CURRENT HISTORY

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"Success or failure on the battlefield of Ukraine is secondary to maintaining the normality of the soft administrative security regime at home and making sure that any imagining of an alternative is impossible."

Maintaining the Illusion: Russian Society After Three Years of War

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Three years ago I wrote in this publication about a shift in Russian society, from responses of shock and fear concerning the invasion of Ukraine to a sense of shared "defensive consolidation." Despite the undeniable aggression of their state, reactions among Russians themselves, from almost the beginning of the conflict, were defensive, characterized by lack of enthusiasm and practical ways of fending off the myriad negative effects stemming from the invasion of Ukraine—material, psychological, and moral. Consolidating such reactions entailed cleaving to local forms of authority and identity (and a rather abstract, diffuse sense of patriotism), but in an unrequited manner. Far from rallying around the flag and jingoism, the problem remains an absence of meaningful leadership and persuasive ideology to channel these responses in the way the regime would like—toward a genuine war economy and ideological consolidation.

Now, well into the fourth year of war, nothing has changed about what we might call this social conundrum in Russia. Everyone, from the core militarist regime to the "fellow travelers" in the government who think the decision to invade Ukraine was a mistake but cannot voice this even to themselves, and the majority of the population who have not materially benefited, understands this conundrum more or less well. There is no rational or material advantage to continuing the war, but there is also no way out for the regime without major risks.

The exception is the upper middle class of managers and entrepreneurs, who have captured more than their previous share of wealth thanks to the re-shoring of parts of production and service industries, and the higher demand for skilled people to coordinate this more inward-looking economy. High inflation has hurt most wage earners, but benefited those drawing on unearned income.

EXPEDIENT PUBLIC OPINION

Before moving on to the broader picture of how Russian society is dealing with the fourth year of war, it is necessary to rehearse the argument for caution in interpreting public opinion measurements in Russia. Surveys give us a picture of what most Russians perceive to be the politically expedient answer to the question they are being asked—which is usually a variant of "Do you support the actions of the Russian Armed Forces in the Special Military Operation in Ukraine?" The problem with the use of leading questions here is readily apparent. The armed forces are among the most respected institutions in the country; who would dare say they don't support "our boys"? As the war has ground on, pollsters have responded to criticism by providing less biased questions, but big problems remain, and overinterpreting the answers can be dangerous.

One of the problems is that researchers assume coherent population groups exist on the basis of answers given, and then assume that these groups (an example might be "loyal xenophobes") have an enduring reality beyond the snapshot of the survey. Even the sociological organization closest to the Russian state admits that only a small minority (22 percent) of people polled believe that their participation in surveys allows them to express their opinion. And only 18 percent of respondents believe that the authorities are interested in their opinion.

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This has significant implications for how seriously we should treat surveys as a reliable barometer of public sentiment. Nonetheless, as of this writing in June 2025, 65 percent of respondents say they want serious peace negotiations to start as soon as possible. That figure has grown somewhat since the start of the year.

How do political decision-makers actually parse such data? We know that there are substantial resources devoted to measuring social sentiment. Sociologists' reports are used by the Presidential Administration directly, and some findings are indirectly reported to the Security Council. But a probing of openly expressed opinion (and a wider consideration of social desires) is not sought—such surveys are not designed to find it. The pollsters and their clients, whether they admit it to themselves or not, are measuring a phantom: for "real" (and quite complicated) society, they substitute a narrow portion willing to respond to what they know are regime agents "in disguise," and to performatively give the correct answer. Former sociological fieldworkers in Russia can attest to this at first hand.

At best, such reports can indirectly express a muted grumble—for example, that the economic or human costs of war are high. Ironically, it may be the pseudo-loyal respondents (10–15 percent of the total) who have the most clear-sighted understanding of the relationship: they know the center needs "numbers." And so they provide them, keeping to themselves their genuine (if rather contradictory) personal views on the war. This is why the polls still show a hard core who say they believe President Vladimir Putin should not shy from nuking their neighbor and engaging in a war with NATO.

The majority of Russians have not shared the benefits of war.

Material interests

If there isn't genuine support for the quagmire of blood and mud, then how does the political economy of war function to maintain social consent? There is a widespread assumption, including among experts, that this consent must be a result of Putin's turn to a nationalist and isolationist ideology that emphasizes "civilizational" difference and inherent conflict. But as scholars like Marlene Laruelle have shown, there is hardly any coherence, even within the same speech, to be had from Putin. He has never even bothered to be consistent in his views about Ukrainians' status in relation to their northeastern neighbors. Are they one of three East Slavic nations in religious and cultural communion (a "triune")? A "brotherly people," inhabitants of regional "outskirts" encompassed by Russianness, which is rightful Russian territory? Or a distinct ethnic group to be forcibly assimilated because its existence offends the geopolitical sensibilities of a resurgent imperial power?

From July 2021, Ukrainians and Russians became, according to Putin, "One People," an escalation in rhetoric which many now interpret as a prelude to the invasion of 2022. Researchers like Pål Kolstø who carefully track "Putinist" chauvinist ideology argue that it relies on "muddled thinking" and "incompatible assertions," implying all of the above categories. Once again, we should not be surprised if Russians with little interest in geopolitics (the vast majority) feel confused about what the "Special Military Operation" is actually for. The name itself is designed to obfuscate. People can hardly be expected to have a coherent or consistent attitude about the war that can be adequately captured by pollsters.

Much more telling was the immediate response to the first mobilization wave in autumn 2022. I was "fortunate" to be in the midst of fieldwork the day it was announced, and judging from my own conversations with angry and fearful interlocutors, I can well imagine the rapid realization within the Kremlin of the unforced and entirely predictable basic political error they had made. The backtracking took less than a month—lightning-fast decision-making by Russian standards. In place of random mobilization, the regime shifted deftly to mercenary recruitment of the equivalent of "poor white trash" (and an indecently disproportionate injection of poor ethnic minorities, too).

Material interests, unsurprisingly, spoke far more clearly and forcefully than values orientations or geopolitical preferences. And this expression needed no calibration by sociologists. More people than ever planned to leave the country, commit arson and disobedience to avoid enlistment, or disappear into the white spaces on the Russian state's bureaucratic map. And these were supposed to be the apolitical and pliant mass whom both elites and liberal oppositionists had assumed were hardly capable of reactive measures. Perhaps it was more the specter of sustained protest in ethnic republics than the less visible opposition in Russian cities that prompted the recruitment U-turn. We will probably never find out.

What we can do, however, is combine the more qualitative sources at our disposal with the better survey data to consider what might be the political and social ramifications of a second mobilization wave if the conflict stretches into 2026. At present, a resort to further mobilization seems unlikely, because so many men are volunteering in anticipation that they can reap the financial rewards of the signing-on bonus just before a cease-fire is signed. But this seems like a fool's gamble. "Survivorship bias" has contributed to the number of volunteers enlisting as they hear stories from veterans implying that it is possible to spin gold from the war without spilling (their own) blood.

The rising expectations of a cease-fire among Russian citizens who hold very different views about the war can only translate into more headaches for the authorities in the more likely scenario—the status quo. At the moment, it seems that there are many Russians with unrealistic expectations that Putin will extract substantial concessions from Ukraine, thanks to the Trump administration's influence, and will be satisfied enough to agree to a peace of sorts.

Let's assume that doesn't happen. This will produce a political and social response much like that which I observed in autumn 2022, except that this time it will occur after more than three years of war, not just a few months. In the interim, the majority of Russians have not shared the benefits that have accrued to the minority who work in armaments, to those who already held wealth, or to the families of volunteer soldiers who received once-in-a-lifetime windfalls.

What they have shared is the experience of inflation outpacing incomes. Unprecedentedly, price rises have affected the core "survival" basket of staples such as potatoes, some meat and eggs, and especially fruits like apples and oranges. Rents have increased by 30 percent in just a year. Services and medicines are also affected by double-digit inflation. It is often argued that state workers are protected to some degree by indexation of benefits and salaries, but due to statistical manipulation, this is just not true.

THE WORKING POOR AND THE COSTS OF WAR

The material cost of war is borne by the majority in Russia who are working poor. There are around 18 million "very poor" people in Russia—a figure 50 percent higher than government estimates. These are people whose real incomes are near or below the minimum needed to just barely survive physically. They include numerous teachers and nurses, many of whom already earned just a few dollars (equivalent) more than janitors and less than supermarket checkout cashiers (who might earn $400 a month outside Moscow). The "working poor"—essentially the next level up—include factory workers and even engineers and technical specialists outside the military industrial complex. These are the 30 percent of the population who earn less than $700 a month.

If we add extreme and absolute poverty groups (29 million people, or 20 percent of the population) to this group, we get to the statement: "the majority in Russia are working poor." Never mind the statistical definition, the working poor in Russia *are* the median. People in this category (who earn between $500 and $800 a month) cannot save much, nor can they easily pay for expensive goods or services out of their "working capital." These are people for whom a broken washing machine is a financial calamity, who are locked into expensive loans for small consumer items that middle-class people take for granted.

Some blue-collar workers have seen wage increases of 50 percent over the course of the war so far, but from a very low base. Inflation took away a large part of any increase, and many of my blue-collar interlocutors report being forced to work "voluntary" overtime because of labor shortages. Thinking with their wallets "materially," they are well able to critique reported findings of a rise in well-being.

One worker in an oil refinery reported that while his monthly income had risen from around 60,000 to 100,000 rubles ($1,270) since the war started, inflation meant that "100" is just the new "50" from a decade ago—and that his household was "running to stand still." He felt worse off in real terms, not least because he was forced to work many more hours for the same salary in worsening conditions, with a shortage of staff and therefore an increase in risk of workplace injury.

Meanwhile, 2025–26 will see increasing disinvestment in state provision in education and health care, one more blow that disproportionately affects this working-poor majority. We cannot disconnect this economic distress from the topic of secondary mobilization for the war. After all, it is precisely these "vulnerable" blue-collar workers who would be the target, just as they were in 2022, in the event of the regime needing to dip into the pool of less-willing recruits. Compared with the white-collar, metropolitan middle class, blue-collar workers

are much less likely to secure deferment from army service.

The potential effects of disappointment arising from a continued conflict rather than the expected peace are hard to quantify in terms of social strife. Wartime labor discipline is real, not least because of correctly placed fears of being victimized under the broad powers granted to the courts. But we should not assume that people will just continue to accept these multifaceted degradations to their living conditions. If they cannot vote or strike, then they find other ways to connect to similarly disgruntled people and offer indirect resistance or "exit" from the unwelcome situation.

It would be foolish to try to predict the socio-political consequences of the war "at home" in Russia if it extended into 2026 and required involuntary mobilization. But one cannot discount unlikely alliances, contagion of contention, or the emergence of "populist" defectors from within the unstable regime constellations—many of which are largely unhappy with the war. This was true of the June 2023 "mutiny" led by Yevgeny Prigozhin of the mercenary Wagner Group. While such a revolt requires a populist figure to rally around, it is likely that the circumstances of the war itself are already producing numerous such figures.

In return for compliance, the big cities offer a 24-hour leisure and consumption culture.

Even short of further spectacular breakdowns in regime coordination, those events laid bare the disjunctures within the Russian state and among elites, and the potential for "politics from below" to gain traction from unlikely sources and then follow a logic of its own. As one of my interlocutors in the regional authorities in Lipetsk state said at the time: "Amid all the panic, it showed who really was prepared to step up and take decisions" (like those who mobilized to dig up the highway toward Moscow to slow the mercenaries' advance). Sources of authority and agency are not predictable in a crisis. The difficulty in expelling Ukrainian troops from the Kursk region in Russia further diminished the authority of the state in many people's eyes.

Can the Russian regime maintain war efforts for an additional 12–18 months without triggering significant popular unrest? Quite possibly, given the resources poured into the security structures. But it is the continuation of austerity politics and the absence of a popular program for prosperity and decent work after a peace that may ignite some notable political fireworks, if not a powder keg.

The soft administrative security regime

How, then, does the political economy of war function to maintain social consent in the absence of a state ideology that has purchase on the imaginations of Russians, and in a steadily deteriorating economic situation?

The status quo of a "soft" administering and prodding coercive regime with strong (one could say unrestrained) capitalist logics was laid down in the late 1990s. It is still hardly "authoritarian," as it is understood by the average Russian. The repressive apparatus is visible everywhere—from the entrances of railway stations, where there may be both police and guards with metal detectors, to the gated entries of housing blocks and the facial-recognition cameras on many streets and even condominium entries. But many accept the regime's argument: that these are necessary security measures to protect the population—from criminality (widely experienced as a public scourge etched in living memory of the "wild" 1990s), from Islamic and separatist terrorism (145 concert-goers were gunned down by ISIS recruits in Moscow in March 2024), and from Ukrainian saboteurs who have been known to blackmail hapless Russians into carrying out attacks on infrastructure.

The point, though, is that this administering security regime is completely routinized—encountered in any public place, or at the workplace, and embedded in routine bureaucracy and paperwork. For example, it is not a given that men of military age may automatically cross the Russian border—questions will be asked. Bookshops can carry books by politically critical authors, but should wrap them in paper to conceal their covers. LGBT people may, for now, exist and live their "degenerate" lives, but any mention of non-heteronormativity in terms other than pathology is illegal.

Speech criticizing the war ("bringing the army into disrepute") may be punished by a long jail sentence. Self-censorship in newspapers and television is the norm. It's hard to avoid the regime's talking points if you listen to mainstream radio or television: "Russia is defending itself against Western aggression. Putin's hand was forced. The Ukrainians are a neo-Nazi puppet regime. The West doesn't want peace, it only wants to destroy our civilization."

University researchers will need some written "security" approval before inviting foreign

colleagues to Russia. Everyone knows that to buy a SIM card or a railway ticket, or to board an intercity train, an "internal passport" must be shown. These little impositions are taken for granted, but they show the creeping effectiveness of the "soft" administration of a state without electoral legitimacy to sustain it.

STRATIFIED CONSUMPTION CULTURE

How does the security administrative regime change Russian society permanently? A new, meager kind of corporative contract emerges: accept these impositions, tune out from politics, feel out the contours of your position in this stratified society and accept it. Focus on consumption and comfort, according to your station.

In return for compliance, the big cities, at least, offer a 24-hour leisure and consumption culture that few other European cities can rival. The model, of course, is a very Russian imaginary of what the United States looks like. In everything, the ideal is to ape conspicuous consumption of the tackiest and most extravagant type: gambling, live music in themed restaurants, unimaginable (to your average European) variety in aspirational food shopping. "Experience" purchases are way up. It is considered almost shameful if an upwardly mobile woman in her thirties isn't already considering some surgical augmentation—or at least lip fillers. Russians have internalized the idea, which they believe is true of the United States, that comfort and pleasure is only possible via almost infinite consumption choices.

Moscow and other regional and metropolitan centers with more than 500,000 inhabitants—of which there are 36—all resemble each other in the profusion of bars, restaurants, fast-food outlets, and 24/7 convenience stores, even in the least salubrious quarters. One interlocutor remarked to me the other day, "You want to know what Russia's real ideology is? It's the Red and the White," referring to the most popular beer and wine chain in the country. Red and White has over 21,000 little stores across the country. That's twice as many outlets as there are McDonald's restaurants in the United States, which has more than double the population of Russia.

There are three Red and White stores within a ten-minute walk of my very unfashionable location in Moscow. There are stores in the Arctic Circle and one on the tip of Chukotka, facing Alaska across the Bering Strait. There is even an outlet in the ancient city of Bukhara in Sunni Muslim Uzbekistan. The number of stores has nearly doubled since the start of the war, as has the net worth of its billionaire owner.

The slightly seedy, cheap, and not at all cheerful stores are reminiscent of the worst New York bodegas. Their explosion shows the abiding practice of self-medication with alcohol among Russian inhabitants and the demand for "low-cost" offerings (the owner has also expanded his holding of discount supermarkets). Pity not only the purchasers of adulterated beers and nasty red wines, but the hapless Central Asian immigrants forced to work for a pittance in these dives, along with the 24/7 kebab joints that usually spring up next to the wine shops.

The Red and White phenomenon is not just about cheap inebriation as an escape from daily woes. It is illustrative of the increasingly sharp class-stratification lines that the war only deepens. Work a cruddy job and have just a couple of dollars' worth of rubles to spare at the end of the day? Why not numb those aches with a few beers from the R&W? But if you're a white-collar manager, you might drop in at a slightly nicer supermarket for some seafood and pastries, then pass on the R&W in favor of the "tap shop," where a locally brewed "American Vest-Koast IPA" can be purchased in a natty aluminium can with a sleek white label for just $2.

My colleague, a professor in an elite Ivy League–type university in central Moscow, by contrast, would never be seen dead even in a perfectly middle-class supermarket. She only shops for food at farmers' markets or in the higher-class chain of outlets called ABC of Taste. There, prices are eye-watering even by European middle-class standards and the security guard might look askance at the less-well dressed who try to enter.

NO ALTERNATIVE?

Many serious observers have toyed with the idea that Russia, without fully embracing authoritarian tendencies like those in China, might become much more like its historical self before the twentieth century. The resemblances to that past are already obvious: a small working class; a large, less-educated peasantry (here we can substitute the very poorly paid service workers); a quite small middle class (20–30 million) of functionaries and office workers; and a ruling class of 3–4 percent of the population who pass on privilege from generation to generation. The latter ensure that their offspring acquire access to the choice positions of prestige, whether in the state apparatus or the cultural

and entertainment fields, business sectors, or legal-finance professions.

Some call this "neo-feudalism"; to others, it is an estates division, as in pre-revolutionary France. For now, these labels don't quite fit. Thanks to the remnants of quality higher education—and the entrepreneurial opportunities of war—some social mobility is possible. Many parents impress upon their children the need either to go into business (and therefore study some cognate subject) or to study law and administration so they can be fast-tracked into prestigious Interior Ministry or procuracy positions and avoid (if they are male) compulsory military conscription at the age of 18. When many hundreds of thousands of educated Russians fled the country after 2022, this merely opened up more opportunities for the remaining members of the middle and upper-middle classes.

Russia is still a not very well-functioning petro-state with an out-of-touch and perhaps rather irrational security elite in the orbit of one aging man. Success or failure on the battlefield of Ukraine is secondary to maintaining the normality of the soft administrative security regime at home and making sure that any imagining of an alternative is impossible. But that's not particularly difficult. A few thousand political prisoners can be either expelled or imprisoned indefinitely, and the rest of the populace can be rewarded according to their emerging identifiable social stations: local state workers filling out forms and filing them, low-level security operatives, educators, nurses, janitors.

These people are the real backbone of the regime—minimally rewarded, but confident that tomorrow will look pretty much like today. Their children might get a free university place. The Red and White might have a discount on Crimean Prosecco. Their miserly wages might be nearly indexed to inflation, though even this increasingly seems like the dream of a madman. The oil and gas keep pumping; the coffins keep coming home, but at least they're not shown on TV. Every year things seem harder than the last. But this can go on indefinitely, can't it? Well, at least while the leader is more or less resigned to continuing along the road taken—and who are we to know what goes on in his head? ■