

**The Cost of Putin's Social Contract: The Evolution of Political Passivity
into Russia's Invasion of Ukraine**

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Studying the Putin's Social Contract: Introduction

Even though the concept of social contract has been widely used to analyze the relationship of the Russian state and its citizens, the majority of studies usually focus on particular aspects of this contract such as economic performance, political passivity, elite bargains, and identity-based legitimacy. However, less attention has been paid to how these elements interact with one another: focus instead lends itself to the shift from a performance-based contract from the 2000s, into a one rooted in identity- and mobilization-based incentives after the full scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This transformation raises the question whether the contract has remained fundamentally unchanged, reoriented some of its crucial parts, or merely supported new narratives due to the lack of presentable performance. Thus, our paper examines how Putin's social contract was constructed, maintained, transformed, and how it coexists with Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Andrey Akhremenko and Yuliya Shulika offer a definition of the social contract as the state's provision of public goods, stability, and a decent standard of living in exchange for political loyalty and an absence of representation demands. Their definition satisfies the stability and security components of Putin's social contract, wherein they establish the distribution of the petrodollars by the state, and the elites as a key to the maintenance of the existing social contract. This idea is accompanied by a policy of low taxes—or least an image of low taxes, which reduces the demand for representation. It further reinforces the idea that the state does not owe anything to its citizens, because its wealth is derived from natural resources. Moreover, it generously provides citizens with the goods, secured by those petrodollars (e.g. Venezuela). John Polga-Hecimovich and Raul Sanchez Urribarrí propose a model explaining how autocrats maintain the sustainability of regimes built on the resource-centered economy. The money from oil is spent to feed the enforcers and to maintain a certain level of public goods. Magnus Feldman and Honorata Mazepus also present Putin's social contract in Russia from a perspective of the state's ability to maintain stability and economic growth. They use Pakulski's concept of *conditional tolerance* to explain that Russian citizens will tolerate the lack of democratic process while the state leverages power to perform to demonstrate its stamina.

An important emphasis is also noted by Feldman and Mazepus: this contract is not assigned by both sides: the state and the citizens, it is only *dictated by the state* to enforce informal rules. Such one-sided establishment places citizens in a position, where they are subject to agree and obey any changes of the contract, while the state manages to instill its non-

fragility. The economic rise of the 2000s through the 2020s allowed the establishment of a contract based on the state's demonstrated ability to provide citizens with opportunities for economic stability and improved living standards. Haerpfer and Kizilova attribute the fruition of the contract through shock therapy. Being dismayed by the economic collapse and the anomie of the 1990s after the illusion of guaranteed success of the West made the demand for new stability and order obvious. Supplemented with the prioritizing of economic changes over the political changes made by the *mladoreformatory*, led to the quiet acceptance of Putin's social contract. Within the moments of crisis shifts, from the economic-based contract to the identity-based contract, Gerber and Gimpelson demonstrate the Crimean Consensus and the start of Russia's full scale invasion into Ukraine stand as established examples of seeking an ideological basis for the weakening contract.

Gerber and Gimpelson explicitly define the social contract as a central framework for understanding state-society relations in Putin-era Russia. They describe it as "whereby the regime commits to providing social stability and gradual improvements in living standards to the population in return for its political quiescence". A significant note is made by the authors about the dual contract system: a contract between the state and the citizens and a contract between the state and the elites. The second one grants the elites an access to nearly unbounded enrichment in exchange for their loyalty towards the regime. This deal is secured by the understanding of inevitable dispossession of elites the minute after the regime is changed. It is unclear whether the third contract exists between the elites and the masses. Ibadildin and Pisareva point out that one of the terms which citizens of authoritarian regimes face in this contract is the enrichment of the elites, but we can not clearly assign it neither as a part of state-masses contract, nor as a new elites-masses one. Haerpfer and Kizilova show one more pillar of the establishment of a social contract in post-Soviet countries. The new elites are actually coming from the *nomenklatura* of the Soviet Union, so there is no new status between them and the population brought in, only the rhetoric changed.

A noteworthy article (Kommersant *Vlast*, 1999 May 11) in the Kommersant Vlast' newspaper, appeared at a time when speculation over President Yeltsin's successor dominated Russian political discourse. It included the results of a poll that asked respondents who they would like to see as the next president of Russia out of Soviet movie characters. Even though Marshal Zhukov was the winner, the poll included Shtirlits (third place contender in the poll) — a Soviet spy inside the Nazi apparatus, according to Yulian Semyonov's novel "Seventeen moments of spring." Some observers guess that this hinted at Putin's rise— an informed attempt to consider a future with a spy-president. The idea was simple: Shtirlits was an

embodiment of a clever troubleshooter who was shrewd, resourceful, and insightful. Although he operated within the enemy's camp, he was portrayed as fundamentally different from them through his unconventional methods, ultimately portrayed as the "good guy." To examine how liberty has been transformed into stability, and similarly how judges were substituted by siloviki, we need to examine the Russia Putin inherited from Boris Yeltsin, and what has led people towards this new contract.

Existing works provide us with valuable descriptions and explanations of particular components for the contract, though it means they often do not examine their coexistence across time. Our paper treats these elements as parts of the contract, tracking their evolution and changes and the interchangeability of these factors over Putin's reign.

Our paper seeks to examine: "How has Putin's social contract been constructed, maintained, transformed, and how does it coexist with the Russian invasion of Ukraine?". Detailed answers to this complex question, using Russia as an example, may provide a perspective on how authoritarian regimes work with the contract, when they need it to be transformed due to adventures of their leaders.

First, we discuss the crises of the 1990s that created societal demand for a new state-society arrangement. Second, we analyze the construction of Putin's social contract and the mechanisms through which political passivity became normalized. Finally, we examine the growing role of militarized identity and show how the contract transformed after 2014 and especially after the invasion of Ukraine.

Historical Preconditions of the New Russia: The 1990s as a "Window of Opportunity" for a New Contract

Crises of the 1990s

The rise of a new social contract coincides with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. In *Armageddon Averted* (2001), Stephen Kotkin claims that the USSR was not just a polity but an active total state where every aspect of life such as housing, employment and chain of supply, etc., was regulated by the administrative circuit of the Communist Party. The collapse of this monolithic system triggered the breakdown of an institution; the disarming of central ministries of planning and supply deprived industrial managers of resources and left citizens without the cradle-to-grave system that the Soviet social contract had provided for decades.

This collapse was solidified by the August coup of 1991, which signified the erosion of the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of coercive power. Kotkin (2001) underlines that the vacuum that followed was not filled by new democratic institutions, but with a plethora of organizations where the informal actors such as organised crime syndicates and private security roofs (Krysha) became the major providers of order. Furthermore, the sudden independence of fifteen new republics turned twenty-five million ethnic Russians into foreigners, defining the emergence of the Russian Federation as a geopolitical disaster (Putin, 2005), rather than a liberation. Thus, the 1991 collapse created a weakened state, and brought about a traumatized population that understood freedom as the terrifying distortion of a state and presenting a window of opportunity for a subsequent social contract on the basis of recreating a working state.

The economic crisis of the early 1990s is described in the academic literature as a phase of “catastroika”, where the active breakdown of the planned economy forced the inception of a socio-economic catastrophe. This crisis was instigated by shock therapy, a radical economic strategy, implemented in 1992 by Yegor Gaidar, with the assistance of Western advisors and the international monetary fund (IMF), aimed at shifting Russia away from a centrally planned economy to a market economy (Murrelp, 1993). Scholars such as Joseph Stiglitz (2002) believe that the objectives of shock therapy, i.e. the liberalization of prices in 1992, were ineffective because they operated within an institutional vacuum: without the regulatory environments to create an efficient market. As a result, when price controls were lifted on about ninety-percent of commodities, hyperinflation reached 2500% in less than a year, erasing the life-savings held by citizens in state-owned banks. This was not only a loss of wealth, but a total failure of the state to fulfill its role as a financial guarantor. With the downward value of the ruble, the security of the cradle-to-grave era of the Soviet Union was replaced by a new reality of biological survival characterized by wage arrears and a poverty rate of more than 32% by 1993 (World Bank, 1995).

Contemporary research claims that the first trigger of the economic delegitimation of the state was the privatisation process (1992-1994). According to Stiglitz (2002), the Washington Consensus model of rapid privatisation was always flawed as it focused mainly on speed, rather than establishing institutional infrastructure. One strategy used during this period was the creation of vouchers. Vouchers were tradable certificates issued by the Russian government intended to give every citizen a stake in former state-owned enterprises as they transitioned to private ownership (Smith-Boyle, 2022). However, without the existence of enforceable contract law and accounting standards, the process of voucher distribution was

commonly disturbed by former Soviet managers looking to exploit the system to accumulate wealth. Chrystia Freeland (2000) outlines the way in which these Red Directors would coerce the workers for their own personal gain. This created a market-without-law atmosphere where, as Gaddy and Ickes (1998) contend, the industrial sector managed to survive not based on market efficiency but rather through an intricate web of non-monetary transactions and price distortions meant to cushion non-competitive enterprises of the Soviet-era against bankruptcy.

This dysfunction of the system put the state in a situation of extreme fiscal weakness. Although the primary objective of the shock therapy was to stabilize the ruble, Anders Åslund (1995) argues that the state's inability to collect taxes in hard currency forced a reliance on promissory notes (Veksels). This shift toward a barter economy undermined the government's capacity to fund the social safety nets that were a hallmark of the Soviet era. Therefore, this state failed to fulfill its paternalistic obligation, and generated what Nicholas Eberstadt (2010) calls a demographic catastrophe of the proportions never before seen by a developed country. A sudden drop in the life expectancy of males from 63.4 years to 57.4 years became the final empirical evidence of the human cost of the transition (Brainerd, 2021). By the mid-1990s, as mentioned by Rose, Munro and Mishler (2004) in their surveys of the New Russia Barometer, the free market has ceased to be linked to liberty but predatory so-called nomenclature capitalism. This cynicism of reform in the mass consciousness produced a vacuum of power which prepared both the structural and the psychological foundations of a social need to have a powerful state capable of bringing order to the anarchy in the private sector.

In the year 1995, the Russian government was virtually insolvent, as it could not support itself and service its growing debt. In a desperate attempt to stabilize the economy, then President Yeltsin adopted a strategy of "loans for shares". According to Chrystia Freeland (2000) and David Hoffman (2002) the auctions of loans for shares proved to be a Faustian bargain: the bankers pledged to provide the state funds to eliminate a budget deficit in return for industry crown jewels, most notably Norilsk Nickel and Yukos. According to Juliet Johnson (1997), these auctions lacked any semblance of transparency, and in most cases, the banks got the assets at very small proportions of their market worths, when the state inevitably defaulted on their loans. Goldman (2003) views this episode as the basis of the inauguration of the so-called oligarchy: where both political power and economic well-being had been reunited and the state no longer served as a detached adjudicator, but rather served the narrow interests of private individuals.

This period of "state capture" (Hellman, 1998) had sociologically significant implications. According to Vadim Volkov (2002), in the book *Violent Entrepreneurs*, when the

state gave up its regulating and protecting roles, the oligarchs created their own sphere of influence, employing former KGB and Interior Ministry officials to protect their property. An example presented by Volkov is the presidential elections of 1996, where the oligarchs pooled media and financial influence to ensure that Boris Yeltsin was elected president. Lilia Shevtsova (1999), argues that the event undermined the remaining civic confidence in the democratic process since the population began to see the state as a closed joint-stock corporation, and not a representative institution. The experience of the middle-1990s was thus defined by extreme disfranchisement; the commoditised concept of freedom was equated by the right of a privileged group to loot the national economy, creating deep resentment that would later be soothed by assurances of de-oligarchisation and restoration of sovereignty of individual states.

The 1998 crisis is thought by researchers to be the point at which the post-Soviet economic model broke down completely. According to Stiglitz (2002) and Anders Åslund (2007), the Russian government had no choice to default due to a combination of falling oil prices, an unstable domestic debt pyramid (the GKO short-term bond market), the spillover effects of the 1997 Asian financial crisis and its failure to service the debt that it had generated itself. Burbank and Cooper (2010) argue that this episode was a major psychological event among the Russian middle-class; once again, in a span of one decade, those who had successfully adjusted to the market realities were struck by the erosion of their savings and buying power, as the ruble lost its value by a third in just a few weeks.

Political implications of the crisis were also very significant. Lilia Shevtsova (2001) holds that the default of 1998 was the moral death of the Yeltsin regime: the state had placed social stability beneath a market apparatus that failed in the end. The academic community is divided on the implications of the 1998 crash for the Russian political and economic system. Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman (2005) argue that the chaos of this event was simply indicative of the transition of Russia into a “normal” middle-income country. They saw Russia’s problems of corruption, inequality and economic volatility as adjustment costs, having seen similar trends in Turkey and Brazil. However, critics like Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski (2001) insist that the crisis of 1998 indicated that Russia is actually a failed state, in the sense of having no democracy and having a kleptocracy.

Most importantly, this disaster spurred a geopolitical pivot even further away from westward ideology. Richard Sakwa (2008) notes that the failure of IMF prescriptions, supported by the West, provoked a revival of “statism” (*Gosudarstvennichestvo*). The appointment of Yevgeny Primakov as Prime Minister following the crash was an indication of

a strategic withdrawal from the liberal globalist orthodoxy and re-assessment of national interests with state-based economic renewal. Consequently, the crisis of 1998 essentially brought to an end the liberal decade, convincing the elite actors, as well as the general population, that a weak state represented an existential threat. It was this chain of events that ushered in a window of opportunity for a decisive leader who had vowed to assure a safe haven of Russia against international turbulence through securing power in a centralized, sovereign power vertical.

The 1998 financial default was the final piece of evidence showing that the market-oriented state could not sufficiently provide for its people. Academics note that following this decline there was a significant change in the ranking of social needs in Russia. Lilia Shevtsova (2001) and Stephen White (2000) believe that the trauma of the 1990s fostered a paternalistic longing: the desire for a state that acted as a father figure, providing food, stability, and safety in exchange for political control. According to Andrei Tsygankov (2014), the caretaker model offered the best solution to the chaos created by oligarchs. As a result, there was an increase in the number of citizens desiring to denature political pluralism and embrace the presence of a state with the authority to penalise the elite, who would centralise authority vertically and ensure a stabilized monetary safety net. What emerged from the chaos of the 1990s is a besieged polity that necessitated state intervention to guarantee the dignity and survivability of its people, which, in turn, supported the development of a new social contract in the 2000s.

Fatigue from the 1990s and Societal Vulnerability

In the late 1990s, the greater Russian population began to realize that the government was not fulfilling its historical role as a protector and provider. Recent studies by the Centre of Research on Public Policy indicate that as a result of accumulated trauma, for every one person that prioritized freedom, four preferred order (Rose, 1999). These results demonstrate a noticeable change in the core concerns of the common citizen: the loss of interest in participatory politics and a focus on protection against the breakdown of the state. This shift generated a paternal deficit; after being betrayed by the state in 1992 and 1998 crises, residents of the country were in a state of need for a government that serves as a provider and guardian, what is known in Russian as a *khozyain*, as opposed to a neutral market regulator.

Vladimir Shlapentokh (2001) builds on this concept of sociological change in an article in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, where he argues that the uncontrolled capitalism of the 1990s made the Russians an atomized people. As soon as the state was no longer able to ensure the minimum of security, or enforce contractual laws, citizens transitioned back into a state of individual survivalism. As a result, the idea of *stabilnost* (stability) became a commodity that was a final

product of politics. The opinions chronicled by the Levada center suggest that the Russian people were ready to accept a new social contract: they were willing to have a state monopoly on political power in exchange for the end of this period of shock. This change in mentality led to a transformation of the state, not into a democratic partner, but into a custodian whose key duty was to provide the material continuity that was lacking in the previous decade.

Scholarship of the late 90s suggests that the new social contract was not merely an imposition politically, but an imperative of structure, necessitated by a society of retreat. Due to the weakening of formal institutions, as Rose (1999) explains, Russians were forced to live in an anti-modern way, where people would survive only through informal networks and non-modern social capital. This exhaustion brought the liberal era of the early 1990s to a close. New leadership received a window of opportunity as a result of public pressure to reform the existing system of governance into a Caretaker State, meant to reestablish its monopoly of force and offer a reliable material underpinning. By the millennium, the Russian voter was no longer interested in democratic rule, but in a guarantor of the sovereign order, thus preconditioning the current social contract, which is based on the exchange of political independence for security of the state and economic renewal. We argue that the crises of the 1990s created not only dissatisfaction with newly established institutions but also a societal demand for stability that made the emergence of Putin's social contract possible.

Historical Tradition of Political Apathy

The political passivity that became one of the foundations of Putin's social contract should not be understood as a permanent characteristic of Russian society. It emerged from a combination of institutional legacies and the disappointment that came after the political and economic transformations of the late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods. This passivity appears through the vision that the administration of the state is the sole province of the ruler, and not the business of the citizenry. In his analysis of the results of the 2012 PONARS Eurasia, Viatcheslav Morozov (2012) states that a large segment of Russian society is typified by what he calls the habitual submission and a passive majority, whose interaction with the state is not activism, but conformism. This cultural stalemate, which is based on centuries of centralized power, frames politics as a business of the state, providing a significant gap between the personal life of the citizens and the political arena. The tradition was further entrenched during the Soviet period, as per Vladimir Shlapentokh (2001), where the rule about intentionally depoliticalizing oneself started to create a psychological mentality of non-incursion by the state. This natural indifference stabilized towards the end of the 1990s as people were simply

tired of democratic reforms; instead of authoritarianism being perceived as a threat, it was seen as a rediscovery of a so-called natural and predictable politics.

This framing of the Russian people as passive in political affairs may be misleading as they were very involved, initially, when Mikhail Gorbachev introduced his practice of *perestroika* (restructuring) and the accompanying *glasnost* (openness) in the mid 1980s. During this area, the stringent restrictions on the freedom of speech and media were relaxed to an extent and citizens were able to come together to form popular activism movements. These groups were responsible for a variety of peaceful demonstrations in 1989 and 1990 that demanded further democratic reforms, free elections, and the removal of article 6 of the Soviet constitution (Vladislav M. Zubok, 2026). The last of which were successful and stripped the Communist party of its legal monopoly on power, paving the way for multi-party politics. However, this democratic momentum would find itself impeded by a variety of factors, two of which being Boris Yeltsin's shock therapy and the fall of the Communist party. Yeltsin market reforms brought about severe hyperinflation, causing the savings of many Russians to disappear and bringing about the rise of oligarchs. This poor economic situation caused many Russians to feel disenfranchised by democracy. Furthermore, the fall of the Communist party and its subsequent abolishment in 1991 removed a common enemy that had once unified the citizens to demand these changes in the first place. They had won against Communism, and thus there was now no more reason to fight. This lack of motivation coupled with Russia's poor financial situation was responsible for the sensation of political apathy that many citizens felt.

Therefore, political apathy should not be viewed as a stable cultural trait. The experience of *perestroika* demonstrates that large-scale political participation was possible when citizens believed that collective action could influence political outcomes. However, the economic hardships of the 1990s, the perceived failure of democratic reforms, and growing distrust toward political institutions became a part of a gradual abolishment of public political participation.

At the turn of the 1990s and 2000s, the Russian population was tired of the chaos and unfavourable surprises from the state, and was ready to give up previously desirable freedoms and delegate its fate to any leader who proposed at least some kind of order and safety, no matter the price hiding behind this offer.

The Construction of the “Putin’s Social Contract” and Public Apathy

The Formula of the Contract

This exact demand for stability in the early 2000s predetermined the basic formula of the social contract proposed by Putin – an informal model of relations between the state and society. In the Russian political context, its essence can be expressed through the following formula: “We take care of politics; you take care of your private lives. We do not interfere in your everyday affairs as long as you remain loyal and do not challenge the rules of the game.” This contract was not legal in nature. It functioned as a stable political and social norm. And it was a competitive framework, because the state for the first time has offered not to mess with everyday life of the people, which was a pretty alluring proposal. (Greene & Robertson, 2019).

The Normalization of Political Passivity in Mass Consciousness

One of the key elements of the contract’s durability was a cultural and psychological transformation in attitudes toward politics.

In mass perception, politics gradually became associated with a “dirty business” — a sphere of cynicism, corruption, and elite infighting. (Hay, 2007). Polity press. Within such a framework, distancing oneself from political participation is perceived not as a lack of civic responsibility, but as a rational choice.

The logic that “nothing depends on us anyway” became widespread. This belief performs a dual function. On the one hand, it reduces motivation for collective action; on the other, it serves as a mechanism of self-justification for personal passivity. (Levada Center, 2021, March 18). Passivity becomes the norm, while activism becomes a deviation. A person who demonstrates political initiative risks being perceived as “problematic,” “radical,” or “naïve.” In this way, social pressure complements institutional constraints.

Institutional Mechanisms of Depoliticization and Political Monopoly

The functioning of this contract was ensured by institutional mechanisms aimed at depoliticizing society and consolidating political monopoly.

First, control over the media and the information space played a crucial role. The centralization of federal television channels and the restriction of independent sources of information created a single dominant narrative. Political reality was presented as a sphere in which alternatives either do not exist or are portrayed as a threat to stability.

Second, a model of managed elections was constructed. Electoral procedures formally remained in place, but competition was significantly limited. A “systemic opposition” emerged, operating within established rules and not questioning the foundations of the political system. This allowed for the preservation of the outward attributes of pluralism while power was effectively concentrated.

Third, independent political actors were marginalized — through administrative barriers, legal restrictions, and reputational discrediting. Independent political activity was gradually pushed to the periphery of the public sphere. (Guriev & Treisman 2023).

However, not only institutional constraints played a decisive role, but also processes of structural depoliticization. These include:

1. fear of political participation (as a result of repressive practices and demonstrative punishments)
2. the conviction that “citizens have no real influence”
3. the normalization of political passivity as a social norm

Thus, depoliticization became not only the result of external pressure, but also an internally internalized attitude.

Political Depression of Society: Collective Powerlessness as a Tool of Governance

The analysis of the Russian model can be clarified through a comparative perspective, drawing on the study of authoritarian regimes proposed by Stein Ringen in *The Perfect Dictatorship*, devoted to the Chinese political system. (Ringen, 2017).

Ringen characterizes contemporary China as a “controlled autocracy,” where regime stability is ensured through a combination of three elements: high state organizational capacity, selective repression, and managed public apathy. In his interpretation, the key resource of power is not mass ideological mobilization, but the ability to keep society in a state of political inertia while maintaining economic functionality.

Although the Russian system differs institutionally from the Chinese one, there is a similarity in the logic of reproducing stability. In both cases, the state seeks to minimize political uncertainty, limit autonomous centers of influence, and at the same time preserve a sense of normal everyday life for the majority of the population.

However, unlike the Chinese model, where economic performance remains the central source of legitimacy, in the Russian case of legitimacy has gradually shifted toward domestic political and geopolitical factors. This makes political depression and managed passivity even more significant elements of regime stability.

Thus, the Russian social contract can be understood as a variation of a broader model of authoritarian governance in which collective powerlessness and low political engagement become not a side effect, but a structural instrument of power.

One may also speak of the phenomenon of political depression of society — a state of collective powerlessness in which a significant portion of citizens are convinced of the impossibility of changing political reality.

This is reflected in attitudes such as: “nothing can be changed”; “they are all the same”; “it is better not to stand out.”

Repression increases the costs of participation, propaganda shapes the perception of the futility of protest, and the absence of institutionalized channels for expressing dissatisfaction deprives citizens of a sense of influence.

As a result, a managed state of society emerges in which low political engagement becomes not an anomaly but a stable characteristic. In this sense, political depression is not merely a consequence of authoritarian consolidation, but one of its functional elements.

The Outcomes

Building on the literature discussed above, we argue that Putin's social contract represents a model of exchange: political loyalty in return for stability and relative non-interference of the state in private life. Its durability is ensured by a combination of institutional control mechanisms and the deep depoliticization of mass consciousness.

Over time, the economic component of the contract has transformed, yet the logic of political passivity as a norm has remained. The political depression of society — a sense of collective powerlessness — has become an important element in maintaining the existing order, turning into a structural resource of governance.

The contract described above was primarily based on economic performance and political passivity. However, as economic growth slowed down and external shocks it became harder for the state to maintain an established picture of stability and to seek support in economic performance. The state increasingly relied on identity-based incentives and geopolitical narratives. Thus, the next section examines how militarized identity gradually became a built-in part of the contract.

Militarized Identity as Part of the Contract

We argue that militarized identity should be understood not as a separate phenomenon, but as a refined adaptation of the existing social contract. The problem with this proposed contract is that it is based solely on the state's performance, which is not conducive to sustain legitimacy without additional dimensions, such as ideology. Moreover, it offers no clear explanation for why political power became concentrated in the hands of Putin and his associates. The narrative is reestablished by placing Putin as the divine protector from threats abroad, and that the safety of Russia rests in his reign. Silent domestic politics are accompanied with militarized foreign politics, which do not require any participation besides admiring the

glorious battle with enemies from the front seats via the official television. At least, they did not require it for a long time, until it was too late.

Defined early on as an offensive military power, Russia has maintained the similar military behavior characteristics throughout history and regimes, from the Tsarist eras to Soviet, to Putin's presidency. And while this tendency has been continuous since the 1700s, it is especially prevalent in Putin's Social Contract, especially where the subjugation of society is concerned. A frightening paradigm emerges: Russia has framed war and its justification, as necessary while emboldening repression, surveillance and censorship in the name of patriotism, military might, and defense from threats.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new Russian state faced unprecedented economic, social, and political turmoil, the result of a complete collapse of government and infrastructure (Edmond, "Post-Soviet Russia: Challenges to Transition and Modernization"). Hyperinflation erased savings, state institutions weakened, and oligarchs, taking advantage of state vulnerability, accumulated enormous economic and political power. It was within this environment that Vladimir Putin's rise to power must be understood. Rather than constructing legitimacy through democratic participation, Putin rebuilt authority through a performance-based social contract, promising stability, restored order, and renewed international prestige in exchange for reduced political freedoms (Sakwa 112).

Central to this new contract was the reconstruction of the Russian state itself. Putin did not wait to realign authority, establishing the "vertical of power," a system that took power from regional governors, strengthened federal jurisdiction, and ensured political loyalty among economic elites. Independent oligarchs were either brought into cooperation with the Kremlin or removed from political influence, signaling that economic power would no longer challenge state authority (Gel'man 45). To the average citizen in a true democracy, these reforms may have been perceived domestically as authoritarian, however, instead this consolidation of power was framed as a necessary measure to restore stability after the chaos of the 1990s. Military revival quickly evolved to be one of the most visible pillars of this renewed state authority. For example, the Second Chechen War was framed as a defensive struggle against terrorism and national disintegration, allowing the government to continue a common narrative: portraying military action as essential for Russia's survival. As political scientist Richard Sakwa notes, the conflict helped establish a narrative in which "state consolidation and national security became inseparable" (Sakwa 118). Military success was symbolic: it demonstrated to citizens that Russia had recovered and was no longer hindered by post-Soviet weakness and could again project power. Subsequent military reforms after 2008 modernized

the armed forces, emphasizing rapid deployment capabilities and technological investment, further reinforcing the perception of a resurgent state.

Foreign policy interventions under Putin similarly served domestic political purposes. The annexation of Crimea in 2014, widely framed within Russia as the correction of a historical injustice and the protection of ethnic Russians, produced a dramatic surge in public approval for the government. Scholars describe this phenomenon as a “rally-around-the-flag” effect, in which external confrontation strengthens internal legitimacy by fostering unity against perceived foreign threats (Tsygankov 163). Through state media, military action was consistently portrayed as defensive rather than aggressive, reinforcing a longstanding historical narrative in which Russia fights not for expansion but for survival against encirclement. This framing allowed military engagement abroad to justify tighter political control at home.

The maintenance of this system depended heavily on information management. Rather than eliminating all dissent, the Kremlin consolidated control over major television networks and shaped political discourse through agenda-setting and patriotic messaging. Media narratives emphasized Western hostility, NATO expansion, and civilizational conflict, encouraging citizens to view political unity as necessary for national defense. As Maria Lipman argues, the regime increasingly relied on “mobilizational patriotism,” where loyalty to the state was framed as a civic duty during periods of geopolitical confrontation (Lipman 71). Under such conditions, surveillance expansion, restrictions on protest, and censorship laws could be presented not as repression but as protective measures safeguarding national stability. This fusion of militarization and governance reflects deeper continuities within Russian political history. From imperial expansion under the tsars to Soviet security doctrines during the Cold War, Russian rulers have repeatedly justified centralized authority through external threat narratives. Geography, historical invasions, and great-power competition have contributed to a political culture in which strong leadership and military readiness are perceived as prerequisites for survival. Under Putin, however, these historical patterns became institutionalized within the modern authoritarian state. War and military preparedness function not only as tools of foreign policy but also as mechanisms of domestic regulation, reinforcing loyalty while discouraging dissent.

Yet this model contains inherent risks. Because legitimacy depends heavily on military success and perceived national strength, prolonged conflict or economic decline threatens the stability of the social contract itself. Analysts note that performance-based authoritarian systems are particularly vulnerable when the state can no longer deliver prosperity or decisive victories (Gel'man 102). As military campaigns grow costly and international sanctions strain

the economy, the same mechanisms that once strengthened regime legitimacy seemed to expose vulnerability. The reliance on patriotic mobilization requires continuous reinforcement, making conflict not merely a policy choice but a structural feature of governance.

Ultimately, Russia's modern military posture cannot be separated from its domestic political order. Across centuries, Russian leaders have framed expansion and conflict as defensive necessities, but under Putin this narrative has become central to regime survival. Military power validates state authority, external threats justify internal control, and patriotism bridges the gap between authoritarian governance and public consent. In this way, Putin's social contract simply reframed the patterns and motivations involving the military, which represents not a break from Russian history, but its adaptation to the twenty-first century, a system in which war, security, and political obedience rely heavily on one another.

Conclusion

In our study we have examined how Putin's social contract was constructed, maintained, transformed, and, finally, how it coexists with the Russian full scale invasion into Ukraine. It has been shown that this contract is a dynamically adaptive system of relations between the state and society, rather than a static set of initially proposed benefits. While usually scholars examine each element of the contract separately, we presented a joint view on their interaction between each other.

The initial construction of the new contract was possible because of the economic, political, and societal crisis that existed during the 1990s. It spoiled the image of the democratic institutions and the market reforms in the eyes of the regular citizen. Constant injustice, economic inequality and institutional dysfunction made people seek for order, stability, security, and safety provided by the state. In such circumstances the new contract was not a one signed by both sides, but a one lifted down to the population by the state: political passivity in exchange for material benefits and state capacity. While everyday life was becoming better and better each day, the contract worked (even the increase was dictated by the previous reforms and petrodollars). But it required some ideological support in the moments of its disruption from the side of the state.

During the 2000s Putin's contract had its two main supporting columns: depoliticization and performance-based legitimacy. It was easy to gain public acceptance because of rising living standards provided by the rent from resource traffic coming out of Russia. Even political restrictions were not a sufficient reason to abolish an arising prosperity in the perception of a

regular citizen. Meanwhile the public sphere began to shrink: tossed up elections, media taken under control, marginalization of the independent political figures. Moreover, the depoliticizing narrative found its way to the core of people's identity. It became a socially praised norm to distance yourself from politics due to inefficiency of any attempts on one side and its *dirty*ness on the other. Since that moment the contract is no longer only a set of coerced suggestions, but also a part of psychological adaptation.

But as we see that without additional glue Putin's contract is quite fragile in cases of economic shocks. For those moments a new tactic had been chosen — add to the formula the rally-around-the-flag factor. This is evident in the annexation of the Crimea, and later in the full scale invasion into Ukraine. The regime strongly relies on the factor of external and internal enemies of the state to reestablish the contract. The contract readjusted itself due to citizen behavior. Citizens are encouraged to participate in a huge nation building project as a part of benefit from the exchange of political passivity. It indeed might be a convenient proposal to be a part of historical justice restoration by doing nothing. Such arrangements will be changed soon, but initially even the term “Special Military Operation” prompts the idea of execution being done by various, special professional soldiers, not requiring anything from the population. This signals a shift from its original status. The state must now begin to demand participation from those who have been steadily taught to avoid any participation.

Within these circumstances, the contract loses its initial features and abolishes the proposal of material benefits and promise of increased living standards. It implies living in a besieged fort, which has enemies both outside and inside, which justifies repression and presents aggressive military actions as defensive. Citizens lose the origins of this original contract — living in improved conditions. Realizations of this shift come too late, as the coercive machine and indoctrinated apathy have already embedded themselves enough to make others conform.

The problem for estimation of the current contract lies in its non-numerical nature. There are no material outcomes, thus in order to ensure its survival, one needs to always reinforce the identity-based aspect of its legitimacy. This could signal that the contract may become more vulnerable, at least partially. Any failures of the imposing of the identity or the discrepancy of reality and a proposed picture of it, especially in the economic or everyday aspect, might threaten the state's credibility. As such, the current social contract is less stable and more dependent on ongoing mobilization. The regime may have missed the fact that initially proposed passivity is being transformed into a requirement for participation in previously perceived exclusively state matters.

Finally, it can be concluded that Putin's social contract is a flexible arrangement with a one sided right for its amendment. On one hand this flexibility allows it to sustain itself over extended periods of time, but, paradoxically this flexibility has pushed the regime towards constant reinforcement of the mobilization of the people who were intentionally made politically passive by the exact same contract a quarter century ago.

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