

Will Putin's war lead to the collapse of Fortress Russia and the dream of a Russian World?

Tony van der Togt

Russia's war in Ukraine will reshape not only Ukraine, but also Russia itself. Although not even Russian experts predicted the present crisis, some trends had already become clear. When thinking about scenarios for a future Russia, a more isolated *Fortress Russia* was considered as one possible scenario.¹ In this sense, Putin's present actions could be perceived as long in the making, although other choices could have been made. The crucial element in the Kremlin's decision to invade Ukraine seems to have been its imperial dream of recreating a unified Russian World.

This article will focus on the internal consequences of the war in Russia: politically, economically and ideologically. Although no one can predict the eventual outcome of the war, nor its duration, Russian society at large is already suffering from increasing isolation from the West with economic and political stagnation and a gerontocracy still clinging to power and attempting to re-establish a Russian Empire. If Moscow were to lose its war in Ukraine, what are the chances of a regime change, either by a democratic revolution or a split in the political/economic elite? After all, also in the early 20th century lost wars led to revolutionary change in Russia and a breakdown of the regime. Could history repeat itself?

A STAGNATING POLITICAL SYSTEM

During the past decade, the political system has become more centralized and gradually more repressive as well, as far as independent opposition, civil society and free media are concerned.

After Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012 and especially after 2020, centralized rule became the norm with increasingly less space for organizations or parties not under Kremlin control or -even worse- those supported or financed by Western sources. Such organizations would be labelled "foreign agents" or undesirable organizations and suffer the legal and political consequences, based

on increasingly repressive Russian legislation. Organizations, like opposition activist Navalny's *Anti-corruption Foundation* or the Human Rights Organization *Memorial*, were recently prohibited as "extremist organization" or repressed on the basis of the foreign agent legislation. Civil society activists had either to stop their activities or to move abroad, in order to avoid potential, long jail sentences. In practice, all organized opposition in Russia is now prohibited.

The same trend can be perceived with regard to independent media. Increasingly, media in Russia had to work within an ever more restrictive environment, even when operating on the hitherto relatively free internet. After the war started, new restrictions have led to the demise of the last independent channels, *TV Dozhd* and *Ekho Moskvy* and newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. Also foreign journalists in Russia were seriously hampered in their work, and many of them left the country, fearing arrest or heavy fines for such violations of the law as speaking about the "war" instead of a "special military operation" or damaging the reputation of the Russian armed forces. Facebook and Twitter are now forbidden and only accessible by VPN. Some independent media, like the *Moscow Times*, have decided to operate from abroad. In practice, independent media within Russia have ceased to exist and official state propaganda dominates a heavily controlled information space.



Organizations, like opposition activist Alexei Navalny's Anti-corruption Foundation or Human Rights Organization Memorial, were recently prohibited as "extremist organization" or repressed on the basis of the foreign agent legislation. Pictured is a demonstration in January 2021 in Moscow in support of Navalny just days after his arrest (photo: NickolayV / Shutterstock.com)

Finally, constitutional changes in 2020 have led to further regime consolidation and opened the possibility for an ever more autocratic president to continue his rule till 2036. A centralized political system has been established to exclude any kind of foreign influence and has increasingly turned to repressive measures to control society at large: autocracy is turning into a more dictatorial regime without any space for opposition, independent civil society or free media.² However, the continuing war in Ukraine could ultimately lead to more opposition to the regime, once the economic consequences have their impact and the losses of Russian soldiers become more clear to the population at large. At the same time, the repression has also led to a large emigration of more than 300,000 especially young Russians, decreasing the potential for democratic change inside the country.

ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF WAR AND SANCTIONS

The war in Ukraine has led not only to more internal repres-

sion and external migration, but also to severe economic and financial consequences, putting the current oligarchic system and state-centered business model at risk.³

After Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012, remaining ideas about modernization of the Russian economy and diversification of exports away from energy resources were shelved and the influence of the state in strategically important sectors of the economy was only increased further. Russia's form of crony capitalism, dominated by the Kremlin and Putin personally, ensured economic stagnation and a negative investment climate in the longer term. Economic sovereignty and state control became key elements, and foreign influence in the Russian economy was very much restricted.

For Russia, one of the lessons from Western sanctions policies after the annexation of Crimea and Russia's interference in Donbas in 2014 was that Moscow had to



After Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012, remaining ideas about modernization of the Russian economy and diversification of exports away from energy resources were shelved and the influence of the state in strategically important sectors of the economy was only increased further. Pictured is an oil storage in the Russian town of Tuapse (photo: Vladimirkarp / Shutterstock.com)

be better prepared and to reduce its dependence on the West, diversifying economic and financial relations, and attempting to find alternatives elsewhere, including with China. However, such policies produced only limited results.

Although partly prepared for new sanctions, Moscow must have been surprised by the severe sanctions packages, speedily adopted by the West in several stages and including a partial disconnection from the SWIFT payment system, an export ban on dual-use high technology and a gradual inclusion of Russian coal, oil and potentially gas in extensive import bans by its former Western partners. A turn to others, like China, could only partially compensate for economic and financial losses, as especially fear of the extraterritorial application of US sanctions could also affect companies in third countries, risking claims in their business dealings with the US.

Freezing of assets and blocking of foreign currency accounts of the Russian Central Bank are increasingly hampering international payments. Although energy prices have increased in the short term and the Russian state is still able to balance the budget and finance the military operation in Ukraine, long-term effects will kick in and affect

the income not only of the Russian state, but also of its citizens who are confronted with high inflation and a lack of foreign goods. Many Western companies have in the meantime decided to leave Russia, some seemingly for good (depending on how long this war will last).

Expectations for economic growth are negative and even a partial default on Russian debts is looming. However, in the short term the Russian economy seems to be still profiting from higher energy prices, although a complete picture is difficult to establish, as the Russian government has stopped publishing essential economic data.⁴

While Moscow is considering nationalization of assets of Western companies leaving Russia and a possible confiscation of Russian frozen assets is discussed in the West, a bigger crisis in economic and financial relations seems to be coming. Also in global trade relations, it is unclear where Russia might be heading, as Moscow would be considering to withdraw from such international organizations as WTO.

Both politically and economically, Russia is becoming increasingly isolated, at least from the West, with other

regions only partially able and willing to compensate for Russia's losses. Decoupling is looming and the longer the war lasts, the more Russia's economic and financial system will be hard hit and Russian society at large will suffer the consequences. Ultimately, this development is likely to have also political consequences, putting the autocratic and kleptocratic system at risk. The earlier social contract of stability and relative increase in income in exchange for non-involvement of citizens in active politics is demolished. Only to be replaced by repression and an ideology of Russia's special mission in the world.

THE RUSSIAN WORLD AND THE WEAPONIZATION OF ORTHODOXY

Apart from the political regime and the supporting economic model, which the Kremlin has turned into a Fortress Russia, the regime has also been setting up ideological barriers against Western influence. It has clearly retracted from earlier attempts at integrating with a liberal-democratic world order, which it now denounces as weak, degenerate and in contrast to Russian traditional values.⁵

Gradually, Russia is returning to the traditional triad of czarist times of "autocracy, orthodoxy and nation" with serious consequences, both for Russia internally and for its relations with the Near Abroad.

Internally, the Russian Orthodox Church has turned into an influential player in politics and society with an impact also on academia and within the armed forces, referring to Orthodox concepts of holy war.⁶ In the Russian context, the church and the state operate in close coordination as a "symphony" in Orthodox thought. Such a relationship enables the state to weaponize religion and use it as an instrument to consolidate society (like communism in Soviet times) and protect its traditional values from foreign liberal-democratic influence. Protection of traditional values has been included in the Russian Constitution and in its National Security Strategy.

Externally, the discourse of traditional values is used in the context of Moscow's *Ruskiy Mir* (Russian World) concept, which is built on the idea that all Russian speakers (including those living outside Russia) belong to the same nation and that Russia has the right and duty to protect them, when Moscow presumes that their fundamental rights are threatened. In this sense, Moscow denies Ukraine's sovereign right to exist as an independent state and nation. Therefore, the secession of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and its newly recognized status as an autocephalous Orthodox patriarchy was considered in Moscow as an important matter for discussion in the National Security Council and is one of the reasons for the current war.⁷

As Russia has been turning more inward to defend its own model from external influence, Orthodoxy and traditional values have been increasingly used in state propaganda and as a justification of the actions of the regime, both in internal repression (hurting religious feelings is punishable under the law) and in its external actions. Even for those not practicing Russian Orthodox religion, the image of a special Russian identity, threatened by Western dominance, seems at present still sufficient to support the Kremlin in its war to construct its Russian World in practice.

In this context, the influence of a large state-related apparatus of propaganda, especially on television (on which many Russians still depend for their information), should be noted. This propaganda machine has resulted in the creation of an alternative reality, based on a re-writing of history and a post-imperial complex of humiliation. Although its deeper impact on society is debatable, as many in the political and economic elite and in the younger generation still have access to external internet sources and social media, the combination of repression and propaganda seems to have resulted in a largely passive and apathetic attitude in Russian society. The big question is, how long this situation will last, as a lack of success in Russia's "special military operation" is putting the political regime and the economic situation increasingly under stress and some first cracks within the elite are already starting to show.

THE IMPACT OF THE WAR ON FORTRESS RUSSIA AND THE RUSSIAN WORLD

What kind of Russia emerges from its Ukraine war will highly depend on how this war might end. Many experts, including Andrey Kortunov of the Russian International Affairs Council, roughly distinguish three possible scenarios:

- Russia succeeds in gaining at least some of its intermediate objectives in Ukraine, like controlling and possibly annexing Donbas and the southern coast of Ukraine;
- Ukraine succeeds in pushing Russian troops back to the line-of-contact before February 24 or even further to the border, regaining the Donbas and possibly even attempting to regain Crimea;
- Neither Russia, nor Ukraine are able reach its maximalist objectives and the war turns into a long, drawn-out protracted conflict with some kind of cease-fire, but without any political solution in sight.⁸

At the moment, the third scenario seems to be the most probable one. But in all three scenarios Putin would be un-



The Russian Orthodox Church has turned into an influential player in politics and society. Depicted are President Putin and leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, Kyrill I during a ceremony in November 2021 when the latter was decorated with the highest Russian state award: the Order of St Andrew the Apostle the First-Called (photo: Kremlin.ru / CC BY 4.0)

able to accomplish his original war aims: full control over Ukraine, bringing it solidly back into the Russian World. However Russian propaganda might attempt to spin this failure into some limited kind of victory, the lack of a political solution and the possibility of a long, drawn-out conflict would put Fortress Russia under profound stress.

Once the political and economic costs of the war become clearer to the population at large, one can seriously question, whether the current system can hold in the longer term. How sustainable is a system which has nothing to offer to the broader population than repression, heavy state propaganda and no improvement in its economic and financial situation? Will a new social contract, based on the need to fight Western dominance and protect Russia's identity and the Russian World, be a realistic prospect to keep an economically suffering middle class under control?

Ultimately, any real change in the system and possibly in the regime will have to come from within the current political-financial elite. Only when a substantial part of that elite, including the security elite, comes to the conclusion that the present crisis leads only to disaster and that the current system is no longer sustainable, can real change become possible. Whether this could take the form of a palace coup or another type of revolt remains to be seen. At the moment, the regime seems to be holding, still in-

tent on completing its historic mission of a “de-Nazification” of Ukraine and preventing the West from driving a wedge in the Russian World and using Kyiv against a resurgent Russia.⁹

As history shows, Russia's future always remains unpredictable. Only when Russia's restless soul finds an answer to its quest for a separate post-imperial identity, will it be able to reconcile itself with its neighbors and a Western liberal-democratic world.¹⁰

Tony van der Togt is Senior Associate Fellow at the Clingendael Russia and Eastern Europe Center. He studied contemporary history in Amsterdam (Free University) and Nijmegen. As a Dutch diplomat, he specialized in dealing with Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, working both at the Dutch MFA and at missions in Moscow, Almaty and St. Petersburg. He has published widely on Dutch and EU relations with Russia, Eastern Partnership and wider Eurasia.

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