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The Formation of New Leading Cadres of the Russian State

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Abstract:

The war in Ukraine has been a real catalyst for political changes, both at the level of the international system and within the Russian political regime. Kremlin leaders were immediately confronted by a failure of their military operation in Ukraine leading to numerous casualties, strong Western sanctions and a massive information campaign aimed at undermining their war effort. Once they had overcome this situation, they were able to activate the war economy to achieve their strategic goals, counting on the backing of Russian oligarchies and the widespread support of the population that, for the most part, has not been affected by the rigours of war. In this context, the Putin regime has begun a process of generational replacement of its ruling elites, which ultimately aims to build the necessary support for the next Russian president.

Keywords:

War in Ukraine, Russia, Putin regime, State power, ruling elites.

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Introduction

The failure of the Russian Armed Forces' military operation on 24 February 2022 intended to take control of Ukraine by surprise and in record time, with few casualties and achieving the submission of its government, forced the Russian leadership to launch a war they did not expect and for which they were not prepared¹. The United States, the European Union (EU) and other Western countries immediately declared their strong support for the Ukrainian authorities, activated a strong regime of economic and financial sanctions against Russia, and began supplying massive amounts of military hardware with the aim of forcing the Russian side to desist from a war against the Western-backed Ukrainian forces².

During this period, Russian forces concentrated their efforts on conquering the Donbas territory (Donetsk and Luhansk) that was still in Ukrainian hands, and attempted to consolidate control of the occupied territories in south-eastern Ukraine (Kherson and Zaporizhzhia). This was the period when they accumulated the most casualties, and a volunteer recruitment campaign had to be activated (covertly in the first phase) that is still active today³, and when there was the greatest uncertainty regarding the direction of military operations, including continuous replacements of military commanders and the withdrawal, first from Kharkov (the object of a rapid Ukrainian offensive) and then from the historic city of Kherson on the western side of the River Dnieper⁴. This situation forced the Kremlin to activate the first military mobilisation since the country's independence, calling up 300,000 reservists to rebuild worn-out units and create new ones for deployment in Ukraine⁵.

At the same time, the initial decisions to rapidly increase war production to meet the needs of units at the front and to equip newly created units, were taken. The government hastily

¹ DACOBA CERVIÑO, F. J. Ukraine: no blitzkrieg, no lasting peace. IEEE Analysis Document 51/2022, https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2022/DIEEEA51_2022_FRADAC_Ucrania_ENG.pdf

² CALVO ALBERO, J. L. La estrategia rusa en Ucrania: cómo resistir al borde del abismo. Global Strategy, 23 January 2023, <https://global-strategy.org/la-estrategia-rusa-en-ucrania-como-resistir-al-borde-del-abismo/>

³ With strong economic and social incentives, the Russian Defence Ministry continues to enlist 20,000 to 30,000 troops per month.

⁴ The Russian view of this period is well explained in ПУКНОВ, R. От "специальной" к "военной" Уроки двух лет операции на Украине [From "special" to "military". Lessons from two years of operation in Ukraine]. Россия в глобальной политике [Russia in Global Affairs], 24 February 2024, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/ot-speczialnoj-k-voennoj/>

⁵ Decree No. 647/2022 of 21 September 2022 on the Kremlin website: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/news/69391> President Putin's televised speech justifying the partial mobilisation measure may be consulted on <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/news/69391>

increased the defence budget and dipped into the National Welfare Fund (Russian sovereign wealth fund) to finance the war. Thus, in the spring of 2023, the Russian Armed Forces managed to stabilise the front and prepared for the announced Ukrainian offensive, which failed to overcome the Russian defences and marked the progressive retreat of the Ukrainian forces⁶. The limited operation against the border *oblast* (province) of Kursk in August 2024 was also blocked, increasing losses of scarce personnel and equipment that were necessary to defend the Donbas front.

Throughout this period, the Russian leadership has been relentless in its efforts to assert itself in Ukraine despite the strong support provided especially by the United States, the United Kingdom and NATO (with EU countries showing varying levels of involvement), turning the so-called special military operation (SVO in Russian) into a full-scale conventional war⁷ in which the nuclear threat from both sides has also been repeatedly present⁸. These questions have been extensively addressed by political scientists, internationalists and military theorists who have focused on conflict and its impact on security systems, alliances, and world peace.

However, the war in Ukraine has also triggered internal political processes in Russia that deserve to be examined and studied. Significant changes have been launched that are not only aimed at strengthening the domestic political regime in the context of a long war, including a campaign against endemic corruption⁹ ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin himself, but in the long term also have his succession in mind. These changes affect the fundamental pillars of the Putin regime¹⁰: the oligarchies, the state leadership, and the political control of the armed forces. A war narrative permits the execution of measures that would not be acceptable in peacetime with widespread public support.

⁶ See SAURÍN MARTÍNEZ, D. Armored vehicles during the Ukrainian summer offensive: new tactics, new models, and new threats. IEEE Opinion Document 83/2023, https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2023/DIEEEE083_2023_DANSAU_Blindados.pdf

⁷ PARDO DE SANTAYANA, J. "Rusia enrocada". Política Exterior, 13 February 2024, <https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/rusia-enrocada/>

⁸ In PARDO DE SANTAYANA, J. Russian Nuclear Roulette. Analysis Document 30/2023. https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA30_2023_JOSPAR_Ruleta_ENG.pdf

⁹ At this stage, as was the case during his first term, Putin uses the fight against corruption as a tool to exemplify and demonstrate his power to his citizens.

¹⁰ After Putin's twenty-five years in power, this term is acceptable to refer to the Russian political regime (see WITKER, I. Putinología). El Líbero, 13 June 2022, <https://eliberro.cl/opinion/putinologia/>, although it has also been referred to as "authoritarian democracy" (in TODD, E. La derrota de Occidente. Ediciones Akal. Madrid, 2024 ; translated from La Défaite de l'Occident. Éditions Gallimard. Paris, 2024). Regarding its ideological foundations, see the study by ELTCHANINOFF, M. En la cabeza de Vladimir Putin. Libbooks Barcelona. Barcelona, 2016 (translated from Dans la tête de Vladimir Poutine. Actes Sud, 2015).

The phenomenon of the creation of a new generation of Russian oligarchs has already been analysed¹¹, as well as the capabilities and economics of warfare in the context of the Ukrainian conflict¹². This article will examine the existence of a Kremlin strategy that aims to create a new generation of cadres who are destined to rule the state and, as in the case of the big businessmen, a new bureaucratic elite is being generated in the heat of the war, made up of individuals who share the same code of values based on loyalty, courage and service to the country that seeks to identify them as the defenders of the Russian state. As discussed below, this is not a trivial matter, but part of a long-term plan to boost the state's power in the coming decades, a period that the current Russian leadership sees as complex and involving continuous confrontation with outside powers.

The Time of Heroes programme

On 29 February 2024, President Putin delivered his annual address to the Federal Assembly in Moscow, where he usually discusses the country's principal problems and proposes solutions to them, his words serving as general guidelines for government action during the ongoing year. In this speech, Putin called the servicemen fighting in Ukraine "true heroes and patriots", who do not back down, do not let down and do not betray, said that it was to such people that governance could be handed over in the future and announced plans to train highly qualified and competent leaders from serving and retired military personnel who had served in Ukraine¹³.

Following these guidelines, in March 2024 the Rector of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPА in Russian)¹⁴, Alexey Komissarov, led the development of a multi-level training programme called "Time of Heroes" (*Vremya Geroyev* in Russian) aimed at preparing participants in public law,

¹¹ In PÉREZ GIL, L. The rise of a new generation of Russian oligarchs as an unexpected consequence of the ongoing war in Ukraine. IEEE Analysis Document 26/2024. https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2024/DIEEEA26_2024_LUIPER_Oligarcas_ENG.pdf

¹² PÉREZ GIL, L. Russian Military Capabilities, and the War Economy in the Conflict in Ukraine. IEEE Analysis Document 48/2024. https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2024/DIEEEA48_2024_LUIPER_Ucrania_ENG.pdf

¹³ Putin declared that "They should take leading positions in the system of education and upbringing of young people, in public associations, state-run companies and privately held businesses, federal and municipal administration. They should head regions and enterprises, as well as major national projects". The full speech is available at <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73585>

¹⁴ Established in 2010, this higher education institution under the Presidential Administration has forty-seven training centres, twelve institutes, ten training centres (including a military training centre) and sixty-five scientific centres, and offers programmes and curricula in different subjects and training levels. In 2023 it trained 28,000 students. Website: <http://ranepa.ru/>

administration, leadership and management of public resources. Officially "the aim of the programme is to train competent and highly qualified management professionals among the participants and veterans of special military operations for posts in state and municipal administrations" ¹⁵.

The president of the Defenders of the Fatherland Foundation, Maria Kostyuk, was appointed deputy director of the programme because her personal profile matched the propaganda message launched by the Kremlin: her son Andrey Kovtun enlisted as a volunteer in 2022, died in combat that same year and was awarded the title of Hero of Russia, the country's highest decoration which also confers great social prestige.

The Political Propaganda Department of the Russian Ministry of Defence and other state agencies and patriotic organisations are also involved in the programme. Additionally, prominent politicians and national civil servants joined as mentors to the candidates. They include the head of the Presidential Administration Maxim Oreshkin, Federation Council Speaker Valentina Matvienko, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Deputy Secretary of the Security Council and former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, and the popular Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyanin (considered a possible candidate for the presidential succession)¹⁶.

The requirements for candidates include Russian citizenship, higher education, experience in team leadership and personnel management and military participation in Ukraine. The first call for student applications closed on 8 April 2024, proceeding to the selection of staff for the first year of the programme¹⁷.

On 9 May 2024, during the commemoration of the 79th Anniversary of Victory Day, President Putin paid tribute to the fallen soldiers of the Second World War, reiterated that the servicemen at the front are today's national heroes, and linked Russia's future to military success in Ukraine¹⁸. In other words, he once again repeated the idea of identifying the soldiers fighting in Ukraine with the heroes of the past¹⁹. Putin's words had

¹⁵ Website: <https://времярепов.рф/>

¹⁶ Within this context, the Russian propaganda apparatus widely publicised Matvienko's reception on 27 September 2024 for medical captain Darya Svetyash, who served in the 31st Airborne Forces Air Assault Brigade (VDV in Russian), took part in the Gostomel operation, and received the Order of Courage.

¹⁷ A new call was opened on 15 November 2024, until 15 January 2024.

¹⁸ Full text of two nine-minute speeches at <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73995>

¹⁹ See also his speech of 30 September 2022 on the annexation of the southern territories of Ukraine to the Russian Federation. The full speech is available at <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>

an immediate objective: to encourage voluntary enlistment for the war on the promise that the best of them would rule the country in the coming years.

Thus, on 27 May 2024, the first eighty-three war veterans who had been selected, including four women and twenty-four awarded the title of Hero of Russia, started the first course of the Time of Heroes programme at the Higher School of Public Administration of the Presidential Academy and at the Senezh Management Centre. The first part of the programme (lasting one and a half months) is aimed at understanding the structure and functioning of the public administration, as well as the characteristics and rules governing the general system of administration. The second part (with the same duration) provides training on the necessary management tools in strategic and project management, process management, personnel development, talent management and technology applications.

Highlights included an Arctic voyage on Atomflot's nuclear-powered icebreaker *50 Let Pobedy*, departing from Murmansk on the Kola Peninsula on 3 June 2024 and reaching the geographical point of the North Pole on 10 June, with all eighty-three members of the programme on board, a significant event judging by subsequent accounts from participants²⁰. On 14 June 2024 Putin held a meeting with the group in Solnechnogorsk, Moscow region, where they were able to speak and engage in direct dialogue with the president²¹.

On 3 October 2024, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said during a public appearance about the first appointments of participants in the Time of Heroes programme. Firstly, he reminded the programme is aimed at providing specialised training to military personnel who have participated in the military operation in Ukraine, to prepare them to join the state bureaucracy. He stated that the selected candidates had the qualifications and had received the appropriate training to perform their duties in government departments and agencies. He also stated that this will be a long-term programme, with thousands of candidates trained in successive batches for management positions in the different public administrations.

²⁰ In <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74292#>

²¹ On this occasion, he declared: "It is clear that we have a big country, many people and many talented people. But among all the talented persons, there are also those who have no regard for their life and safety when it comes to serving their country in the most dangerous conditions. If you don't trust people like these, then who do you trust?" Putin's speech and the subsequent dialogue with the students is available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74292#>

Furthermore, he declared that any fighter could become president of Russia under the premise (stated by Putin himself) that those who put their lives on the line in the interests of the country should form the cadres of the state²². Though likely nothing more than a propaganda statement to maintain the voluntary enlistment campaign, it is also part of a perfectly planned strategy, that shows how rigid power structures can also adapt quickly to changes brought about by a crisis. The following day, Peskov gave a lecture on the importance of information activities in the context of the war in Ukraine in the second part of the Time of Heroes training course.

First appointments

In September 2024 began the appointments of Time of Heroes' figures in various posts in the federal government, parliament, regional administration, and state agencies. The most noteworthy case is that of the Chairman of the People's Council of the Donetsk People's Republic, Colonel Artem Zhoga, who was appointed Presidential Plenipotentiary Envoy to the Ural Federal District.

The known appointments are listed below in chronological order.

- On 14 September 2024, President Putin signed Decree No. 790/2024 appointing Commander Artur Orlov as Chairman of the Board of the All-Russian Children's and Youth Movement (Movement of the First)²³. Orlov (born in Udmurtia, 1989) joined the Armed Forces in 2006, graduated from the Kazan Higher Tank Command School, was deployed to Syria in 2016, participated in the war in Ukraine, and was awarded the title of Hero of Russia in October 2022. He is also enrolled at the Military Academy of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia.
- On 17 September 2024, Colonel Alexey Kondratyev was appointed as a senator representing the Kursk *Oblast* and became a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federation Council. Kondratyev is a veteran of the Airborne

²² In <https://iz.ru/1768873/2024-10-03/peskov-ukazal-na-ratsionalnyi-podkhod-v-naznacheniiakh-putina-po-programme-vremia-geroev>

²³ This movement was created in July 2022, also in the heat of the war in Ukraine, to promote patriotic values and encourage education among young people.

Forces (VDV) and served in Chechnya and Kosovo. In 2022 he left his post as mayor of Tambov to enlist as a volunteer commander of a Cossack brigade.

- On 18 September 2024, Captain Vladimir Saibel (born in Ulan-Ude, Republic of Buryatia, 1982) was appointed Deputy Director of the Department of Social Development of the state-owned Russian Railways²⁴, providing support to railway workers who have enlisted as military personnel and their families. He graduated from the Novosibirsk Military Institute and the Novosibirsk Higher Military Command School and served in the special forces (Spetsnaz in Russian) in the Caucasus. In September 2022, he was mobilised as a reservist, was seriously wounded in combat (he lost an arm and a leg) and was awarded the title of Hero of Russia.
- On 25 September 2024, Colonel Evgeny Chintsov was appointed Chairman of the Nizhny Novgorod City Duma. A veteran of Russian Military Intelligence (GRU), in 2022 he commanded a military intelligence unit and later served as deputy commander of the 1st Armoured Army in Ukraine. He was selected and became a part of the first group of the Time of Heroes programme.
- On 2 October 2024, the Russian President signed Decree No. 841/2024 appointing Colonel Artem Zhoga as Presidential Envoy to the Ural Federal District²⁵, replacing Vladimir Yakushev, who was appointed Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council²⁶. In 2022 he commanded the Sparta battalion of the Donetsk People's Militia, where his son Vladimir Zhoga, who was killed in action in March of that year, also served. On 8 December 2023 he made his presence felt during a meeting of the Russian president in the Kremlin with decorated military officers of all wars: in a theatrical informal huddle Zhoga, in uniform, asked Putin to stand for election because the country demanded it. He was also an active participant in the first Time of Heroes meeting with President Putin on 17 June 2024 (discussed above).

On 4 October, the Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council, Yakushev, presented it in Ekaterinburg to the six governors of the regions that make up the Ural Federal District, the part of the country with the largest defence industry and

²⁴ In <https://lenta.ru/news/2024/09/18/stalo-izvestno-o-novom-naznachenii-uchastnika-programmy-vremya-geroev-saybelya/>

²⁵ In <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/page/7>

²⁶ In <https://kommersant.ru/doc/7199341#comments>

the highest per capita income. The Minister of Construction, Housing and Public Utilities of the federal government, Irek Fayzullin, was also in attendance²⁷. He was also appointed by President Putin to the Russian Security Council on 25 October 2024²⁸, the highest Presidential advisory board on security issues and which includes the most important state officials with powers related to security, domestic and foreign policy, emergency management, resources, and economy. For several reasons, this appears to be the most significant and highest-level appointment so far: Zhoga is a politician from one of the newly annexed *oblasts* in southern Ukraine, the position he has been appointed to and the importance of the territory placed under his responsibility²⁹. The Kremlin has therefore sought to give maximum visibility to his promotion as part of an ongoing propaganda campaign aimed at boosting voluntary enlistment with the promise of appointments to positions at all levels of the civil service.

- On 4 October 2024, Major Amir Argamakov (aged 30) was appointed senator for the Republic of Altai in the Federation Council. In 2013 he joined the Armed Forces, graduated from the Moscow Higher Military Command School, was deployed to Syria and in 2023, commanded a Mechanised Infantry Battalion in Ukraine. In 2024 he was appointed Chairman of the SVO Veterans' Union in Altai, and was also selected to be part of the first Time of Heroes group. In February 2024, he was awarded the title of Hero of Russia.
- On 7 October 2024, Andrey Dubrovsky (Uglovaya, 1982) was unanimously elected speaker of the Duma of Tula *oblast*, replacing Nikolay Vorobyov. A graduate in law from the University of the Russian Academy of Education, he has worked in the private sector and was deputy director of a transport company. In 2022 he enlisted as a volunteer to serve in Ukraine. He was selected and became part of the first group of the Time of Heroes programme. Since his appointment, he has been working on the social and labour integration of military personnel returning from the front, to encourage the recruitment of new volunteers.

²⁷ In <https://kommersant.ru/doc/7212369#comments>

²⁸ Presidential Decree No. 911/2024 of 25 October 2024, at <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202410250006>

²⁹ The Ural Federal District consists of the Sverdlovsk, Tyumen, Chelyabinsk, and Kurgan *oblasts*, as well as the Khanty-Mansi and Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrugs, covers an area of 1.82 million square kilometres (10.62% of the country's area) and has a population of 12.2 million.

- On 4 November 2024, Putin signed Decree No. 937/2024 appointing Evgeny Pervyshov as acting governor of Tambov *oblast*³⁰, replacing Maxim Egorov. Pervyshov, a native of the Krasnodar *krai* (territory), took part in the Chechen war in 1995. From 2016 to 2021, he was mayor of the city of Krasnodar and then a deputy in the Duma (lower house of the Russian parliament). In September 2022 he enlisted as a volunteer and served in Ukraine, where he was selected to be part of the first Time of Heroes course. This appointment was part of a round replacing regional governors, including the heads of the Kaluga, Rostov, and Tambov *oblasts* and the Jewish autonomous *okrug*.
- On 5 November 2024, Putin signed Decree No. 942/2024 appointing Maria Kostyuk as acting governor of the same *okrug* in the far east³¹, of which she is a native (she was born in Smidovich in 1977 and graduated from the Birobidzhan State Pedagogical Institute). From 2021 to 2023 he was vice-president of the regional government. Her son, Lieutenant Andrey Kovtun, was killed in action in Ukraine in 2022 and was awarded the title of Hero of Russia. For this reason, she was appointed head of the regional affairs department of the Defenders of the Fatherland Foundation; she was also deputy secretary of public associations and youth affairs for the ruling United Russia party (President Putin's party, headed by former President Dmitry Medvedev). She was appointed Deputy Director of the School of Public Administration at the Presidential Academy and later headed the programme. Notably, she is the only woman to be governor of a region in the Russian Federation.

With this appointment, the Kremlin has pursued the same propaganda goals as in the case of Zhoga: to cast light on her with regard her personal conditions, to highlight her level of commitment and suffering (in this case the loss of a son in the war), and to show the exemplary character of her appointment to positions of public responsibility.

³⁰ In <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/news/75490>

³¹ In <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/news/75498>

Vladimir Putin's succession

In 1998, the then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin took note of Vladimir Putin as the head of internal control in the Property Management Department of the Presidential Administration, where he appeared to be a dedicated and efficient official who was not afraid to act in the interests of others, but who stood out for his loyalty to his superiors. Yeltsin's enquiries were linked to serious allegations of corruption against his own family, especially his son-in-law and daughter, who were accused by the press and opposition politicians of holding power together with a small group of oligarchs to the detriment of the president himself, whose health was deteriorating. At the same time, the country's economic situation continued to worsen, forcing even the previously unthinkable suspension of debt payments, while the living conditions of Russian citizens plummeted.

Within this scenario, Yeltsin sought to appoint a successor based on an essential premise: to ensure his family's and his own immunity from any investigation or prosecution after he left office. He appointed the then-Prime Minister Putin³² who, in Yeltsin's opinion, had the necessary qualities to fulfil the task, and who was completely and solely responsible for his appointment³³.

Thus, after an agreed resignation, Putin became interim president of the Russian Federation on 31 December 1999³⁴, a position that was endorsed in the presidential elections of March 2000. Since then, he has ruled Russia for twenty-four years, either as president (now in five terms), or as prime minister (one term) in an interregnum with Dmitry Medvedev as president, exercising strong control of the state with a seemingly solid power base and considerable public support.

The constitutional reform passed in a referendum in July 2020 allowed him to participate as a candidate once again in presidential elections when an amendment submitted by MP Valentina Tereshkova (the Russian cosmonaut who became the first woman in space on 16 June 1963) to reset the presidential term count to zero was approved. Thus, Putin ran for and won the 15-17 March 2024 presidential election, beginning a fifth term that

³² Earlier, Yeltsin had appointed him head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), one of the offshoots of the former KGB after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

³³ See MYERS, S. *El nuevo zar. Ascenso y reinado de Vladimir Putin*. Ediciones Península. Ediciones Península, Barcelona, 2018 (translated from *The New Tsar. The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin*. Alfred A. Knopf. New York, 2015).

³⁴ The first decree he signed was on guarantees for the former president of the Russian Federation and his family members, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20010219192247/http://www.rg.ru/oficial/doc/ykazi/1763.htm>

will run until 2030, and is legally eligible for another re-election. However, on that date Putin will be seventy-seven years old, so if the leadership is not renewed, the country could find itself in a dynamic similar to that faced by the Soviet leadership in the mid-1980s with ailing octogenarians who succeeded each other within a very short period, after the sudden death of Yury Andropov (precisely the mentor of the forgotten Mikhail Gorbachev) in February 1984³⁵.

The Russian president's succession is therefore on the agenda of the Kremlin's inner circle and will become an increasingly pressing issue as time goes on. This is where the Time of Heroes programme comes into play. As argued in the above-mentioned analysis document on the new generation of Russian oligarchs, Putin is most likely not seeking new loyalties for himself, as he has proven his ability to sustain state power in times of crisis³⁶, but rather to secure a new support base for his future successor, who is not yet known, but who might appear publicly before the next presidential elections scheduled for 2030, due to the biological imperative imposed by Putin's advanced age.

Final considerations

The war in Ukraine has unleashed major processes of change, both internationally and domestically, including in Russia itself, which has been under severe tensions after its armed forces failed to succeed in a surprise operation aimed at bringing Ukraine under the Kremlin's dictates.

However, it seems that the Russian authorities have taken important decisions at this time of crisis, and despite pressure, have not backed down in their war effort against Ukraine by putting more resources into winning the war and, at the same time, initiating internal change processes with a long-term perspective aimed at ensuring the survival of a state increasingly distant from Western democratic standards.

Within this context, the Time of Heroes programme aims in the medium term to generate new state cadres with individuals (men and women) who have fought in the war in

³⁵ In the excellent book by CIMORRA, B. *La caída del Imperio Soviético*. Editorial Actas. Madrid, 2021.

³⁶ We must remember, for example, the rebellion by Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Wagner Group on 23-24 June 2023. See COLOM PIELLA, G. *Wagner y su «marcha por la libertad»: los dos días que estremecieron al Kremlin*. IEEE Opinion Document 70/2023. https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2023/DIEEE070_2023_GUICOL_Wagner.pdf

Ukraine, who have contributed to and support the will to win and who, in many cases, have been wounded in combat, have suffered the loss of family members in combat, or have been decorated for their contribution to the war effort, under the same conservative values. This narrative of heroism by Russian fighters in Ukraine seeks to institutionalise a ruling class of military or war veterans.

But it is also designed for a political succession based on a militarisation and nationalisation of the public administration and other sectors, reinforcing a government structure with a strong martial approach. This plan emphasises a value structure in which sacrifice and loyalty outweigh pluralism and openness, marking a growing ideological estrangement from the West, which could be further entrenched and deepened in the coming years by aggravating the framework of relations with Europe.

Kremlin's ruling circle therefore aims to surround itself with an apparatus of senior officials with proven loyalty (even Prigozhin's betrayal is not forgiven), developing a generation of leaders who are prepared to maintain the *status quo*. But it also aims to create the necessary power bases to allow for an orderly succession at the head of state, both if Putin decides to step down voluntarily and if the Kremlin power circle agrees to undertake his replacement, following a model similar to the one that brought Boris Yeltsin's term in office to an end.

The new business (oligarchic) and civil service elites that are being created would support such an orderly shift of power and ensure the functioning of the state during the transition period. This long-term plan demonstrates how the Kremlin is reinforcing the current system through a carefully orchestrated succession. This is to ensure that after Putin, his replacement will have the backing of both the bureaucratic and popular apparatus derived from a system of wartime loyalties that seeks to avoid the influence of external actors and reinforce the autonomy of the Russian state in an already evident context of global rivalry over the coming decades.

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