

# Putin's war in Ukraine shows the limits of authoritarianism

*The lasting impact of Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine could be contrary to what the Russian President intended, writes **Roland Benedikter**. The Russia-Ukraine war could ultimately serve as a demonstration of how authoritarian regimes can sow the seeds of their own downfall.*

There has long been a debate about the evolving nature of Russian authoritarianism. '[Putin the disruptor](#)' became a common phrase from early on in the Russian President's career – often accompanied by all too vague and generous interpretations, and underpinned by much diplomatic self-restraint regarding the 'political culture of other worlds'.

For simplification and to make it easier for the West not to show too much involvement, Russian authoritarianism was often depicted as merely a somewhat 'different' form of illiberalism with some democratic characteristics. Even warning signs such as missing or dead journalists or imprisoned critics were dismissed as single cases probably not directly connected with the regime, and in any case not inbuilt into the system. The perception of Russian structures in the 2000s was mostly static; what was missing was the observation of authoritarian dynamism, i.e., its evolutionary character.

Yet like democratic societies, authoritarian regimes unfold and evolve over time. Their traits might be more complex than those of static dictatorships (which tend toward conservation at all costs), but nevertheless present identifiable mechanisms. 'Dynamic' authoritarianism in our time consists – in essence – of ten intertwined (and simultaneously present) characteristics which make it both 'dense' and flexible.

These characteristics include victimising oneself by ascribing responsibilities to others; silencing critics at home; progressively personalising power and restricting it to an increasingly smaller circle of the trusted; changing the account of history to feed '[imaginal politics](#)' for the creation of self-justificatory narratives; relying on imaginaries of hyper- or meta-nationalism (for example projection of forced belonging of others into one's own nation); identifying authoritarian ideology as 'post-ideological' or pragmatic 'statehood normalisation'; defining key terms (and their dialectics) in monolateral ways to impose consensus also on the subconscious level; expanding territories both in the geographic realm and on the virtual level (developing a [nationalised internet](#), surveillance, cyberattacks, know-how theft and economic espionage); achieving one's goals using tactics of planned provocation and pondered escalation with subsequent generous mitigation offers; and 'using all means' simultaneously by creating a hybrid of civil power tools and de facto warfare.

At the intersection of these characteristics, various versions of authoritarianism have emerged since the 2000s – some more self-restrictive, others more strict; some more self-referential, others more extroverted; some of a stronger self-perception of being embedded in historical continuity, others just floating for their own sake; some more hidden under systemic camouflage, others more in the open. Nevertheless, the overarching typological development path of recent authoritarianisms has been their – often veiled, but always latent – evolution by self-escalation, in most cases by an increasing hubris and self-overestimation of individuals over time, and a reliance on historic circumstances, triggers and opportunities.

The inbuilt law has been that, sooner or later, the self-referential but rarely self-sufficient nature of authoritarianism leads from rather 'embedded' to elitist to solipsist practices in the first phase, and from authoritarian to (the threshold of) proto-totalitarian strategies and actions in the second phase. This is what the West has seen at work not only in the '[new China](#)' of [Xi Jinping](#) or in the '[new Turkey](#)' of [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), but also in even more ways in the recent evolution of Russian anti-Westernism and anti-liberalism.

Putin... can barely hide the fear that, sooner or later, the tide may be turning against him.

Most of these developments have been floating under the tip of the iceberg for quite some time. They have de facto been ignored by the West, more concerned as it was with practical matters such as energy supply and access to economic markets. Yet with the war in Ukraine, a turning point in the perception of contemporary authoritarianism by global democracies may have been reached.

After a long incubation phase, the war in Ukraine is challenging former (rather conciliatory) perceptions of 'advanced authoritarian regimes' and their inbuilt evolutionary drive – not only in the West, but also, perhaps more importantly, in authoritarian societies themselves. The correction of views could become a part of ['re-globalisation'](#), i.e. of the [self-critical reconceptualisation](#) – and envisaged post-Covid-19 reform – of globalisation mainly by the global alliance of democracies.

But the change of views is certainly valid, first and foremost, for the societies of these authoritarian regimes themselves. The Ukraine war that began on 24 February has surprised many Russians by making it suddenly clear to them that their government has been changing gradually since the start of the 2000s. Together with the reconstitution and modernisation of the military and the progressive concentration of authoritarian power, with each step it has become more aggressive and militant.

This insight has [torn Russians apart](#) and [is dividing them](#) like few developments before. In the eyes of many citizens, the war is [against Russia's own historic-cultural 'brother nation'](#). The Russian President's explanation that Ukraine is simply Russia and has [no historical or cultural right to its own statehood or nationhood](#) is backfiring on the battlefield. It is one reason why the Russian army allegedly cannot use its full potential of destruction and remains hesitant to fully use its force to indiscriminately destroy Ukrainian positions.

According to an increasing number of observers, if the Russian leadership is unable to finish the war quickly, bring the population under stable control and mitigate the enduring effects of sanctions (which may be virtually impossible in the medium and long term), it could have [problems with its own population](#), this time including [its nomenklatura](#), which was seemingly also somewhat [uninformed and unprepared for the war](#).

The fact that around [13,000 Russian citizens](#) may have been arrested in their own cities for protesting against the war; the fact that even [Russian state media are starting to doubt the war](#); and the surreal tale that at the beginning of March private Russian businessman Alex Konanykhin [put up a bounty of 1 million dollars](#) for the arrest of Russia's President by his own police, indicates that the war in Ukraine has emboldened critics at home and abroad, and that resistance is coming into the open.

Putin is still rational enough to [let his most prominent critic, Alexei Navalny, incite a mass revolt against him on Twitter](#) from prison in order to demonstrate Russia's 'democratic' nature. He has also essentially pardoned visible critics such as the TV protester [Marina Ovsyannikova](#), who received a fine with the [threat of further investigations](#) on her and her family. But the autocrat can barely hide the fear that, sooner or later, [the tide may be turning against him](#). Further [restricting freedom of speech](#) with new laws that build on the [pre-war crackdown on the free press and political dissent](#), and [blocking Facebook and Twitter](#) for 'discrimination' against state-controlled information will hardly sustain the President's self-description as a "democrat" among his fellow citizens. These moves show he is rather publicly manifesting his tightening grip on all aspects of his society.

Many citizens now have no option but to acknowledge the fragility and vulnerability of the system that authoritarianism has built in Russia – which previously apparently had only the appearance of being stable and cemented in place. This is why former [International Criminal Court \(ICC\) judge Cuno Tarfusser](#) opines that the Russian leadership may ultimately be brought to justice by its own people (for example in the upcoming or in new emergency elections).

Overall, in a wide-reaching global shift in perceptions of still unknown consequences, Putin's actions in Ukraine have diminished the ['seductive lure of authoritarianism'](#) (Anne Applebaum) both in Russia and abroad. They have shown how easily an all too broad notion of authoritarianism can transform into more precise applications of (proto-)totalitarianism – and what the potential elements and laws of such an "evolution" are. By eradicating the middle ground and forcing Russia's bureaucracy and even the [educational and scientific sector](#) to either [stand with it or against it](#), the Russian government has increasingly [followed the footsteps of its 'little brother'](#) in Belarus, which it once considered a vassal state, but is now imitating.

In the eyes of many academics, the Russian President's actions against its own scientific and university communities were perhaps the most eminent proof of his evolution from 'medium-ground' to 'oppressive' authoritarianism. Laws passed during the initial stages of the war on ['protecting the human rights of Russian citizens in Russia'](#) have further restricted the actions of all domestic and foreign citizens, with every encounter and movement potentially monitored and a constant threat of harassment or arrest now hanging over everybody, including visiting scientists or other friendly contacts.

Thus, contrary to Putin's eagerness in his early years to establish ties for economic and technological cooperation and to expand know-how to prove his progressive mindset to his voters, Russia's decades-long developed [international scientific cooperation](#) is now being more or less eliminated in one brushstroke. It may take years if not decades to recover. The only exception might be in the case of cooperation with other oppressive authoritarian states, however these states tend to perform less well than free societies when it comes to science and key fields of non-military development.

As a result, despite silencing the media and repressing protests, the Russian President has made the thin line dividing his allegedly 'rational' authoritarian regime from its escalating practices observable to a much larger percentage of his population. His attempt to complete his ideology as a coherent 'Putinism' by changing the account of history, to the point of rewriting it in his '[century speech](#)' on the eve of the February 2022 Ukraine invasion and in [speeches during the subsequent war](#), has demonstrated the psychological bubble that authoritarians create for their societies and – mainly – for themselves. Yet this bubble could now be about to burst.

"But where danger is, also grows the saving power" – Friedrich Hölderlin

The Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 judges that for the first time in post-WWII history there are [more authoritarian states on the globe than democratic ones](#). As a countermovement, the war in Ukraine could be the start of the epochal reversal of this trend. Independent of whether there is [a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine conflict](#) or not, Putin's actions of escalating authoritarianism may speed up the West's shift toward green energy in order [to become more independent of Russia](#).

In the medium term, this might force Russia to modernise its economy and production system, turning away from just selling raw resources and, as a consequence, becoming necessarily more complex, more labour-sharing, and thus more participatory and less [oligarch-based](#). This might change the patterns of a regime that allows [Russian oligarchs living in Western democracies](#) to seize the resource wealth of the country and take it abroad in exchange for silence at home.

The Russian regime's war in Ukraine might also speed up the gender debate, as Russia's current politico-economic system of aggressive hyper-nationalism features virtually no women. Among the possible paradoxical effects of the Russia-Ukraine war may also be a further run on cryptocurrency. Interestingly, in this regard both Russia and Ukraine seem to be participating. Russia has shifted assets into cryptocurrencies to be less vulnerable to sanctions; Ukraine has asked for help to be sent via cryptocurrency transfers to be more independent of official banking channels which could be attacked by Russian cyberwarfare.

Be this as it may, the effects of the war are likely to not only prompt changes in the international financial and economic sphere, but also particularly [for Russia's economy](#). A downward spiral seems to be unavoidable and might further stir up domestic public protest against 'borderline' authoritarian structures.

Perhaps most importantly, the Ukraine war will sharpen the international perception of what a 'managed democracy' or 'steered democracy' really is, and what it is not. This might reshape the notion of 'authoritarianism' both in the West and the East (for example, among dissidents who are sometimes still torn between democracy and neo-communism) by better differentiating it. This unprecedented war might reintroduce partial notions of 'totalitarianism' into the application of political science during timely events. It could also change academic departments in the medium and long term by better balancing analytical trends and by inducing the theorisation of a new Western-European geopolitical realism, the latter beyond self-castigating apologetics for non-domestic policy patterns.

Last but not least, the war in Ukraine could force the EU to eventually draft its own global strategy. This indeed could be a breakthrough given its rather turbulent recent history, and it may help the push toward a real European unification. On an even broader level, it might strengthen the awareness of the global alliance of democracies that the 'great new divide' of our time is – and most probably for our and the next generation will remain – one between democracies and non-democracies. There may also be recognition that this divide is not simply replacing the Cold War but – after the 'happy period of indiscriminate globalisation' that occurred between 1991 and 2016 – is instead opening up a new, perhaps more complex chapter of systemic competition and confrontation that will characterise the coming decades.

The Russia-Ukraine war, last but not least, shows that democracies have to unite and that, for example, the new brand of '[Caesarean politics in Central Eastern Europe](#) risks damaging this unity from a geopolitical perspective – something Poles and Hungarians in particular may now be starting to understand on a more practical level. This war is forcing Europeans to understand that '[the weakness of democrats is more dangerous than the ado of reactionaries](#)', as Roger de Weck put it. And it will make Europeans more sceptical about China's '[New Silk Road](#)', too, which could be interpreted as another authoritarian project into the heart of (very different, and partly competing) European regions by different means.

More generally, the Russia-Ukraine war will bring about a less one-sided understanding in Europe of what a nation and a supra-national integration project such as the EU should be by re-balancing power, welfare, and peace projections. This includes the insight that – as former German President and Lutheran pastor [Joachim Gauck](#) put it – a 'strong defence of what we love is necessary and normal. It is not war-mongering or anti-peace'. The war will thus normalise the concept of nation within supranational bodies such as the EU; and it ultimately will teach us that [authoritarianisms are here to stay](#), which means that there will be no unified world system in the foreseeable future, and that democracies will have to develop stable and encompassing [multi-resilience strategies](#) on how to deal with cooperation, with the future of globalisation, and with systemic rivalries in the long term.

All of these are effects that could unleash trajectories that are contrary to what the Russian President wanted to achieve. The Ukraine war could thus ultimately be a turn against Russian authoritarianism – and against authoritarianism in principle. This suggests that the Russian leadership may not be interested in going much further with open confrontation or even in escalating the war, let alone turning to nuclear means. Nevertheless, seen from an evolutionary lens, authoritarianism in Russia has evolved from being predictable and to some extent accommodating at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to unpredictable and extreme over the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Russian war in Ukraine can be seen as proof of the dangers of a widely unchallenged evolution of authoritarianism.

At the same time, the more than two-decade long reign of Russia's current elite will not be able to modify the fact that the notion of 'Russia' describes a grand – spiritually and productively – nation with a globally influential history; a most honourable, generous and brave population that often suffered under its governments; and a bright, majestic and overwhelming culture which is part of Europe's and the world's cultural and religious humanity. No one can appropriate or change these historic facts, not even if they apply the most sophisticated technological, propagandistic, or ideological tools in recent human history to restrict perceptions at home and abroad.

And despite the emotions that are inevitably generated by a conflict, the great world cultures and nations at play in this war must not be equated with politics. We should distinguish between governments and countries. We should distinguish between institutions, ideologies, systems, and people. In the long run, there must be reconciliation, because after wars, 'the others' continue to be there, just as we do. We have to coexist, even across systems, and despite all odds and differences. We are all human, and we all are brothers and sisters, as the religions of the world tell us on the basis of millennial experience. In the end, humanity and reason have always prevailed throughout human history. They will hopefully do so this time, too.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [kremlin.ru](#)*

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