democratic values, can ensure lasting peace in Europe.