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## **Neo-Totalitarian Transformation of the Political Regime in Russia under Vladimir Putin: Democratic Institutional Degradation, Elite Militarisation, and Manipulative Legitimation of the War against Ukraine**

*Abstract:* The article examines the neo-totalitarian transformation of the Russian political regime under Vladimir Putin in the context of democratic degradation, elite militarisation, manipulative legitimization, and the war against Ukraine. The relevance of the study is determined by the need to explain how a formally constitutional state, preserving elections, parliament, courts, parties, official statistics, and diplomatic rhetoric, can progressively convert these institutions into instruments of authoritarian control, coercive governance, and wartime mobilisation. The central research problem lies in the contradiction between the formal preservation of democratic and legal structures in Russia and their functional transformation into mechanisms of regime reproduction. The article advances the hypothesis that the war against Ukraine is not an external deviation from the internal development of the Russian regime, but both a consequence and an instrument of its neo-totalitarian transformation. The object of the research is the political regime of contemporary Russia under Vladimir Putin. The study aims to identify how democratic erosion, personalisation of power, elite subordination, information manipulation, statistical representation, and militarisation contribute to the consolidation of a neo-totalitarian model of governance. The study demonstrates that the degradation of democratic institutions created the structural preconditions for personalist and coercive rule; the war against Ukraine intensified repression, disciplined elites, and legitimised the expansion of security-state mechanisms; peace rhetoric and socio-economic statistics became instruments of perception management; and the militarisation of new elites contributed to the long-term institutionalisation of war. The article concludes that contemporary Russia should be analysed not merely as an authoritarian regime, but as a neo-totalitarian system in which war, propaganda, institutional conversion, elite loyalty, and managed reality operate as interconnected mechanisms of political domination.

*Keywords:* neo-totalitarianism, democratic erosion, authoritarianism, Russia, Vladimir Putin, political regime, elite militarisation, war against Ukraine, political legitimacy, propaganda, statistical manipulation, managed reality.

## Introduction

The transformation of the Russian political regime under Vladimir Putin represents one of the most significant cases of democratic erosion, authoritarian consolidation, and militarised state transformation in contemporary political science. Since the early 2000s, Russia has moved from a formally pluralistic but institutionally fragile post-Soviet political order towards an increasingly centralised, repressive, and militarised system of rule. This transformation has not occurred through the immediate abolition of constitutional institutions, political parties, elections, courts, federal structures, or formal legal procedures. Rather, it has taken place through their gradual functional conversion: institutions that formally imitate democratic mechanisms have been progressively deprived of autonomous political meaning and subordinated to the logic of executive dominance, elite loyalty, coercive control, information management, and regime reproduction.

This article examines this process as a neo-totalitarian transformation of the Russian political regime. The concept of neo-totalitarianism is used here not as a direct reproduction of the classical totalitarian models of the twentieth century, but as an analytical category describing a contemporary form of authoritarian rule in which formal institutions, electoral procedures, legal norms, propaganda systems, security agencies, economic resources, digital instruments, and war mobilisation are integrated into a single structure of political control. Unlike classical totalitarianism, such a regime does not necessarily require permanent mass ideological mobilisation in its earlier party-state form. However, it seeks to monopolise the political interpretation of reality, restrict autonomous civic action, discipline elites, suppress alternative sources of legitimacy, and transform war into a central mechanism of domestic consolidation.

The Russian case is especially important because it demonstrates how democratic backsliding may develop not as a single rupture, but as a cumulative process of institutional hollowing-out. Contemporary theories of democratic erosion emphasise that democratic regimes often decline gradually, through legal, electoral, administrative, and discursive mechanisms, rather than through abrupt coups or formal constitutional collapse (*Bermeo, 2016*). In hybrid and competitive authoritarian regimes, elections may continue to exist, opposition parties may formally participate in politics, courts may preserve their institutional appearance, and parliaments may continue to legislate; yet the competitive substance of these institutions becomes systematically distorted (*Levitsky & Way, 2002; Schedler, 2002*). Russia's political trajectory illustrates this dynamic with particular clarity. The formal architecture of constitutional democracy has been preserved, but its core democratic functions—political competition, accountability, representation, judicial independence, federal pluralism, media freedom, and civil society autonomy—have been progressively weakened, neutralised, or transformed into instruments of controlled legitimation.

A significant body of scholarship has analysed Russia as an authoritarian, hybrid, patronal, or personalist political regime. Fish (*2005*) explained the derailment of democratic development in Russia through the failure of open politics and the rise of super-presidential dominance. Gel'man (*2015*) interpreted post-Soviet Russian politics through the lens of authoritarian regime change and the institutionalisation of non-democratic rule. Hale (*2015*) emphasised the role of patronal networks in structuring power relations across Eurasian political systems, while Reuter (*2017*) analysed the origins and functions of dominant-party institutions in post-Soviet Russia. These approaches remain essential for understanding the earlier stages of Russia's authoritarian consolidation. However, the full-scale war against Ukraine and the subsequent militarisation of

domestic politics require an expanded analytical framework capable of connecting democratic erosion, personalist authoritarianism, elite coercion, propaganda, war legitimization, and statistical manipulation into a unified model of regime transformation.

The personalisation of power is central to this transformation. Research on authoritarian rule shows that personalist dictatorships tend to weaken institutional constraints, reduce elite autonomy, increase the unpredictability of decision-making, and rely more heavily on coercion and loyalty-based governance (*Geddes et al., 2018; Svolik, 2012*). The Russian political system under Putin has increasingly reflected these features. Decision-making has become concentrated around the presidential centre, while political, administrative, economic, security, and regional elites have become dependent on access to state-controlled resources and symbolic recognition from the regime. In such a system, elite survival is determined less by institutional competence, electoral accountability, or policy effectiveness than by demonstrated loyalty. The increasing role of the security apparatus and the growing political value of military experience further deepen this transformation, linking elite reproduction to coercive and militarised forms of state power.

The war against Ukraine must therefore be analysed not only as a geopolitical event, but also as a structural outcome of Russia's internal authoritarian evolution. The absence of effective institutional checks, the marginalisation of independent expertise, the suppression of pluralistic public debate, and the personalisation of strategic decision-making created a political environment in which aggressive external policy became more probable. At the same time, the war has become a mechanism for further consolidating the regime domestically. It has allowed the authorities to intensify repression, narrow the space for dissent, justify censorship, expand the role of the security services, mobilise society around narratives of external threat, and impose collective responsibility on political and administrative elites. In this sense, war is not external to the regime's domestic logic; it is one of the instruments through which that logic is reproduced.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 made visible a deeper transformation that had been developing for many years. The annexation of Crimea in 2014, the conflict in eastern Ukraine, the growing repression of domestic opposition, and the increasing ideological emphasis on historical grievance, sovereignty, and civilisational confrontation all contributed to a gradual militarisation of Russian political discourse and state practice. Plokhy (*2023*) interprets the Russo-Ukrainian war as a return of imperial history, while Snyder (*2018*) analyses Russia's confrontation with Ukraine and the West through the broader logic of authoritarian politics, disinformation, and anti-liberal ideological revisionism. Laruelle (*2021*) cautions against simplistic classifications of Russia as fascist, yet her analysis also demonstrates the importance of examining the ideological, symbolic, and propagandistic dimensions of the regime. Taken together, these approaches suggest that the war cannot be reduced to a single geopolitical cause. It should be examined as part of the long-term transformation of state power, political identity, and authoritarian legitimization.

This article also focuses on the manipulative legitimization of war. Authoritarian regimes do not rely exclusively on coercion; they also construct narratives that explain, justify, normalise, and moralise their policies. The contemporary Russian regime combines coercive repression with what Guriev and Treisman (*2022*) define as the logic of "spin dictatorship": the management of public perception through information control, selective visibility, symbolic performance, and the manipulation of political meaning. In the Russian case, this logic has become inseparable from militarised propaganda. Official discourse presents the war not as aggression, but as defence; not

as imperial expansion, but as historical correction; not as a crisis of regime legitimacy, but as a test of national unity. The rhetoric of peace is used in a similarly manipulative manner. Declarations of readiness for negotiations may function not as evidence of genuine de-escalation, but as communicative devices aimed at shifting responsibility, influencing external audiences, and sustaining domestic belief in the rationality of state policy.

A further dimension of this legitimation concerns the political use of socio-economic and military data. In a neo-totalitarian system, statistics cease to function merely as instruments of public knowledge and become part of the regime's symbolic infrastructure. Economic indicators, employment data, inflation figures, military reports, and claims about battlefield developments are selectively emphasised, restricted, reframed, or embedded in official narratives of stability and resilience. The manipulation of information does not necessarily require the complete fabrication of all data. More often, it operates through selective publication, methodological opacity, omission of politically damaging indicators, asymmetrical access to information, and the saturation of public discourse with state-approved interpretations. In this way, statistical governance becomes a mechanism of political legitimation: it produces a managed image of reality in which war, sanctions, repression, and institutional degradation appear controllable, rational, and historically justified.

The object of this research is the political regime of contemporary Russia under Vladimir Putin.

The subject of the research is the set of institutional, elite, informational, and legitimising mechanisms through which democratic institutions have been degraded, political authority has been personalised, elites have been subordinated and militarised, and the war against Ukraine has been incorporated into the domestic logic of regime reproduction.

This focus makes it possible to analyse the Russian case not merely as an example of authoritarian consolidation, but as a more complex process in which institutional decay, coercive governance, propaganda, war mobilisation, and statistical manipulation operate as mutually reinforcing elements of neo-totalitarian transformation.

The article aims to identify how democratic erosion, the personalisation of power, the weakening of institutional constraints, the coercive control of elites, and the manipulative management of public perception have contributed to the neo-totalitarian transformation of the Russian political regime and to the legitimisation of the war against Ukraine.

To achieve this aim, the article pursues several research objectives:

- it clarifies the theoretical relationship between democratic backsliding, competitive authoritarianism, personalist rule, and neo-totalitarianism;
- it analyses the degradation of democratic institutions in Russia, including elections, parliamentarism, judicial independence, federalism, media freedom, and civil society;
- it examines the mechanisms through which political, administrative, economic, regional, and security elites have been incorporated into a system of loyalty-based governance;
- it explains the war against Ukraine as both a consequence of the regime's internal authoritarian evolution and an instrument of its further consolidation;
- it investigates the rhetoric of peace as a form of manipulative political communication;
- it considers the political use of socio-economic and military data as a means of constructing an image of stability, resilience, and controlled reality;

- it explores the militarisation of new elites and the long-term institutionalisation of war as defining features of the current stage of Russian regime transformation.

The hypothesis of the article is that the war against Ukraine is not an external deviation from the internal development of the Russian political regime, but a logical consequence and an instrument of its neo-totalitarian transformation. The degradation of democratic institutions, the concentration of power in the presidential centre, the reduction of elite autonomy, and the suppression of political pluralism created the structural preconditions for aggressive foreign policy. After the beginning of the full-scale war, the conflict itself became a mechanism of regime reproduction, enabling the authorities to strengthen domestic control, militarise elite recruitment, legitimise repression, and manage public perception through propaganda and selective statistical representation.

The theoretical significance of the article lies in its attempt to integrate several strands of contemporary political science into a single explanatory framework. Existing literature has examined democratic erosion, personalist authoritarianism, Russian patronal politics, propaganda, and the war against Ukraine as important but often analytically separate phenomena. This article argues that these dimensions should be understood as interconnected components of a broader neo-totalitarian transformation. By doing so, it contributes to the study of modern authoritarianism by showing how a regime may preserve formal constitutional, electoral, legal, and administrative structures while transforming them into instruments of coercion, mobilisation, elite discipline, and manipulated legitimacy.

The practical significance of the research is determined by the need to understand the political mechanisms that allow authoritarian regimes to adapt, radicalise, and reproduce themselves under conditions of war, sanctions, international pressure, and internal social tension. The findings may be useful for experts in political science, international relations, security studies, democratic resilience, and post-Soviet studies. They may also contribute to the development of analytical tools for assessing the risks of authoritarian militarisation, identifying manipulative forms of peace rhetoric, evaluating the political use of official statistics, and interpreting the relationship between domestic regime transformation and external military aggression.

The article makes three main contributions to the existing literature. First, it integrates theories of democratic backsliding, competitive authoritarianism, personalist dictatorship, and neo-totalitarian control into a single explanatory model of contemporary Russian regime transformation. Second, it interprets the war against Ukraine not only as a foreign policy outcome, but also as a domestic political technology of authoritarian consolidation. Third, it highlights the role of socio-economic and military data in the legitimisation of authoritarian governance, showing that statistical manipulation is not peripheral to the regime, but one of its key instruments of reality management.

The structure of the article follows the IMRaD model. The literature review examines the main theoretical approaches to democratic erosion, personalist authoritarianism, neo-totalitarianism, wartime legitimisation, propaganda, and information manipulation. The methodology section explains the use of historical-political, institutional, comparative, systemic, discourse, and content analysis. The results section presents seven interconnected analytical findings: the theoretical foundations of democratic erosion and neo-totalitarianism; the degradation of democratic institutions in Russia; elite control as a mechanism of regime reproduction; the war against Ukraine

as an outcome of the regime's internal logic; the rhetoric of peace as a manipulative communicative strategy; socio-economic statistics as an instrument of political legitimation; and the militarisation of new elites as a step towards the long-term institutionalisation of war. The discussion section interprets these findings in relation to broader theories of authoritarian resilience and regime transformation, while the conclusion summarises the article's theoretical and practical implications.

### Methods

This study is designed as a qualitative political science inquiry into the neo-totalitarian transformation of the Russian political regime under Vladimir Putin. The methodological logic of the article is based on the assumption that the transformation of political regimes cannot be adequately explained through a single institutional, ideological, military, or communicative variable. The Russian case requires an integrated analytical approach that connects democratic erosion, personalist authoritarianism, elite subordination, coercive governance, wartime mobilisation, propaganda, and the political use of socio-economic and military data. For this reason, the study combines historical-political analysis, institutional analysis, comparative political analysis, systemic analysis, discourse analysis, content analysis, and interpretive analysis of political legitimation.

The research is based on a qualitative single-case study design. Russia under Vladimir Putin is treated as an analytically significant case of long-term authoritarian consolidation and post-democratic regime transformation. The single-case design is justified by the exceptional political relevance of the Russian case for contemporary studies of democratic backsliding, authoritarian resilience, militarisation of state power, and war legitimation. The purpose of the study is not to produce a statistical generalisation across a large number of regimes, but to develop an explanatory model of how formal democratic institutions can be gradually converted into mechanisms of authoritarian and neo-totalitarian control.

The chronological focus of the research covers the period from the early 2000s to the current stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war. This period allows the article to trace the movement from the early consolidation of executive power and the construction of "managed democracy" to the later development of personalist authoritarianism, the suppression of political pluralism, the militarisation of public discourse, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the subsequent institutionalisation of war as a domestic political mechanism. At the same time, the article refers to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in eastern Ukraine as critical turning points that connected domestic authoritarian consolidation with external military aggression.

The theoretical framework of the study draws on several interrelated fields of contemporary political science. The first is the theory of democratic erosion and democratic backsliding, which explains how democratic institutions may decline gradually while preserving their formal constitutional appearance (*Bermeo, 2016; Lübrmann & Lindberg, 2019*). This framework is necessary for analysing how elections, parliamentarism, judicial independence, media pluralism, federalism, and civil society in Russia have been weakened without the complete formal abolition of democratic institutions. The second theoretical field is the theory of competitive and electoral authoritarianism, which explains the persistence of elections and other nominally democratic procedures under conditions of unequal competition, institutional manipulation, and administrative domination (*Levitsky & Way, 2002; Schedler, 2002*). This perspective is essential for

interpreting the Russian regime not as an absence of institutions, but as a system of controlled and politically subordinated institutions.

The third theoretical field concerns personalist authoritarianism and the politics of authoritarian rule. Studies of personalist regimes show that the concentration of decision-making around a single political centre weakens institutional constraints, reduces elite autonomy, increases the role of loyalty, and expands the use of coercive mechanisms (*Geddes et al., 2018; Svolik, 2012*). This framework is applied to the Russian case in order to analyse the progressive concentration of power around the presidency and the transformation of political, administrative, regional, economic, and security elites into actors dependent on the regime's system of patronage and coercive discipline. The fourth theoretical field concerns patronal politics and authoritarian institutions in post-Soviet contexts, which helps to explain the role of informal networks, resource distribution, dominant-party structures, and loyalty-based governance in Russia (*Hale, 2015; Reuter, 2017*).

The fifth theoretical component concerns propaganda, information manipulation, and the communicative dimension of authoritarian rule. The study uses the concept of “spin dictatorship” to explain how contemporary authoritarian regimes combine coercion with the management of public perception, selective visibility, symbolic performance, and manipulation of political meaning (*Gurieff & Treisman, 2022*). This framework is especially relevant for analysing Russian official discourse on the war against Ukraine, the rhetoric of peace, the representation of external threats, and the use of socio-economic and military data as instruments of political legitimisation.

The empirical basis of the research consists of several categories of sources. The first category includes legal and institutional materials: constitutional provisions, federal legislation, electoral regulations, laws affecting media, civil society, public assembly, political opposition, and the legal treatment of dissent. These sources are used to analyse the institutional transformation of the Russian political system and the legalisation of repressive governance. The second category includes official political discourse: presidential speeches, public statements by senior state officials, policy documents, strategic narratives, and official explanations of the war against Ukraine. These sources are used for discourse and content analysis of legitimisation strategies.

The third category consists of international democracy and governance assessments, including reports and indices produced by organisations and research projects that monitor political rights, civil liberties, democracy, corruption, repression, and institutional change. These materials are used not as mechanically definitive classifications, but as comparative indicators that help situate Russia within broader patterns of authoritarian consolidation and autocratisation. The fourth category includes analytical reports, scholarly studies, and expert assessments concerning the Russian political regime, the Russian-Ukrainian war, elite politics, propaganda, and socio-economic governance under wartime conditions. The fifth category includes open socio-economic and military-related data, where available, as well as secondary analyses of restrictions, omissions, changes in accessibility, and selective representation of such data.

The study uses historical-political analysis to reconstruct the main stages of Russia's regime transformation. This method makes it possible to identify the sequence through which formal pluralism gave way to managed democracy, then to consolidated authoritarianism, and finally to a more militarised and neo-totalitarian model of political control. Historical-political analysis is applied not only to major events, but also to institutional trajectories: changes in electoral

competition, party development, media regulation, relations between the federal centre and regions, judicial dependence, civil society restrictions, and the expansion of security-state influence.

Institutional analysis is used to examine the transformation of formal political institutions. The study analyses elections, parliament, courts, political parties, federal structures, media regulation, and civil society organisations as institutions whose formal existence does not automatically imply democratic functionality. The key methodological task is to distinguish between institutional form and institutional function. This distinction is essential for understanding how the Russian regime preserves constitutional and legal structures while transforming their practical role. Elections, for example, are analysed not only as procedures of vote aggregation, but as mechanisms of symbolic confirmation, administrative mobilisation, elite discipline, and managed legitimacy.

Comparative political analysis is used to relate the Russian case to broader theories of authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, competitive authoritarianism, personalist rule, and neo-totalitarian control. The purpose of comparison is not to equate contemporary Russia mechanically with classical totalitarian regimes or with all other authoritarian systems. Rather, comparison is used to identify both common features and specific differences. The Russian case is compared conceptually with existing regime types in order to clarify whether the concept of neo-totalitarian transformation captures features that are not fully explained by the categories of hybrid regime, electoral authoritarianism, or personalist dictatorship alone.

Systemic analysis is applied to the Russian political regime as an interconnected structure of institutions, elites, coercive agencies, propaganda mechanisms, legal instruments, economic resources, and war mobilisation. This method is important because the article does not treat democratic erosion, elite control, propaganda, statistical manipulation, and the war against Ukraine as isolated phenomena. Instead, they are analysed as mutually reinforcing elements of a single regime logic. Systemic analysis allows the study to explain how institutional degradation creates conditions for external aggression, while war in turn strengthens domestic repression, elite militarisation, and the manipulation of public perception.

Discourse analysis is used to examine the official rhetoric of the Russian authorities concerning democracy, sovereignty, national security, historical memory, Ukraine, the West, peace, and war. The analysis focuses on recurrent semantic patterns, legitimising narratives, binary oppositions, historical analogies, and moral justifications. Special attention is given to the rhetoric of peace, which is treated as a potentially manipulative communicative strategy when it coexists with continued military escalation, refusal to recognise responsibility, and the preservation of maximalist political goals. Discourse analysis makes it possible to identify how the regime constructs meanings that frame aggression as defence, coercion as stability, and repression as national necessity.

Content analysis is used as a supplementary method for identifying repeated themes and justificatory formulas in official statements, state-controlled media narratives, and public communication concerning the war and the socio-economic situation. The analysis pays attention to recurring categories such as “sovereignty”, “security”, “historical justice”, “external threat”, “stability”, “resilience”, “peace negotiations”, “national unity”, and “economic adaptation”. This method supports the interpretation of propaganda not as random messaging, but as a structured system of political meaning production.

A separate methodological component concerns the analysis of socio-economic and military data as instruments of political legitimation. The study does not treat official statistics as neutral or

self-sufficient evidence. Instead, it analyses the political conditions under which data are produced, selected, published, restricted, reframed, or embedded in official narratives. This approach is especially important in wartime conditions, when access to certain categories of information may be limited and when official indicators may be used to construct an image of economic resilience, social stability, military effectiveness, and administrative control. The methodological emphasis is placed not only on what data show, but also on what data are excluded, how they are communicated, and how they are used to legitimise regime performance.

The key analytical categories of the study are operationalised as follows. “Democratic degradation” refers to the weakening of the substantive functions of democratic institutions, including political competition, accountability, judicial independence, media freedom, federal pluralism, and civil society autonomy. “Personalisation of power” refers to the concentration of strategic decision-making around the presidential centre and the reduction of effective institutional constraints on executive authority. “Militarisation of elites” refers to the increasing incorporation of military, security, veteran, and war-related actors into political representation, administrative governance, symbolic hierarchy, and elite recruitment. “Manipulative legitimation” refers to communicative, legal, symbolic, and statistical practices through which the regime constructs public acceptance or passive compliance without relying solely on direct coercion. “Neo-totalitarian transformation” refers to the integration of institutional control, elite discipline, coercion, propaganda, war mobilisation, and reality management into a consolidated system of political domination.

The validity of the study is strengthened through methodological triangulation. Legal and institutional materials are interpreted alongside official discourse, international indices, scholarly literature, expert analyses, and available socio-economic data. This triangulation is necessary because no single category of source is sufficient for analysing an authoritarian regime under wartime conditions. Official sources reveal the regime’s self-presentation and formal legal architecture, but they must be critically compared with independent assessments and scholarly interpretations. International indices provide comparative indicators, but they require contextual interpretation. Scholarly literature offers theoretical depth, but it must be connected to current empirical developments. The use of multiple source categories therefore reduces the risk of one-sided interpretation and strengthens the explanatory coherence of the study.

The study also recognises several limitations. First, the analysis is constrained by the limited transparency of authoritarian governance and by restrictions on access to reliable political, military, and socio-economic information. Second, the wartime context complicates the verification of certain data, especially those related to military developments, casualties, public opinion, elite conflict, and economic costs. Third, official statistics may be incomplete, selectively published, or methodologically adjusted. Fourth, the concept of neo-totalitarianism remains analytically contested and must therefore be used with caution. In this article, it is not applied as a rhetorical label, but as a theoretical category whose usefulness depends on its ability to explain the integration of institutional degradation, coercion, propaganda, elite militarisation, war mobilisation, and manipulated legitimacy.

Ethically, the research is based exclusively on publicly available materials, published academic studies, official statements, legal documents, and open analytical sources. No private personal data, interviews with vulnerable individuals, or non-public materials are used. The article does not aim

to reproduce propaganda narratives as factual claims, but to analyse their political function within the regime's system of legitimation. For this reason, official discourse is treated as an object of analysis rather than as neutral evidence. This distinction is essential for maintaining analytical distance when studying authoritarian communication under conditions of war.

Overall, the methodological design allows the article to move from description to explanation. It does not merely document the degradation of democratic institutions in Russia, but reconstructs the mechanisms through which this degradation has contributed to a broader neo-totalitarian transformation. By combining institutional, historical, comparative, systemic, discourse, content, and data-oriented analysis, the study provides a methodological basis for understanding the war against Ukraine as both an outcome of Russia's internal authoritarian evolution and an instrument of its further consolidation.

### Literature Review

The literature on the transformation of the Russian political regime under Vladimir Putin can be situated at the intersection of several major fields of contemporary political science: democratic erosion, competitive and electoral authoritarianism, personalist rule, patronal politics, neo-totalitarian control, authoritarian legitimation, propaganda, and the relationship between domestic regime dynamics and external military aggression. Each of these fields explains an important dimension of the Russian case. However, taken separately, they do not fully capture the systemic character of the current transformation, in which institutional degradation, elite subordination, militarisation, war mobilisation, and manipulated representations of reality operate as mutually reinforcing mechanisms. This literature review therefore examines the main theoretical traditions relevant to the study and identifies the analytical gap that the present article seeks to address.

#### *Democratic erosion and the hollowing-out of institutions*

The first theoretical foundation of the study is the literature on democratic erosion and democratic backsliding. Contemporary research has moved beyond the earlier assumption that democracies usually collapse through abrupt coups, revolutions, or openly anti-constitutional seizures of power. Bermeo (2016) argues that democratic backsliding increasingly takes place through more gradual and legally ambiguous processes, including executive aggrandisement, election manipulation, and strategic harassment of opposition forces. This approach is particularly relevant to the Russian case because the country's authoritarian consolidation did not occur through the immediate abolition of democratic forms. Instead, elections, courts, parties, parliaments, and federal arrangements remained formally present while their substantive democratic functions were gradually weakened.

Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) develop this argument further by conceptualising the contemporary period as a "third wave of autocratisation". Their contribution is important because it situates the Russian case within a broader global trend in which democratic decline is often incremental, institutional, and discursively justified. Autocratisation does not necessarily require the formal rejection of democratic language. On the contrary, regimes undergoing democratic erosion may continue to use constitutional, electoral, legal, and even democratic terminology while transforming these mechanisms into instruments of control. This insight is essential for analysing Russia's movement from post-Soviet pluralism to managed democracy and subsequently to a more repressive and militarised form of authoritarian rule.

Theories of competitive and electoral authoritarianism provide a second crucial layer of explanation. Levitsky and Way (2002) define competitive authoritarianism as a regime type in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the principal means of gaining power, but incumbents violate these rules so extensively that the regime fails to meet conventional democratic standards. Schedler (2002) similarly emphasises the “menu of manipulation” available to authoritarian incumbents, including institutional engineering, control over the media, restrictions on opposition activity, administrative pressure, and manipulation of electoral competition. These concepts are highly applicable to Russia because they explain how elections may continue to occur without functioning as mechanisms of genuine accountability or alternation in power.

The Russian case, however, also reveals the limits of the competitive authoritarian framework. In the earlier stages of Putin’s rule, the category of competitive authoritarianism helped explain the coexistence of formal elections, limited opposition, media pluralism under pressure, and a dominant executive. Over time, however, the space for meaningful political competition narrowed so significantly that the regime’s institutional logic shifted beyond competitive authoritarianism towards a more closed and coercive model. The increasing repression of opposition actors, legal restrictions on civil society, criminalisation of dissent, and militarisation of official discourse indicate that the Russian regime has moved from manipulated competition to a system in which political alternatives are not merely disadvantaged but increasingly excluded from legitimate public existence.

Fish’s (2005) analysis of Russia’s failed democratic development remains one of the most important early contributions to understanding this trajectory. He identifies super-presidentialism and the weakness of institutional constraints as central causes of democratic derailment. This argument remains relevant because it shows that Russia’s later authoritarian consolidation was rooted in institutional imbalances established in the post-Soviet period. However, the subsequent evolution of the regime suggests that super-presidentialism alone is not sufficient to explain the current system. What began as executive dominance developed into a broader structure of institutional subordination, elite discipline, ideological mobilisation, and coercive control.

Gel’man (2015) provides a more direct analysis of authoritarian regime change in post-Soviet Russia. His work is especially significant because it conceptualises Russian authoritarianism not as a temporary deviation from democratisation, but as a purposeful and institutionalised political order. Gel’man’s approach helps explain how political institutions in Russia became instruments of non-democratic governance rather than defective versions of democratic institutions. This perspective is crucial for the present article, which interprets the degradation of democracy not as institutional failure alone, but as institutional conversion: the transformation of democratic forms into authoritarian functions.

*Patronal politics, dominant-party institutions, and elite control*

The second body of literature concerns patronal politics, dominant-party systems, and the mechanisms of elite management. Hale’s (2015) theory of patronal politics is particularly important for understanding the informal foundations of power in post-Soviet political systems. According to this approach, political authority in many Eurasian regimes is structured through networks of personal dependency, resource distribution, and informal hierarchy. Formal institutions matter, but they are deeply embedded in patron-client relations. This framework is useful for analysing the Russian regime because it explains why elite loyalty, access to resources, and proximity to the

presidential centre have often mattered more than programmatic competition or institutional accountability.

Reuter's (2017) study of dominant-party institutions in post-Soviet Russia further clarifies how authoritarian regimes use parties not primarily as vehicles of ideological representation, but as instruments of elite coordination and electoral management. In this interpretation, the ruling party serves several functions: it signals loyalty, organises electoral mobilisation, distributes access to political careers, integrates regional elites, and reduces uncertainty within the authoritarian system. This analysis is central to understanding how United Russia and associated political structures have contributed to the reproduction of Putin's regime. The party does not operate as an autonomous representative institution; rather, it functions as part of the administrative and symbolic infrastructure of regime stability.

The literature on patronal and dominant-party politics is particularly useful for analysing the earlier and middle stages of Russian authoritarian consolidation. Yet the militarisation of elite recruitment after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine requires additional conceptual development. The regime's increasing emphasis on loyalty, patriotic performance, military participation, and symbolic association with the war suggests that elite reproduction is no longer based only on patronage, administrative utility, or electoral management. It is increasingly linked to participation in or endorsement of the war project. This development indicates a shift from patronal authoritarianism towards a more militarised and coercively integrated model of elite control.

Belton (2020) offers an important account of the relationship between the security services, state capitalism, and political power in Putin's Russia. Her analysis shows how networks connected to the security apparatus became central to the reconstitution of state authority and the consolidation of power. Although her work is journalistic in style rather than strictly theoretical, it is valuable for understanding the sociological and institutional foundations of the regime's coercive elite structure. Mommsen (2017) similarly emphasises the role of secret-service networks in shaping Putin's Russia. These perspectives contribute to the argument that the Russian regime cannot be understood solely through electoral or constitutional analysis; it must also be examined as a security-centred system of elite domination.

#### *Personalist authoritarianism and the concentration of decision-making*

The third theoretical tradition relevant to this study concerns personalist authoritarianism. Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2018) provide a systematic account of how different types of dictatorships function, emphasising the distinctive features of personalist regimes. In such regimes, power becomes concentrated around the ruler, institutional constraints weaken, elite autonomy declines, and decision-making becomes more dependent on the preferences, perceptions, and strategic calculations of a narrow ruling circle. This framework is essential for analysing the Putin regime, especially in its later stages, when decision-making became increasingly centralised and insulated from institutionalised deliberation.

Svolik (2012) offers a complementary analysis by focusing on the internal politics of authoritarian rule, particularly the dilemmas of power-sharing and control. Authoritarian rulers must manage both mass threats and elite threats. They must prevent popular opposition while also ensuring that insiders do not defect or challenge the ruler. In personalist systems, this often produces a combination of patronage, surveillance, coercion, and loyalty tests. The Russian case reflects this logic. The regime has increasingly narrowed the space for independent elite behaviour,

while also using legal vulnerability, economic dependency, symbolic rewards, and coercive pressure to maintain elite discipline.

Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, Wright, and Xu (2020) further show that the personalisation of power is associated with increased repression in dictatorships. Their argument is particularly relevant to Russia because the personalisation of Putin's rule has coincided with the expansion of repressive legislation, restrictions on independent media, criminalisation of opposition activity, and intensified coercive practices under wartime conditions. This literature supports the claim that personalisation is not merely a stylistic feature of leadership; it has institutional consequences. It reduces the resilience of formal constraints and increases the probability that the regime will rely on coercive instruments to manage uncertainty.

Frye (2021) adds nuance to this discussion by challenging overly simplified images of Putin as an all-powerful ruler. His concept of the "weak strongman" highlights the limits, vulnerabilities, and constraints faced by personalist leaders even in highly centralised systems. This perspective is valuable because it prevents the analysis from reducing Russian politics to personal will alone. The Putin regime is not simply the expression of one individual's preferences; it is also a system of incentives, dependencies, institutional distortions, elite fears, and social adaptation. Nevertheless, the personalisation of power remains central because it shapes how these structural elements are coordinated and how strategic decisions are made.

Greene and Robertson (2019) also complicate the analysis of Putinism by examining the relationship between society and the regime. Their work demonstrates that Russian politics cannot be reduced to coercion alone. Public attitudes, social divisions, regime narratives, and managed participation are all part of the system. This insight is important for the present study because neo-totalitarian transformation is not interpreted as a purely top-down apparatus of repression. It also involves the production of consent, resignation, conformity, or passive acceptance through narratives of stability, external threat, national unity, and controlled normality.

#### *Neo-totalitarianism and the transformation of authoritarian control*

The concept of neo-totalitarianism requires careful theoretical positioning. Classical totalitarianism, as analysed by Arendt (1951), referred to political systems that sought comprehensive domination over society through ideology, terror, mass mobilisation, and the destruction of autonomous social life. The Soviet and Nazi cases shaped the classical understanding of totalitarian rule. However, contemporary authoritarian regimes often operate differently. They may preserve markets, private consumption, legal forms, selective openness, digital communication, and formal elections while simultaneously expanding coercive and informational control. For this reason, the term "neo-totalitarianism" should not be used as a rhetorical synonym for dictatorship. It must be analytically specified.

In the context of this article, neo-totalitarianism refers to a contemporary configuration of authoritarian power in which formal institutions, coercive agencies, propaganda, legal repression, elite discipline, economic management, statistical representation, and war mobilisation become integrated into a unified system of political control. This differs from classical totalitarianism because it does not necessarily require permanent mobilisation through a single mass party or a fully coherent official ideology. However, it resembles totalitarian logic in its ambition to monopolise political meaning, eliminate autonomous sources of legitimacy, define enemies, criminalise dissent, and subordinate public reality to the interpretive authority of the state.

Applebaum (2024) contributes to this discussion by situating contemporary autocracies within transnational networks of mutual support, corruption, repression, and information manipulation. Although her work addresses a broader global phenomenon, it is relevant to the Russian case because it highlights how modern authoritarian systems adapt to global capitalism, digital media, and international institutions while undermining liberal-democratic norms. Contemporary autocracies do not always isolate themselves from the world; they may use global financial systems, technological tools, and information networks to strengthen domestic control and external influence. This is important for understanding the adaptive nature of Russia's authoritarianism.

Guriev and Treisman (2022) provide one of the most influential recent frameworks for analysing contemporary authoritarian communication. Their distinction between “fear dictators” and “spin dictators” helps explain why many modern autocrats rely less on mass terror than on image management, selective repression, and manipulation of public perception. In the Russian case, however, the full-scale war against Ukraine suggests a partial transformation of this model. The regime has not abandoned the instruments of spin, but it has combined them with more overt coercion, censorship, repression, and militarisation. This hybridisation of spin and fear is one of the reasons why the concept of neo-totalitarian transformation is analytically useful.

Snyder (2018) contributes another important dimension by analysing the ideological and informational foundations of Russia's anti-liberal politics. His account of the “politics of eternity” is relevant because it shows how historical myth, grievance, civilisational rhetoric, and disinformation can be used to undermine liberal democratic temporality and justify aggression. In this framework, politics is no longer oriented towards institutional improvement or accountable governance, but towards permanent conflict with constructed enemies. This is directly relevant to the Russian regime's use of Ukraine, the West, and domestic dissent as interconnected objects of political mobilisation.

Laruelle (2021) offers a more cautious and analytically differentiated interpretation of Russian ideology. She warns against simplistic claims that Russia is fascist, arguing instead for a more careful analysis of the ideological plurality, symbolic repertoires, and propagandistic flexibility of the regime. This caution is methodologically important for the present article. The concept of neo-totalitarianism should not collapse all forms of authoritarian ideology into a single label. Instead, it should capture the functional integration of ideological ambiguity, coercion, propaganda, elite discipline, and war mobilisation. The Russian regime may not possess a fully coherent ideology in the classical totalitarian sense, but it has developed a powerful system of ideological instruments capable of legitimising repression and war.

#### *War, regime survival, and authoritarian legitimation*

The literature on war and authoritarian politics provides another essential theoretical foundation. The article treats the war against Ukraine not only as an external geopolitical conflict, but also as a domestic mechanism of regime consolidation. This approach is supported by broader theories of authoritarian legitimation, which show that regimes may use external threats, military conflict, and nationalist mobilisation to strengthen internal cohesion, justify repression, and redirect social discontent.

Plokhyy (2023) interprets the Russo-Ukrainian war as a return of history, emphasising the imperial, national, and historical dimensions of the conflict. His analysis is important because it places the war within a longer historical context of Russian imperial identity and contested

Ukrainian sovereignty. However, for the purposes of this article, the war must also be understood as part of contemporary regime dynamics. Historical narratives matter not only because they shape elite beliefs, but also because they are politically mobilised by the regime to legitimise present actions.

Snyder (2018) similarly links Russia's war against Ukraine to a broader anti-liberal and anti-democratic project. His analysis suggests that the external aggression of the Russian state is inseparable from its internal politics of disinformation, historical myth, and authoritarian consolidation. This perspective supports the argument that the war should not be interpreted solely as a geopolitical reaction to external stimuli. It is also a product of domestic regime transformation: the weakening of institutional constraints, the exclusion of alternative voices, the concentration of strategic decision-making, and the use of imperial narratives to legitimise violence.

Horvath (2011) offers an earlier but still relevant interpretation of Putinism as a form of "preventive counter-revolution". His argument focuses on how the Russian regime responded to the perceived threat of democratic revolutions in the post-Soviet space by developing strategies of authoritarian defence. This framework is highly relevant to Ukraine, because democratic mobilisation in neighbouring countries was interpreted by the Kremlin not merely as a foreign policy problem, but as a potential domestic threat. From this perspective, aggression against Ukraine can be understood partly as an externalised form of regime security: a way to prevent the consolidation of an alternative democratic and geopolitical model in the post-Soviet region.

Eltchaninoff (2015) contributes to the analysis of Putin's worldview by exploring the intellectual and ideological influences that shape the Russian president's political imagination. Although such interpretations must be treated with caution, they help illuminate how civilisational rhetoric, historical grievance, and anti-Western narratives became part of the regime's legitimising vocabulary. Milosevich (2024) and Taibo (2022) similarly examine Russia's confrontation with Ukraine and the international order from European analytical perspectives, highlighting the relationship between Russian imperial thinking, authoritarian adaptation, and geopolitical revisionism.

The literature on war legitimisation also intersects with the study of elite politics. War changes the criteria of loyalty. It creates new symbolic hierarchies, elevates military actors, expands the role of the security apparatus, and transforms participation in or support for war into a marker of political reliability. This process is central to the militarisation of elites. In Russia, the war against Ukraine has not only intensified repression against opponents; it has also created new channels of elite incorporation for military personnel, veterans, propagandists, and administrators connected to occupied territories or wartime governance. This development suggests that war is becoming institutionalised within the domestic structure of political authority.

#### *Propaganda, information control, and the manipulation of reality*

The literature on propaganda and information manipulation is indispensable for understanding the Russian regime's capacity to legitimate authoritarian governance and war. Authoritarian regimes do not govern by coercion alone. They also construct political realities in which repression appears necessary, war appears defensive, economic hardship appears manageable, and loyalty appears patriotic. Guriev and Treisman's (2022) work is especially useful in this regard because it shows how contemporary autocrats often rely on perception management rather than permanent visible

terror. However, the Russian case demonstrates that spin and coercion can coexist and reinforce each other.

Sharafutdinova (2020) provides an important account of identity politics in Putin's Russia. Her concept of the "red mirror" highlights how the regime appeals to insecure national identity, Soviet nostalgia, emotional belonging, and status anxiety. This is important because propaganda does not operate only through false information. It also works through identity, emotion, memory, humiliation, pride, and fear. The regime's narratives about Ukraine, the West, sovereignty, and historical justice draw on these affective resources. They create a symbolic framework in which war can be presented as restoration, defence, or national survival.

Laruelle (2021) again provides a useful corrective by demonstrating that Russian propaganda is ideologically flexible rather than doctrinally uniform. It combines conservative, imperial, Soviet, Orthodox, anti-liberal, anti-Western, and civilisational motifs without necessarily resolving their internal contradictions. This flexibility is a strength rather than a weakness. It allows the regime to address different audiences, adapt to changing circumstances, and maintain interpretive dominance without committing itself to a single coherent ideological system. In a neo-totalitarian framework, the goal is not necessarily ideological consistency, but monopolisation of permissible meaning.

The manipulation of peace rhetoric is a specific aspect of this broader communicative strategy. Official declarations of readiness for negotiations may serve multiple political functions: shifting blame to Ukraine or the West, presenting the regime as rational and responsible, reducing domestic anxiety, influencing international publics, and obscuring the continuation of maximalist war aims. The literature on authoritarian communication helps explain why such rhetoric should not be analysed only at the level of stated intention. It must be interpreted as part of a wider system of symbolic governance in which language is used to manage perceptions, distribute responsibility, and legitimise policy continuity.

The political use of statistics and socio-economic data is less developed in the literature on Russian authoritarianism, but it is crucial for understanding the current stage of regime transformation. Official data in authoritarian systems may perform a dual function. On one level, they provide administrative information necessary for governance. On another level, they serve as instruments of political representation, constructing an image of competence, stability, resilience, and control. Under wartime conditions, this second function becomes especially important. Economic indicators, employment figures, inflation data, budgetary categories, and military claims may be selectively published, methodologically reframed, or rhetorically embedded in narratives of national endurance.

This does not mean that all official data are necessarily fabricated. A more sophisticated approach recognises that manipulation often occurs through selection, omission, opacity, timing, contextual framing, and asymmetrical access. The state may emphasise indicators that support the narrative of resilience while limiting access to data that reveal structural costs. It may present adaptation as success, militarised spending as economic strength, and restricted transparency as national security. In this sense, statistics become part of the regime's broader reality-management apparatus. They help produce a public image in which war, sanctions, repression, and institutional degradation appear governable and historically justified.

*Russia between fascism, authoritarianism, and neo-totalitarianism*

A major analytical challenge in the literature concerns the classification of the contemporary Russian regime. Some interpretations emphasise authoritarianism, others personalism, patronal politics, fascist tendencies, imperial nationalism, or totalitarian revival. Each concept captures part of the phenomenon, but each also has limitations. The category of authoritarianism is broad and analytically flexible, but it may understate the extent to which the Russian regime has integrated coercion, ideology, propaganda, war, and elite militarisation. The category of competitive authoritarianism explains earlier stages of regime development, but it becomes less adequate as genuine competition disappears. The concept of personalism captures the concentration of power, but it does not by itself explain the regime's ideological, informational, and wartime dimensions.

The debate over whether Russia should be described as fascist is particularly contested. Laruelle (2021) argues that the fascism label often obscures more than it clarifies, especially when applied without attention to ideological complexity and historical specificity. At the same time, Snyder (2018) and other scholars emphasise the importance of imperial myth, anti-liberalism, violence, and the politics of historical grievance in Russian state ideology. The present article does not seek to resolve this debate by replacing one label with another. Instead, it proposes the concept of neo-totalitarian transformation as a way to analyse the functional integration of several processes: democratic degradation, personalist centralisation, elite subordination, security-state expansion, propaganda, statistical manipulation, militarisation, and war legitimisation.

Arendt's (1951) classical theory of totalitarianism remains important because it directs attention to the relationship between ideology, terror, atomisation, and the destruction of autonomous political life. However, contemporary Russia differs from classical totalitarian systems in significant ways. It does not reproduce the exact institutional structure of Stalinism or Nazism. It retains market mechanisms, consumer practices, formal elections, private property, digital communication, and selective international engagement. Yet these differences do not mean that totalitarian logics are entirely absent. The regime's attempt to define legitimate reality, criminalise dissent, mobilise society around constructed enemies, discipline elites, and subordinate institutions to a single centre of power demonstrates a partial reactivation of totalitarian mechanisms in a new historical form.

For this reason, the term neo-totalitarianism is used in this article not as a moral metaphor, but as an analytical category. It refers to a regime trajectory in which authoritarianism becomes increasingly comprehensive, militarised, and reality-controlling while retaining some formal and adaptive features of contemporary governance. This concept allows the article to move beyond the limitations of static regime typologies. It focuses not only on what the Russian regime is, but on how it is transforming and through which mechanisms this transformation occurs.

#### *Research gap and analytical contribution*

The reviewed literature provides a rich foundation for analysing Russia's political development. Studies of democratic erosion explain the hollowing-out of institutions. Theories of competitive authoritarianism clarify the manipulation of elections and formal democratic procedures. Research on patronal politics and dominant-party systems explains elite coordination and resource distribution. The literature on personalist authoritarianism highlights the concentration of decision-making and the weakening of institutional constraints. Studies of propaganda and spin dictatorship explain the manipulation of public perception. Historical and

geopolitical analyses of the Russo-Ukrainian war illuminate the imperial, ideological, and international dimensions of the conflict.

However, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature treats these dimensions as analytically separate. Democratic backsliding, elite politics, propaganda, war, and statistical manipulation are often studied in different subfields or with different methodological tools. Second, existing analyses sometimes explain the war against Ukraine primarily through geopolitics, ideology, imperial history, or security dilemmas, while insufficiently integrating it into the domestic logic of regime reproduction. Third, the political use of socio-economic and military data as part of authoritarian legitimation remains underdeveloped compared with the literature on propaganda and censorship. Fourth, the militarisation of elites after the full-scale invasion requires more systematic analysis as a mechanism of long-term regime transformation.

This article addresses these gaps by proposing an integrated explanatory model of Russia's neo-totalitarian transformation. It argues that the degradation of democratic institutions, the personalisation of power, the subordination and militarisation of elites, the war against Ukraine, the rhetoric of peace, and the manipulation of socio-economic and military data should be understood as interconnected elements of a single political process. The war is not treated merely as an external policy outcome; it is analysed as both a consequence of internal authoritarian evolution and an instrument of further domestic consolidation. Similarly, propaganda and statistics are not treated as secondary instruments of communication; they are analysed as central mechanisms through which the regime constructs legitimacy and manages reality.

The contribution of the article therefore lies in its synthesis. It brings together theories of democratic erosion, authoritarian institutions, personalist rule, patronal politics, propaganda, wartime legitimation, and neo-totalitarian control to explain the current stage of Russian political development. This synthesis is necessary because the Russian regime has itself become increasingly synthetic: it combines formal institutions with informal dependency, electoral procedures with coercive exclusion, legalism with repression, diplomacy with war, peace rhetoric with militarisation, and statistical representation with reality management. A fragmented theoretical approach cannot fully explain such a regime. An integrated framework is required to capture the systemic logic of its transformation.

## Results

### *Theoretical Approaches to Democratic Erosion and Neo-Totalitarianism*

The analysis of the Russian political regime under Vladimir Putin requires a conceptual framework that goes beyond the binary distinction between democracy and dictatorship. The Russian case demonstrates that democratic degradation may unfold through a prolonged process of institutional conversion rather than through a sudden formal abolition of constitutional structures. Elections, courts, parliaments, political parties, federal institutions, and public rhetoric of legality may persist, while their substantive democratic functions are gradually emptied and replaced by mechanisms of control, loyalty production, symbolic legitimation, and coercive administration. This result is consistent with contemporary theories of democratic backsliding, which emphasise gradual executive aggrandisement, manipulation of institutions, and erosion of accountability rather than abrupt regime collapse (Bermeo, 2016; Lübrmann & Lindberg, 2019).

The first theoretical result of this study is that Russia's trajectory can be interpreted as a sequence of regime mutations: from post-Soviet institutional fragility to managed democracy, from managed democracy to consolidated authoritarianism, and from consolidated authoritarianism to a neo-totalitarian form of political control. The concept of "managed democracy" captures the earlier phase in which political competition was limited but not entirely eliminated, opposition existed but was structurally disadvantaged, and the state increasingly controlled electoral and media environments. Theories of competitive authoritarianism and electoral authoritarianism are particularly useful for analysing this phase, since they explain how incumbents use formal democratic institutions while undermining the fairness, openness, and uncertainty that make democratic competition meaningful (*Levitsky & Way, 2002; Schedler, 2002*).

However, the Russian regime has progressively moved beyond the logic of competitive authoritarianism. In competitive authoritarian regimes, opposition actors are disadvantaged but may still possess some meaningful capacity to compete, mobilise, litigate, communicate, and win limited political victories. In contemporary Russia, the sphere of permissible political action has narrowed to such an extent that political competition has largely become ritualised. Opposition has been fragmented, exiled, criminalised, co-opted, or symbolically tolerated only where it does not threaten the ruling centre. As a result, the regime no longer relies primarily on manipulation of competition; it increasingly relies on the exclusion of alternative political legitimacy.

This shift makes it necessary to introduce the category of neo-totalitarian transformation. The concept does not mean that contemporary Russia mechanically reproduces the institutional structure of classical totalitarian regimes analysed by Arendt (*1951*). It does not possess the same type of mass-party mobilisation, universal ideological coherence, or total social penetration characteristic of Stalinist or Nazi systems. Yet it increasingly displays a neo-totalitarian logic: the state seeks to monopolise the interpretation of political reality, define legitimate and illegitimate speech, construct enemies, discipline elites, criminalise dissent, and integrate war, propaganda, coercion, law, statistics, and institutional control into a single structure of domination.

The neo-totalitarian character of the regime lies not in the complete elimination of social complexity, but in the political subordination of complexity. Markets may continue to function, private consumption may remain possible, formal elections may be held, courts may issue decisions, and official statistics may be published. However, these mechanisms are embedded within a political order in which their function is subordinated to regime survival. Legal procedures become tools of repression, elections become instruments of plebiscitary confirmation, public data become elements of symbolic governance, and political language becomes a mechanism of reality management.

This transformation also reflects the evolution from "spin dictatorship" to a more coercive and militarised model. Guriev and Treisman (*2022*) argue that many contemporary autocrats seek to govern through image management, manipulation, selective repression, and the performance of competence rather than through visible mass terror. Russia retains many features of this model, especially in its management of economic indicators, media narratives, and official claims of stability. Yet the full-scale war against Ukraine has intensified the role of fear, coercion, censorship, military mobilisation, and criminalisation of dissent. Therefore, the Russian case demonstrates not the replacement of spin by fear, but their integration. Spin legitimises coercion, while coercion protects the communicative monopoly of the regime.

The theoretical result of this subsection is that the Russian regime should be analysed as a dynamic and hybridised neo-totalitarian formation. It combines electoral authoritarian procedures, personalist decision-making, patronal elite management, coercive legislation, militarised propaganda, selective statistical visibility, and wartime mobilisation. This synthesis explains why narrower concepts—hybrid regime, competitive authoritarianism, personalist dictatorship, or patronal politics—are useful but insufficient when used separately.

*Thus*, the theoretical analysis shows that contemporary Russia represents not merely an authoritarian regime with weakened democratic institutions, but a regime undergoing neo-totalitarian transformation. Its central feature is the conversion of formal democratic, legal, informational, and administrative structures into instruments of political control, elite discipline, manipulated legitimacy, and wartime mobilisation.

### ***Degradation of Democratic Institutions in Russia: From Managed Democracy to Repressive Autocracy***

The degradation of democratic institutions in Russia has followed a cumulative and systemic logic. It did not begin with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, although the war accelerated and radicalised the process. The foundations of this degradation were laid much earlier through the centralisation of executive power, the weakening of federalism, the subordination of national television, the transformation of party politics, and the reduction of meaningful electoral competition. Fish (2005) identified super-presidentialism as one of the core institutional sources of Russia's democratic derailment. Gel'man (2015) later demonstrated that post-Soviet Russian authoritarianism was not simply the result of institutional weakness, but also the result of purposeful political construction.

The first institutional sphere affected by democratic degradation was electoral competition. Elections in Russia continued to be held regularly, but their democratic function changed. Instead of serving as mechanisms of uncertainty, representation, and accountability, they became procedures of controlled legitimation. Administrative resources, restrictions on candidates, control over electoral commissions, media imbalance, legal pressure on opposition actors, and the strategic use of loyal systemic opposition narrowed the field of political alternatives. This corresponds to Schedler's (2002) concept of electoral manipulation, in which authoritarian incumbents do not necessarily abolish elections but transform them into instruments of domination.

The second sphere was parliamentarism. The Federal Assembly formally retained its legislative role, but the real capacity of parliament to constrain the executive declined significantly. The State Duma became increasingly aligned with presidential initiatives, while the legislative process increasingly served the political priorities of the executive centre. In this context, parliamentarism was not destroyed formally; rather, it was converted into a mechanism of legal authorisation for executive power. This is an important feature of authoritarian legalism: the regime governs through law, but law ceases to function as a constraint on power.

The third sphere was the judiciary. Judicial independence is central to democratic accountability because courts can constrain arbitrary power, protect rights, and resolve political conflicts according to legal norms. In Russia, however, the judiciary became increasingly dependent on executive priorities, especially in politically sensitive cases. Courts have been used to sanction opposition figures, suppress civil society, enforce media restrictions, and legitimise repressive

legislation. This transformation illustrates the distinction between legal form and legal function. The presence of courts does not guarantee the rule of law if judicial institutions operate as instruments of political control.

The fourth sphere was media freedom and information pluralism. Independent media were gradually marginalised through ownership pressure, regulatory constraints, labelling practices, criminal prosecutions, blocking of platforms, and the expansion of state-controlled narratives. The degradation of media pluralism is particularly important because democratic institutions require a public sphere in which citizens can access competing interpretations of political reality. Under Putin, the media environment increasingly shifted from pluralistic contestation to state-centred narrative management. After 2022, this process intensified as the war created a justification for censorship, criminalisation of alternative descriptions of the conflict, and the narrowing of permissible public language.

The fifth sphere was civil society. Non-governmental organisations, independent associations, protest movements, human rights groups, and foreign-linked institutions faced increasing pressure through restrictive legislation, financial controls, administrative harassment, and reputational delegitimation. The classification of organisations and individuals as “foreign agents” or “undesirable” contributed to the transformation of civic activity into a legally vulnerable sphere. This degradation weakened the autonomous social foundations of democracy and increased the state’s capacity to isolate citizens from independent political organisation.

The sixth sphere was federalism. Although Russia remains formally federal, political centralisation has significantly reduced the autonomy of regions. Regional governors and elites became increasingly dependent on the federal centre, while fiscal, administrative, and political mechanisms strengthened vertical control. Hale’s (2015) theory of patronal politics helps explain this process: formal federal institutions are embedded in networks of dependency, resource distribution, and loyalty. As a result, federalism becomes not a mechanism of pluralism and territorial representation, but a system of administrative transmission from the centre to the periphery.

The degradation of democratic institutions was not accidental or fragmented. It was cumulative and mutually reinforcing. Electoral control weakened accountability; parliamentary subordination legalised executive dominance; judicial dependence protected repression; media control shaped public perception; civil society restrictions prevented autonomous mobilisation; and federal centralisation reduced territorial pluralism. Together, these processes transformed managed democracy into repressive autocracy.

*Thus*, the degradation of democratic institutions in Russia occurred through functional conversion rather than formal disappearance. Elections, parliament, courts, media regulation, civil society law, and federal institutions remained visible, but their democratic functions were replaced by mechanisms of control, confirmation, repression, and loyalty management. This institutional hollowing-out created the domestic foundation for the regime’s later neo-totalitarian transformation.

### ***Elite Control as a Mechanism of Regime Reproduction***

The reproduction of the Putin regime depends not only on mass control, electoral manipulation, or propaganda, but also on the systematic management of elites. Political regimes

endure when they solve two interconnected problems: controlling society and controlling insiders. Svoboda (2012) argues that authoritarian rulers face a permanent dilemma of power-sharing with elites. They need elites to govern, administer, finance, repress, and legitimise the regime, but they must also prevent elites from becoming autonomous centres of power. In Russia, the solution to this dilemma has been the construction of a loyalty-based elite order.

The Russian elite system combines formal hierarchy, informal patronage, resource dependency, legal vulnerability, and coercive discipline. Hale's (2015) theory of patronal politics is particularly useful here. Russian elites are not organised primarily through programmatic political parties, ideological competition, or institutional accountability. They are embedded in networks of dependency centred on access to state resources, administrative protection, political status, and personal connections. In such a system, loyalty is not simply a moral expectation; it is a survival mechanism. Political, administrative, economic, regional, and security elites depend on their perceived reliability in relation to the presidential centre.

Dominant-party institutions play an important role in this system. Reuter (2017) shows that dominant parties in authoritarian contexts often serve as tools for elite coordination, candidate selection, electoral mobilisation, and administrative integration. United Russia has performed these functions in the Russian political system. It does not operate as an autonomous party representing social interests against the state. Rather, it functions as a political-administrative mechanism that organises loyalty, channels political careers, manages regional elites, and produces an image of national consensus around the executive.

The personalisation of power has intensified elite dependency. In personalist authoritarian regimes, elite autonomy declines because institutional rules become less important than proximity to the ruler and alignment with the ruler's political priorities (Geddes *et al.*, 2018). Under Putin, strategic decision-making has become increasingly centralised, while elite access to influence has become more dependent on presidential trust and loyalty. This does not mean that all elites are powerless or identical. Economic groups, security agencies, regional administrators, technocrats, party officials, and propagandists occupy different positions within the regime. However, their autonomy is limited by their dependence on the centre and by the risks of disloyalty.

The role of the security apparatus is especially significant. Belton (2020) and Mommsen (2017) emphasise the importance of security-service networks in shaping Putin's Russia. The strengthening of the siloviki is not merely a personnel issue; it reflects the broader transformation of the state's governing logic. Security thinking has become central to domestic politics, economic control, foreign policy, and elite discipline. Political loyalty is increasingly evaluated through the language of security, sovereignty, threat, and betrayal. This creates a regime environment in which dissent is not treated as legitimate disagreement, but as a security problem.

The war against Ukraine has further transformed elite control. Before 2022, elite discipline was largely maintained through patronage, selective coercion, political exclusion, and control over resources. After the full-scale invasion, loyalty became more explicitly tied to the war. Silence, compliance, public support, participation in patriotic rituals, involvement in wartime administration, and acceptance of sanctions became mechanisms through which elites demonstrated reliability. The war imposed collective responsibility on elites: even those who may privately doubt the war's rationality are publicly bound to the regime by complicity, fear, dependency, and lack of exit options.

This logic also explains why elite fragmentation has not automatically produced regime breakdown. Personalist regimes may be vulnerable when elites coordinate against the ruler, but coordination becomes difficult when elites lack trust, fear repression, depend on state resources, and are publicly implicated in regime decisions. The war increases the cost of defection because disloyalty can be framed as betrayal during national struggle. Thus, militarised crisis strengthens the disciplinary environment in which elites operate.

At the same time, the regime faces a paradox. The more it relies on loyalty, coercion, and militarised selection, the less it can rely on autonomous expertise, institutional correction, and policy feedback. This creates a system in which strategic mistakes become more likely because decision-makers are insulated from dissenting information. Frye's (2021) argument about the limits of strongman rule is relevant here: apparent centralisation may conceal vulnerability, information distortion, and governance inefficiency. Elite control stabilises the regime politically but weakens its adaptive capacity.

*Thus*, elite control is a central mechanism of regime reproduction in Russia. The Putin regime maintains elite compliance through patronage, dominant-party coordination, security-state influence, legal vulnerability, symbolic rewards, and wartime loyalty tests. The war against Ukraine has intensified this system by transforming support for the conflict into a criterion of political reliability and by binding elites to the regime through collective responsibility.

### ***The War against Ukraine as a Result of the Internal Logic of the Political Regime***

The war against Ukraine should not be analysed solely as an external geopolitical event. It is also a result of the internal evolution of the Russian political regime. The degradation of democratic institutions, concentration of power, weakening of accountability, marginalisation of expertise, and construction of a militarised ideological discourse created conditions in which aggressive foreign policy became increasingly probable. The central result of this subsection is that the war is both an outcome and an instrument of Russia's authoritarian transformation.

Democratic institutions reduce the probability of reckless external aggression by introducing constraints, deliberation, public scrutiny, parliamentary debate, media investigation, electoral accountability, and pluralistic expertise. When these mechanisms are weakened, foreign policy becomes more dependent on the perceptions and strategic preferences of a narrow ruling group. In Russia, the personalisation of decision-making around the presidential centre reduced the capacity of institutions to question or restrain military escalation. This corresponds to theories of personalist authoritarianism, which show that such regimes are often prone to risky decision-making because leaders face fewer institutional constraints and receive less reliable feedback (*Geddes et al., 2018; Svolik, 2012*).

The war also reflects the regime's ideological and symbolic evolution. Russian official discourse increasingly framed Ukraine not as a fully sovereign political community, but as an object of historical, civilisational, and security claims. Snyder (2018) analyses this logic as part of a broader politics of anti-liberal myth and imperial revisionism. Plokhy (2023) interprets the war as a return of imperial history, rooted in contested narratives of Russian and Ukrainian statehood. These interpretations are crucial because the Russian regime's aggression cannot be reduced to immediate security calculations. It is embedded in a longer process through which historical memory, imperial identity, and anti-Western narratives became instruments of regime legitimisation.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a key turning point. It demonstrated that external aggression could generate domestic political consolidation, increase patriotic mobilisation, marginalise dissenting voices, and strengthen the symbolic legitimacy of the leadership. Horvath's (2011) concept of "preventive counter-revolution" helps explain why Ukraine was perceived by the Kremlin as more than a foreign policy issue. Democratic mobilisation in Ukraine represented a potential alternative model for the post-Soviet space. From the perspective of the Russian regime, preventing Ukraine's democratic and geopolitical consolidation became linked to domestic regime security.

The full-scale invasion of 2022 radicalised this logic. The war allowed the regime to transform internal repression into a wartime necessity. Laws restricting speech, dissent, protest, and independent reporting were justified by reference to national security, external threat, and the need for unity. Opposition to the war could be framed not as a legitimate political position, but as betrayal, extremism, or collaboration with hostile forces. Thus, the war expanded the moral and legal boundaries of repression.

The war also functions as an instrument of social mobilisation and demobilisation at the same time. On one level, the regime uses patriotic rhetoric, historical narratives, and external-threat discourse to mobilise symbolic support. On another level, it seeks to demobilise autonomous political action by producing fear, uncertainty, exhaustion, and resignation. This dual strategy is characteristic of contemporary authoritarian governance: the regime does not necessarily require active ideological enthusiasm from all citizens, but it does require the absence of effective collective resistance.

Economically, the war has reorganised state priorities. Military expenditure, defence industry, sanctions adaptation, import substitution rhetoric, and state-directed economic management have become central to the regime's narrative of resilience. Politically, war has become a mechanism for reordering the hierarchy of loyalty. Administrators, propagandists, military figures, and war participants gain symbolic value, while liberal, civic, and opposition-oriented actors are excluded from legitimate political space.

The war therefore deepens the transformation of the Russian state. It strengthens the security apparatus, expands censorship, increases elite dependency, militarises public discourse, narrows political pluralism, and justifies the further conversion of institutions into instruments of wartime governance. This does not mean that the war solves all problems for the regime. It produces economic costs, human losses, elite anxiety, international isolation, and governance distortions. However, these costs are politically managed through coercion, propaganda, selective data presentation, and the framing of hardship as patriotic endurance.

*Thus*, the war against Ukraine is not external to the internal logic of the Putin regime. It is a consequence of democratic degradation, personalist decision-making, imperial narratives, and the securitisation of political life. At the same time, the war has become an instrument of domestic consolidation by legitimising repression, disciplining elites, mobilising society around external threat, and accelerating the neo-totalitarian transformation of the state.

### ***The Rhetoric of Peace and Manipulative Management of the Perception of War***

The Russian regime's rhetoric of peace should be analysed as part of its broader strategy of manipulative legitimisation. Official statements about negotiations, de-escalation, sovereignty,

security guarantees, and peaceful intentions cannot be interpreted only as diplomatic positions. They must also be examined as communicative acts directed at domestic society, foreign governments, international organisations, and audiences in the Global South. The central result of this subsection is that peace rhetoric functions as a mechanism for managing responsibility, obscuring aggression, and preserving the regime's claim to rationality.

Authoritarian communication often works through semantic inversion. Repression is described as protection, aggression as defence, censorship as security, and imperial domination as historical justice. Guriev and Treisman's (2022) concept of spin dictatorship helps explain how regimes manipulate public perception without necessarily relying on a single rigid ideology. In the Russian case, however, spin operates together with coercion. The state not only promotes narratives but also criminalises alternative interpretations. This combination gives official rhetoric a coercive environment in which it can dominate public discourse.

The rhetoric of peace performs several functions. First, it shifts responsibility for the continuation of war. By presenting itself as ready for negotiations while framing Ukraine or the West as obstructive, the regime attempts to externalise blame. This strategy is useful domestically because it reduces the perception that the war continues due to the Kremlin's own political choices. It is also useful internationally because it allows the regime to present itself as a rational actor open to diplomacy.

Second, peace rhetoric creates a distinction between declared intentions and actual policy. The regime may continue military operations, maintain maximalist goals, reject accountability, and demand political concessions while simultaneously presenting itself as peace-oriented. This gap between rhetoric and practice is not a contradiction in the communicative system; it is part of the strategy. It allows different audiences to receive different messages. Domestic audiences hear that the state is strong but humane; foreign audiences hear that negotiations are possible; loyal elites hear that the official line remains flexible but controlled.

Third, peace rhetoric helps normalise the war by embedding it in a narrative of forced necessity. If the regime claims that it wanted peace but was compelled to fight by external threats, then war becomes morally reframed as reluctant defence. This narrative is central to the construction of legitimacy. It transforms agency into compulsion: the state presents itself not as the initiator of aggression, but as an actor responding to historical injustice, security threats, or Western hostility.

Fourth, peace rhetoric contributes to the management of social anxiety. War produces uncertainty, fear, economic pressure, casualties, and moral discomfort. A permanent discourse of escalation alone could increase social fatigue. By periodically invoking peace, negotiations, and controlled resolution, the regime offers a symbolic horizon of stability without changing the underlying military logic. In this sense, peace rhetoric does not necessarily reduce militarisation; it may make militarisation more sustainable by presenting it as temporary, defensive, and politically controlled.

Fifth, the rhetoric of peace is linked to the manipulation of time. Snyder (2018) argues that authoritarian anti-liberal politics often operates through mythic historical temporality, in which the present is absorbed into narratives of eternal struggle, humiliation, and restoration. The Russian regime uses both historical time and diplomatic time. Historical time presents the war as part of a long civilisational conflict; diplomatic time presents the regime as waiting for reasonable conditions

for peace. Together, these temporal strategies legitimise continuation: the war appears both historically necessary and diplomatically manageable.

The manipulation of peace rhetoric also affects the perception of Ukraine. If Russia presents itself as ready for peace while denying Ukraine's full agency, sovereignty, or legitimacy, then negotiations become framed not as dialogue between equal political communities, but as a process in which Ukraine should accept the geopolitical terms imposed by Moscow. This discursive structure reproduces the same imperial logic that contributed to the war.

The rhetoric of peace therefore has to be analysed not through isolated statements, but through its place in the regime's system of communication. It interacts with propaganda, censorship, battlefield narratives, economic statistics, elite messaging, and diplomatic signalling. It is not merely a language of de-escalation; it is a technology of perception management.

*Thus*, the Russian regime's rhetoric of peace functions as a manipulative communicative strategy. It shifts responsibility, obscures aggression, manages domestic anxiety, influences external audiences, and sustains the image of rational state behaviour while the war continues. Peace rhetoric is therefore not separate from militarisation; it is one of the instruments through which militarisation is politically normalised and legitimated.

### ***Socio-Economic Statistics as an Instrument of Political Legitimation***

In democratic systems, public statistics are expected to support accountability, informed debate, policy evaluation, and public knowledge. In authoritarian and neo-totalitarian systems, however, statistics may perform a different function. They can become instruments of political legitimation, symbolic governance, and reality management. The Russian wartime context demonstrates how socio-economic and military data may be selectively published, restricted, reframed, or embedded in official narratives to construct an image of stability, resilience, and state competence.

The political use of statistics does not necessarily require the complete fabrication of data. More often, it operates through selective visibility. Certain indicators are emphasised, while others are omitted or made less accessible. Methodological changes may complicate comparison over time. Aggregated indicators may conceal sectoral distortions. Public communication may focus on growth, employment, wage increases, industrial production, or budgetary stability, while underemphasising inflationary pressure, labour shortages, war-related spending, demographic costs, technological dependency, or the long-term consequences of sanctions.

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian state reduced access to a range of economic and administrative data. This development is analytically significant because data transparency is not merely a technical issue. It shapes the ability of citizens, experts, businesses, journalists, and foreign observers to evaluate the real condition of the economy and the costs of war. When transparency declines, the state gains greater control over public interpretation. In this context, statistics become part of the regime's information hierarchy.

The logic of statistical legitimation is closely connected to Guriev and Treisman's (2022) analysis of contemporary authoritarianism as perception management. The regime does not need every citizen to believe every official claim. It needs to create enough ambiguity, confidence, confusion, and selective optimism to prevent coherent collective opposition. Official data can contribute to this by producing a narrative of normality: the economy adapts, unemployment

remains low, industry grows, sanctions fail, the budget is manageable, and society remains stable. These claims may contain partial truths, but their political function lies in how they are selected and framed.

The wartime economy provides a clear example. Military production and state spending can stimulate certain sectors, increase measured output, and support employment. However, this does not necessarily indicate healthy long-term development. A war economy may generate growth that is fiscally burdensome, technologically constrained, inflationary, and dependent on coercive or state-directed priorities. If official communication presents war-driven production as evidence of economic strength without acknowledging structural trade-offs, then statistics become a tool of legitimation rather than transparent diagnosis.

The same logic applies to social indicators. Low unemployment may coexist with labour shortages caused by mobilisation, emigration, demographic decline, and military recruitment. Rising nominal wages may coexist with inflation and regional inequalities. Budgetary figures may conceal the opportunity costs of military expenditure. Public investment may shift from social development to defence and security priorities. When these complexities are absent from official narratives, socio-economic data help construct an image of controlled stability.

Military data are even more politically sensitive. Claims about territorial gains, casualties, equipment losses, mobilisation, and battlefield effectiveness are deeply embedded in propaganda. The regime's battlefield narrative seeks to maintain the perception of inevitability, endurance, and strategic control. As with economic statistics, manipulation may operate through omission, selective reporting, unverifiable claims, and repetition of official frames. The goal is not simply to inform, but to sustain morale, discipline elites, and prevent public recognition of failure.

Statistical manipulation also contributes to the moral economy of authoritarian rule. Citizens are encouraged to evaluate reality through officially sanctioned indicators rather than through independent experience or pluralistic debate. If prices rise, casualties spread, or public services deteriorate, official narratives can reframe these experiences as temporary, externally caused, or outweighed by national goals. In this way, data do not merely describe reality; they compete with lived reality.

This process is a core feature of neo-totalitarian transformation. Classical totalitarian systems sought to impose ideology on reality. Contemporary neo-totalitarian systems often impose curated information environments on reality. They do not always deny material problems directly; instead, they contextualise, relativise, and statistically manage them. This produces a political environment in which citizens are surrounded by official evidence of stability even when the underlying social and economic conditions are more fragile.

*Thus*, socio-economic and military statistics in wartime Russia perform a legitimising function. Through selective publication, restricted transparency, methodological opacity, and strategic framing, data are used to construct an image of resilience, competence, and control. Statistical governance thus becomes an integral component of the regime's reality-management apparatus and supports the broader neo-totalitarian transformation of political power.

### ***Militarisation of the New Elite and Long-Term Institutionalisation of War***

The final result concerns the militarisation of elite formation and the long-term institutionalisation of war within the Russian political regime. War is not only a foreign policy event

or a military campaign; it can become a principle of domestic political organisation. In contemporary Russia, the war against Ukraine has begun to reshape elite recruitment, symbolic hierarchy, ideological legitimacy, administrative priorities, and the relationship between state and society.

Militarisation of elites refers to the increasing political value assigned to military service, security credentials, veteran status, war-related administration, and public support for the war. This process does not mean that all elites become soldiers or that civilian governance disappears. Rather, it means that proximity to the war becomes a source of legitimacy. Military participation, patriotic rhetoric, association with occupied territories, defence-industry involvement, and loyalty to wartime narratives become markers of political reliability.

This transformation is consistent with the logic of personalist authoritarianism and elite discipline. In a system where loyalty is more important than institutional competence, war creates new loyalty tests. Supporting the war publicly, participating in its administration, or representing its symbolic values allows individuals to demonstrate alignment with the regime. Conversely, hesitation, silence, cosmopolitanism, liberalism, or technocratic neutrality may become politically risky. The war therefore reorganises the criteria of elite inclusion.

The militarisation of elites also strengthens the security-state component of the regime. Security agencies, military institutions, defence industries, veterans' organisations, patriotic education structures, and war-related media actors gain increased political relevance. This expands the influence of coercive and militarised actors within civilian politics. Belton (2020) and Mommsen (2017) have already shown the importance of security-service networks in Putin's Russia. The war intensifies this pattern by making security logic even more central to governance.

The long-term danger is that war becomes institutionalised even if active military operations change form. Institutionalisation means that wartime structures, narratives, laws, budgets, careers, and identities become embedded in the state. Repressive legislation adopted under wartime conditions may remain. Military spending may become structurally entrenched. Veterans and war administrators may enter politics. Education may become more militarised. Media narratives may continue to define politics through enemies and threats. Civil society may remain constrained by the logic of national security.

Militarisation also affects political culture. It normalises coercion, hierarchy, sacrifice, suspicion, and external-threat thinking. It narrows the legitimacy of compromise and pluralism. It frames dissent as betrayal and peace advocacy as weakness or collaboration. This is especially significant for the future of democratic alternatives in Russia. A political system that elevates war loyalty as a criterion of citizenship and elite status creates a hostile environment for democratic reconstruction.

The incorporation of war participants into political and administrative roles also serves a symbolic function. It allows the regime to present the war as a source of moral renewal and social mobility. The "new elite" is framed as patriotic, sacrificial, disciplined, and nationally authentic. This narrative helps the regime contrast militarised loyalty with allegedly corrupt, liberal, cosmopolitan, or Westernised elites. In practice, however, such elite renewal may deepen authoritarian control by replacing pluralism and competence with ideological conformity and coercive legitimacy.

At the same time, militarised elite formation may produce internal tensions. War veterans, security actors, technocrats, regional administrators, oligarchic groups, and ideological propagandists do not necessarily share identical interests. The regime must manage these groups while preserving presidential centrality. Militarisation may therefore stabilise the regime in the short term but create long-term governance risks: radicalisation of expectations, increased claims on state resources, expansion of coercive actors, and reduced space for technocratic correction.

This result is closely connected to the broader argument of the article. The Russian regime's neo-totalitarian transformation is not limited to repression or propaganda. It involves the reorganisation of the state around war as a governing principle. War legitimises repression, structures elite loyalty, justifies statistical opacity, shapes political language, mobilises society, and redefines the boundaries of citizenship. In this sense, the war against Ukraine has become embedded in the domestic architecture of power.

*Thus*, the militarisation of Russia's new elite indicates that war is becoming institutionalised as a domestic political principle. Military experience, security credentials, patriotic performance, and loyalty to the war are increasingly used as markers of political reliability. This process strengthens the coercive core of the regime, narrows the space for democratic alternatives, and contributes to the long-term neo-totalitarian transformation of the Russian state.

### ***General Synthesis of the Results***

The seven results presented above demonstrate that the contemporary Russian political regime should be analysed as a system of mutually reinforcing transformations. Democratic institutions have not simply failed; they have been converted into instruments of authoritarian control. Elite autonomy has not merely declined; it has been reorganised through loyalty, dependency, coercion, and wartime complicity. The war against Ukraine is not only an external conflict; it is a mechanism of domestic consolidation. The rhetoric of peace is not only diplomacy; it is a form of manipulative legitimisation. Socio-economic and military statistics are not only administrative data; they are instruments of reality management. The militarisation of elites is not only a personnel trend; it is a sign of the long-term institutionalisation of war.

The central analytical result of the study is that Russia's current political transformation cannot be adequately explained by any single concept taken in isolation. It is not only democratic backsliding, not only competitive authoritarianism, not only personalist dictatorship, not only patronal politics, not only propaganda, and not only militarisation. It is a neo-totalitarian transformation in which these elements are integrated into a consolidated system of rule. The degradation of democratic institutions created the conditions for personalist and coercive governance; personalist governance increased the probability of strategic radicalisation; war intensified repression and elite discipline; propaganda and statistics managed public perception; and militarised elite formation embedded war into the state's long-term institutional structure.

This synthesis confirms the article's hypothesis: the war against Ukraine is both a consequence and an instrument of the neo-totalitarian transformation of the Russian political regime. It emerged from the internal logic of democratic degradation, personalisation of power, imperial discourse, and weakened institutional constraints. After its escalation, it became a mechanism for reproducing the regime through mobilisation, repression, manipulated legitimacy, and militarised elite renewal.

## Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the transformation of the Russian political regime under Vladimir Putin cannot be adequately explained by conventional regime typologies alone. The Russian case includes elements of electoral authoritarianism, personalist dictatorship, patronal politics, security-state governance, propaganda-based legitimacy, and wartime mobilisation. However, the interaction of these elements produces a more complex configuration than any single category can capture. The central interpretive conclusion of the article is that contemporary Russia should be understood as a regime undergoing neo-totalitarian transformation: a process in which formal institutions, coercive mechanisms, elite dependency, information control, statistical representation, and war mobilisation are integrated into a unified system of political domination.

This interpretation does not reject existing theories of democratic erosion, competitive authoritarianism, personalist rule, or authoritarian legitimisation. On the contrary, it builds upon them. The literature on democratic backsliding explains how democracies may decline gradually while preserving constitutional and electoral forms (*Bermeo, 2016; Lübrmann & Lindberg, 2019*). Theories of competitive and electoral authoritarianism clarify how elections, parties, courts, and parliaments may continue to exist while losing their democratic function (*Levitsky & Way, 2002; Schedler, 2002*). Studies of personalist authoritarianism explain the concentration of power, elite dependency, and weakening of institutional constraints (*Geddes et al., 2018; Svobik, 2012*). Research on patronal politics and dominant-party institutions explains the informal and organisational foundations of elite management in post-Soviet Russia (*Hale, 2015; Reuter, 2017*). Yet the Russian case after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine shows that these mechanisms have entered a new stage of integration, in which war is no longer only an outcome of authoritarian politics but becomes one of the central instruments of regime reproduction.

The first major implication of the findings concerns the relationship between democratic erosion and external aggression. The results support the argument that the war against Ukraine should not be analysed exclusively as a geopolitical or foreign policy event. It emerged from a domestic political context in which institutional checks had been weakened, political competition had been neutralised, independent expertise had been marginalised, and decision-making had become concentrated around a narrow presidential centre. This does not mean that domestic regime dynamics alone explain the war. Historical narratives, imperial identity, security discourse, and international factors also matter. However, the findings indicate that these factors became politically actionable because the domestic institutional environment no longer contained effective mechanisms of restraint.

This interpretation extends the literature on authoritarian foreign policy by showing how democratic degradation alters the risk environment of strategic decision-making. In democratic systems, foreign policy is shaped by public scrutiny, parliamentary debate, media investigation, expert contestation, legal accountability, and electoral consequences. These mechanisms do not eliminate the possibility of war, but they complicate unilateral escalation. In the Russian case, the progressive destruction or subordination of these mechanisms reduced the regime's exposure to corrective feedback. Personalist centralisation further intensified this problem by concentrating strategic authority and limiting the circulation of dissenting information. Thus, the war against Ukraine can be interpreted as a consequence of institutional narrowing: the more closed the

political system became, the more likely it was to produce radical and poorly constrained foreign policy decisions.

The second major implication concerns the transformation of authoritarian legitimation under wartime conditions. Authoritarian regimes do not survive by coercion alone. They require narratives, symbols, performances of competence, and mechanisms of public interpretation. Guriev and Treisman's (2022) concept of "spin dictatorship" is especially useful for understanding how contemporary autocrats manage public perception through information control rather than relying solely on visible terror. However, the Russian case demonstrates that the boundary between "spin" and "fear" is historically unstable. Before the full-scale war, the regime relied heavily on managed elections, media control, symbolic stability, and selective repression. After 2022, these instruments did not disappear, but they were combined with open coercion, intensified censorship, criminalisation of dissent, and militarised mobilisation.

This suggests that contemporary authoritarian regimes may evolve through hybridisation rather than replacement of control mechanisms. Russia has not simply moved from manipulation to terror, nor from electoral authoritarianism to classical totalitarianism. Instead, it has combined multiple forms of domination: electoral ritual, legal repression, propaganda, elite coercion, data management, patriotic mobilisation, and security-state governance. This hybridisation is precisely what makes the concept of neo-totalitarian transformation analytically productive. It captures the movement towards more comprehensive political control without assuming an exact return to twentieth-century totalitarian models.

The third implication concerns the role of formal institutions in non-democratic regimes. The Russian case confirms that institutions may remain formally intact while being functionally transformed. Elections continue, but they primarily confirm the regime's dominance. Parliament legislates, but mainly authorises executive priorities. Courts operate, but often legitimise political repression in sensitive cases. Parties exist, but the ruling party serves as a mechanism of administrative coordination and elite discipline rather than autonomous representation. Federalism remains constitutionally declared, but regional autonomy is structurally constrained by political, fiscal, and administrative dependency. This supports the argument that the analysis of authoritarian regimes must distinguish between institutional form and institutional function.

The concept of institutional conversion is therefore central. Russia's democratic institutions did not simply disappear; they were repurposed. This is theoretically important because it shows that democratic erosion is not only a process of institutional weakening, but also a process of institutional refunctionalisation. Institutions that once had at least partial democratic potential can be transformed into mechanisms of authoritarian governance. This finding contributes to the broader literature on democratic backsliding by demonstrating that the survival of formal institutions may conceal a deeper transformation of regime logic.

The fourth implication concerns elite politics. The findings confirm that elite control is one of the decisive mechanisms of regime reproduction. In authoritarian systems, elites are both necessary and dangerous for rulers. They administer the state, manage resources, control coercive institutions, shape public narratives, and organise political mobilisation. At the same time, they may become potential challengers if they develop autonomy or coordinate against the ruler (*Svolik, 2012*). The Putin regime has addressed this dilemma through a combination of patronage, informal

dependency, dominant-party coordination, security-state influence, legal vulnerability, and symbolic rewards.

The war against Ukraine has added a new layer to this system: militarised loyalty. Elite reliability is increasingly measured not only through administrative performance or political obedience, but also through public alignment with the war. War support, patriotic rhetoric, participation in occupation governance, association with military structures, or symbolic proximity to veterans can function as markers of loyalty. This development alters the sociological composition and symbolic hierarchy of the elite. It gives political value to militarised experience and weakens the space for technocratic neutrality. In the long term, such a process may create a governing class whose legitimacy is tied not to policy competence or institutional representation, but to participation in a permanent security-war narrative.

This raises an important theoretical question: does militarised elite formation strengthen or weaken authoritarian resilience? In the short term, it may strengthen the regime by disciplining elites, raising the cost of defection, and integrating political careers into the war project. However, in the long term, it may reduce adaptive capacity. Regimes that reward loyalty over competence tend to experience information distortion, policy rigidity, and reduced institutional learning. Frye's (2021) concept of the "weak strongman" is useful here: personalist authoritarianism may appear stable precisely when it is becoming more dependent on distorted information and coercive control. The militarisation of elites may therefore stabilise the regime politically while undermining its administrative and strategic flexibility.

The fifth implication concerns propaganda and the manipulation of peace rhetoric. The findings show that official declarations about peace and negotiations should not be analysed only as diplomatic signals. They also operate as domestic legitimising devices. The rhetoric of peace allows the regime to present itself as rational, defensive, and responsible while maintaining military objectives. It shifts blame for the continuation of war to Ukraine or the West, reduces domestic anxiety, and creates a narrative in which Russia is portrayed as a state forced into conflict but open to settlement on its own terms.

This finding contributes to the study of authoritarian communication by showing that peace rhetoric can become part of war legitimisation. In democratic discourse, peace rhetoric is often associated with de-escalation, compromise, and accountability. In the Russian case, however, it functions as a mechanism of semantic control. It does not necessarily signal readiness to abandon coercive goals. Rather, it may help normalise the continuation of war by presenting it as unavoidable, defensive, and diplomatically manageable. The manipulation of peace rhetoric thus illustrates a broader feature of neo-totalitarian communication: the regime seeks not only to control facts, but also to control the moral vocabulary through which facts are interpreted.

The sixth implication concerns the political role of statistics. This is one of the less developed areas in the literature on Russian authoritarianism, yet it is crucial for understanding the current stage of regime transformation. The findings indicate that socio-economic and military data are not merely administrative instruments; they are part of the regime's legitimacy infrastructure. Official statistics can be used to construct an image of resilience, normality, competence, and control. In wartime conditions, this function becomes especially important because the regime must manage public perceptions of economic costs, sanctions, mobilisation, casualties, inflation, and long-term structural damage.

The political manipulation of statistics does not always require direct falsification. It may operate through selective publication, restricted access, methodological opacity, aggregation, omission, and strategic framing. This is important because authoritarian reality management often works through partial truths rather than total fabrication. A regime may highlight indicators that show adaptation while obscuring indicators that reveal fragility. It may present war-driven industrial output as economic success while underplaying opportunity costs, inflationary pressure, labour shortages, demographic consequences, or technological dependency. In this sense, statistics function as a symbolic technology of governance. They help produce a public world in which crisis appears manageable and state policy appears effective.

This finding expands the concept of propaganda. Propaganda should not be understood only as ideological messaging or media disinformation. In contemporary authoritarian regimes, propaganda may also operate through numbers, rankings, indicators, and official measurements. Statistical representation can create an aura of objectivity around politically curated interpretations. The neo-totalitarian dimension lies in the integration of statistical narratives with media control, legal repression, and wartime discourse. Citizens are not only told what to think; they are also presented with official indicators that structure the boundaries of what can be publicly known.

The seventh implication concerns the long-term institutionalisation of war. The findings show that the war against Ukraine has begun to reshape not only foreign policy, but also the internal architecture of the Russian state. Wartime laws, military spending, propaganda structures, patriotic education, veteran incorporation, occupation administration, and security-state expansion may endure beyond specific battlefield developments. This means that war can become institutionalised as a mode of governance. It structures political careers, defines loyalty, organises public discourse, and expands the legitimacy of coercion.

The institutionalisation of war creates a serious obstacle to future democratic transformation. Democratic reconstruction requires pluralism, legal accountability, civic autonomy, independent information, and a political culture that recognises legitimate disagreement. A militarised neo-totalitarian order weakens all these conditions. It normalises hierarchy, external-threat thinking, suspicion of dissent, and the moral elevation of coercive service. Even if the intensity of military operations changes, the institutions and narratives produced by war may continue to shape domestic politics. This is why the war must be analysed not only as a conflict between states, but also as a process of internal regime reorganisation.

The findings also clarify the relationship between Russia and classical totalitarian models. The article does not argue that contemporary Russia is identical to Stalinist totalitarianism or to the classical cases analysed by Arendt (1951). Such a claim would ignore the persistence of markets, private consumption, formal elections, digital communication, international economic adaptation, and fragmented ideological repertoires. However, the Russian case demonstrates the reactivation of certain totalitarian logics in a contemporary form: monopolisation of political meaning, criminalisation of dissent, enemy construction, elite discipline, information control, and the subordination of institutions to a single political centre. The prefix “neo-” is therefore essential. It indicates both continuity and difference: the re-emergence of comprehensive domination through new institutional, technological, communicative, and wartime mechanisms.

This interpretation also helps position the article within the debate over whether Russia should be classified as fascist, authoritarian, imperial, personalist, or totalitarian. Laruelle (2021) rightly

warns against simplistic labelling, especially when ideological complexity is reduced to polemical categories. The present article avoids treating neo-totalitarianism as a moral label. Instead, it uses the concept to describe a process of functional integration. Russia may contain fascistic motifs, imperial narratives, personalist authority, patronal networks, electoral authoritarian procedures, and security-state practices. The analytical question is not which single label should replace all others, but how these elements interact within the current regime. The concept of neo-totalitarian transformation is proposed as a way to capture this interaction.

At the same time, the concept requires careful use. If applied too broadly, it may lose analytical precision. Not every authoritarian regime with propaganda, repression, and manipulated elections is neo-totalitarian. The category becomes useful only when it identifies a specific level of integration among coercion, institutional conversion, elite militarisation, war mobilisation, information control, and managed reality. In the Russian case, the findings suggest that such integration has become increasingly visible after 2022. Nevertheless, further comparative research is necessary to determine whether this concept can be applied to other contemporary authoritarian systems or whether Russia represents a more specific regime trajectory.

The study has several limitations. First, the analysis is constrained by the limited transparency of the Russian political system, especially under wartime conditions. Access to reliable information about elite dynamics, internal decision-making, military losses, economic costs, and public opinion is restricted. Second, official data must be treated critically because they may be selectively published, methodologically altered, or politically framed. Third, the study is based on a qualitative single-case design, which allows for deep analytical interpretation but does not permit broad statistical generalisation. Fourth, the concept of neo-totalitarianism itself remains contested and requires continued theoretical refinement. Fifth, the rapid development of the war and domestic repression means that some empirical elements may change after the completion of the article.

These limitations do not undermine the article's central argument, but they define its scope. The purpose of the study is not to provide a final classification of the Russian regime for all future contexts. Rather, it seeks to explain the current trajectory of transformation and to identify the mechanisms through which democratic degradation, elite control, war, propaganda, statistical manipulation, and militarisation reinforce one another. The value of the analysis lies in its capacity to connect phenomena that are often examined separately.

The broader theoretical contribution of the study is that it reframes authoritarian transformation as a process of systemic integration. Democratic erosion weakens institutional constraints; personalist rule concentrates decision-making; patronal politics disciplines elites; propaganda manages public meaning; statistics construct controlled reality; war legitimises repression; and militarisation institutionalises the new political order. The Russian case shows that these processes do not merely coexist. They interact, reinforce one another, and generate a regime logic that is more comprehensive than ordinary authoritarian consolidation.

The practical implications are also significant. Analysts, policymakers, and scholars should avoid interpreting the Russian regime through isolated indicators, such as electoral manipulation, media control, military aggression, economic adaptation, or elite loyalty alone. Each of these elements is important, but their political meaning becomes clearer when analysed as part of an integrated system. For democratic states and international institutions, this means that responses to Russian aggression cannot be limited to military or diplomatic measures. They must also address

propaganda, statistical opacity, elite complicity, transnational authoritarian networks, and the domestic mechanisms through which war is legitimised.

Finally, the findings suggest that any future de-escalation or post-war transformation will face not only geopolitical obstacles, but also deep institutional and sociological ones. If war has become embedded in elite recruitment, legal structures, political language, economic priorities, and symbolic legitimacy, then ending military operations would not automatically reverse neo-totalitarian transformation. Democratic reconstruction would require the restoration of institutional autonomy, accountability, media pluralism, civic freedom, legal independence, and the demilitarisation of political legitimacy. The difficulty of such a process underscores the importance of analysing the war against Ukraine as both an international conflict and a domestic regime-making project.

In sum, the discussion confirms the central hypothesis of the article. The war against Ukraine is not an external deviation from the internal development of the Russian political regime. It is both a consequence of democratic degradation and personalist authoritarian consolidation, and an instrument through which the regime has intensified repression, disciplined elites, manipulated public perception, and institutionalised militarised governance. The Russian case therefore contributes to contemporary political science by demonstrating how democratic erosion may culminate not merely in authoritarian stability, but in a neo-totalitarian transformation organised around war, propaganda, elite coercion, and managed reality.

### **Conclusion**

This article has examined the neo-totalitarian transformation of the Russian political regime under Vladimir Putin through the interconnection of democratic degradation, personalist authoritarian consolidation, elite militarisation, manipulative legitimation, and the war against Ukraine. The central argument of the study is that contemporary Russia cannot be adequately understood through a single analytical category such as hybrid regime, electoral authoritarianism, personalist dictatorship, patronal politics, or wartime autocracy. Each of these concepts captures an important dimension of the Russian case, but the current stage of regime transformation is defined by their systemic integration. Formal institutions, coercive mechanisms, elite dependency, propaganda, controlled statistics, and military mobilisation now operate as mutually reinforcing components of a broader neo-totalitarian order.

The research has confirmed the hypothesis formulated in the introduction: the war against Ukraine is not an external deviation from the internal development of the Russian political regime, but both a consequence and an instrument of its neo-totalitarian transformation. The degradation of democratic institutions, the concentration of decision-making in the presidential centre, the weakening of institutional constraints, the subordination of elites, and the suppression of pluralism created the political conditions under which aggressive external policy became increasingly probable. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the war itself became a mechanism of domestic regime reproduction. It enabled the authorities to intensify repression, justify censorship, discipline elites, mobilise society around narratives of external threat, and reconstruct political legitimacy through the language of security, sacrifice, sovereignty, and historical necessity.

The first major conclusion of the study is that democratic degradation in Russia has occurred primarily through the functional conversion of institutions rather than through their formal

disappearance. Elections, parliament, courts, parties, federal structures, media regulation, civil society law, and official statistics have remained visible components of the state system. However, their democratic functions have been progressively weakened, neutralised, or reversed. Elections have increasingly served as rituals of confirmation rather than mechanisms of political uncertainty and accountability. Parliament has functioned largely as a legislative extension of executive will. Courts have become instruments for sanctioning politically sensitive repression. Federalism has been subordinated to vertical administrative control. Media and civil society have been transformed into objects of surveillance, regulation, delegitimation, and coercion. This process demonstrates that democratic institutions may survive formally while being incorporated into an authoritarian and neo-totalitarian logic of governance.

The second conclusion is that elite control represents one of the central mechanisms of regime reproduction. The Russian political system has developed a loyalty-based elite order in which access to resources, status, protection, and political survival depends on alignment with the presidential centre. Patronage, administrative dependency, security-service influence, legal vulnerability, and dominant-party coordination have contributed to the reduction of elite autonomy. The war against Ukraine has further deepened this mechanism by turning public support for the war into a test of political reliability. Elite loyalty is now increasingly connected not only with obedience to the regime, but also with symbolic participation in the militarised narrative of the state. This has produced a new stage of elite incorporation, in which war, security, patriotism, and political survival are tightly interlinked.

The third conclusion is that the war against Ukraine must be interpreted as part of the internal logic of the Russian regime. It is not sufficient to explain the war only through geopolitics, security claims, historical grievances, or imperial ideology, although all these dimensions are significant. The war became possible within a domestic political environment where institutional checks had been dismantled, opposition had been suppressed, independent media had been marginalised, and strategic decision-making had become concentrated within a narrow ruling circle. At the same time, the war has become a domestic political technology: it legitimises repression, reinforces the authority of the security apparatus, produces new criteria of elite loyalty, and reorganises public discourse around external threat and national mobilisation.

The fourth conclusion concerns the manipulative rhetoric of peace. The article has shown that official statements about negotiations, de-escalation, and peaceful intentions should not be interpreted only as diplomatic communication. In the Russian case, the rhetoric of peace functions as part of the regime's system of perception management. It allows the authorities to shift responsibility for the continuation of war, present themselves as rational and defensive, influence foreign audiences, and manage domestic anxiety. This rhetoric does not necessarily contradict militarisation; rather, it can make militarisation more politically sustainable by framing war as reluctant, defensive, temporary, and externally imposed. The language of peace therefore becomes one of the instruments through which the regime legitimises the continuation of war.

The fifth conclusion is that socio-economic and military statistics have become an important element of authoritarian legitimation. Under wartime conditions, official data are not merely administrative indicators; they participate in the construction of political reality. Selective publication, restricted transparency, methodological opacity, omission of politically damaging indicators, and strategic framing allow the regime to produce an image of resilience, stability,

competence, and control. This does not necessarily require the complete falsification of all data. More often, manipulation operates through selective visibility and interpretive framing. The political function of statistics is therefore to support the narrative that war, sanctions, repression, and economic pressure remain manageable and historically justified.

The sixth conclusion is that the militarisation of elites points to the long-term institutionalisation of war within the Russian state. War is becoming not only a foreign policy condition, but also a principle of domestic political organisation. Military service, veteran status, security credentials, participation in wartime administration, and public loyalty to war narratives increasingly acquire political value. This process strengthens the coercive core of the regime and narrows the space for democratic alternatives. It also creates long-term institutional consequences: wartime legislation, militarised education, expanded security structures, defence-oriented economic priorities, and symbolic hierarchies based on sacrifice and loyalty may persist even if the intensity of military operations changes.

The theoretical significance of the article lies in its attempt to conceptualise contemporary Russia as a case of neo-totalitarian transformation rather than merely authoritarian consolidation. This distinction is important. Authoritarian consolidation refers to the stabilisation of non-democratic rule. Neo-totalitarian transformation refers to a deeper process in which institutions, elites, law, propaganda, statistics, coercion, and war are integrated into a system that seeks to monopolise political meaning and subordinate public reality to the regime's interpretive authority. The Russian case demonstrates that modern neo-totalitarianism does not need to reproduce the exact institutional forms of twentieth-century totalitarianism. It can coexist with markets, formal elections, digital technologies, selective legalism, international economic adaptation, and fragmented ideological repertoires. Its defining feature is not total uniformity, but the political integration of coercion, manipulation, militarisation, and institutional control.

The practical significance of the study is connected with the need to understand how contemporary authoritarian regimes adapt under conditions of war, sanctions, international pressure, and internal social tension. The Russian case shows that such regimes may use war not only as an external strategy, but also as an internal mechanism of political reproduction. For scholars, experts, and policymakers, this means that the analysis of authoritarian aggression should include not only military and diplomatic dimensions, but also domestic institutional transformation, elite discipline, propaganda, statistical opacity, and the militarisation of legitimacy. Without this broader perspective, the political durability of the regime and the depth of its transformation may be underestimated.

The study also has implications for the analysis of future democratic reconstruction. If the war against Ukraine has become embedded in Russia's legal structures, elite recruitment, political discourse, educational narratives, economic priorities, and symbolic hierarchy, then a possible cessation of hostilities would not automatically restore democratic potential. De-escalation in foreign policy would need to be accompanied by demilitarisation of political legitimacy, restoration of institutional autonomy, judicial independence, media pluralism, civic freedom, electoral competitiveness, and public accountability. The depth of neo-totalitarian transformation suggests that democratic renewal would require not only leadership change, but also profound institutional and cultural reconstruction.

At the same time, the article recognises the limitations of its analysis. The study is based on a qualitative single-case design and therefore does not claim statistical generalisability. The wartime context limits access to reliable data on elite conflicts, military losses, public opinion, budgetary costs, and internal decision-making. Official statistics and public statements require critical interpretation because they may be selectively presented or politically framed. The concept of neo-totalitarianism also requires further theoretical refinement and comparative testing. Future research may examine whether similar mechanisms of institutional conversion, statistical legitimation, elite militarisation, and war-based regime reproduction are present in other contemporary authoritarian systems.

Further studies should also investigate several specific dimensions in greater detail. First, more attention should be given to the sociology of the new militarised elite and the channels through which war participants, security actors, propagandists, and wartime administrators are incorporated into political institutions. Second, the political economy of wartime legitimacy requires deeper analysis, especially the relationship between military expenditure, regional dependency, labour shortages, sanctions adaptation, and official narratives of economic resilience. Third, future research should examine the long-term effects of propaganda and patriotic education on political socialisation. Fourth, comparative studies could explore whether the Russian case represents a unique trajectory or part of a broader pattern of authoritarian radicalisation under conditions of geopolitical conflict.

In conclusion, the Russian political regime under Vladimir Putin has undergone a transformation that cannot be reduced to ordinary authoritarian consolidation. The degradation of democratic institutions, the personalisation of power, the subordination and militarisation of elites, the manipulation of public perception, the political use of statistics, and the war against Ukraine have become interconnected elements of a single regime logic. This logic is neo-totalitarian because it seeks not only to monopolise political power, but also to define legitimate reality, discipline society and elites, and institutionalise war as a mode of governance. The war against Ukraine is therefore both the product of this transformation and one of its principal instruments. Understanding this relationship is essential for explaining the current nature of Russian power, the persistence of its aggression, and the obstacles to future democratic change.

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