



ANOTHER 6 YEARS WITH VLADIMIR PUTIN

**WHAT TO EXPECT AFTER THE REELECTION
OF THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENT?**

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Another 6 years with Vladimir Putin. What to expect after the reelection of the Russian president?

Vladimir Putin won the presidential elections in the Russian Federation held on March 15-17, 2024, with 87.28% of the vote, securing his fifth presidential term leading the country, which will end in 2030.¹ At the end of this term, Vladimir Putin will be 77 years old, with the possibility of running for another 6-year term. However, the trajectory of Putin's future remains intricately tied to the outcome of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Therefore, the years to come will be marked by decisions and initiatives aimed at winning this war. A defeat for Russia in the war could lead to the downfall of the Putin regime and his sudden exit from the political stage, while a victory would give him the opportunity to meticulously prepare his succession, considering both his political legacy and his enduring place in Russian history.

Messages conveyed by Vladimir Putin in the electoral context

Even though the outcome of the presidential elections was largely predictable, this does not mean that the event did not have an impact on the political, social, or economic landscape. The discourse during the electoral campaign served as a platform for outlining the aspirations of the Kremlin regime in the short or medium term.

Firstly, the presidential elections aimed to highlight the stability and power of the Kremlin regime led by Vladimir Putin, which did not allow any cracks in the electoral process, and the accepted candidates to participate in the elections were representatives of the traditional political system, who supported the conflict in Ukraine. In this regard, it should be noted the authorities' refusal to register the candidacies of the two politicians who spoke out against the war, Yekaterina Duntsova and Boris Nadezhdin.²

Secondly, Putin presented a firm approach for the immediate future against "deviant" behaviors or potential "revolutionaries". Therefore, state structures will continue to oppose any actions deemed unpatriotic and will promote conservative values, a strong state, patriotism, and the Church, to accentuate the contrast with the West and liberal ideas.³ Any manifestation of dissent against the regime will be suppressed to prevent its spread and amplification in society. The death of Alexei Navalny in prison before the presidential elections was, in fact, a ritual execution, intended to show that there are no limits or hesitations in repression.⁴

Thirdly, Vladimir Putin promoted in his electoral campaign a significant increase in the influence of the military agenda on the decision-making process in the state, with his

¹ "Putin won the election with 87.28% of the vote after processing 100% of the protocols", *Interfax*, March 18, 2024, available at: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/951052>

² "The CEC refused to register Boris Nadezhdin to participate in the presidential elections of the Russian Federation. We tell you what is known about this decision," *Current Time*, February 8, 2024, available at: <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/tsik-otkazal-nadezhdinu/32809757.html>

³ Vladimir Putin's speech to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, February 29, 2024, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73585>

⁴ "Putin commented on Navalny's death", *Lenta.ru*, March 18, 2024, available at: <https://lenta.ru/news/2024/03/17/putin-prokommentiroval-smert-navalnogo/>

candidacy announcement itself made at a meeting with the heroes of the "special operation".⁵ In his electoral message, Putin emphasized the military character of the current situation, relegating economic projects for the country's development or the achievements he has registered in the last 20 years to a secondary role.⁶

Lastly, the message that Vladimir Putin aimed to convey through the anticipated outcome of this electoral scrutiny is that Russia, under his current leadership, has emerged as a global power, claiming a prominent place on the international stage, with a national identity consolidated through patriotism, essentially a Russian nationalism of imperial type. At the same time, in the Kremlin's vision, Russians must understand that this sense of pride and national prestige requires sacrifices, including accepting restrictions on individual freedoms and intensifying state control, actions reminiscent of the Brezhnev era. To maintain Russia's status and influence, citizens must endure the hardships of a period marked by the war in Ukraine, seen as a necessary effort for the defense and promotion of national values and interests. Therefore, in the context of the presidential elections, Vladimir Putin attempted to justify his actions and policies, presenting them as essential measures for protecting the country, and any personal or collective sacrifice becomes an act of patriotism necessary for asserting Russia as a respected global power.

Putin's Personality

This presidential mandate holds paramount importance for Vladimir Putin on a personal level, considering his aspiration to occupy a significant place in Russian history. Putin's ambitions are underscored by his repeated references to prominent historical figures, particularly to Peter the Great.⁷ Putin desires to be remembered as such a leader, whose achievements transcend the dimensions of time and significantly contribute to the consolidation of national identity and Russia's position on the international stage.

Moreover, considering the possibility of Vladimir Putin extending his mandate until 2036, thus surpassing the duration of Joseph Stalin's leadership, the issue of comparison between the two will arise. Joseph Stalin is recognized as one of the bloodiest dictators of the 20th century, who ordered massive purges resulting in the deaths of millions of people, but also for his role in accelerating the industrialization and militarization of the Soviet Union and in achieving victory in the Second World War, transforming the USSR into a global superpower. On the other hand, Vladimir Putin is perceived as the leader who has brought Russia back onto the world stage after the decade of post-Soviet instability and decline in the 1990s. Under his leadership, Russia has not only experienced a revival of nationalism but also a reaffirmation of its geopolitical influence, with him emphasizing, on several occasions, that these achievements occurred despite opposition from the West.⁸

⁵ "Putin announced his candidacy for President of the Russian Federation", *Izvestia*, 8 December 2023, available at:

<https://iz.ru/1617522/2023-12-08/vladimir-putin-obiavil-o-vydvizhenii-svoei-kandidaturny-na-post-prezidenta-rf>

⁶ "War, family, new elite - what Putin said in his address to the Federal Assembly", *BBC News*, 29 February 2024, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/crgk77lj0eio>

⁷ "Putin compared himself to Peter I and called the return of territories his task," *BBC News*, June 9, 2022, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-61749842>

⁸ "Putin believes that no one can slow down Russia's development", *TASS*, 7 December 2023, available at: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/19482177>

Putin openly assumes the role of a leader with the historic mission of reclaiming Russia's historical territories. He aspires to be perceived as a unifier of these territories, displaying a strong emotional involvement in this endeavor. In this framework, he perceives Ukraine not only as a strategic territory for Russia but as an inseparable part of Russian history and identity. From his perspective, the loss of Ukraine would not only equate to a strategic failure but also to a significant loss of Russian identity and historical heritage.

Putin's legacy, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine, will largely depend on the outcome of this conflict and its long-term impact on Russia's status in the world. If Stalin is now remembered in Russia for his role in the Soviet transformation and victory in the Second World War, a success perceived as a moment of national pride despite the atrocities of the Stalinist regime, Putin could be evaluated based on his success or failure in the war in Ukraine and his ability to navigate Russia through the challenges of the 21st century, maintaining its influence and internal cohesion.

Putin has presented himself as the central figure who has reunited the most remarkable characteristics of the Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet eras, consolidating Russia's image as a state-civilization that has never been subjugated. He sees himself as the president who has reinstated the sense of national pride in Russia and promoted Russia's strength beyond its borders, a guardian of traditional values in opposition to the moral decline of the West, and the leader who has ensured Russia's ability to contend with the West.⁹ Russia has not only resisted the West but has also been able to reclaim some of the territories it once had within its borders. This is intended to be his primary legacy left in the annals of Russian history.

Putin cannot afford a long-term frozen conflict

Vladimir Putin did not initiate the war in Ukraine with the aim of being remembered in history as the leader who generated a frozen conflict on Russia's borders. Any potential peace agreement or cessation of hostilities along the current frontlines in Ukraine would most likely represent a temporarily accepted solution to prepare for a new offensive.

Putin frequently articulates the perspective that Russians and Ukrainians are essentially one people, characterizing the situation in Ukraine as a civil war instigated by the selfish interests of the West.¹⁰ In these circumstances, the idea of freezing the conflict is inapplicable in the scenario of a civil war. History shows us that most civil wars have ended with the clear defeat of one of the parties: in the US Civil War, the South was defeated; in the Russian Civil War, the "Whites" surrendered to the Bolsheviks; in the Spanish Civil War, the Republicans were defeated by Franco's forces; the Greek Communists were defeated in the Greek Civil War, and in North Vietnam, the Communists achieved final victory against the South, supported by the US. The only civil war with a strong ideological foundation that ended in a frozen conflict was the Korean War, the consequences of which are still visible today. Putin does not even remotely consider that the "civil war" in Ukraine will follow the Korean scenario but fervently desires a clear outcome, with a decisive victory and Kyiv's surrender.

⁹ "Putin said the West "has sought and is seeking a new chance to destroy Russia" *RBC*, September 30, 2022, available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/30/09/2022/6336e3cd9a7947ec2a8e3088>

¹⁰ "Interview with Tucker Carlson," *Russian President*, February 9, 2024, available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73411>

During this mandate, Vladimir Putin will mobilize all available resources to annex Ukraine, a step he considers crucial for the consolidation of his historical legacy. This vision also includes other territories perceived as part of the Russian imperial heritage, such as Moldova, Georgia, and possibly even the Baltic states, seen as parts of a glorious past that must be revitalized.

Therefore, in the immediate future, Russia's military strategy will primarily focus on intensifying the offensive on the Ukrainian front. At the same time, President Putin will continue to exploit vulnerabilities in the West, especially in the context of upcoming major elections in the US and the EU, attempting to diminish Western support for Ukraine as much as possible through hybrid activities, primarily extensive disinformation campaigns.

The issue of a new wave of mobilization

Most likely, the Kremlin regime will seek to avoid or delay a general mobilization as much as possible, relying on the current mobilization capabilities, estimated annually at around 380,000 military personnel. This strategy will be influenced, of course, by possible favorable political changes internationally, such as the return of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States, or the installation of governments in some European capitals that would be less inclined to assist Ukraine.

If, in 2024, Ukraine continues to benefit from robust Western assistance and demonstrates the capacity to resist or even make progress on the battlefield, Putin will be compelled to expand mobilization efforts to increase the number of troops on the front lines. Additionally, in such a scenario, the issue of military personnel rotation will become increasingly pressing for the Kremlin regime to allow for the rest and partial recovery of soldiers who have been involved in combat thus far.

Another factor that may influence the course of a new mobilization is represented by the protests organized by the wives of mobilized men, within the "Puti Domoi" (Way Home) movement, which call for rotations to bring the men on the front lines back home.¹¹ These demonstrations cannot be suppressed through repressive methods and are the most dangerous for the regime, as there is a risk of escalating discontent among the troops.

The initiation of a new mobilization does not necessarily require a public announcement from Vladimir Putin. The decree regarding partial mobilization from September 2022 remains in force, meaning that Russian citizens could be called up without prior notice.¹² Additionally, Putin has instructed the Ministry of Defense to utilize a single registry of recruits for the autumn enrollment.¹³ Furthermore, he has requested that summonses be sent electronically, significantly complicating Russian citizens' attempts to evade the obligation to deploy to the

¹¹ "In Moscow, wives of mobilized men for the first time held a picket demanding to bring their husbands home", *Current Time*, December 7, 2023, available at: <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/zheny-mobilizovannyh-pervyi-piket/32674896.html>

¹² Ekaterina Bormotova, "The Supreme Court has ruled that mobilization continues. What does this mean for all of us?", *Novosti Novosibirsk*, 24 May 2023, available at: <https://ngs.ru/text/world/2023/05/24/72331232/>

¹³ "Putin orders use of 'unified registry' of eligible citizens in fall 2024 Russian military conscription", *Meduza*, December 21, 2023, available at: <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/12/21/putin-orders-use-of-unified-registry-of-eligible-citizens-in-fall-2024-russian-military-conscription>

front lines. Moreover, in July 2023, the State Duma adopted a law prohibiting recruits from leaving Russia starting from the day they received a summons to report to enlistment offices.¹⁴

Putin presents the militarization of the state as prosperity within society

Vladimir Putin, in his address to the Federal Assembly on February 29, portrayed war as a key driver of economic growth and an essential source of income for a significant portion of the population working in sectors related to the defense industry. The cessation of hostilities could lead to severe social problems, as many Russians would become unemployed or lose access to decent incomes. Simultaneously, ending the war will involve the repatriation of men earning high salaries on the front lines, thereby generating the need to integrate them into a labor market that provides comparable remuneration. Given the current economic context of the Russian Federation, creating a large number of new well-paying jobs for former combatants in the short term is impossible.

To prevent these internal complications, Putin must continue the state of war and arms production, preparing the population for potential new confrontations with the West. At the same time, supporting a war industry faces a major long-term economic challenge. In the context of sanctions and international isolation, Russia may not have the financial resources necessary to sustain such an economy. This vicious cycle will increase its aggressiveness in foreign affairs to avoid a situation where social unrest and economic problems caused by demobilization and declining demand for the defense industry could create a revolutionary situation.

The increase in repression within the state apparatus

In the near future, we are likely to witness an escalation of repressive measures undertaken by the Kremlin regime, including against the state apparatus. With Ukraine maintaining its resistance, the Russian regime will seek to assign blame for the lack of results. These individuals will be singled out among the directors of enterprises supplying products for the front, regional governors, officials involved in economic and military planning, as well as other representatives of the state apparatus. Dismissals, possibly followed by indictment and convictions, could be utilized as a form of punishment for failures or delays in achieving war objectives, aimed at explaining the challenging situation to the Russian population.

These trends are inevitable in a context where increased efficiency in decision implementation becomes crucial, especially within an economy predominantly oriented towards the military sector. In this context, Putin expects the governmental apparatus to demonstrate remarkable efficiency in implementing defense-related directives. Otherwise, the repeated replacement of officials and their punishment will become common practice.

Putin's message regarding the change of elites was clearly expressed in his address to the Federal Assembly: the elites of the 1990s must disappear, and the new elites - heroes and

¹⁴ Andrei Zlobin, "State Duma bans conscripts from leaving Russia from the day they receive a summons", *Forbes.ru*, July 25, 2023, available at: <https://www.forbes.ru/society/493433-gosduma-zapretila-vyezd-iz-rossii-prizyvnikom-so-dna-napravlenia-povestki?clid=1610>

martyrs, creators and bearers of the highest moral principle - must take their place.¹⁵ In this regard, Putin has launched an initiative aimed at integrating war veterans into leadership positions within governmental structures. This initiative represents not only a new approach in Putin's regime's personnel policy but also aims to consolidate the ideologization of the Russian administration and intolerance towards any form of dissent.

The acceleration of the militarization of Russian society

Analyzing the actions of Roskomnadzor in recent months, the possibility of blocking YouTube and Telegram in Russia can be anticipated, as they are the only platforms from which the population can still obtain information from alternative sources.¹⁶ This trend can be attributed to the efforts of the Kremlin regime to promote in society an ideology centered around the idea of military victory, aiming to unite the population in support of efforts to combat the perceived enemy from the West. In a state that emphasizes militarization, it is imperative that any criticism of the state, the authorities, as well as any attack on patriotism and Russian identity, be firmly prohibited. In Russia, censorship is applied vigorously, and those who criticize the regime are labeled as foreign agents, risking various sanctions, including asset confiscation.¹⁷ Protests are de facto banned, and the opposition has been crushed, with regime critics subjected to extreme measures such as assassination, imprisonment, or exile.

If until now the architects of imperial ideas have only outlined their radical initiatives, in the post-electoral context, it is possible that these projects will be implemented and evolve towards much more rigorous and extensive approaches. For example, just a few days before the presidential elections, the ideologist Alexandr Dugin published an article proposing the "total militarization" of Russia by imposing extensive control over society and severe restrictions on individual freedoms, even going as far as reinstating Smersh units (an abbreviation in Russian for "death to spies"), established during World War II to suppress traitors, saboteurs, or any other individuals suspected of anti-Soviet activities.¹⁸ It cannot be excluded that in the near future we will see many of these proposals put into practice, leading to the refinement of the oppressive regime and further militarization of Russian society and economy.

In this context, the consolidation of militaristic and nationalist sentiment in Russian educational institutions is taking shape. This strategy includes not only the promotion of traditional values but also the introduction of revised history courses,¹⁹ integrated into the educational curriculum from preschool onwards and continuing through higher education, along with activities and courses for the development of military-related skills (handling certain categories of weapons,

¹⁵ Tatiana Antonova, "Putin revealed to whom he is ready to hand over Russia: the new elite", *Moskovskii Komsomolets* (MK), February 29, 2024, available at: <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2024/02/29/putin-rasskazal-komu-on-gotov-peredat-rossiyu-novaya-elita.html>

¹⁶ "The head of Roskomnadzor said he is looking for a balance in the issue of blocking YouTube", *RBC*, October 24, 2023, available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/6537d09b9a79476ed06bb1f6>

¹⁷ "State Duma passes law on confiscation of property for fakes about the Russian Armed Forces", *Izvestia*, January 31, 2024, available at: <https://iz.ru/1642703/2024-01-31/gosduma-priniala-zakon-o-konfiskatsii-imushchestva-za-feiki-o-vooruzhennykh-silakh-ri>

¹⁸ Alexander Dugin, "Total Militarisation", *X (Twitter)*, March 12, 2024, available at: <https://twitter.com/Agdchan/status/1767577858824683851>

¹⁹ "Moscow showed new history textbooks with operation in Ukraine", *RBC*, August 7, 2023, available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/07/08/2023/64d1016a9a794763ffc7ab63>

basic medical aid, field navigation, and even extending to drone operation).²⁰ All these initiatives are designed to support a pro-war movement and ensure broad and sustained support for aggression against Ukraine. For the Russian regime, revitalizing and actively promoting traditional values, raising awareness of Russia's historical mission, and fostering a strong and authentic Russian identity become crucial.²¹ Integrating these elements into all aspects of social and cultural life is essential for consolidating the unity of the Russian people around Vladimir Putin.

The economic factor could be decisive for Putin's future

President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly stated that Russia is engaged in an open war with Western countries, a conflict that serves as both an ideological foundation and a tool for the Kremlin regime to ensure its power continuity. To sustain this state of belligerence, national resources are being heavily mobilized, which may reveal significant vulnerabilities on the economic front.

Examining the current economic situation, we observe that the Russian economy, although maintaining a basic structure oriented towards the market economy, is becoming increasingly dependent on state investments. The state sectors, especially the military-industrial complex, have become the central pillars of this economy. As evidenced by the 2024 budget, allocations for military spending have increased by 70% compared to the previous year, accounting for a quarter of the total budget.²² At the same time, exports, dominated by energy resources, are experiencing declining revenues due to the isolation of Western markets and unfavorable sales conditions due to sanctions,²³ while imports, especially from China, are on the rise.²⁴

Government statistics indicate a 3.6% decline in labor productivity for the year 2022, with the clarification that data for the year 2023 is not yet available.²⁵ This trend is exacerbated by the massive funding of the "metal goods" sector - a euphemistic term for the military arsenal - from public funds and revenues from primary resources, leading to an economy with a rudimentary structure.

More specifically, throughout the year 2023, Russia experienced a decline in its financial reserves due to extensive funding of military efforts and the need to cover budget deficits. The country's National Welfare Fund saw a reduction in liquidity by one-third, with the government tapping into these reserves to minimize the economic impact of the conflict in Ukraine.²⁶ At

²⁰ "Primary Military Training Lessons in Schools. Why do Russian children need basic military training courses in 2024?", *Lenta*, March 6, 2024, available at: <https://lenta.ru/articles/2024/03/06/nachalnaya-voennaya-podgotovka/>

²¹ "Russian schools will introduce compulsory singing of the anthem before lessons", *Lenta*, April 19, 2022, available at: <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/04/19/gimn/>

²² Rinat Tayrov, Olga Ageeva, "Ministry of Finance has planned nearly a 70% increase in defense spending in 2024," *Forbes.ru*, September 28, 2023, available at: <https://www.forbes.ru/finansy/497441-minfin-zaplaniroval-uvelichenie-rashodov-na-oboronu-v-2024-godu-pocti-na-70>

²³ Artem Chugunov, "The balance of payments has been formally annulled," *Kommersant*, January 22, 2024, available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6464811>

²⁴ Ivan Tkachev, Anna Galcheva, "What Russia sold and bought from China in 2023," *RBC*, January 24, 2024, available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/24/01/2024/65af9e809a79472aaca18347>

²⁵ "Rosstat reported a 3.6% decrease in labor productivity in the country in 2022," *Interfax*, October 6, 2023, available at: <https://www.interfax.ru/business/924578>

²⁶ Vadim Visloguzov, "Weakened National Welfare Fund bids farewell to euro," *Kommersant*, January 17, 2024, available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6455331>

this spending rate, it is estimated that the liquid reserve of the fund could be depleted by 2025, and the ability to replenish reserves will largely depend on revenues from oil exports, which are hindered by Western sanctions.

In addition to these aspects, Russia is experiencing an upward trend in inflation,²⁷ excessive lending,²⁸ while the stability of the national currency is uncertain,²⁹ and budget revenues require overtaxation to generate new funds.³⁰ Ultimately, a significant proportion of Russia's GDP growth is attributed to the military industry and related sectors,³¹ wage increases and unemployment reduction are driven by labor migration to the military-industrial sector, and the emergence of a personnel deficit in the market context of mobilization.

In conclusion, Russia's economy remains prone to instability and is exposed to the risk of Western sanctions, a fact that further underscores the uncertainty that will follow the presidential elections. On the other hand, Putin's strategy to maintain power is grounded in ensuring a level of socio-economic well-being, particularly by securing the loyalty of less advantaged segments through social support measures. However, even though current economic issues may be temporarily masked or compensated for by repressive methods and nationalist rhetoric, the long-term viability of this strategy remains doubtful.

Through the war initiated against Ukraine and the West, Vladimir Putin has, in fact, undermined the future of the country and the Russian economy, the latter potentially generating significant problems, including socially, ultimately contributing even to the downfall of the regime.

Challenging the regime from within

For Vladimir Putin, any act of contestation against him is the ultimate evil. For this reason, political repression has intensified within Russia, with assassinations, imprisonments, or the forced departure of the most prominent opposition figures.

At the same time, noteworthy is the public's reaction to the death of Alexei Navalny, which sparked an unexpected wave of resistance against the regime, marking the first direct confrontation of authorities with a visible disobedience of the population since the invasion of Ukraine. People took to the streets, disregarding workplace and institutional intimidations, as well as the efforts of the authorities to prevent the funeral from turning into a political protest.³²

²⁷ "The Russian economy has been predicted a new inflation shock," *The Moscow Times*, February 2, 2024, available at:

<https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2024/02/02/rossiiskoi-ekonomike-predrekli-novii-inflyatsionnii-shok-a120445>

²⁸ Viacheslav Agapov, "The number of Russians with loans has sharply increased," *Lenta.ru*, October 30, 2023, available at: <https://lenta.ru/news/2023/10/30/dolgi/>

²⁹ "The authorities aim to support the ruble exchange rate until the presidential elections in March. What will happen after that?," *Meduza*, January 12, 2024, available at: <https://meduza.io/feature/2024/01/12/vlasti-hotyat-podderzhat-kurs-rublya-do-prezidentskih-vyborov-v-marte-a-cto-budet-potom>

³⁰ Iulia Starostina, "Fiscal mobilization: The government plans to increase personal income tax to 20% and profit tax to 25%," *iStories*, March 11, 2024, available at: <https://istories.media/news/2024/03/11/nalogovaya-mobilizatsiya/>

³¹ "Rosstat: Russia's GDP grew by 3.6% in 2023. In 2022 (the first year of the war), it decreased by 1.2%," *Meduza*, February 7, 2024, available at: <https://meduza.io/news/2024/02/07/rosstat-vvp-rossii-v-2023-godu-vyros-na-3-6-v-2022-m-v-pervyy-god-voyny-on-snizilsya-na-1-2>

³² "The funeral of Alexei Navalny," *Meduzona*, March 2, 2024, available at: <https://zona.media/chronicle/pokhorony-navalnogo#59263>

The role of Navalny's wife will be decisive in determining whether this spark of resistance will turn into a wave of dissent that ultimately overthrows the Putin regime, or if it will merely become a symbolic representation of Russian exile in the West, akin to that of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the exiled leader of the Belarusian opposition.

In this regard, the beginning of Putin's new presidential term could be marked by the challenge of how to definitively neutralize the voices declaring "We are not afraid!", a matter that one of the regime's prominent opponents, the historian Vladimir Kara-Murza, who was sentenced to 25 years in prison, has drawn attention to. The imprisoned politician argues that democratic changes in Russia are not only possible but inevitable, and Putin's regime is not fighting against the opposition, but against the future, desiring Russia to never become a democracy.³³ Consequently, according to Kara-Murza, even if opposition leaders are eliminated, others will take their place, and Russia will sooner or later, definitely become a democracy. Yulia Navalnaya, the wife of Alexei Navalny, believes that supporting resistance forces in Russia is essential to ensure that Putin's regime will not survive a crisis from within, so the military defeat in Ukraine should push the regime towards collapse.³⁴

To all these, are added other risks for the Kremlin, such as protests from those who, although generally supportive of the regime, such as "war journalists or bloggers", the families of mobilized soldiers, or ultra-patriots, may express their frustration towards the president and military leaders for the delayed victory, lack of decisive measures, or the conditions on the front lines.

This susceptibility to protests will be a determining factor for the intensification of repression and the amplification of propaganda. As internal dissatisfaction grows, authorities will be compelled to respond with increasingly drastic measures, and various government structures will continue to combat any resistance to the regime and promote militarism, nationalism, and blind trust in Putin to extreme levels.

If the Putin regime intensifies its militaristic discourse and resorts to widespread military mobilization, forced by circumstances on the front lines, then there might emerge a gap between the policies of the authorities and the perception of the majority of citizens of the Russian Federation, who are accustomed to viewing war as a distant event that does not affect their daily lives. In this context, Putin's new mandate could pave the way for a gradual deterioration of solidarity and support for Vladimir Putin, which may ultimately lead to the collapse of the regime.

Conclusions

The fifth term of Vladimir Putin's leadership in the Russian Federation can be considered one of utmost importance due to its consequences and decisive for his historical legacy. The Kremlin's attempts to rally society in support of the "special operation" through militarization measures and repressive actions may erode popular support as the difficulties or even the impossibility of forcing Ukraine's surrender become evident. In this context, the gap between

³³ "Even if they kill us all, others will come in our place" - Vladimir Kara-Murza wrote a letter to Meduza from prison - about what to do after Navalny's death and Putin's next 'elections'", *Meduza*, March 16, 2024, available at: <https://meduza.io/feature/2024/03/16/dazhe-esli-oni-ubyut-vseh-nas-na-nashe-mesto-pridut-drugie>

³⁴ Yulia Navalnaya, "Putin isn't a politician, he's a gangster," *The Washington Post*, March 13, 2024, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/03/13/alexei-navalny-yulia-navalnaya-putin-russia-election/>

internal support for the conflict and a geopolitical agenda aimed at a "victory" in Russia's terms could become increasingly pronounced. Therefore, in the medium term, over about three years, this situation could pose a strategic threat to the regime's stability. This does not automatically imply that the regime will fall or that mass protests will erupt, but it will intensify internal contradictions, including within the regime's elite.

Additionally, there is the issue of Vladimir Putin's legitimacy. While the Kremlin leader uses this edition of the presidential elections as a tool to consolidate power and send a message of strength to the West, the regime could still be contested, and Vladimir Putin may no longer be seen as a legitimate leader, which would pose a major challenge to the current power structure. This idea is advocated by Yulia Navalnaya, who argues that in order to defeat Putin or at least to punish him seriously, it is essential for the West to perceive his behavior as that of the head of a criminal organization. Therefore, it becomes imperative to impose sanctions that affect his status and wealth, as well as that of his associates, in order to weaken the regime and generate tensions within it.

Ultimately, one of the crucial aspects for Putin's evolution is Ukraine's ability to resist. The stronger Ukraine demonstrates resistance, the more vulnerable Putin's regime becomes. Control over Crimea could play a pivotal role, being a focal point of the conflict. Any potential loss of control over Crimea would be extremely difficult for Russians to accept, as its annexation is portrayed as a monumental personal achievement of Vladimir Putin.

In the long term, all efforts of indoctrination and radicalization of the youth, educating them in a nationalist spirit promoting Russian imperialism, indicate Putin's desire to build a militarized society in Russia with imperialistic aspirations that must survive as a mindset beyond Putin's era. A society rooted in this militarism will continue to desire, even after Putin, an authoritarian leader to maintain a vengeful spirit towards the West and the desire for territorial expansion. This scenario presents significant risks, especially for states that were once under the influence of the Russian Empire and/or the Soviet Union. Therefore, Ukraine's resistance is essential not only for the future of the Ukrainian people or for the survival of the Kremlin regime but also for the future of Europe, to prevent the territorial expansion of Russia and the continuation of aggressive behavior by the Kremlin leader, regardless of who it may be. To heal from neo-imperial ambitions, Russia must lose the war in Ukraine. Otherwise, sooner or later, any ceasefire will be followed by a new aggression, with Moscow exploiting the weakness of the West or its political indecision.

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