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INTERNATIONAL  
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# WARapping Up...

## Is Putin Preparing Russia for a Post-War Future?



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# **WARapping Up... Is Putin Preparing Russia for a Post-War Future?**

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## Introduction

Russia started the war to stop Ukraine's modernization along Western lines. The naming of the war – a “Special Military Operation” – implied that it was planned as a quick, successful campaign that would result in Ukraine losing its international and domestic identity and returning to Russia's control.

During the first months of the invasion, the information support of the “SMO” was based on broadcasting Moscow's confidence in the “unconditional achievement of the special operation's tasks”. At the same time, the tasks themselves were not clearly formulated. They were rather propaganda clichés – “protection of the people of Donbas”, “denazification”, “demilitarization”, “stopping NATO's military development of the territory of Ukraine”. The mantra of “the Special Operation going according to plan” sounded until the fall of 2022.

In September-December 2022, after the liberation by the Armed Forces of Ukraine of Kherson city, the right-bank Kherson region and most of the occupied territories in the Kharkiv region, the Russian Federation changed both its approach to the war and its positioning. On 21 September, Putin announced a “partial mobilization”, and on 30 September, he performed out the procedure for incorporating the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia and Kherson regions into the Russian Federation. In December, he admitted that the “SMO” could become a “long process”.

In his addresses to the RF's Federal Assembly on 21 February 2023, and 29 February 2024, Putin developed a narrative about the war as a “civilizational confrontation with the West”. And the Kremlin's main domestic political idea, starting in late 2022, was the “normalization” of the war.

Addressing the Federal Assembly in 2023, Putin devoted a significant part of his speech to socio-economic issues. The main emphasis was on the fact that social stability has been maintained in the country, the authorities are keeping the situation under control and fulfilling their promises; the war continues, but does not affect everyday life of ordinary Russians<sup>1</sup>.

This positioning of the war was dominant until the end of 2024. Since the last ten days of 2024, against the backdrop of Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election and the lack of strategic gains on the front, the Kremlin has adjusted its narrative line.

In the first half of 2025, Putin rhetorically appeals more to the category of “peace”. He sees the rapid geopolitical changes this year as a chance to get closer to the implementation of the “goals of the special

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<sup>1</sup> Путін виступив з посланням до Федеральних зборів (video). UNIAN. 2023. 21 February. URL: <https://www.unian.ua/world/poslannya-putina-do-federalnih-zboriv-divitisya-onlayn-21-02-2023-12153147.html>

operation” (dismantling Ukraine's statehood and destroying Ukrainian identity or its transformation in line with the concept of “one people”) through the negotiation process. The minimum task is to achieve at least partial international legitimization of the occupation of part of Ukraine's territory. The scenario of continuing the war (“we will finish them off”) is part of the blackmail, primarily of Western elites.

Putin did not achieve his strategic goal by military force. ***Ukraine suffered losses, but did not change its course towards modernization according to the Western model. Instead, the Russian Federation underwent changes, embarking on the path of totalitarian transit and systemic archaization.*** The continuation of the war, which is privately recognized as “not only a moral crime, but also a strategic mistake”<sup>2</sup> even by representatives of the Russian power elites, creates domestic political risks for the Russian Federation itself.

However, even the “withdrawal from the war”, after many years of militaristic propaganda and more than three years of the “Special Operation”, can be “potentially crisis-prone” on the Russian domestic political track<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, there is a point of view according to which the period after the end of the war is expected to be “quite a difficult time, if not the most difficult in the last 30 years”<sup>4</sup>.

Understanding these risks is one of the reasons why Putin rejected Trump’s proposals for a quick end to the war. Putin needs the “summer campaign” of 2025 not only to try to seize more Ukrainian territory, but also to assess the benefits and risks of stopping the active phase of the war in the domestic political dimension.

The delay in making a decision is straining even the circle of elites closest to the Russian ruler. During the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (June 2025), the Chair of the Central Bank Nabiullina, the Minister of Economic Development Reshetnikov, and the Minister of Finance Siluanov, in different ways (while trying to evade responsibility), spoke about the economic risks for the Russian Federation. Nabiullina stated that many of the resources for the growth of the Russian economy have been exhausted<sup>5</sup>.

In fact, Russian elites, with the greatest possible frankness in the Russian Federation, publicly declared: it is time to make a decision to end the war and engage in internal development.

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<sup>2</sup> Габуев А. Россия, созданная Путиным. Briefly. URL: <https://briefly-news.com/rossiya-sozdannaya-putinyam/>

<sup>3</sup> Перцев А. «Ждали, что война закончится»... Meduza. 2025. 9 January. URL: <https://meduza.io/feature/2025/01/09/zhdali-cto-voyna-zakonchitsya>

<sup>4</sup> Жизнь после СВО. ТК Миг России. 2024. 29 августа. URL: <https://t.me/mig41/36555>

<sup>5</sup> Набиуллина: многие из ресурсов роста экономики РФ исчерпаны. DW. 2025. 19 June. URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/nabiullina-mnogie-iz-resursov-rosta-ekonomiki-rf-iscerpаны/a-72977983>

However, Putin himself gave a speech in which he spoke about the prospects for Russia's development. And then, in the format of a discussion, he repeated the key narratives about the war, and basically it is clear that he was not going to stop, since the Russian army was "advancing on the entire front"<sup>6</sup>.

The decision to stop the war can only be made by Putin. In the first half of 2025, there were repeated hints about the readiness of the Russian ruler to de-escalate. He twice (on Easter and on 9 May) announced short-term ceasefires, constantly stating that the Russian Federation is ready for negotiations on "eliminating the root causes of the Ukrainian crisis". Information about Putin's readiness to stop at the scrimmage line was fed into the Western press through "sources". In May, direct negotiations between Ukraine and the Russian Federation resumed.

However, public information about the content of the negotiations did not indicate Russia's readiness to end the war. Russia insisted on fulfilling Putin's ultimatum of 14 June 2024 (withdrawal of the Armed Forces of Ukraine from the entire territory of the four partially occupied regions and official refusal to join NATO, etc.) as conditions for a ceasefire and the start of a meaningful negotiation process<sup>7</sup>.

Similarly, the intensification of air strikes on Ukraine in the spring and early summer of 2025 and the start of the "summer offensive" on the front did not indicate a willingness to stop the war. Nevertheless, starting in the second half of 2024, preparations are underway in the Russian Federation to "withdraw from the war" and fix its results, including domestic political ones. According to Russian media, the "roadmap to normalization" is being discussed in the Presidential Administration<sup>8</sup>.

However, stopping the war is not the only scenario for the nearest future. In parallel with creating the preconditions for the completion of the "SMO", prerequisites are also being created for its continuation for as long as the authorities deem necessary. The Kremlin is preparing the tools for both scenarios and, accordingly, the state machine, elites, and the population of the Russian Federation are being prepared for both scenarios.

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<sup>6</sup> «Нет задачи забрать Сумы, но я этого не исключаю»... Настоящее время. 2025. 20 June. URL: <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/net-zadachi-zabrat-sumy-no-ya-etogo-ne-isklyuchayu-putin-zayavil-chto-armiya-rs-mozhet-bez-kakoy-libo-tseli-okkupirovat-novyy-region-ukrainy/33450193.html>

<sup>7</sup> Путин назвал условия миру – віддати Запоріжжя, Херсон і весь Донбас. BBC News Ukraine. 2024. 24 June. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/cq5511r0newo>

<sup>8</sup> «Верни себе Россию 2021»: в Кремле обсуждают планы по «нормализации» жизни в стране после войны. Verstka. 2025. 28 March. URL: <https://verstka.media/v-kremle-obsuzhdayut-plany-po-normalizaczii-zhizni-v-strane-posle-voiny>

## Scenario for Ending the War

*Betting on the "quiet majority", marginalization of "Z-patriots", control over the participants of the invasion*

Key decisions on the tactics of "withdrawing from the war" have already been made. Preparations for their implementation have partially begun. The Kremlin's main idea is to be ready to act systematically and consistently at the moment the war stops, using proven algorithms for working with the population and individual social groups.

### "Focus on the Quiet Majority"

According to Russian media, the RF's Presidential Administration held a seminar at the end of November 2024 for vice-governors in the Moscow Region. The main topic was the beginning of preparations for the 2026 State Duma elections. Work with the "image of victory" was also discussed. The vice-governors were informed that "one should focus on the quiet majority"<sup>9</sup>. That is, on the sociological "swamp" that will accept any final of the "SMO" at any time, as well as the "image of victory" that will be offered by the authorities.

The "quiet majority" is 50-60% of the adult population that unconditionally supports the government. Today, it supports the war. However, the nature of this support is not the desire for new conquests or the achievement of the "goals of the special operation", but unconditional loyalty to the government.

According to a Levada Center poll conducted in May 2025, 80% of Russians "support the actions of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine" (47% - definitely support, 33% - "rather support"). The 80% figure is formed from two components: 15-25% - pro-war "Z-patriots" and 50-60% - the sociological "swamp".

At the same time, 64% of those surveyed said they were in favor of starting peace talks: 30% (the highest value during the survey) are unequivocally in favor of peace talks; 34% prefer peace talks to continuing the war. No less telling is the decline to the lowest value (28%) during the survey period in the share of supporters of continuing the war.

A Ukrainian study conducted by the sociological company New Image Marketing Group jointly with Dilova Stolytsia media (January-February 2025) shows that the sense of loss has significantly increased among the Russian population. And the share of those who believe that the number of

<sup>9</sup> «Коммерсант»: администрация президента на семинаре для вице-губернаторов обсудила подготовку «образа победы» после окончания войны. Meduza. 2024. 2 December. URL: <https://meduza.io/news/2024/12/02/kommersant-administratsiya-prezidenta-provela-seminar-dlya-vice-gubernatorov-po-podgotovke-obraza-pobedy-posle-okonchaniya-voyny>

casualties does not correspond to the achievements of the SMO has increased from 47% to 54% over the past year<sup>10</sup>.

The “quiet majority,” declaring their support for Putin, expect him to take steps that are completely opposite to those he is taking. The Russian research project in exile, “Chronicles,” found that 83% of respondents who declare their support for Putin would like the Russian ruler to focus on his domestic socio-economic agenda. And 61% of Putin adorers support concluding a peace deal with Ukraine<sup>11</sup>.

That is, although the population of the Russian Federation declares positions that fully satisfy the authorities, it demonstrates, at the same time, clear signs of fatigue from the war and forms a demand for its end.

This position of the Russians is quite satisfactory to the authorities, since they receive from the population the most important resource – obedience. An average Russian is not ready to accept militaristic discourse as a personal value. This restrains the growth of the social and electoral niches of “Z-patriots” – the only segment of the population that at this stage has the resource of pressure on the authorities.

The Kremlin hopes to reorient the mood of the “quiet (or rather, obedient) majority”, over which the government considers its control to be close to absolute, without excessive effort. It is expected that a number of steps will be taken to ensure the loyalty of the “swamp” if a course is set to stop the war.

*The basic “image of victory” will be formulated in categories understandable to the “quiet majority”.*

The main element of the image is the territorial gains of the Russian Federation. The “new territories” formula introduced into media circulation back in 2022 should become a visible emphasis on the “SMO” success. “The emergence of new territories is a significant result for Russia, this is a serious issue - the Sea of Azov has become the internal sea of the Russian Federation. Even Peter I fought for access to the Sea of Azov”, Putin said back in December 2022<sup>12</sup>. And since the beginning of 2024, the Russian ruler has been using the term “conquest” when speaking of the occupied territories<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Росія напередодні переговорів. Соціально-політичні настрої росіян. Ділова столиця. 2025. 23 February. URL: <https://www.dsnews.ua/ukr/world/rosiya-naperedodni-peregovoriv-socialno-politichni-nastroji-rosiyan-22025-517259>

<sup>11</sup> Проект «Хроники»: большинство заявляющих о поддержке Путина россияне хотят вещей, полностью противоположных его действиям... Медуза. 2024. 22 октября. URL: <https://meduza.io/news/2024/10/22/proekt-hroniki-bolshinstvo-zayavlyayuschih-o-podderzhke-putina-rossiyan-hotyat-veschey-polnostyu-protivopozhnyh-ego-deystviyam-naprimer-mira-s-ukrainoy>

<sup>12</sup> Путіну мариться, що Азовське море «стало внутрішнім морем для РФ». ТСН. 2022. 7 December. URL: <https://tsn.ua/ato/putinu-maritsya-scho-azovske-more-stalo-vnutrishnim-morem-dlya-rf-2218168.html>

<sup>13</sup> Владимир Путин назвал «завоеваниями» захваченные российской армией территории Украины. Важные истории. 2024. 16 January. URL:

"New territories" is what Putin can present to the Russian population. This is an argument with which the authorities plan to "cover up" the issue of the price of "conquests", the strategic losses and socio-economic problems caused by the war.

The "quiet majority" will be satisfied with *de facto* control over the occupied territories, and it will not think about the fact that illegal occupation is a long-term problem for the Russian Federation, which will ultimately become an important component of future crises. Similarly, the sociological "swamp" will react calmly if, within the framework of the agreements to end the war, the "new subjects of the federation" remain under the control of the Russian Federation only partially.

*The decision to stop the war will be positioned as a response to the request of the "quiet majority".*

Since 2023, the share of Russians who would support "Putin's decision to end the military conflict with Ukraine this week" has been consistently around 70%<sup>14</sup>. As long as the Kremlin is ready to continue the war, the population's demand for peace remains latent. Russians do not have the tools to articulate this demand and include it in the domestic political agenda. When (and if) the Kremlin is forced to "WARap Up", the authorities will justify this step and will be able to create an atmosphere of "popular support".

The transition from the formula "the special operation is going according to plan" to the formula "the SMO may be a long process" was accompanied by several programmatic speeches by Putin, in which he emphasized that the authorities would fulfill their social obligations to the population.

In 2025, Putin did not deliver a message to the Federal Assembly in February (as he did in 2023 and 2024). The main reason is the uncertainty regarding the issue of stopping the war. The Kremlin does not have a clear understanding of what to orient the population towards: continuation of the "SMO as a long-term process", expansion of the war, or transition to a peaceful period.

The 2025 address will be delivered only if the authorities have an understanding of at least the medium-term perspective on the issue of war. If there is no such certainty, there will be no address. There have already been precedents when Putin "skipped" the annual address, namely, in 2022.

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<https://istories.media/news/2024/01/16/vladimir-putin-nazval-zavoevaniyami-zakhvachennie-rossiiskoi-armiei-territorii-ukraini/>

<sup>14</sup> Голобуцький О. Кремль готує росіян до завершення війни? Главком. 2023. 11 November. URL: <https://glavcom.ua/columns/golobutskyi/kreml-hotuje-rosijan-do-zavershennja-vijni-967893.html>

## Pro-War Minority: A Problem the Authorities Don't Know How to Solve

Despite the high figures of declarative support for the war by the Russian population, the stable pro-war social base is about 10-15% of the population. This is how it is assessed, among others, by pro-government Russian sociologists.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, during sociological surveys, about 30% declare support for the continuation of the war.

According to the Levada Center (May 2025), in terms of age, the most pro-war group is 55+ years old. 35% of representatives of this group are in favor of continuing the war. For comparison: in the 18-24 age group, support for continuing the war is 13%. By type of settlement, these are cities with a population of over 500 thousand. In Moscow, 40% are in favor of continuing the war. At the same time, in the Russian capital this indicator decreased from April to May 2025 by 6%.

However, for the authorities, the social group is not a problem. The Kremlin uses the sentiments of this part of the population during the war. The “capacity” of the pro-war minority is sufficient to form appropriate narratives and create an information background of “popular support” for the war. At the same time, the majority of the group’s representatives, in general, are completely dependent on the authorities. Therefore, the Kremlin is confident that if the official position changes, the position of the “bloodthirsty pensioners” will change, as well.

The situation is somewhat more complicated with the part of society that directly benefits from the war. First of all, we are talking about workers in the military-industrial complex. According to the RUSI analytical center, as of the beginning of 2025, 4.5 million people worked for the Russian military industry<sup>16</sup>. The war allowed representatives of this group to obtain a higher level of provision and consumption than they had before the war, and higher than the average Russian.

However, the possible end of the war will not come as a shock to the group, since the most expected scenario is the preservation of large defense orders due to the need of the Russian Armed Forces to compensate for lost equipment.

The Kremlin has no intention of demilitarizing the economy even if the war in Ukraine stops. Defense spending in 2025-2027 is planned at 7% of GDP. Putin will be ready to sacrifice the standard of living of Russians

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<sup>15</sup> Troianovski Anton, Entous Adam, Julian E. Barnes. Putin Quietly Signals He Is Open to a Cease-Fire in Ukraine. The New York Times. 2023. Dec. 23. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/23/world/europe/putin-russia-ukraine-war-cease-fire.html>

<sup>16</sup> Oleksandr V Danylyuk, Jack Watling. Winning the Industrial War Comparing Russia, Europe and Ukraine, 2022–24. RUSI. URL: <https://static.rusi.org/winning-the-industrial-war-comparing-russia-europe-ukraine-2022-24.pdf>

(whom the government tightly controls and does not expect protests), but not the level of the RF's military capability<sup>17</sup>.

In addition, military industry workers are controlled by enterprise management and do not have intensive horizontal ties. The authorities has tools to quickly localize and minimize the potential for discontent.

The real problem is the passionate part of the pro-war minority, represented by "war correspondents", propagandists, volunteers, some of the participants in the invasion, and Russian nationalist groups.

The "war correspondents" reached the peak of their popularity and influence in mid-2023. They became the main source of information about the real situation on the front for the Russian population, provided actual information support for Prigozhin's activities up to his "March of Justice" and formed opposition narratives against the regime.

Realizing the danger to themselves from their activities, the authorities took a number of public and non-public steps aimed at "formatting" the work of the "Z-patriots". The main public action was Putin's meeting with the "war correspondents", which took place in June 2023<sup>18</sup>. At a non-public level, the "war correspondents" have been worked with, which resulted in a noticeable reduction in the number of critical speeches. However, there is no talk of the Kremlin's complete control over this segment of the media space.

Another problem for the Kremlin is that during the war years, a "connection" was formed between public pro-war actors and a non-public part of the passionaries who help the invading forces on a volunteer basis.

This "connection", among other things, allowed the "Z-patriotic" segment to receive funds to support its activities. The initiative of the State Duma deputies to ban the collection of charitable donations on personal bank cards is aimed at establishing control over the circulation of these funds. Instead, it is proposed to introduce special accounts for individuals<sup>19</sup>. In this way, the government will control the circulation of funds, be able to influence it, and prevent the emergence of large financial resources in the hands of its potential critics.

In general, the regime is currently demonstrating a desire to work with the passionate part of society without taking drastic actions. The main methods are partial involvement of the activists in Kremlin-controlled

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<sup>17</sup> Путін не має наміру демілітаризувати економіку, навіть якщо бойові дії в Україні припиняться, - FT. Цензор.НЕТ. 2025. 7 June. URL: <https://censor.net/ua/news/3556653/u-volodymyra-putina-nenasytynyj-apetyt-do-viyiny>

<sup>18</sup> Путін на зустрічі з воєнкорами хвалився ударами по енергетиці та штабу ГУР. BBC News Україна. 2023. 13 June. URL: [https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-65894418?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-65894418?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>19</sup> Россиянам хотят запретить сбор пожертвований на личные банковские карты. Forbes.ru. 2025. 20 May. URL: <https://www.forbes.ru/society/537629-rossianam-hotat-zapreit-sbor-pozertvovanij-na-licnye-bankovskie-karty>

projects, restriction of space for activity (including information), and forceful pressure (up to imprisonment) on the most prominent figures.

The efficiency of such tactics is not obvious. “Z-patriots” regularly raise a wave of discontent after Russia's failures. A new peak of such activity was their reaction to the attack by Ukrainian UAVs on strategic aviation airfields. “War correspondents” and other pro-war activists express discontent with defeats, criticize the system and individual key figures of the regime. However, Putin usually remains outside of direct criticism<sup>20</sup>.

However, the nature of the statements of the “Z-patriots” in June 2025 became much more radical. The main message is “this cannot continue, changes are needed”. In fact, the pro-war part of the Russian population is one step closer to conceptualizing an opposition agenda to Putin. The authorities respond with targeted repressions and measures to curb the information activity of the “Z-community”.

But the Kremlin still has no clear answer to the question of how to resist the politicization and distancing of the “Z-patriots” from officialdom. Stopping the war will only radicalize today's most passionate group. Continuing the war will lead to growing dissatisfaction among the “quiet majority”.

## **Invasion Participants: "New Elite" or New Problem?**

Putin has repeatedly emphasized the special attitude towards the participants in the invasion of Ukraine. He has declared them a “new elite” and a “golden fund”. The Russian regime has taken an official course to actively involve the invasion participants in the government bodies. Since 2024, the “Time of Heroes” program has been implemented at the federal level. Since 2025, it has been extended to the regions. The federation constituents have been tasked with training 30-60 “SMO participants” at the regional level in HR programs annually.

Alumni of these programs are supposed to receive appointments in the executive branch. However, in most cases, it is experienced officials who nominally joined the army that are brought into power through the program.

In addition, a number of presidential decrees, government acts, and federal laws (as amended in 2022-2024) provide for priority employment of “SMO participants” in various state and municipal structures.

The involvement of “heroes” in municipal elected bodies is being encouraged, as well. An option is also being considered under which “SMO participants” should receive up to 100 mandates in the 2026 State Duma

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<sup>20</sup> Z-каналы ищут виноватых в подрыве мостов и атаке беспилотников на военные аэродромы России. Meduza. 2025. 2 June. URL: <https://meduza.io/paragraph/2025/06/02/z-kanaly-ischut-vinovatyh-v-podryve-mostov-i-atake-bespilotnikov-na-voennye-aerodromy-rossii-vot-chno-oni-pishut-kratkiy-pereskaz>

elections. Deputies to elected bodies of government are nominated through the “Association of SMO Veterans”, which should become “the country's main organization of veterans”<sup>21</sup>.

However, there is no record of a high willingness of the population to vote for “heroes”. This feature was first manifested in the elections of the governor of Khakassia in 2023. Against the current head of the region, Valentin Konovalov, the only representative of the “systemic opposition” (Communist Party of Russia) at the post of governor, “United Russia” nominated a “SMO participant”, State Duma Deputy Sergei Sokol. During the campaign, however, it became clear that Sokol (who served for six months in the “parliamentary” battalion “Cascade”) would lose the elections. Therefore, he withdrew his candidacy, announcing that he had health problems<sup>22</sup>.

Candidates “marked” as “SMO participants” did not show impressive results in the United Russia primaries for the elections to regional parliaments, which will be held in 2025. Only 23 out of 58 participants in the war in Ukraine won the intra-party vote<sup>23</sup>.

Nevertheless, the authorities will ensure the presence of personnel who are positioned as “SMO participants” in both executive and representative bodies of power. This is necessary so that the social group has its own “entry points” when resolving issues and problems. It is critically important for the authorities that **the group of war participants has vertical, not horizontal, integration**. This is a key element of control over a group that will consist of several million active, but problematic, individuals. That is why, on behalf of the “veterans”, influential positions in power should be occupied by personnel who are understandable to the regime and loyal to it. Even if their participation in the war is not obvious, formal, or even faked. The “Association of SMO Veterans” is focused on ensuring that “activists and officials, rather than fighters” should become candidates.

However, building a “veteran vertical” is not the only direction of preparation for the return of a large number of “heroes” from the war.

In the first half of 2025, preparations began for a significant reformatting of the work of the Federal Service for the Execution of

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<sup>21</sup> «Только за победой». Ветераны войны в Украине впервые организованно идут в депутаты. Verстка. 2025. 13 May. URL: <https://verstka.media/tolko-za-pobedoj-veterany-vojny-v-ukraine-vpervye-organizovanno-idut-v-deputaty>

<sup>22</sup> Депутат от «Единой России» Сергей Сокол снял свою кандидатуру с выборов главы Хакасии. Meduza. 2023. 2 Spetember. URL: <https://meduza.io/news/2023/09/02/deputat-gosdumy-ot-edinoy-rossii-sergey-sokol-snyal-svoyu-kandidaturu-s-vyborov-glavy-hakasii-dva-dnya-nazad-on-popal-v-bolnitsu>

<sup>23</sup> Большинство «ветеранов СВО» вновь проиграли праймериз «Единой России» в региональные парламенты. Verстка. 2025. 26 May. URL: <https://verstka.media/bolshinstvo-veteranov-svo-vnov-proigrali-prajmeriz-edinoy-rossii-v-regionalnye-parlamenty>

Sentences (Russian: FSIN). The government submitted proposals to the State Duma to change the powers of the FSIN. According to these proposals, the Service is granted the right to carry weapons, check documents and transport. The FSIN will also control personal records of parolees<sup>24</sup>.

The initiators of the changes explicitly state that they are aimed at ensuring control over the tens of thousands of participants in the invasion who were recruited in prisons.

Another important function that the FSIN must perform in the context of a possible end to the hot phase of the war is to recruit members of the invasion who do not have a criminal past. The FSIN director, Arkady Gostyev, stated that the Service lacks 54 thousand employees (23% of the staff)<sup>25</sup>. Vacancies will be filled by prioritizing the involvement of war veterans in the structure.

It should be noted that other Russian defense and law-enforcement agencies have also been experiencing a high personnel shortage throughout the war. In particular, in the Ministry of Interior Affairs, it is 172 thousand (an increase of 33 thousand over the year)<sup>26</sup>.

The personnel shortage in the security forces is being maintained deliberately. It will be eliminated by the post-war recruitment of the participants in the invasion. However, for a significant part of the “SMO heroes”, a job offer in the police or in the system of execution of sentences may not be of interest. During the war, their salary was more than 200 thousand rubles per month (plus one-time payments upon signing a contract reaching 4 million rubles). In the police, the salary is about 50-70 thousand rubles.

Accordingly, the risks that the participants of the invasion will find themselves in a criminal environment after returning from the front are quite high. That is why preparations are being made not only for the reintegration of healthy participants of the war into peaceful life, but also for increased control over them as a potential addition to the criminal world.

Working with people with disabilities and people with PTSD remains outside the scope of public discourse. It is “tacitly” assumed that the social protection system will handle the problems of the former.

Regarding people with PTSD, there are signs that the Russian authorities are starting to work on the problem.

During one of Solovyov's broadcasts, a resonant dialogue took place between hosts Sergei Karnaukhov and Anastasia Kashevarova. The former

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<sup>24</sup> Уголовно-исполнительная система выходит из-за решетки. Независимая. 2025. 20 April. URL: [https://www.ng.ru/politics/2025-04-20/1\\_9238\\_system.html?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.ng.ru/politics/2025-04-20/1_9238_system.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>25</sup> Директор ФСИН сообщил о нехватке почти 54 тыс. сотрудников. РБК. 2025. 12 March. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/society/12/03/2025/67d188829a79475d65e087d5>

<sup>26</sup> Колокольцев заявил, что МВД не хватает больше 170 тыс. сотрудников. РБК. 2025. 5 March. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/05/03/2025/67c8375a9a794797bf603045>

insisted that families "must endure" while the stressed the need for help<sup>27</sup>. The episode sparked a discussion, to which the authorities responded by actively promoting Putin's statement last year about mandatory psychological rehabilitation for those who returned from combat zones<sup>28</sup>.

In general, the authorities are not focusing on a full-fledged solution to the problem of war participants, but on demonstrating their attention to the problem. That is, the media component is primary. In addition, through a campaign to attract "heroes" to power at all levels, the Kremlin is putting pressure on bureaucratic elites, forcing them to defend their positions and demonstrate efficiency.

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<sup>27</sup> Ведущий «Соловьев Live» заявил, что жены участников войны должны «целовать им ноги» и терпеть побои. Новая газета Европа. 2025. 29 April. URL: <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2025/04/29/vedushchii-solovev-live-zaiavil-cto-zheny-uchastnikov-voiny-dolzhny-tselovat-im-nogi-i-terpet-poboi-news>

<sup>28</sup> Президент Путин предложил сделать обязательной психологическую помощь вернувшимся из зоны СВО. Психологическая газета. 2024. 26 January. URL: <https://psy.su/feed/11967/>

## **Scenario of the War "Until Victory"**

*Controlled pro-war mobilization of the population, militarization of all spheres of life, ensuring maximum time resources for the current regime*

Despite the noticeable signs of the Russian regime's preliminary preparation for the post-war period, there is no reason to believe that the Kremlin regards the ending the hot phase of the war as having no alternative. An appeal to the history of the Northern War (Putin in 2022, Medinsky, the head of the RF's "Istanbul" negotiating delegation, in 2025) is a message about Russia's readiness to wage war for as long as possible. Regardless of how the Kremlin views the Russian Federation's resource readiness for an "endless war", it is doing everything it can to convince both Western societies and elites, and its own population, that "Russia's resources are endless".

However, the Russian authorities also have purely pragmatic motives for continuing the war. The war is a convenient excuse for "tightening the screws" inside the Russian Federation. Over the course of more than three years of war, Putin's regime has significantly strengthened in the domestic political dimension.

### **Controlled pro-war mobilization is a successful model of control over the RF population**

At the beginning of the war, the Putin regime had an informal social agreement with the Russian population. The essence of the agreement is that the government provides Russians with a certain set of social guarantees, a gradual increase in living standards, certain opportunities for development, and security; and the population, in return, renounces civic activity and control over the government.

During the war, the government changed the "formula" several times, demanding more and more from the population and offering less and less instead. The reduction in the government's obligations to the population was explained by the war and promises to compensate for these losses with "greatness". In other words, the war, while not giving Putin the desired geopolitical results, nevertheless allowed him to establish almost total control over Russia.

This is a significant "prize" received by Putin. The continuation of the war gives him the opportunity to strengthen the regime and personal power.

As of early 2022, the Russian authorities have brought anti-Ukrainian hysteria to a peak, using propaganda tools. However, propaganda has only served as a resonator for Russian sentiment. "People are victims of

propaganda, but at the same time they are its customers,” the Russian publication Meduza noted in April 2022<sup>29</sup>.

That is, the genocidal war against Ukraine was by definition popular among Russians even “before propaganda”. Russian society perceived not just the secession of Ukraine, but its development according to Western standards of modernization, as a betrayal. According to the observation from the said Meduza material, Ukrainians betrayed “us” (Russians) by becoming “them” (not “us,” “alien”).

With such public sentiment, propaganda only shapes the "plot" of the war, which was initially based on "denazification/demilitarization," then on "civilizational confrontation with the West," and now on "the fight against terrorism" and "inevitable victory".

Given these sentiments of the Russian population, propaganda does not so much “brainwash” as it formats models of declaring positions and behavior. The Russian authorities, in fact, do not need a real “mobilized nation”. What they need is a society that is ready to pretend to be a “mobilized nation”. Or to pretend to be something else when the needs of the regime change.

A real “mobilized nation,” within the parameters described by Nicholas Stargardt, would pose a threat to the regime. After all, it would claim political identity. A “mobilized nation” would be ready to make sacrifices, but would also demand results from the authorities.

Therefore, the Kremlin chooses the "mobilized nation" only as a technology. The "special operation" format allows a significant part of the population to distance themselves from the war, and to act according to the standards of the "mobilized nation" only when the authorities demand it.

For the first time, such a hybrid format of a “mobilized nation” became noticeable during the “partial mobilization” in the fall of 2022. Then, the media and ideological support of the process of recruiting into the army (as well as the entire discourse of “support for the war”) was finally concentrated in the hands of the first deputy head of the Presidential Administration, Sergei Kirienko. He personally came up with the concept of a “people’s war”<sup>30</sup>.

Most likely, Kirienko's personal appeal to the topic is explained by his desire to make the process controlled. Therefore, the 2022-style "people's war", as well as the subsequent declarative support of the war by Russians, is a political technology successfully implemented by the Kremlin.

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<sup>29</sup> Войти во мрак и нащупать в нем людей. Почему россияне поддерживают войну? Исследование Шуры Буртина. Meduza. 2022. 24 April. URL: <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/04/24/voyti-vo-mrak-i-naschupat-v-nem-lyudey>

<sup>30</sup> Замглавы АП Кириенко призвал к «народной войне». Радио Свобода. 2022. 22 October. URL: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/zamglavy-ap-kirienko-prizval-k-narodnoy-voyne-/32096046.html>

In the fall of 2022, a certain "bar" of mobilization of Russian society was established. And this conditional "bar" was maintained throughout 2023-2024.

During this period, the leading role in supporting pro-war sentiments was played by United Russia. The formal head of the party, Dmitry Medvedev, became the main pro-war "hawk". There are opinions that for Medvedev, frankly marginal rhetoric is a tactic of personal political self-preservation. In this way, he demonstrates that he does not cause any political threat for Putin personally. However, the information support for the boorish posts of the deputy head of the RF Security Council, who has no chance of independent political leadership, indicates that this was also a technological decision. Mobilization around the war and the "parade in Kyiv (Berlin, Paris)" should not go beyond a certain sociological framework.

Another "United Russia" member actively involved in the mobilization rhetoric was Andrei Turchak, secretary of the party's general council (until June 2024). His resignation and the appointment of the more media-restrained and less charismatic Vladimir Yakushev to the vacant position marked a decrease in United Russia's activity on the topic of war. The party's deputies are directly instructed that they should pay less attention to the "SMO" topic and more to social issues<sup>31</sup>.

It was this approach that allowed the authorities to obtain "sociological settings" that could not only be interpreted, but also used in their own interests. When survey respondents advocate an end to the war, but "support the actions of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine", this means that the authorities have a necessary resource of population's obedience, which will allow them to wage war for as long as they deem necessary.

According to Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov, there is currently a "vague dissatisfaction" with the war among Russians. They "believe that it has brought more harm than good, and that the goals set by the leadership have not been achieved"<sup>32</sup>.

It is precisely the vagueness of discontent, however, that allows the authorities to work as they know how. And it can "turn" the mood of the population either towards peace or, if necessary, towards strengthening efforts aimed at "achieving the SMO goals".

Dissatisfaction with the war is as vague as sincerity of support for the war. That is, Russian society is controlled. And the main task of the government is to maintain control. Under this condition, Russians will obediently pretend to support the war even in conditions of "vague discontent".

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<sup>31</sup> «Единая Россия» призвет своих депутатов меньше пиариться на СВО... ТК ПолитСатирКа. 2025. 23 January. URL: <https://t.me/satirkka/4186>

<sup>32</sup> Российский социолог Лев Гудков... ТК ЕЖ. 2025. 2 January. URL: <https://t.me/ejdailyru/293252>

## Militarization: Technology and Strategy

The militarization of all areas of public life is part of the controlled mobilization of the Russian population. Therefore, militaristic ideology and practices are implemented in the controlled mode, as well. However, if mobilization capacity is needed for the Kremlin to solve current problems, then militarization includes elements of a strategic course aimed at forming stable and long-term attitudes that will allow the RF to preserve basic features of the current regime even in the “post-Putin” period.

Militarization is one of the main tools for supporting and legitimizing authoritarian power. That is why the Kremlin is working not only to develop the country's military potential, but also to introduce military ideologies, structures, and models in all areas of life.

For this, propaganda is fully involved, which forms a complex militaristic discourse. At its core is the “cult of Victory”. “Victory over fascism” has become one of the main markers of Russian identity, and the celebration of May 9 has taken on grotesque forms<sup>33</sup> – with storming the plywood Reichstag, exploitation of the slogan “we can do it again”, and other bizarre manifestations. Militaristic mythology and aesthetics are also spread through mass culture – movies, TV series, literature, music, visual media, commercial ads.

Putin draws direct parallels between the “Great Patriotic War” and the “Special Operation”. “SMO participants” take part in the May 9 parades, and the experience and models of visual accompaniment of the “grandfathers’ feat” are actively used to introduce modern canons of militarism into everyday life.

War symbols (in particular, the letters Z and V, as well as “Wagner patches” until the summer of 2023), portraits of “SMO heroes” have become visual markers of public spaces, schools, and government institutions. Children's toys, school supplies, and household items with war symbols have become widespread.

*The main target audience of the militarist course is the younger generation.* The regime has been searching for optimal forms of working with youth for quite a long time. In the days of “early Putin”, youth organizations such as “Nashi” and “Idushchiye Vmeste” played leading roles. However, the active participation of young people in the protests on Bolotnaya square convinced the regime that such tools were not enough. Therefore, since 2012, a course has been taken to strengthen “patriotic education” in schools. Courses of “Basics of Military Training” and electives with militaristic content have been introduced. History and literature

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<sup>33</sup> Не День перемоги? Навіщо Росія вигадала свято 9 травня. РБК-Україна. 2024. 9 Мау. URL: <https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/den-peremoqi-navishcho-rosiya-vigadala-svyato-1715070859.html>

textbooks are as close as possible to the principles of official propaganda<sup>34</sup>. In 2016, the "Youth Army Movement" was launched.

Such a policy is more than supporting the degree of pro-war mobilization during the war with Ukraine. This is evidenced by the fact that since the end of 2022, the work on the militarization of youth has gradually been taken over by the Presidential Administration's internal policy department. Under its auspices (and under the direct supervision of Kirienko), the project called "The Movement of the First" is being implemented<sup>35</sup>. "Putin's Pioneers" pays significant attention not only to ideological and patriotic, but also militaristic education.

Those Russians who are under 18 today are intended to replace the older age group, the most pro-war and most loyal to the regime, during Putin's current and next presidential terms. And this is precisely an element of the strategy.

*Another priority audience for militaristic propaganda is potential recruits to the invading forces.* However, while the younger generation is ideologically indoctrinated, material incentives are offered to potential "volunteers". Payments for signing a contract with the Ministry of Defense in 2025 reached 4 million rubles<sup>36</sup>. However, there has been a gradual trend towards a decrease in these payments<sup>37</sup>. Moreover, criticism of the "money give-away", which is creating a "parasitic class" in Russia, has emerged among the "Z-patriots"<sup>38</sup>.

However, the authorities still have an opportunity to use coercion tools. The decree by which Putin announced a "partial mobilization" in 2022 has not been canceled. This creates a legal basis for re-conducting a large-scale mobilization at any time. Since then, the authorities have carried out significant work aimed at correcting the shortcomings. In particular, a system of electronic summonses<sup>39</sup> and much stricter conditions

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<sup>34</sup> Архаїзація, ідеологізація, уніфікація: російська освіта та кремлівська пропаганда (2014-2024). Український інститут майбутнього. 2024. 23 October. URL: <https://uifuture.org/publications/arhayizacziya-ideologizacziya-unifikacziya/>

<sup>35</sup> Пионерия для Путина. Конкурсы, письма на фронт и лагерь в КНДР. Радио Свобода. 2024. 10 July. URL: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/pioneriya-dlya-putina-konkursy-pisjma-na-front-i-lagerj-v-kndr-/33025342.html>

<sup>36</sup> РФ пропонує мільйони контрактникам через труднощі на фронті – ГУР. Суспільне. 2025. 23 March. URL: <https://suspilne.media/977553-rf-proponue-miljoni-kontraktnikom-cerez-trudnosi-na-fronti-gur/>

<sup>37</sup> В Росії продовжують знижувати виплати за відправку на війну проти України. Бізнес Цензор. 2025. 3 June. URL: <https://censor.net/biz/news/3555900/u-rosiyi-prodovjuyut-znyjuvaty-vyplaty-za-vidpravku-na-viyinu-proty-u-krayiny>

<sup>38</sup> Журналистка Анастасия Кашеварова о том, как выплаты за участие в СВО создают в России паразитирующий класс. ТК ЕЖ. 2025. 7 June. URL: <https://t.me/ejdailyru/329971>

<sup>39</sup> Госдума приняла закон об электронных повестках в армию – и о целом ряде запретов для «уклонистов». Медуза. 2023. 11 April. URL:

for conscription have been introduced<sup>40</sup>. Tougher penalties have been set for attempts to evade the draft. A Russian "dodger" may face blocking of social services and banking tools.

Militaristic propaganda is aimed not only at priority target audiences, but also at the RF's entire population. On the one hand, the authorities strive to "not press too hard". On the other hand, they are preparing the population for a possible war against Europe using the same patterns they've been to prepare the war against Ukraine for a long time. The constant appeal of propaganda to the theme of "civilizational conflict with the West", cultivation of the myth of the West's age-old desire to "inflict a strategic defeat on the Russian Federation" and "seize Russian lands" leads the population to believe that war is the only way to "protect Russian civilization", "just like our grandfathers did". The circle is closed.

The militarization of all spheres of life allows the authorities to maintain an ideological "framework", ensure forced loyalty of people, and move the life strategies of Russians in a direction that meets the needs of the regime. It allows the option of continuing the war "to infinity" to be always relevant, which is an additional factor of pressure on both Ukraine and Western governments and societies.

## **Instead of a Strategy: Providing the Current Regime with the Maximum Time Resource**

In June 2025, a discussion erupted in the Russian media around the text of the former deputy of the Odessa City Council, collaborator Igor Dimitriev. He states that Russia was not only unable to "overturn the regime in Kyiv", but also found itself in a situation where its geopolitical influence had significantly decreased. "Previously, Russia was surrounded with a buffer zone of formal neutrality, now it is surrounded with a system of defense alliances, where Moscow often has neither allies nor intermediaries. Such tectonic shifts are irreversible. This fact alone indicates that the geopolitical "special operation" led to the exact opposite result", Dimitriev writes<sup>41</sup>.

Indeed, Putin does not have the desired and intuitively understandable "results of the SMO" for the sociological majority. In the

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<https://meduza.io/news/2023/04/11/gosduma-odobrila-vo-vtorom-chtenii-popravki-ob-elektronnyh-povestkah-v-armiyu-i-o-tselom-ryade-zapretov-dlya-uklonistov>

<sup>40</sup> Госдума приняла закон, позволяющий забирать россиян в армию по решениям предыдущих призывных кампаний. Meduza. 2025. 8 April. URL: <https://meduza.io/news/2025/04/08/gosduma-prinyala-zakon-pozvolyayuschiy-zabirat-rossiyan-v-armiyu-po-resheniyam-predyduschiy-prizyvnyh-kampaniy>

<sup>41</sup> Предатель Димитриев подвел итог «СВО»: «Россия больше не лидер, мы обнулились». Диалог.ua. 2025. 8 June. URL: [https://www.dialog.ua/war/315002\\_1749376056](https://www.dialog.ua/war/315002_1749376056)

fourth year of the war, the Kremlin is faced with a problem that was an advantage at the beginning of the war – the absence of declared formal goals.

And the lack of results regarding the actual goals – establishing control over Ukraine, stopping its modernization according to the Western model, restoring the RF's zone of influence in Central and Eastern Europe, and transforming Moscow into a full-fledged geopolitical pole – is obvious.

“Russia has no post-war utopia. Russia’s victory will be nothing more than the transformation of a few more regions (ideally, the whole world) into the "Russian World", that is, into a full-fledged hell, where the main entertainment – a very sophisticated one – will be mutual torture in basements... The cessation of history is the basis of the Russian idea, therefore there is no concept of the future in modern Russia”, writes Russian writer Dmitry Bykov<sup>42</sup>, one of the most prominent figures among the “dissenters”.

The Russian regime really does not have an image of the future. Moreover, it is not working on forming such an image. The key idea is not development, but “stopping history”, fixing “Putin’s reality”. Stopping the war, just like its continuation, are tools for ensuring the regime’s internal political stability.

After all, if the external intermediate results of the war are not obvious, then in the domestic political dimension the regime has significantly strengthened.

In April 2025, the head of the department for monitoring and analysis of social processes of the Presidential Administration, Alexander Kharichev, published the article “Civilization “Russia”, in which he developed the theme of “special statehood”, which plays the role not only of a political institution, but also of a “spiritual center”. Therefore, it is quite logical, according to Kharichev, that the population is oriented towards the personification and sacralization of power. And the “highest purpose” for a Russian is “fulfillment of obligations to family, society, country»<sup>43</sup>.

Kharichev's text, which is not the first time he has tried to position himself as the regime's ideologist, was assessed by most observers as being aimed at a single reader - Putin. This is certainly one of the main motives of the PA official. However, this text can be viewed more broadly.

To some extent, Kharichev's article "echoes" with Timofey Sergeytsev's text "What Russia Should Do with Ukraine" published in 2022.

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<sup>42</sup> Быков Д. Есть чувство, что никакого «после войны» не будет. Эхо. 2025. 25 May. URL: <https://echofm.online/opinions/est-chuvstvo-chno-nikakogo-posle-vojnny-ne-budet>

<sup>43</sup> Сотрудник АП Александр Харичев написал статью, которая выглядит как инструкция «строителя путинизма». Meduza. 2025. 18 April. URL: <https://meduza.io/feature/2025/04/18/sotrudnik-ap-aleksandr-harichev-napisal-statyu-kotoraya-vyglyadit-kak-instruktsiya-dlya-stroitelya-putinizma>

In this case, however, one of Kirienko's closest associates reflects on "what the Russian regime should do with Russia".

If the Kremlin fails to "do with Ukraine" what it planned, then it may well succeed with Russia. Kharichev uses an approach that is typical of Putin's presidential administration: behind a "visionary" cover are quite specific ideological positions and technological solutions aimed at strengthening the regime.

What Kharichev calls "civilization" is actually a model for ensuring maximum time resources for the current regime. After all, both the end (or stoppage) of the war and its continuation do not give new meanings to Putin personally or to the system of power built for him. Preparing for a change of power (and possibly the regime) is becoming the main challenge for the Russian Federation in the near future.

Putin, understanding the mood and processes taking place among the elites, first quite clearly indicated the topic of a "successor" in early May 2025. "I constantly think about a successor, but, ultimately, the choice will be up to the Russians. Several people must appear at once who would be able to gain the trust of the people", the Russian ruler said in an interview with propagandist Pavel Zarubin<sup>44</sup>.

This statement was included in the documentary film "Russia. Kremlin. Putin. 25 years". This form of presentation is not accidental: the ruler's "reflections" against the background of the anniversary of his stay in power allow both to give a signal that the topic is under Putin's control and to prevent the elites from immediately starting a "competition" for the "successor" position. Potential contenders for the role of the RF's next ruler understood the signal: the topic of succession is currently marginal, the centers of influence do not risk showing ambitions, understanding that whoever declares them first will have the highest chances of being "shot down on takeoff".

However, as noted by Tatyana Stanovaya, a Russian researcher of political processes in the Russian Federation, "the older Putin gets and the more detached he seems from reality, the less the elites believe in his ability to ensure a stable transfer of power". The successor, Stanovaya believes, should be "pumped with political weight". And the later Putin starts this process, the less he will control it<sup>45</sup>.

Putin himself and his closest entourage do not see this as a problem. The idea of the sacredness of power, first expressed by a representative of

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<sup>44</sup> Спадкоємець Путіна: кого і коли володар Кремля бачить наступним президентом Росії. Фокус. 2025. 5 May. URL: <https://focus.ua/uk/politics/704816-spadkoyemec-putina-kogo-i-koli-volodar-kremlya-bachit-nastupnim-prezidentom-rosiji>

<sup>45</sup> Становая Т. Дикий путинизм: что война делает с политическим режимом и элитами. Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center. 2024. 14 November. URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/russia-wild-putinism-politics?lang=ru&center=russia-eurasia>

this power, is a new “formula” that should partially reduce the focus of the elites and the population on the idea of power transit. In this conceptual construction, the power realizes its “higher function”. And the population, under its leadership, participates in the implementation of Russia’s “special mission”, fighting for an unspecified but desired “greatness”.

Another meaning of the idea of sacralizing power is that it can become a substitute for Putin's social contract. The sacral power no longer owes anything to the population. It completely reserves for itself the function of determining the path of Russia's development, without taking into account the position, interests, and needs of the population. The government claims to remain beyond any criticism. Even when the actions of the government harm the Russian Federation and even when some representatives of this government do not publicly admit that mistakes have already been made and, with a high probability, will multiply.

"In Russia, at home, everything is very wrong with us. No one knows where we are going, we are just "holding on" with all our might, so as not to change, we are backing up without looking back, but sooner or later we will stumble" - this is how the Telegram channel "Kanal Visionera" assesses the situation in the Russian Federation<sup>46</sup>.

“No one – neither the pro-government majority, nor the anti-Putin minority in Russia, nor the opposition abroad – has any idea how the problems that have accumulated not only over the past three years, but over 25 years of Putin’s rule, can be solved. ... And this creates even more uncertainty and anxiety”, claims Lev Gudkov<sup>47</sup>.

The crisis of ideas about the future of Russia is also acknowledged within the government. "Next, we need to tell people what will happen tomorrow, why it is difficult now, when it will get easier, why it will get easier. And no one knows the answers", Meduza quotes an anonymous PA official<sup>48</sup>.

The war did not provide Russia with the conditions for modernization. It did not improve the possibilities of using its geopolitical position and status. In the second year of the war, the Russian authorities understood this. That is why a course was taken towards archaization and “traditional values” in domestic politics. The regime, even if it does not admit this, has switched to a policy of self-preservation.

Therefore, as a “basic idea,” the Kremlin proposes to keep Putin personally in power and his “post-Putin” regime in power for as long as possible. Russians, despite all these difficulties, are offered “service to

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<sup>46</sup> Сирийские уроки. ТК Канал визионера. 2024. 7 December. URL: [https://t.me/vizioner\\_rf/10303](https://t.me/vizioner_rf/10303)

<sup>47</sup> Сеньшин Е. Есть ли свет в конце тоннеля русского ресентимента? Большой разговор с социологом Львом Гудковым («Левада-Центр»). Проект «Republic». 2024. 31 December. URL: [https://republic.ru/posts/114646?utm\\_source=republic.ru](https://republic.ru/posts/114646?utm_source=republic.ru)

<sup>48</sup> Перцев А. «Ждали, что война закончится»... Meduza. 2025. 9 January. URL: <https://meduza.io/feature/2025/01/09/zhdali-cto-voyna-zakonchitsya>

higher ideals” in words and unconditional implementation of the government’s decisions in practice.

## **A Wide Range of Elites: "Foremen" of Future Normalization... or Mobilization?**

On a rhetorical level, representatives of a wide range of elites declare their full loyalty to the Kremlin's course. Pro-war speeches, organization of visual and media dominance of "patriotic themes", providing the invading forces with manpower and material resources - these are the things that the Russian bureaucracy, representatives of business circles, and the "creative intelligentsia" are busy with in their daily lives.

It is this environment that generates a lot of ideas that could potentially appeal to the authorities. Ideas about new prohibitions, upholding "traditional values", "increasing the birth rate", restricting migrants, returning to a one-party system, and so on are manifestations of elites' attempts to "adjust" to the current agenda (as they understand it) of the top leadership.

However, from the Kremlin's point of view, they are only executors. The agenda is formed at the highest level without taking into account any grassroots initiatives.

Stable peace rhetoric, as of 2025, is virtually absent. The exiled opposition ("good Russians") has effectively abandoned attempts to form a movement to end the war, instead positioning itself more as "bystander observers". Moreover, it often shares solidarity with the regime in its assessments of Ukraine's actions and prospects.

Paradoxically, under such conditions, it was precisely a part of the Russian elites (in parallel with the "race" of senseless initiatives in the spirit of "banning everything") that became the exponents of the hopes for peace.

One of the most famous Russian oligarchs, Oleg Deripaska, has repeatedly spoken negatively about the war and called for a ceasefire. On an anonymous basis, opposition media have repeatedly cited negative assessments of the war from "sources" – officials working at the highest levels of government. Ultimately, for most representatives of the "middle-level" elites, the war has become an "unpleasant problem" that has changed their usual lifestyle.

From the loyal elites' circle, cautious hopes for a partial post-war "thaw" are being communicated indirectly (usually through posts in anonymous Telegram channels).

The RF's top authorities are aware of this situation. Potentially, they can use the mood in elite circles to their advantage when/if the time for "normalization" comes. The Kremlin expects that bureaucratic, economic, and regional elites will implement a peaceful agenda, proceeding not only from "official necessity," but also from their own interests.

For this category, the myth of "returning to 2021" is being cultivated. That is, returning to the situation in which the "Evening Urgant Show"

exists, one can easily obtain a Schengen visa, conduct business with “unfriendly countries”, and not be afraid of repressions or semi-forced deportation to “new regions” or “the SMO zone”.

However, while representatives of the elite can still hope for a return to the formal trappings of more comfortable times, they cannot hope for a “thaw” or liberalization. The regime is not ready to “ease the screws”, and a wide circle of elites will not insist on this. If a course is taken towards “normalization”, the elites will not raise the question of systemic changes or even limited reforms. The end of the war will be quite enough for them even if the domestic political situation after the war has more totalitarian signs.

That is why the caste of “mobilization foremen” are also potential “foremen of normalization”. Until the “starting whistle” sounds, however, a wide range of elites will obediently carry out (in some cases, simulate carrying out) the instructions of the top leadership, aimed at drawing the Russian Federation ever deeper into pro-war mobilization.

## Conclusions

Starting in the second half of 2024, conditions began to emerge for the Russian authorities that required certainty about the future of the war. These conditions were as follows:

- Slowdown in the advance of Russian Armed Forces on the front line, lack of strategic territorial gains
- The Trump team came to power in the US, which declared its goal to stop the war
- Change in public goals of the war by Ukraine – emphasis on a just peace and readiness to abandon the goal of liberating the occupied territories by armed means
- Russia's inability to achieve the "goals of the Special Operation", in particular, geopolitical ones
- Signs of "war fatigue" among Russians, as recorded by sociological surveys
- A latent desire for peace among the Russian elite (despite their unwillingness to clearly articulate this desire)

In this situation, the Kremlin began preparations for both main scenarios: ending the war and continuing it. At the same time, no steps have yet been taken on either track that would make either scenario irreversible.

The main efforts on the track of "Russia's preparation for peace" are focused on creating conditions under which the authorities can ensure control over the internal political situation and prevent its destabilization. The Kremlin views "withdrawal from the war" as a crisis process. Therefore, preparations for this scenario are being made as part of anti-crisis measures.

The scenario of continued war foresees maintaining the current domestic policy course, with a gradual increase in pressure on the population, a growing role for coercive measures, and complete control over society enforced by the security forces, propaganda, and innovative digital methods.

The two-track preparation is evidence that Putin has not yet decided which of the scenarios poses a greater threat to him. By starting a dialogue with Trump and intensifying the rhetoric of a "peaceful resolution of the Ukrainian crisis", the Russian president is extending the time for making a decision on the "Special Operation".

The summer offensive of 2025 is viewed by Moscow as an event that can either improve negotiating positions (if conditions are created for a real peace process after its completion), or become a decisive step towards "achieving the SMO goals", which involve the elimination of Ukrainian

statehood or a significant limitation of Ukraine's external and internal subjectivity. This remains Putin's strategic goal.

Putin is not considering a scenario of defeat or even partial failure. He is confident that he will be able to adapt the situation to possible new challenges, as he did in the fall of 2022, conducting a "partial mobilization" and putting pressure on Ukraine's Western partners with nuclear threats<sup>49</sup>.

Therefore, both stopping the war and continuing it are perceived by Putin as tools for achieving a strategic goal in Ukraine and in the geopolitical arena.

Similarly, both stopping the war and continuing it are tools for the Russian regime to solve domestic political problems consisting in:

- Ensuring the regime's complete control over the population
- The longest possible retention of the current formation of bureaucrats in power
- Formation of the "Putin legacy" and preservation of the basic features of "Putinism" for a long period
- Creating optimal conditions for the transition of power

The war is the peak of Putin's regime. Regardless of how and when it ends, the next large-scale "project" that the Kremlin will have to tackle is the transition of power. Putin will become a "lame duck", even if he remains in power for a long time. The war is the peak of Putin's regime. Regardless of how and when it ends, the next large-scale "project" that the Kremlin will have to tackle is the transition of power. Putin will become a "lame duck", even if he remains in power for a long time. He cannot abandon power both for his personal security and because he is the "axis" of the personalist regime. And it is becoming increasingly difficult to find reasons to continue Putin's rule.

Despite the fact that Putin personally hinders the transit process, Russian elites are gradually starting to think and act in the logic of transit. That is why the most rational attitude toward ending or continuing the war is currently being demonstrated by representatives of the elite. However, the decision on this issue remains entirely the prerogative of Putin, who is guided by "higher motives." Among other things, this has shaped a persistent narrative about the "tsar's detachment from reality", not only in opposition circles.

Putin plans to remain in power until at least 2036, and ideally until the end of his life. If continuing the war is a condition for remaining in power, Putin will do everything to ensure that the war continues. Over time, however, the relevance of the transit agenda will grow.

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<sup>49</sup> Ядерні погрози Путіна – блеф чи реальна загроза? DW. 2022. 24 September. URL: <https://www.dw.com/uk/aderni-pogrozi-putina-blef-ci-realna-zagroza/a-63217288>

Similarly, the longer the war continues, the more significant domestic political rather than geopolitical motives will emerge for decisions on whether to stop or continue it.

Based on this, the Russian regime is trying to create conditions that will give it the maximum range of options for rapid response to possible changes that may occur, either according to the “WARapping Up” scenario or the escalation scenario, which would include a new wave of forced mobilization, complete subordination of the economy to the needs of war, and even expansion of the scene of operations beyond Ukraine and Russia.