NEW EURASIAN STRATEGIES CENTRE

Power and Society in Russia

The Political Transformation Index

June 2025

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This report was prepared by NEST Centre's Laboratory for the Analysis of Transformation Processes, which conducts in-depth research into political, institutional, and social change in Russia, with a focus on long-term trajectories and structural shifts.

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About NEST Centre

Based in London and Washington, D.C., NEST Centre brings together the best expertise on Russia and the surrounding region. Its mission is to identify the forces shaping Russia's long-term future, analyse their impact and develop strategies to bring about peaceful and positive development of the country.

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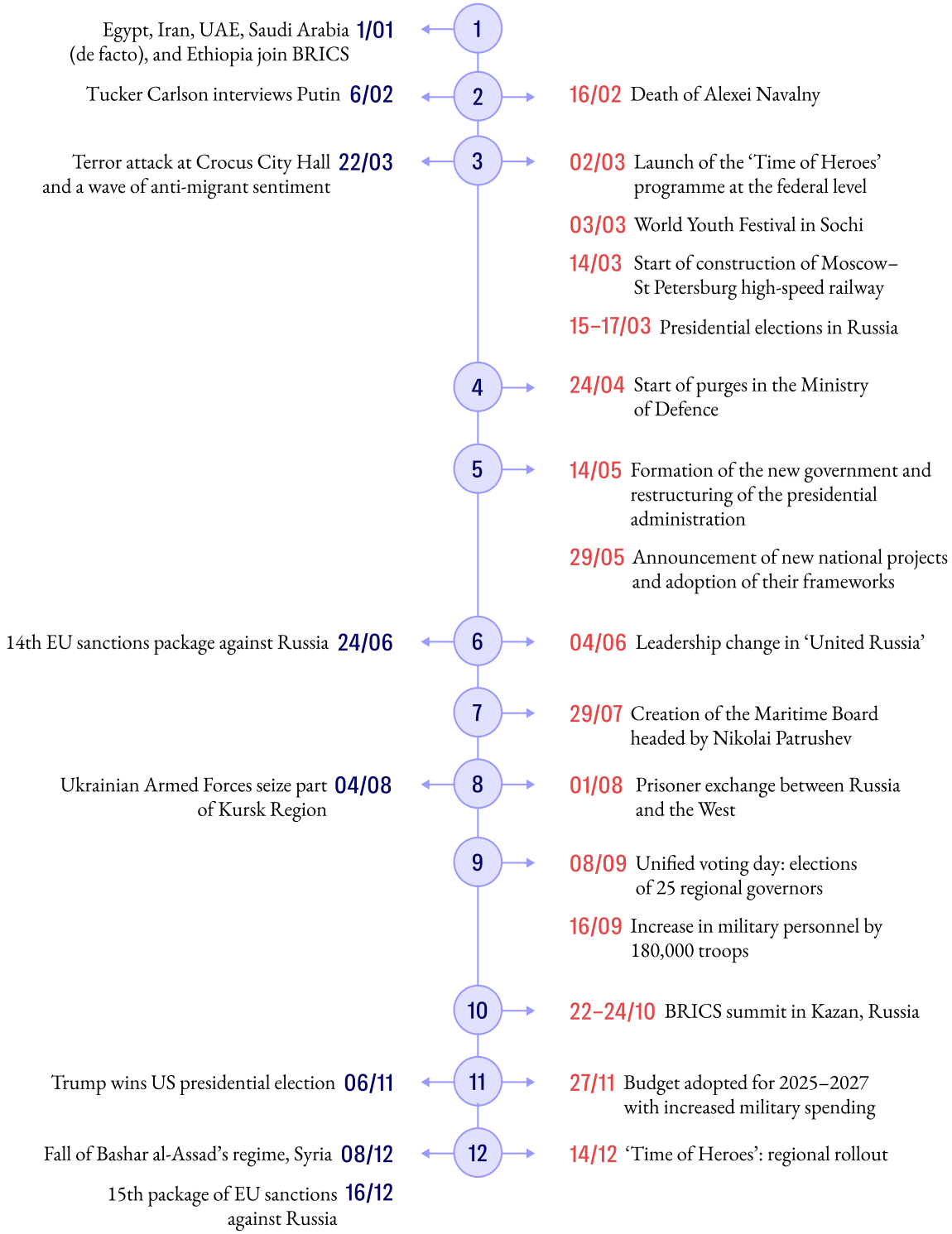
FIG. 1. RUSSIA AND THE WORLD IN 2024. TIMELINE



Introduction

2024 was an eventful year. Both the Russian regime and the way it interacts with society – in fact, the entire political system – experienced significant changes in 2024 (see Fig. 1).

The transformation was gradual in nature, reflecting the continued evolution of trends that first emerged in the spring of 2022 after the start of the full-scale war against Ukraine, as well as earlier impulses from 2020 – the constitutional reform (launched with Putin's speech on 15 January) and the pandemic (marked by his televised address on 25 March).

The most significant developments and acceleration can be observed in the following socio-political phenomena (see Fig. 2):

Personalism and substitution. The 'President Writ Large' has grown stronger against the backdrop of continued institutional weakening and the decline of the main elite clans. Putin-the-leader is increasingly distancing himself from his old associates and relying more and more on personally loyal servants.

State seizure of private property. Requisitions have intensified, with open disregard for property rights and the rule of law on the part of the president, the Prosecutor General's Office, and the judiciary.

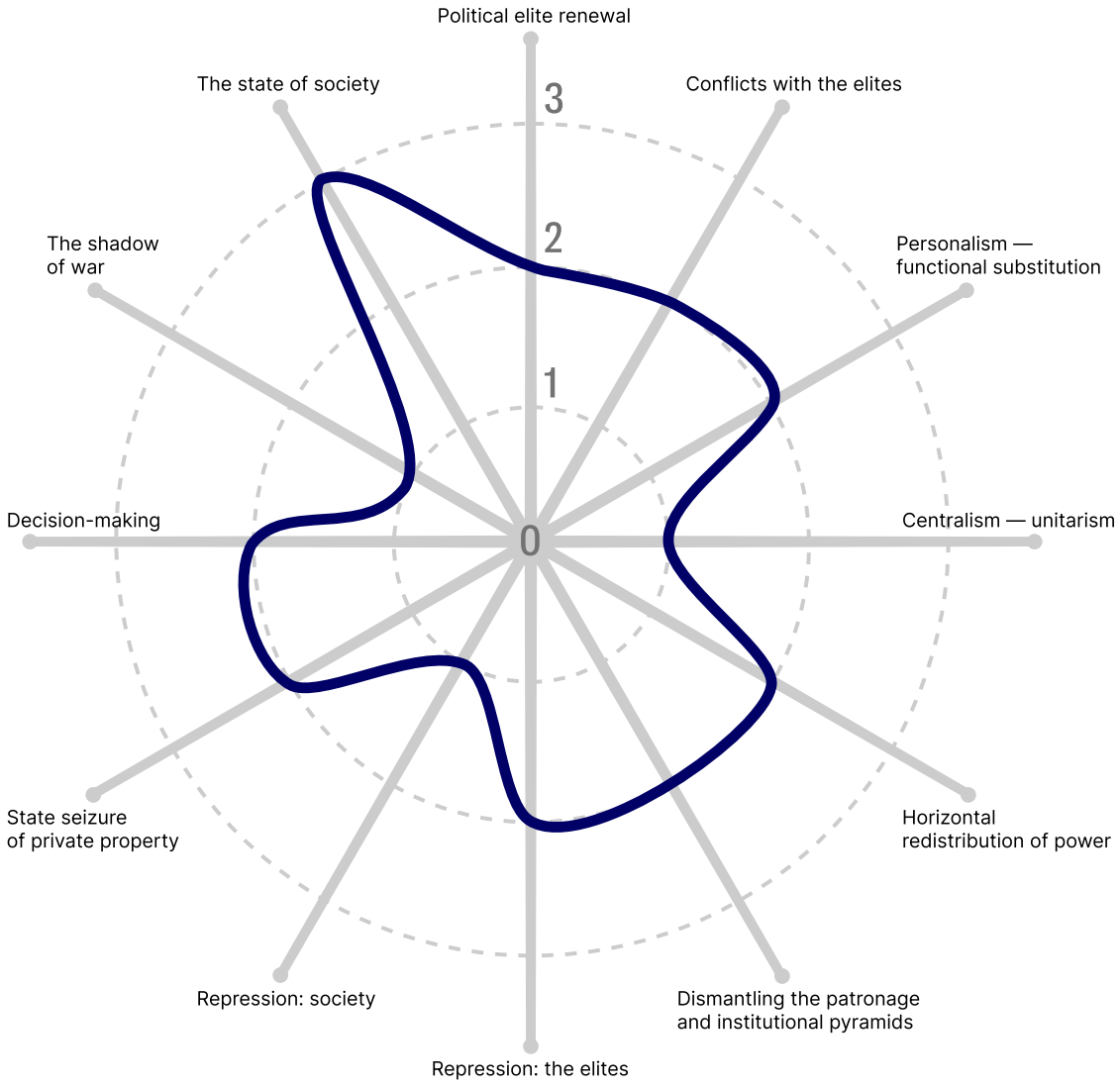
Closed-loop personnel policy. The Putin model appears to have exhausted its capacity for leadership renewal, while the upper ranks of the system are ageing. There has been a sharp expansion of the institute of 'overseers', increasingly staffed by members of the president's 'extended family'.

Shifts in the elite balance. Business is under pressure, corporate pyramids are being dismantled and integrated into a single structure.

At the same time, the following trends remain largely unchanged:

- Continued centralism and centralisation
- Repression directed at members of the elite
- The consolidation of society.

FIG. 2. SHIFTS IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM ALONG KEY VECTORS IN 2024



As a result of the transformation of 2024, the system has become more personalistic. Institutions are no longer functioning independently; they act only when directed by the 'President Writ Large' – the expanded structure of presidential authority that encompasses the presidential administration, the State Council, the Security Council, and various other councils and commissions under Putin (see Fig. 3).

The 'President Writ Large' expanded further in 2024, with the reorganised Maritime Board, the Federal Biomedical Agency, and the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation all transferred from the government to presidential oversight.

New directorates have appeared within the makeup of the administration: for state policy in the humanitarian sphere, in the sphere of the military-industrial complex, and others.

Personalism has intensified as well in the public sphere: the war provided Putin with a dominant position in the view of the security bureaucracy, social conservatives, and, what is especially important, the 'losers' in the process of modernisation – skilled and unskilled industrial workers and the technical *intelligentsia*. Putin himself places particular trust in the veterans of the 'special military operation', but it is too early to speak of them as a fully formed social group.

If Russian society suffered from insufficient social mobility throughout all of the 2000s, the start of the war switched on the social elevators. Broad career opportunities are opening up for those who are ready to fight, are needed by the war economy, are loyal to the regime, and do not entertain any democratic illusions. The urban educated class – participants in and supporters of modernisation – have found themselves on the sidelines.

Besides, a qualitative transformation of power is taking place. The Russian regime has worked out a strategy, and has begun its implementation in two directions:

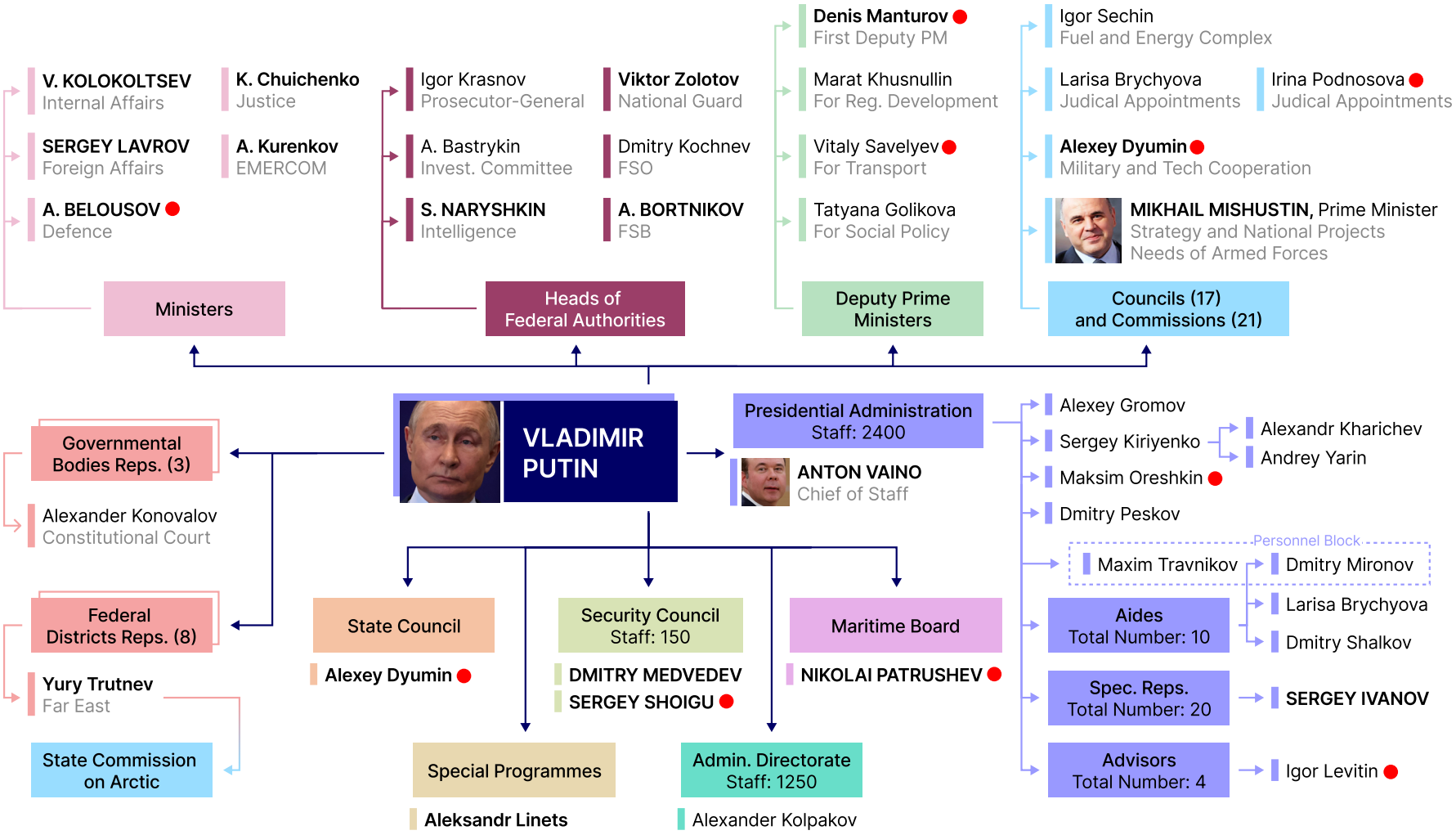
- Preparation for a prolonged standoff with the West.
- Preparation for the transfer of power to a new generation of leaders – to the 'older grandchildren' over the heads of the 'children'.

Although the regime as a whole has aged, relatively young individuals – by the standards of the bureaucratic system – are being appointed to key positions in state institutions, despite lacking substantial management experience. For example, 38-year-old Anton Alikhanov has become the minister of industry and trade, and 39-year-old Dmitry Bakanov is now the head of Roscosmos. Promoting youth to positions that they will 'grow into' is a widespread model for authoritarian regimes. On the one hand, it ensures a nominal change of managers, while on the other, it delays real change by 5–10 years. At the same time, political competition within the system is also declining: the younger cohort is still preparing for it, while the middle generation of leaders has been stripped of any real prospects.

FIG. 3. PRESIDENT WRIT LARGE

Putin's management model is highly personalized, but it is changing as a technocratic model shaped by Prime Minister Mishustin emerges alongside it

● Changes in 2024



ABOUT THE INDEX

The political transformation index is our first attempt at a comprehensive assessment of the transformation of the regime and the start of a large-scale, regularly updated monitoring project.

The Putin regime is unique by its nature, and we have decided not to restrict ourselves to the idea of end-to-end transformation, for example along the democratic/authoritarian axis. The aim of our project is to analyse the multi-faceted transformation of Russian society and the Russian state as a dynamic, evolving process.

The index is calculated annually and consists of a set of scores along a system of vectors pointing to specific shifts. These vectors are:

- **Personalism – functional substitution.** Tracks the degree of personalisation in governance.
- **Centralism and unitarism.** Measures the degree to which power is centralised on the federal executive level, with reduced autonomy for regions and institutions.
- **Horizontal redistribution of power.** Assesses changes in the balance of power across state structures – whether coordination bodies are gaining or losing influence relative to one another.
- **Repression: the elites.** Monitors the scale and frequency of repressive measures targeting elites.
- **Repression: society.** Captures the extent of state coercion against broader society.
- **State seizure of private property.** Reflects the level of state encroachment on private economic assets – through nationalisation, forced transfers, or informal pressure.
- **Political elite renewal.** Measures whether and how new personnel enter the ruling class.
- **Dismantling the patronage and institutional pyramids.** Tracks changes in the structure of power hierarchies, including patronage networks and institutional pyramids.
- **The state of society.** Evaluates shifts in social cohesion, trust, inequality, and public engagement – as well as the emergence of new privileged or marginalised groups.

- **Conflicts within the elites.** Captures signs of intra-elite rivalry, competition for influence, and shifts in the informal balance of power.
- **Decision-making.** Assesses the visibility, transparency, and structure of political decision-making.
- **The shadow of war.** Measures how the war affects domestic politics.

Each of these vectors is assessed using the following scale:

- 0 – absence of changes
- 1 – limited development of previously formed trends
- 2 – substantial development
- 3 – radical change.

If a process is moving in reverse, the same scale is applied with a negative sign.

Analytical comments with respect to each of the vectors provide the rationale for our scores and offer an expanded picture of what is taking place. The scores for each of the vectors are re-evaluated on a regular basis as the situation develops, and supplemented if needed. The vectors of the index are calculated on the basis of instrumental parameters or, where possible, on the basis of expert assessments.

This summary index will be followed by a series of thematic reports on the key directions, to be published separately. The base index offers a snapshot of the situation at the end of 2024, with selected updates from the first half of 2025 included where relevant.

Personalism – functional substitution

The personalistic character of the Putin regime has intensified significantly over the past five years: since 2020 (the constitutional reform), and especially since 2022 – after the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine. The most significant event of 2024 in this context was the presidential election.

The first elections under the new (Putin) Constitution symbolised the transition to a consolidated dictatorship with the weakening of all political institutions except the presidency, and of all elite clans besides Putin's 'extended family'.

In the 15–17 March election, Putin secured 87.3 per cent of the vote, with an official turnout of 77.5 per cent. Three little-known candidates were permitted to participate as nominal opponents. The effective number of candidates in 2024 was 1.3, down from 1.65 in the 2018 elections. This indicator reflects not just how many candidates ran, but how evenly the votes were distributed among them – a lower number means less real competition and a more dominant frontrunner.

As early as 2014, Putin's legitimacy began to rest less on electoral success – that is, winning competitive elections – and more on his image as the nation's leader or chief. This role was further reinforced in 2022 with the outbreak of war and his assumption of the role of supreme commander-in-chief. A chief, by definition, does not compete seriously in elections – he cannot have credible opponents, as that would undermine his very status.

According to Levada Center data, the level of trust in the president in 2024 increased noticeably compared with 2023. 80 per cent of respondents had complete trust and a mere 5 per cent did not trust Putin – against 76 per cent and 8 per cent a year earlier.[1] The presidency remains the only powerful institution in Russia, continually consolidating authority at the expense of all other institutions without exception. As a result, confidence in institutions in general diminishes, as does their role.

The raw results of social surveys do not provide a complete picture, as they are influenced by the 'halo effect' – where trust in the president is partially transferred to other institutions. The relative trust in these institutions, expressed as a proportion of the trust placed in the president, is as follows:

- The army – 0.86
- The state security organs – 0.79

- Regional authorities – 0.6
- The State Duma – 0.59
- The courts – 0.51
- Big business – 0.39.

The annual '100 Leading Politicians of Russia' ranking by Nezavisimaya Gazeta offers insight into the broad contours of the Russian 'Olympus' – one that is more administrative than political in nature.[2] In 2024, against the background of large-scale personnel reshuffles, 550 changes were recorded in the rankings of specific persons (against 492 in 2023) and 571 changes in job positions (against 476 a year earlier). The example of the Security Council secretary illustrates clearly that influence in Russian politics depends more on the individual than on the position itself. In 2023, this position was held by Nikolai Patrushev, and he was ranked 7th in the influence rating. In 2024, despite holding the very same position, Sergey Shoigu was ranked 31st.

The 'extended family', including Putin's relatives, the children of his associates, as well as aides, bodyguards, and university classmates, accounts for over 40 per cent of the appointments to top positions in 2024. The overall influence rating of the 'President Writ Large' increased from 111 in 2023 to 139 in 2024. It had comprised 21.4 per cent of the sum total in 2023; in 2024 this figure was 24.3 per cent.

ELITE CLANS

Elite clans are being weakened as institutions erode, since clan influence is exercised – in one form or another – through formal and informal institutional structures.

In Yury Kovalchuk's clan, for example, the erratic career path of his son Boris is particularly telling. After stepping down early as head of the energy company 'Inter RAO', he passed briefly through the Presidential Control Directorate before becoming chairman of the Accounts Chamber. Formally, it is a high-ranking position – in reality, an honorary retirement at not quite 50.

A blow from the authorities also struck the clan of Igor Sechin, a situational ally of Kovalchuk. Sechin – chairman of the board of directors of 'Rosneftegaz' – failed miserably in the development of 'Vostok Oil', breaking a promise made to Putin. Besides, Sechin was unable to handle problems with shipbuilding – this sector had to be handed over to Andrey Kostin (VTB bank) and Nikolai Patrushev (the Maritime Board).

The head of yet another clan, Sergey Chemezov, could not handle another important matter – civilian aircraft manufacturing, which provoked Putin's fury and led to the resignation of the heads of the United Aircraft Company (UAC).

Mikhail Mishustin demonstrated technical efficiency as head of the government, but ran into a humiliating delay during the official announcement of his candidacy for a new term. Mishustin also lost part of his team.

Sergey Kiriyenko came out more a loser than a winner during the formation of the new presidential administration (PA). In particular, he lost control over the State Council.

Moscow mayor Sergey Sobyanin survived the year without significant losses and even acquired a controlling stake in the leadership of 'United Russia' (UR) through his protégé Vladimir Yakushev.

FUNCTIONAL SUBSTITUTION

During all the years of Putin's rule there has been a steady reduction in the role of relatively independent political institutions, and their replacement by substitutes – functional analogues under the control of the president, deprived of direct legal capacity. Examples of this are the State Council, the Security Council, the Accounts Chamber, and other kinds of councils and commissions under the president. The list of positions in these substitutes already numbers in the hundreds, and the growth of this list is starting to slow naturally.

The activity of the political parties, the Central Electoral Commission, and the structure of 'independent observers' (most of whom are, in fact, state-aligned) around the 2024 presidential elections can serve as an example of the weak individual agency of institutions. According to the script prepared by the presidential administration, only three candidates approved by the Kremlin were able to 'compete' with Putin – and these were not even the strongest representatives of their respective parties.

The clearing of the political stage continued under the label of 'foreign agent' – a modern echo of the Soviet-era term 'enemy of the people'. On 15 May 2024, a federal law was adopted prohibiting foreign agents from running for office in elections, from being observers at elections or candidates' agents and their authorised representatives. As a result, three deputies to the Moscow City Duma received the status of foreign agent in Russia and lost the right to be elected anew to the city parliament. Several regional and local deputies lost their mandates.

In the case of substitutes, three main points of their growth emerged in 2024:

- New directorates in the presidential administration, transforming it into a *de facto* analogue of the Communist Party's Central Committee, as it increasingly duplicates the functions of the government.

- The Maritime Board under the president with three councils: for strategic development of the Navy (Nikolai Patrushev); for defence of the national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic (vice-premier and presidential envoy Yury Trutnev); for development and support of the maritime activity (head of the Presidential Directorate for National Maritime Policy Sergey Vakhrukov).
- The 'Time of Heroes' personnel programme – a specialised initiative for participants in the war in Ukraine, aimed at training new civil servants and shaping a new elite.

Putin's system of placing 'overseers' from his extended circle at the helm of ministries and agencies has gained renewed momentum. These people are Irina Podnosova (Supreme Court), Alexey Dyumin (State Council and the defence complex), Anna and Sergey Tsivilev (Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Energy), Valery Pikalev (Federal Customs Service), and Boris Kovalchuk (Accounts Chamber).

With the replacement of its secretary (Shoigu for Patrushev), the Security Council has likewise lost relative independence. A similar situation can be observed the Accounts Chamber and the State Council. The replacement of not only the entire leadership of 'United Russia' but also its model of governance – shifting from a politico-public structure to a purely bureaucratic one – has led to a marked weakening of the party.

The composition of many presidential councils and commissions has been refreshed, including that of the Commission for Strategic Development of the Fuel and Energy Sector and Environmental Security – of paramount importance from the point of view of state budget revenues. Igor Sechin remains the executive secretary of the commission. Its new composition brings together executives from oil and gas companies and state corporations, government officials, academics, and members of the security services. The commission's working groups – one focused on the fuel and energy sector (FEC) itself, the other on improving efficiency and transparency within FEC companies – are chaired by 'Zarubezhneft' Director General Sergey Kudryashov and FSB Deputy Director Sergey Korolev, respectively.

At the regional level, the system of 'party' governors – in place for over a decade – continued to be dismantled. The governors of Smolensk and Omsk Regions were replaced in 2023, followed by the governor of Khabarovsk Krai in 2024. As a result, the LDPR party lost its sole representative in the governors' corps, while 'A Just Russia' now counts one governor in its ranks instead of two.

The Kremlin's long arms have even reached down to municipal organs of power, which had faded into the deep background with the start of the full-scale war.

In 2025, Putin signed a law that formally eliminates nationwide elections of mayors – they are now going to be appointed by governors. The principal work on this law had been carried out back in 2024.

TABLE 1. GROWTH OF PERSONALISM: INDICATORS

Person/ institution	2023	2024	Notes
Rating of the 'President Writ Large'	21.4%	24.3%	An increase in influence by nearly 3%
The 'extended family' in personnel appointments	insignificant	40%+	Increase in influence in top appointments
Effective number of candidates in presidential elections	1.65% (2018)	1.31%	Sharp reduction in electoral competition
Trust/distrust in the president (according to Levada Center data)	76% vs. 8%	80% vs. 5%	Increase in trust
The government in counterbalance to the PA and the State Council			Redistribution of functions and powers from the government in favour of the PA and the State Council

Source: The NEST Centre's assessment based on various influence indicators

Score: 2 – substantial development

- There was significant growth of the regime's personalistic features – a trend reinforced by the war, the presidential elections, and the ageing of Putin-the-leader, who is distancing himself from old associates and increasingly relying on loyal servants.
- De-institutionalisation continued, enabling short-term crisis management – but also heightening the risk of institutional paralysis. The leadership of key ministries and agencies saw a sudden and substantial influx of Putin's personal overseers.
- The presidential administration began rolling out institutional substitutes aimed at integrating participants in the war in Ukraine back into civilian life.
- Institutions connected with elections and local self-government grew weaker.

Centralism and unitarism

Russia is a country that is *de facto* unitary and centralised beyond measure. Nevertheless, during the pandemic – and even more so during the war in Ukraine – the system required flexibility and the capacity for swift action. While Moscow delegated certain powers to the regions to manage urgent challenges, it retained centralised control over the distribution of resources.

During the time of the war, the regions were supposed to produce 'volunteer battalions' and keep supporting them with fresh personnel and ammunition, on the Kremlin's orders. The responsibility for supplying personnel for the regular army rests on the regions' shoulders as well. In addition, the regions are expected to take cities and districts in the occupied Ukrainian territories 'under their wing' – providing them with financial and staffing support, as well as equipment and personnel.

The lack of regional independence or political weight is reflected as well in the expert rating of top 100 leading politicians of Russia.[3] There are only seven representatives of the regional elite, and not a single municipal politician.

Moscow mayor Sergey Sobyanin was the only regional figure to appear among the top five most trusted politicians, according to Levada Center surveys. Trust in Sobyanin hovers in the 3–5 per cent range nationally (presumably, in Moscow his trust levels are much higher). The last nationally recognised municipal politician was Sardana Avksentyeva, former mayor of Yakutsk (2018–2021), deputy head of the 'New People' party faction in the State Duma. As of now, directly elected mayors of regional capitals remain only in three cities across Siberia and the Russian Far East: Abakan (Khakassia), Anadyr (Chukotka), and Khabarovsk. In Buryatia and Yakutia, direct election of mayors of regional centres was abandoned in 2024.

According to the new Putin edition of the constitution, local self-administration has ceased being a stand-alone power – it now forms the lower tier of public (read: state) power. That said, adoption of the corresponding law on organs of local self-administration was stalled all three years of the war due to resistance from some of the regions' authorities. Stalled for all three years, the draft law proposed at the end of 2021 was finally adopted only at the start of 2025.

The original plan to unify the two-tier system of local self-government into a single level – as already implemented in some regions – fell through, forcing the Kremlin to compromise by leaving the final decision to the discretion of individual regions. As a result, Tatarstan publicly objected to the initial draft of the reform.

It is worth noting that Tatarstan occasionally plays the opposite role – serving as the initiator of federal legislative proposals, presumably at the behest of the central authorities.

On the whole, administrative, political, and financial control over the situation in the regions remains in the hands of the Kremlin. No cracks in the monolith of Russian unitarism can be observed.

The campaign to replace local heads of regions with outside appointees, actively launched in 2018, appears to have come to an end. In 2024, the heads of ten regions, including five taken into the federal government and the administration of the president after an 'internship' in the regions, were replaced according to the 'like for like' principle: outsiders were replaced by other outsiders, while locals were succeeded by local figures.

Of the five governors who had been transferred to ministerial posts in Mishustin's new government, four had been parachuted into the regions from the federal government and the State Duma in the last cycle of replacements. Only Sergey Tsivilev transitioned into a governorship from the business sector – but as the husband of Putin's first cousin once removed, and a member of the president's 'extended family', he occupies a unique position.

From the Kremlin's point of view, the regions are the territorial subdivisions of a single unitary corporation. Work experience in these 'subdivisions' is useful, but not mandatory. In 2024, the Kremlin replaced 13 heads of regions: eight in the spring within the framework of the pre-election rotation, and five in the autumn. Five of the spring-time governors, who had served a full first five-year term or had begun a second, were summoned to Moscow – as ministers into the government and into the presidential administration. All of them had in their time been sent to the regions from the federal structures and had gone through the informal 'school of ministers'.

The case of Samara Region governor Dmitry Azarov, elected a year earlier to a second term, is unusual. Thanks to the joint efforts of *siloviki* [security agencies] and the Kremlin's political bloc, Azarov proved unable to form a team, as key appointments were blocked or imposed from above. In the autumn, a similar incident took place in Kursk Region, where the Kremlin replaced a governor who had taken up the position half a year before and had been officially elected several weeks prior to his dismissal.

While the 2018–2020 cycle saw an active replacement of local elites with Moscow-appointed bureaucrats in the governors' corps, the current approach appears more cautious – particularly with regard to troubled regions. New governors have stronger regional ties than their predecessors (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. REGIONAL LEADERSHIP TURNOVER IN 2024: PROFILES OF OUTGOING AND INCOMING GOVERNORS

Region	Outgoing Governor	Age	Years in office	Local Roots (1 to 5)	Transition month	New Governor	Previous activity	Age	Years at previous position	Local Roots (1 to 5)
Khabarovsk	Mikhail Degtyaryov	43	4	1	May	Dmitry Demeshin	Deputy Prosecutor General for Far East and Siberia	48	4	2
Kaliningrad	Anton Alikhanov	38	7	3	May	Aleksei Besprozvannykh	Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade of Russia	45	6	1
Kursk	Roman Starovoit	52	5	2	May	Aleksei Smirnov	First Deputy Governor of Kursk Region	51	3	5
Tula	Alexey Dyumin	52	7	1	May	Dmitry Milyaev	First Deputy Governor of Tula Region	49	1	1
Kemerovo	Sergey Tsivilev	63	6	2	May	Ilya Seredyuk	First Deputy Governor of Kuzbass	49	1	1
Khanty-Mansi AO	Natalya Komarova	69	14	3	May	Ruslan Kukharuk	Mayor of Tyumen	45	5	3
Samara	Dmitry Azarov	54	7	4	May	Vyacheslav Fedorishchev	First Deputy Governor of Tula Region	35	1	3
Altai Republic	Oleg Khorokhordin	52	5	2	June	Andrei Turchak	First Deputy Speaker of the Federation Council	49	3	1
Rostov	Vasily Golubev	67	14	3	November	Yuri Slyusar	President of UAC (United Aircraft Corporation)	49	3	1
Tambov	Maksim Yegorov	47	3	2	November	Evgeny Pervyshov	State Duma Deputy (8th convocation)	47	1	4
Jewish Autonomous Region	Rostislav Goldstein	55	4	4	November	Maria Kostyuk	Program Director, 'Time of Heroes'	48	1	3
Komi	Vladimir Uyba	66	4	2	November	Rostislav Goldstein	Acting Governor of Jewish Autonomous Region	55	4	3
Kursk	Alexey Smirnov	51	-	-	December	Alexander Khinshtein	State Duma Deputy (8th convocation)	50	4	1
Average		**55**	**6**	**2**		**Average**		**48**	**4**	**3**

Source: The NEST Centre's internal assessment

In the development of the new national projects for 2025–2030, regional governors took part in the work of project committees – appointed as deputy heads in their capacity as chairs of the relevant State Council commissions. Their involvement might not have played a big role, but symbolically it was important. When the adoption of the programmes started to fall behind schedule, Putin reminded the government of the need to provide the regions in a timely manner with specific milestones relating to the national projects as well as the corresponding funding.

Particularly noteworthy is the appointment of public-facing politicians as heads of Vologda Region (Georgy Filimonov), Samara Region (Vyacheslav Fedorishchev), and Kursk Region (Alexander Khinshtein). All are outside appointees and populists; that said, their populism is directed not against the central authorities, but against local oligarch businessmen. Andrey Turchak, the only federal-level politician to take up a regional post, was appointed governor of the Altai Republic; he no longer plays a public role in federal politics.

Contributing as well to regional consolidation is a growth in the regions' financial dependence on the centre, and a reduction in regional contrasts. If a flattening out towards the middle is taking place in economics, then in politics it is a flattening towards the bottom.

According to the 'Expert RA' rating agency's data, the share of inter-budgetary transfers in 2024 fell to 17.3 per cent – this is 2.7 percentage points lower than in 2023.[4] The reduction can be explained by an increase in the regions' own tax and non-tax incomes (by 13.5 per cent in 2024). Equalisation transfers from the federal budget were received by 63 regions, while 22 regions (excluding the four occupied territories) received none. In 2023, the figures were 62 and 23, respectively.

A serious challenge to the vertical system of territorial administration developed under Putin was posed by events in the second half of last year, when the Ukrainian army seized part of Kursk Region. Neither the local nor regional authorities – nor the emissaries sent from Moscow – were able to function effectively in the emergency. Personnel changes made no difference, nor did the introduction of a hands-on management regime.

Standing alone among the Russian regions is Chechnya. Its leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, has built his own political regime, connected with Putin's through vassal relations. He combines the positions of a long-time head of a region and chief of his own security structure. Some time ago one could regard him as a federal-level politician, but now it would be more appropriate to see him as a newsmaker.

Score: 1 – limited development of previously formed trends

- The concentration of authority and assets at the very top has reached a level where it cannot grow further, and indeed this would not be in the regime's interests.
- Since 2020, and especially since 2022, a forced and limited movement toward partial decentralisation has begun: the regime has delegated some of the responsibility for resolving its long-time problems on to the regions.
- Decentralisation, even to such a low degree and accompanied by tight administrative and financial control on the part of the Kremlin, shows the well-known adaptability of the system and increases its robustness.

Horizontal redistribution of power

The executive branch of power has dominated the Russian regime since the end of 1993. The degree of independence of the representative and judiciary branches is d irectly dependent on the strength or weakness of the Kremlin. Currently, the Kremlin is stronger than ever; it has taken over the administrative, financial, personnel, security and other levers and has obtained tight control over all spheres of the state's activity. This control, not always formal prior to 2020, was officially enshrined in Putin's 'reformed' Constitution. 2024 can be regarded as a year of continuation of Putin's constitutional reform.

The fiction of the Duma's and Federation Council's new powers concerning the confirmation of the government was demonstrated for the first time. The parliament, naturally, had no influence on the composition of the government, but was merely formalising decisions already adopted by the Kremlin.

Expansion of the 'President Writ Large' continued at the government's expense – ever more government functions are *de facto* controlled by the presidential administration or by Putin personally.

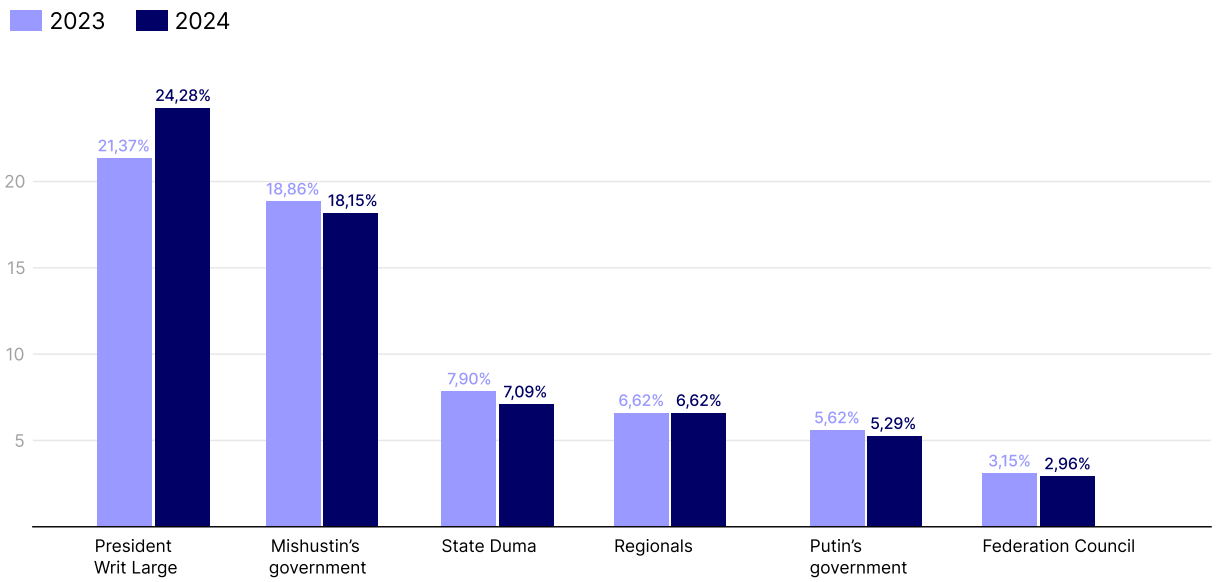
The de-privatisation and nationalisation of private assets at the behest of the Kremlin has shown a new stage in the deterioration of the judicial power; noticeable repressions in the judicial corps were carried out as a warning.

A law was prepared (and signed by Putin in 2025) abolishing the institution of elected mayors in regional centres – they will now be appointed by the governors. Municipal reform did not end with the complete dismantling of the institution as such – remnants of this level of power have been preserved as a concession to large ethnic republics.

The 'President Writ Large' dominates over all branches of power; assessing the redistribution of power between them therefore gets quite difficult. One of the ways of assessing is to trace the representation of officials from various branches of power among the hundred leading politicians of Russia (see Fig. 4).

From the rating, it is clear that the power of the 'President Writ Large' has grown stronger at the expense of the government, including that part of it which is directly subordinate to the president; one can also see the relatively insignificant role that the Federal Assembly and the regions play. The Federal Assembly is represented in the rating by eleven people (hereinafter – ranks in cardinal numbers).

FIG. 4. DISTRIBUTION OF THE HUNDRED LEADING POLITICIANS BY CENTRES OF POWER



Source: The NEST Centre's assessment based on the 'Top 100 leading politicians' rating by Nezavisimaya Gazeta

These are both speakers – Vyacheslav Volodin (rank 17 in the rating in 2024; 18 in 2023) and Valentina Matviyenko (ranks 22 and 23, respectively), their first deputies, and the heads of the Duma factions. There are one or two top 'United Russia' functionaries in both the Federation Council and the Duma. All the senators and deputies taken together account for 10.1 per cent of the total rating in 2024 (11.1 per cent in 2023). Their overall number has fallen as well – from 12 in 2023 to 11 in 2024.

As is traditional, the judicial power is only modestly represented in the hundred influential politicians – by the two heads of the highest courts: the Supreme (Podnosova, 78 in 2024; 79 in 2023) and the Constitutional (Zorkin, 97 in 2024). Higher positions are held by the representative of the president in the Constitutional Court (Alexander Konovalov, 83–84 in 2024; 76 in 2023) and chief of the Main Legal Directorate of the President Larisa Brychyova (55 in 2024; 60 in 2023). Chairman of the Supreme Court Irina Podnosova is a classmate of Putin's from St Petersburg (Leningrad) University, who ended up on the Supreme Court in 2020 and represents not so much the pinnacle of the judiciary as Putin personally.

The Duma demonstrated a high degree of consolidation in voting in 2024, especially on key issues. The majority of deputies, irrespective of what faction they belonged to, voted identically. Last year, the Duma considered 1,086 legislative initiatives, 564 of which became federal laws.

Practically all the government's draft laws were adopted (their overall number was 265, which comprises 22 per cent of the total number of draft laws). A mechanism for accelerated consideration of the government's draft laws by the Federal Assembly has been in effect since 2022. This mechanism was not used in 2024, but some important laws, including the law on the budget, were adopted in short time frames.

The shift of certain functions from the government to the presidential institution – notably through the establishment of the Maritime Board and new directorates within the presidential administration responsible for the military-industrial complex was examined in the chapter 'Personalism – functional substitution'.

In the view of experts, the balance between the president's government and the prime minister's government has shifted only marginally. In 2023, five members of the government directly subordinate to the president entered into the country's first hundred influential politicians – their aggregate influence comprised 5.6 per cent of the overall sum for the hundred. In 2024, these same five accounted for 5.3 per cent. There were 19 direct subordinates of the prime minister in the top 100 in 2023; in 2024 there were 18. Their total weight dropped from 18.9 per cent to 18.2 per cent.

Formal discussion of and voting on candidates to become members of Mishustin's government in the State Duma lasted three days, from 11 to 14 May 2024. Consultations in the Federation Council on the heads of the security agencies, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and other presidential structures took even less time: 13 May in committees, and 14 May at the plenary session. All the candidates submitted by Putin and Mishustin received full support.

One telling detail illustrates the balance of power between the government and the State Duma. During the formation of Mishustin's new cabinet in May 2024, three ministers were left without seats in the government. Yet by September, all three had become State Duma deputies through by-elections – and were promptly appointed to senior roles: one as a deputy speaker and two as chairs of key committees.

Repression plays a far from marginal role in shaping the configuration of the presidency, government, Federal Assembly, and the courts. In 2024, it was used primarily as a tool of warning: targeted dismissals and prosecutions affected several deputy ministers, two senators, and the leadership of regional courts – a practice that first emerged in 2023. A criminal investigation is currently underway against a group of individuals from the judicial system in Rostov Region. The FSB has also intervened in neighbouring Krasnodar Krai, where Alexander Chernov – chairman of the Krasnodar Krai Court from 1994 to 2019 – and members of his family are facing charges over breaches of anti-corruption laws.

The situation is different at the regional level than at the federal – above all by virtue of centralism. In the regions, both the judicial power and the representative power are subordinate to a significant degree to the 'federals'. Business has become a more active player: in many regions, the party branches operate in all but name like franchises – they are run not by party leaders from above, but by local businessmen.

In the regions, the executive power, with support from the federal centre, is gradually taking authority away from the representative organs. The situation is the opposite in the judicial branch: show-trial criminal cases against current and former chairmen of the courts in Rostov and Novosibirsk Regions, as well as in Krasnodar Krai, are aimed at breaking up the close ties between the judicial system, the local executive power, and business.

The course of municipal reform and the revised law on local self-government highlight both the subordinate role of municipal authorities and the ongoing tug-of-war between federal and regional levels over issues the Kremlin does not see as fundamentally important. The draft law 'On the General Principles of the Organisation of Local Self-Government within the Unified System of Public Authority' was adopted in the first reading on 25 January 2022. The Duma came back to considering it only in the autumn session of 2024. The second reading was scheduled for 12 December; one day before that, the Council of the Duma decided to postpone consideration of the question to 2025.

The key sticking point was the abolition of city and village settlements in favour of a single-tier system of local self-government based on urban and municipal districts. A new redaction of the law on local self-administration (LSA), granting regions the right to decide for themselves whether to change the two-tier LSA system to a single-tier one, has already been adopted by the Duma, approved by the Federation Council, and signed by the president.

Score: 2 – substantial development

- Executive power grew noticeably stronger following the constitutional reform – above all, the president's authority; gestures toward the Federal Assembly remained largely symbolic.
- The Kremlin, and Putin personally, tightened their grip on the judiciary at both the federal and regional levels.
- Judges and parliamentarians continued to lose what limited autonomy they once had.

Repression: the elites

The frequency of repressions in relation to the elite rose sharply after 2014 – with Putin's transition from electoral legitimacy to that of chief – and has been holding steady ever since. The difference is that there are fewer and fewer elite groups left that do not fall under the repressions. If high posts previously provided protection from repressions, the positions of governor (since 2015), federal minister (since 2016), senator (since 2019), and head of a regional court (since 2023) have now been removed from the list of untouchables.

The scope and severity of the repressions or the rationale behind them remained unchanged in 2024. The highest-ranking officials arrested at the federal level were deputy ministers: of defence, energy, and culture. Two senators fell victim to the repressions: a businessman and a former governor; of the 'regionals' – two former heads of regional courts were prosecuted.

At the Ministry of Defence, where a personnel purge took place (see Fig. 5), six of minister Sergey Shoigu's deputies were fired, along with Shoigu himself. Three of the six were taken into custody and are under investigation. They are suspected of receiving bribes. Also under investigation are several Ministry of Defence contractors associated with Shoigu's deputies.

The purges in the Ministry of Defence, like the previous time, when minister Serdyukov was fired in 2012, were public and played to sentiments in the military community, for whom the minister and his team remained outsiders. Following the cases brought against Ministry of Defence officials, numerous investigations were also launched into commercial entities linked to them, and subsequently into individuals from Shoigu's circle in other state institutions. This campaign is likely to spread even further.

No other sector has experienced such a clear concentration of repressive measures as the Ministry of Defence. When it comes to specific positions, however, a wide range of institutions has come under scrutiny: Rosatom, Rosgvardiya [National Guard], the Administrative Directorate of the President, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Digital Development, the Investigative Committee, the Federal Service for the Execution of Punishments, the Federal Protection Service, and others.

FIG. 5. PERSONNEL PURGES IN THE MINISTRY OF DEFENCE, 2024

23 April

Timur Ivanov
Deputy Minister

Detained for bribery and embezzlement

12 May

Sergey Shoigu
Minister

Reassigned as Secretary of the Security Council

14 May

Yuri Kuznetsov
Head of the Main Personnel Directorate, Ministry of Defence

Detained for bribery

17 May

Ivan Popov
Commander of the 58th Army

Convicted of fraud and forgery; sentenced to 5 years

20 May

Yuri Sadovenko
Deputy Minister

Dismissed from office

21 May

Vladimir Verteletsky
Head of the Department for State Defence Procurement

Detained for bribery and abuse of office

22 May

Vadim Shamarin
Head of the Main Communications Directorate

Detained for bribery; sentenced to seven years in a strict-regime colony

17 June

Ruslan Tsalikov, Tatyana Shevtsova, Nikolai Pankov, Pavel Popov
Deputy Ministers

Removed from office

26 July

Dmitry Bulgakov
Deputy Minister

Dismissed in 2022; arrested in 2024 for embezzlement and organised crime

5 August

Vladimir Shesterov
Deputy Head for Innovations in the Armed Forces

Charged with large-scale embezzlement

29 August

Pavel Popov
Deputy Minister

Dismissed on 17 June; charged with embezzlement in August

2 September

Valery Mumindzhanov
Deputy Commander, Leningrad Military District

Detained for bribery

28 October

Alexander Ogloblin
Head of a Department in the Communications Directorate

Charged with large-scale bribery

Source: The NEST Centre's internal assessment

There has been a marked increase in repressive actions against former officials – even after a significant time out of office, notably at Rosnano, the Administrative Directorate of the President, the Ministry of Transport, and Rosgvardiya. Repressions against former officials are advantageous in that they create a deterrent effect, but do not destabilise the system.

A clear example is a corruption case dating back to 2009–2014, involving two former deputy chiefs of the Presidential Administrative Directorate, Ivan Malyushin and Sergey Kovalev, as well as the widow of a third former deputy, with 16 other individuals and four construction companies also listed as respondents.

Between 2003 and 2014, Ivan Malyushin was the right hand man of the powerful administrative director of the president Vladimir Kozhin, now a senator from Moscow, while their wives were developing a joint business. The case against Malyushin was initiated back in 2019, was twice dismissed and then reopened anew, and at the end of 2023; he and the other respondents were found guilty. The court ordered them to pay 1.5 billion roubles ($18.5 million), and to forfeit 14 apartments and 118 non-residential properties in Moscow.

It would seem that the misdeed had been punished and justice had triumphed, but at the beginning of 2024 another court began hearing a new case against the 75-year-old former official. This time, it was an issue of exceeding official authority: Malyushin was accused of leasing a parcel of land in the centre of Moscow belonging to the Administrative Directorate of the President to a private firm, the beneficiary of which was a US company. Under the new case, the Prosecutor General's Office was able to not only achieve recognition of the lease agreement as invalid, but also to transfer the complex of buildings being constructed on the leased land into state ownership.

When posts are taken away from former officials and deputies, this is often framed as serving the geostrategic interests of the state – in practice, this refers to broader political aims such as responding to Western sanctions and compensating for lost export markets through the redistribution of major corporate assets, including in the oil and gas sector, food industry, and others. When Deputy Prosecutor General Igor Tkachev – known for targeting major oligarchs – begins pursuing a 2,500-square-metre plot and an unfinished building, it signals a shift in the rules of the game. Under these new rules, lifetime immunity no longer applies to an official's freedom or property, remaining in place – and even then, conditionally – only for the duration of their service.

Today, officials and corrupt actors are being offered a form of indulgence: a contract with the Ministry of Defence that includes deployment to the front. In 2024, a law was passed exempting individuals serving in the 'special military operation' from criminal liability and punishment.

Those not yet convicted but already entangled in the legal system can also take advantage of this option. The war – and the threat of being sent to the battlefield – has become a tool of both punishment and purification.

Among the highest-ranking current regional officials subjected to repressions are 20 vice-governors, the mayors of Astrakhan, Petrozavodsk, and Sochi, and ten heads of territorial structures of the law-enforcement organs (most of all in Sverdlovsk Region and St Petersburg). Here too, repressive measures are mostly directed at former high-ranking officials, rather than current ones. Examples include the former governor of Ryazan Region (2017–2022), the ex-chairman of the Krasnodar Krai Court (1994–2019), and the former head of the Main Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) for St Petersburg and Leningrad Region (2012–2019). In addition to St Petersburg, senior MIA officials were also detained in Tula Region.

Purges of regional elites happened most actively in Samara Region, where the governor himself was replaced, as well as in Krasnodar Krai, and in Ivanovo Region.
In Omsk Region, repressions followed on the heels of a change of governor.
A standard pattern was applied: repressive measures took place both before and after changes in corporate leadership – either pushing for such changes or following them, particularly when protection from powerful patrons had weakened. The most common charges addressed at regional elites were bribes for general patronage, theft during the construction of automobile roads, and organisation of unlawful migration.

Score: 2 – substantial development

- Targeted repressive measures are applied against one segment of the federal elite, while the status quo remains largely unchanged for regional elites.
- The system as a whole finds itself in homeostatic equilibrium with the retention of a relatively stable level of elite repressions.
- Individual bodies, both regional and functional, periodically experience increased pressure – during transition from one state of equilibrium to another, new one.

Repression: society

Paradoxically, during the war years, and in 2024 in particular, the overall repressiveness of the regime has grown but without unleashing the criminal repression machine: the number of cases, both those of a political character and general criminal ones, remains largely unchanged. The climate of fear is instead fuelled by the openness of prosecutions and the performative severity of sentences, with individuals now receiving punishments for social media posts that were previously reserved for active involvement in opposition activity. The authorities are not impeding the dissemination of information about political trials; at times they do not even close the sessions of military courts, and allow the press in. This is the first trend.

The second trend is the diffusion of repressive functions throughout state agencies not directly connected with law-enforcement activity. New laws are being adopted that allow non-criminal and extra-judicial repressions, such as placement on all manner of registers that lead to a restriction of rights (to participate in certain kinds of activity, to dispose of property, to leave the country, and even to drive a car). Educational establishments are expelling students for disloyalty – a call-up to the army is also a powerful tool of repression.

The functions of the system of general criminal law are likewise getting blurred by the emergency wartime order: it is possible to legally avoid prosecution in most general criminal cases by going to fight in the war. Ever more often, criminal charges are being used to pressure individuals considered fit for service into signing contracts with the army. Those who return from war enjoy factual immunity from criminal prosecution, even for violent crimes (this is discussed in greater detail in the chapter 'The shadow of war').

POLITICAL REPRESSIONS

In February 2024, the opposition leader Alexei Navalny was murdered in custody. According to the data of the OVD-Info information centre, which aids arrestees and collects data on political repressions (here and below we cite the annual report for 2024[5]), another four people arrested for political motives died in places of confinement; yet another two died in investigative jails; one – from the after-effects of being taken into custody.

In 2024, 449 people were given jail sentences for political motives. For comparison: in 2012 there were 46, ten times fewer. In the preceding year, 2023, 429 political sentences were issued.

The average term of imprisonment in politically motivated cases has held steady since pre-war times and fluctuates at around six years. In the times of war, a large part of convictions have been for offences such as 'public incitement to terrorism' (the most frequently applied article), 'spreading false information about the army', and 'discrediting the armed forces'. In 2024, people are receiving jail sentences for their words – sentences that, before the war, were typically handed down to active opponents of the regime. By the end of the year, at least 62 well-known journalists and bloggers were in jail.

There are 438 people on the Memorial society's list of political prisoners,[6] and another 430 on a separate list of those persecuted for religion.[7]

ADMINISTRATIVE CASES

According to OVD-Info's data, 3,213 administrative cases were submitted to courts under article 20.3 (Propaganda and Public Display of Nazi Symbols and Symbols of Prohibited Organisations) of the Code on Administrative Offences. Usually targeted under this article are those who publish Ukrainian symbols on social networks, as well as the symbols of organisations prohibited in Russia – those that actually exist (the Anti-Corruption Foundation) and imaginary ones (the AUE – 'Arestantsky Uklad Edin', a purported prison-style youth subculture, or the LGBT 'movement'). The report records 1,199 administrative detentions for participation in peaceful public events, including ones in memory of Navalny.

FOREIGN AGENTS AND OTHER REPRESSIVE LEGISLATION

At the start of the full-scale war, 336 organisations and individuals were entered into the register of foreign agents controlled by the Ministry of Justice. 187 were added to the register in 2022 (nine of these before the war), 187 in 2023, and 204 in 2024. As of the end of 2024, the total quantity of registered foreign agents comprised just under 1,000 individuals and organisations.

Several laws were adopted in 2024 that substantially complicated the situation for foreign agents: the list of grounds for inclusion in the register was expanded, and the rights of foreign agents were restricted – from the right to participate in the activity of various organisations and place advertisements on their own resources to the right to dispose of their own funds. In effect, punishment for disloyalty – typically for regular public statements – has become harsher, while the criteria used by the authorities to place individuals on the register have become even more opaque.

The number of administrative cases opened for not fulfilling the 'obligations of a foreign agent' has been rising: 570 in 2024 (223 in 2022 and 441 in 2023). Starting in 2022, a second administrative case in a row leads to criminal prosecution. As of December 2024, a minimum of 32 people have been prosecuted under the article 'Evasion From Fulfilment of the Obligations of a Foreign Agent'.

Affiliation with 'undesirable organisations' can lead to immediate criminal prosecution, and the register of such organisations has been expanding at an accelerating pace since 2015. It is likewise overseen by the Ministry of Justice. In 2024, a record 65 organisations were entered into the register.[8] Globally known media, charitable foundations, and educational organisations are on the list. Hundreds and thousands of people in Russia were connected with each of them – now they all find themselves under threat of criminal prosecution.

The grounds for being entered onto the list of 'terrorists and extremists' have been expanded as well – this is done by Rosfinmonitoring [Federal Financial Monitoring Service], likewise by way of an in-house decision, without recourse to a court. Being entered on this list entails not only stigmatisation, but also harsh routine restrictions (for instance, on using a personal bank account).

A whole series of repressive laws restricting the rights of different categories of citizens was adopted in 2024. For example, a law prohibiting childfree propaganda has made public discussion of any difficulties associated with parenthood impossible.

In January 2024, the Supreme Court recognised as extremist the LGBT movement, which does not exist in any organisational forms. Now the police conduct regular raids of clubs – under the pretext that LGBTQ+ events are taking place there. The patrons of a gay-friendly club or an establishment with 'suspicious' décor risk being subjected to a document check and administrative detention. Criminal cases are initiated against the organisers of 'suspicious' events, and administrative prosecution is in order for 'LGBT-propaganda' and displaying of LGBT symbols, including a rainbow.

Repression is intensifying against lawyers and the human rights community, while both factual and legal standards for public statements are becoming increasingly stringent. Laws prohibiting the inflaming of social enmity and offending the feelings of believers and veterans, as well as laws on the protection of personal data are being used to restrict the most varied forms of self-expression. Consequently, videos shot against the background of a temple or a war monument may lead to arrest.

Pressure in the education system is also escalating: children are being required to participate in ideologically-charged activity under threat of punishment; students are being expelled from universities for disloyalty.

The school is intruding into the life of the family, requiring children and parents to account for their life and views. Whole layers of everyday practices associated with the life of urban, relatively progressive social strata are falling under prohibition, or becoming risky – from frequenting night clubs to discussing personal life on social networks and shooting videos in public places.

Surprisingly, this clear increase in the regime's repressiveness has not resulted in a greater number of criminal prosecutions overall, nor in the expansion of law enforcement bodies. On the contrary, repressive functions are diffusing throughout the entire state apparatus, and are not concentrated in the criminal justice system.

Score: 1 – limited development of previously formed trends

- There has been a moderate increase in pressure – driven primarily by extrajudicial persecution.
- Law enforcement bodies have succeeded in maintaining stable performance indicators.
- Criminal repressions are not increasing in quantitative terms – that said, political repression is increasingly concentrated on socially active and stigmatised segments of the population.

State seizure of private property

The redistribution of property, carried out with open disregard for private ownership rights – which the authorities treat as their own, in keeping with Soviet tradition ('the state giveth, the state taketh away') – represents a particularly significant trend in political development. It is not only the scale of the property being requisitioned that matters (with more likely to follow), but also the complete subordination of those owners who have not yet lost anything to the bureaucratic apparatus. On the one hand, business, including private business, is reckoned to be a part of the Putinite bureaucracy, but on the other, it finds itself in an even more subordinate position with respect to the authorities.

The total value of the assets seized in 2024 by the state from Russian business comprised no less than 900 billion roubles ($11.1 billion), which exceeds the value of the assets seized a year earlier by a factor of two. The Moscow Times assessed the volume of nationalised property at 483.5 billion roubles ($6 billion)[9], while Novaya Gazeta Europe and Transparency International estimated it at approximately 360 billion roubles ($4.4 billion).[10] This refers specifically to assets seized by the state through court rulings. The value of the assets expropriated to the benefit of public officials is probably an order of magnitude higher than the official numbers.

The issue is not the price of the assets, but the open violation of the law by the president, the Prosecutor General's Office, and the courts. For example, at the beginning of the year an accident took place at the heating plant of the Klimov Ammunition Factory outside Moscow, which was providing heat to a large residential district. Having found out that the owners were abroad, Putin gave the order to nationalise the enterprise – without getting into details. The enterprise was transferred to Rostec, which had held a minority stake in the company prior to the incident. This egregious case revealed the state's attitude toward private property and how related decisions are made.

Another major example – involving Rolf, Russia's largest automobile dealer (with 78 showrooms and 20 dealer centres nationwide) – unfolded in a manner similar to the Yukos case, with one key difference: Rolf's owner, Sergey Petrov, was abroad and beyond the reach of Russian law enforcement.

Pursuant to a claim by the Prosecutor General's Office, in February 2022 a court imposed recovery from Petrov into the budget of 19.4 billion roubles ($240 million) – supposedly obtained unlawfully, 'during a time of combining parliamentary [Petrov had been a State Duma deputy in 2007–2016] and commercial activity'.[11]

In December 2023, Rolf was transferred by presidential edict into temporary management by Rosimushchestvo [Federal Agency for State Property Management], and less than a month later, on 15 January 2024, the Prosecutor General's Office filed a claim in court for the nationalisation of Rolf – on the grounds that Petrov had possessed it unlawfully. On 21 February the court satisfied the claim, and 100 per cent of the shares in Rolf were converted into the income of the state.

In March, Rolf employees were introduced to the new owner – Umar Kremlev, one of the leading players on the Russian bookmaker market, associated with the head of the Security Service of the President, Alexey Rubezhny. The Rolf case became yet another step in the direction of emergency legislation and redistribution of private property at the Kremlin's pleasure.

The three key legal grounds for the seizure of private property in 2024 were:

Unlawful enrichment. The most popular pretext for the seizure of assets in 2024 became unlawful possession or enrichment. The state obtained assets in a sum of no less than 632 billion roubles ($7.8 billion) on these grounds. Courts took an average of 4.5 months to examine such claims, but in individual cases the trial was much speedier. For example, the nationalisation of the Chelyabinsk Electrometallurgical Combine (ChEMK) took less than a month, while the biggest case of the year – the seizure of the assets of 'crab king' Oleg Kan – was completed in two months.

Corruption. Nationalisation on the grounds of violation of anti-corruption legislation or fraud took place more quickly than standard 'de-privatisation' trials – in 3.5 months on average. The value of the seized assets in this category comprised no less than 185 billion roubles ($2.3 billion).

Extremism. The procedure for processing claims against owners recognised as 'extremists' (mostly Ukrainian entrepreneurs) was even quicker. The average period for consideration of such cases comprised one month, and a minimum of 40 billion roubles ($500 million) worth of property was transferred into the budget.

Setting aside the details, the Prosecutor General's Office's wording may appear legally sound. In practice, however, once a political order targeting a specific asset or businessman is received from above, the prosecutor's office begins searching for suitable grounds for nationalisation. If an asset had at one time been privatised (the statute of limitations and changes of ownership are of no relevance), it is possible to declare that the privatisation had taken place with violations, and seize the asset on these grounds.

If the owner of the asset had been a deputy of any level for some period of time (as were the majority of businessmen until recently), such a situation falls under unlawful combining of a deputy's post with commercial activity.

If neither option applies, the fact that the owner holds a second citizenship or has registered a company linked to the asset in a foreign jurisdiction can serve as a useful basis for action. The extremely short turnaround times for case reviews indicate that the courts are merely rubber-stamping decisions based on the claims submitted by the Prosecutor General's Office.

The logic of the 2024 requisitions changed in comparison with previous years. Initially, the emphasis had been placed on supporting the work of the military-industrial complex (MIC) and on geostrategic considerations associated with infrastructure and logistics. Here is how prosecutor general Krasnov described this in March 2024: '15 strategic enterprises just in the sphere of the MIC alone with an overall value in excess of 333 billion roubles [$4.1 billion] that had unlawfully left the possession of the Russian Federation, and in some cases had ended up under foreign control, have been returned in judicial procedure into its ownership, I will underscore, since the year 2023.'[12] In the words of the prosecutor general, residents of unfriendly states, having acquired enterprises of the MIC in contravention of prohibitions, were working towards destroying these enterprises and harming Russia's defence capabilities.

In the current situation there are fewer and fewer lofty state considerations, while the appetite of the state and of specific individuals for private property is growing. It is not by chance that minister of finance Anton Siluanov, appearing at the St Petersburg Forum 2024, discussed the privatisation of nationalised assets and – over the long term – a hundred-fold increase in incomes from this process. The treasury benefits from the revenue, while 'overachievers' – such as Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov or the president's chief bodyguard Dmitry Rubezhny – acquire the assets of businessmen deemed disloyal or insufficiently loyal.

Score: 2 – substantial development

- The cohort from whom property is being requisitioned has expanded – now including insufficiently 'loyal' Russians, especially those residing abroad.
- The range of targeted assets has also grown – moving beyond previously privatised property to encompass assets of military-industrial or strategic significance.
- The wave of property seizures in 2024 is reminiscent of the end of the Bolsheviks' New Economic Policy (NEP) – a period of partial market liberalisation in the 1920s that was ultimately abandoned in favour of strict state control. Henceforth the state is declaring rights to any property of citizens found within the ambit of its reach.

Political elite renewal

Elite renewal is the regime's Achilles' heel. The system is getting older, together with Putin, and is experiencing ever more serious problems with top-level managers who are part of the president's *nomenklatura*. The problem is not being addressed systemically, but through ad hoc fixes. This approach both undermines the effectiveness of the personnel and heightens the risk of a staffing crisis should Putin's ageing associates retire en masse.

The May–June package of new top-level appointments, the largest throughout the time of the war, includes some 20 people. It is worth underscoring that this was specifically a package (a systemic, comprehensive decision), which included – besides reshufflings in the government and the presidential administration – long-overdue appointments of the chairman of the Accounts Chamber and the head of the Federal Customs Service (FCS).

How can it be explained that even as the elites' dependence on Putin has increased, some important appointments are not being made for months, if not years? The ageing tsar Putin is not capable of personally maintaining a constant balance of forces within the elites and will not risk upsetting it even for a time. Appointment via a balanced package makes it possible to avoid this risk.

The actual reshuffles during the time of the war have become more compact, economical, and in large part reactive. The Kremlin is not thinking about the career trajectory of the appointees but, in military style, redeploys personnel to wherever they can have a greater effect for the system as a whole. The old deck is being reshuffled; there are practically no new people making their way into the pinnacle of the elite; that said, neither is there an outflow of personnel (if targeted repressions are not counted). The number of age-related retirements has diminished.

Those screws in the administrative machine that have turned out to be situationally redundant are transferred from 'technocrat managers' to 'political technologists'. (Putin's nomenklatura bureaucracy consists of five cohorts: *siloviki*, state decision-makers (technocrats), the business bloc – state and private business, political technologists, and regional politicians.)

In 2024, vice-premier Viktoria Abramchenko, minister of energy Nikolay Shulginov, and minister of sport Oleg Matytsin all lost their posts in the government – and leadership positions in the State Duma were immediately freed up for them.

Several 2024 shifts substantively altered the design of the system. These were the radical replacement of the leadership of the Ministry of Defence, including the replacement of minister Sergey Shoigu with Andrey Belousov; the replacement of Nikolai Patrushev in favour of Shoigu in the post of secretary of the Security Council; the appointment of Alexey Dyumin as aide to the president and secretary of the State Council; the replacement of the leadership of 'United Russia' that began with the departure of secretary of the General Council Andrey Turchak.

Some shifts seem to have a more simulated character. For example, the swapping of Kaliningrad governor Anton Alikhanov, who until 2015 had been director of a department in the Ministry of Industry and Trade, with deputy minister of industry and trade Alexey Besprozvannykh. Alikhanov returned to Moscow as minister, while Besprozvannykh went off to Kaliningrad as governor.

The design of the system is shaped not only by radical reshuffles, but also – albeit less noticeably – by the absence of change where it is clearly needed, given the age and physical frailty of certain figures in key positions. This applies first and foremost to the law-enforcement and judicial system.

The oldest of the old-timers in the system until recent times was the chairman of the Supreme Court, 80-year-old Vyacheslav Lebedev, who had been appointed a staggering 35 years ago, under Mikhail Gorbachev. Lebedev died in February 2024 while still in position.

His colleague, chairman of the Constitutional Court Valery Zorkin, is 82. He first took up his post under Yeltsin (he held it in 1991–1993), then was appointed a second time in 2003, and has been heading the court to this day.

Sergey Lavrov is 75; he became minister of foreign affairs 21 years ago. Yuri Ushakov is 78, and has held the post of assistant to the president for foreign policy for 13 years. Alexander Bortnikov is 73, and has been running the FSB for 17 years; Alexander Bastrykin is 71, and has headed the Investigative Committee for 18 years. Yuri Chikhanchin is 73, and has been heading the Federal Service for Financial Monitoring for 17 years.

On the one hand, for 72-year-old Putin – who has held the presidency for 21 years, with only a nominal interruption during the tandem with Dmitry Medvedev – it is more comfortable to rely on long-serving, trusted personnel. At the same time, placing ageing managers at the helm of potentially powerful institutions reduces the risk that these bodies might begin to act independently.

Putin's system of 'overseers' has become widespread. It involves appointing individuals personally loyal to him to senior – often strategically important – positions within institutions, regardless of their direct connection to the organisation. The goal of such appointments is not to reform the institution, but to ensure control and a direct line of communication with the Kremlin.

Among the overseers are head of the Federal Customs Service (FCS) Valery Pikalev, from among Putin's adjutants; the new chairwoman of the Supreme Court – Putin's classmate from Leningrad University Irina Podnosova; the president's first cousin once removed Anna Tsivileva, appointed state secretary of the Ministry of Defence. New minister of defence Belousov – not a military person, appointed from the outside, loyal to Putin and under his personal control – can be included among the overseers as well.

An overseer placed at the head of a corporation brings it into a state of semi-paralysis – at least until they familiarise themselves with the organisation and gain control of its levers of management. Thanks to the reshufflings of 2024, many key structures found themselves in just such a state: the Security Council, the State Council, the Ministry of defence, customs, the Supreme Court. Nothing of the kind had been observed before.

Problems with the personnel pool have worsened significantly as Putin and his close associates have grown older. Hence the advancement to high posts of members of Putin's 'extended family':

- Adjutants and bodyguards: aide to the president and secretary of the State Council Alexey Dyumin and director of the FCS Valery Pikalev in addition to minister for emergency situations Aleksandr Kurenkov and personnel manager of the presidential administration Dmitry Mironov.
- Relatives: Anna Tsivileva and Sergey Tsivilev.
- Children of friends and associates: Dmitry Patrushev, Boris Kovalchuk, Pavel Fradkov.
- Friends of children: Kirill Dmitriev.
- University classmates: Irina Podnosova.

The 'extended family' accounted for over 40 per cent of the high appointments in 2024.

While the system has clearly exhausted its resources at the very top – the level of officials personally appointed by Putin – it includes, starting from the next tier down, a built-in mechanism for renewing the personnel base.

The model for this rejuvenation can be called 'Mishustinist-Kiriyenkovist', from the surnames of the prime minister and the top man in charge of domestic policy. In this model, there is a procedure for the selection and training of personnel that contains elements of meritocracy. The training projects and initiatives include the 'digital *spetsnaz*' (cyber special forces) and Kiriyenko's programmes 'Leaders of Russia', 'School of Governors', 'School of Mayors', 'Time of Heroes', and others.

The call to integrate 'war heroes' into the elite turned out to be largely symbolic. In practice, at the federal level, the initiative has functioned more as a training programme for existing elites – similar to the 'School of Governors'. In the regions, the same programme serves to prepare returning soldiers for demobilisation.

Active rotation is under way at the deputy minister level – part of Mishustin's *nomenklatura*. In four ministries where the ministers were replaced (Industry, Transport, Energy, and Agriculture), nine out of 35 deputy ministers – roughly a quarter – have been newly appointed since May 2024. A similar proportion is seen in the Ministry of Economic Development, where the minister remained unchanged: three of the 11 deputy ministers are new.

At the regional level, a rotation has taken place in the governors' corps: four governors have become ministers, one an assistant to the president, and three were removed from their posts. This amounted to a renewal of nine per cent of the entire gubernatorial corps.

This was the first time that a systemic revitalisation of the federal elite had occurred by way of simultaneously bringing in several officials who had done their 'internship' in the regions. Notably, four of the five governors called up to the federal level in 2024 had had experience working in the federal government or the State Duma prior to having been sent into the regions in 2016–2019. Four of the governors had had experience working in the presidium of the State Council, where they headed commissions on matters related to their new jobs. Their current appointment to the government looks systemic and prepared in advance. In essence, this is the first graduating class of the 'school of ministers'.

For an analysis of the upper echelon of Putin's elite (see Fig. 6), we propose a benchmark group of profiles consisting of:

- Permanent members of the Security Council (13 persons).
- The leadership of the presidential administration (18).
- Regular participants in Putin's meetings with members of the government (14).
- Putin's 'security cabinet' (12).

- The federal part of the State Council presidium (6).
- Members of the presidium of the Council for Strategic Development and National Projects (19).
- Members of the presidium of the government of the Russian Federation (21).
- Those most directly responsible for carrying out the president's assignments in 2024 (21).

Taking into account numerous overlaps, the database includes a total of 83 individuals. In addition, ten more were added – senior figures from the media sector and regional leadership.

The numerically largest groups turned out to be political technologists (30) and state decision-makers (26). Next, with a large gap, come *siloviki* (12) and regional politicians (10); the smallest cohort are businessmen (5).

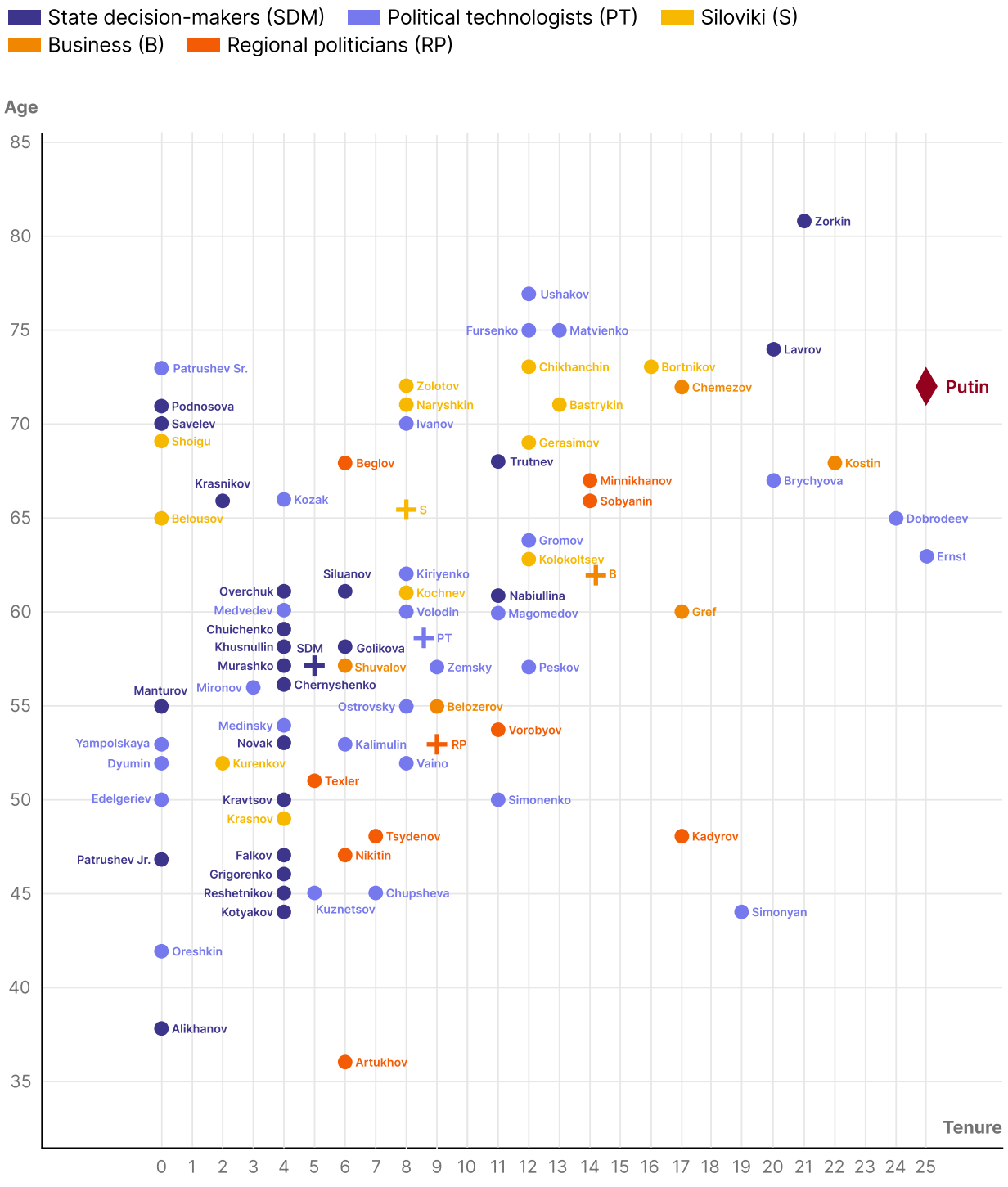
The average age by groups fluctuates in the 59–66 range; moreover, the youngest are the civil servants (59) and the oldest are the *siloviki* (65). Average length of service at one's current position is eight–nine years for political technologists, *siloviki*, and regionals; the shortest is among civil servants (five years), and the longest is in business (14 years). The spread broken down by length of service and age is considerably large: every sixth official is aged 70 or more, every fifth is under 50. Overall, a direct dependence can be observed between age and length of service.

The upper tier of Putin's *nomenklatura* elite appears ageing and firmly entrenched in its positions. While this provides stability for now, it also carries the risk of future destabilisation as key figures in the regime near the end of their political careers.

Score: 2 – substantial development

- The system is losing momentum due to ongoing reshuffles and the natural ageing of Putin's inner circle – a dynamic reminiscent of late Brezhnev-era stagnation.
- While mass appointments have accompanied the start of the new presidential term, the regime has retained its inefficient practice of promoting long-time loyalists. In contrast, a more functional mechanism for renewing personnel operates one level below, where appointments carry little political weight.
- Among the new trends that emerged in 2024, two are particularly noteworthy:
  - Rapid expansion of the overseer model via Putin's 'extended family'.
  - The first graduates of the 'school of ministers' – federal officials who completed an 'internship' in the regions and the State Council.

FIG. 6. DISTRIBUTION OF THE TOP LEVEL OF PUTIN'S ELITE BY AGE AND LENGTH OF SERVICE



Source: The NEST Centre's internal assessment

Dismantling the patronage and institutional pyramids

Putin's arrival at the post of president in 2000 marked the beginning of centralisation 1.0 – the dismantling of the quasi-federation of regions. Built in its place was a quasi-federation of institutions, which the Kremlin began to systematically dismantle in 2014. Centralisation 2.0 had begun, in the form of de-institutionalisation. The abrupt replacement of the entire management and administration leadership at the Ministry of Defence in 2024 became one of the radical examples of this second centralisation.

There are two directions for dismantling the pyramids of power:

1. Radical replacement of the top ranks – 'decapitation', for example, the firing of Sergey Shoigu from the Ministry of Defence in 2024 or Anatoly Chubais from Rosnano in 2020.
2. A gradual weakening of the upper echelons of power is taking place through natural attrition – ageing and behind-the-scenes manoeuvring. In the Federation Council, the tandem of speaker Valentina Matviyenko and her first deputy, seen as a successor-in-waiting, remains in place. A similar dynamic was visible in the Supreme Court, where Irina Podnosova began to assert herself during the later years of the ageing chairman, Vyacheslav Lebedev, between 2020 and 2024.

Since 2014, the top tiers of many institutional pyramids have been replaced – the Administrative Directorate of the President (2014), Russian Railways (2015), the Federal Protective Service (2016), Rosnano (2020), and others. None, apart from Putin's own (the presidential administration and the administrative directorate), has preserved any autonomy after these changes: regardless of what form of independence they previously enjoyed, all have been fully integrated into the unitary Kremlin system.

Replaced in 2024, besides the leadership of the Ministry of Defence, was the leadership of the Supreme Court, the Federal Customs Service, the Accounts Chamber, and five ministries – subdivisions of the governmental 'corporation'. In most of the cases (besides the Ministry of Agriculture), the new head came from outside. A special case is the Supreme Court. Its new chairwoman Irina Podnosova was brought in from outside straight to the post of deputy to the chairman Vyacheslav Lebedev back in 2020, while the previous candidate, deputy chairman Oleg Sviridenko, was transferred from the Supreme Court to the Ministry of Justice.

Most of the time, appointing an external figure to head an institution signals that the formation of new institutional pyramids is unlikely in the foreseeable future. The ability of an institution to act in a consolidated manner as a political actor decreases, while control over the institution on the part of the Kremlin increases. A reduction in the institution's efficiency also occurs, at least for a time. The Ministry for Emergency Situations can serve as an illustration of the latter: it has had three different chiefs over the past six years, and yet is proving incapable of delivering the required level of efficiency.

The sweeping replacement of the Ministry of Defence leadership in the midst of the war – at a time when the situation on the front lines had begun to stabilise in Russia's favour – should be understood as a sign that military operations are expected to continue for an extended period.

The incorporation of semi-independent institutional pyramids into a big unitary one leads to the latter becoming less sturdy, which requires additional management efforts – with respect to both subordination and coordination. Such is the reason for the appearance of new directorates in the administration of the president:

- For national maritime policy, headed by former deputy secretary of the Security Council Sergey Vakhrukov.
- For state policy in the sphere of the military-industrial complex, headed by former deputy minister of industry and trade Viktor Yevtukhov.

Two of Putin's aides – Alexey Dyumin and Nikolai Patrushev – were brought into the administration of the president for this same reason.

Patronage pyramids are a special category. They are more amorphous than institutional pyramids, although these structures often coincide: personnel resources are needed for forming and rejuvenating patronage pyramids, and the cadres are provided by the institutions.

Represented in the hundred most influential Russian politicians is, in essence, the sole patronage pyramid – the 'President Writ Large', consisting of 23 figures. Another nine personal minions of the president in formally independent posts can be defined as being within the 'contour of the president':

- Alexander Bastrykin (rank 13)
- Andrey Belousov (15)
- Viktor Zolotov (29)
- Dmitry Patrushev (35)

- Boris Kovalchuk (49)
- Sergey Tsivilev (54)
- Anna Tsivileva (75)
- Alexander Kurenkov (77)
- Irina Podnosova (78–79).

A couple of 'small pyramids' represented in the hundred are the 'Premier Writ Large' and Kiriyenko's orbit. A step lower down (the government's executive office, the Federal Tax Service, and deputy ministers in the case of Mishustin), these structures become ramified.

'Premier Writ Large': Mikhail Mishustin (2), Dmitry Grigorenko (41–42), Dmitry Chernyshenko (41–42), Alexey Overchuk (51).

Kiriyenko's orbit: Sergey Kiriyenko himself (7), Andrey Yarin (32–33), Sergey Novikov (45), Alexander Kharichev (47–48), Andrey Smirnov (87–88), Alexey Likhachev.

The general line of political development is to weaken both the patrons themselves and their pyramids. This can take place in different ways in each specific situation. As an example, let us examine the dynamics of influence of the most prominent patrons:

Nikolai Patrushev – traded a higher-status position as secretary of the Security Council for a more resource-rich job as assistant to the president and chairman of the Maritime Board; retained his team and strong positions in the Security Council after leaving; the positions of his son, who became vice-premier in the government, have strengthened.

Sergey Sobyanin – notional beneficiary of the competition between Sergey Kiriyenko (administration of the president) and Vyacheslav Volodin (State Duma) for control over 'United Russia'; his positions noticeably weakened in the Urals where he lost informal influence (due to the departure of his protégés Vladimir Yakushev and Yevgeny Kuyvashev).

Sergey Chemezov – his positions strengthened with the advancement of Denis Manturov (Chemezov's protégé and family business partner) to the post of first vice-premier; the spectacular failure of civilian aircraft manufacturing led to the replacement of the leadership in the corporations that make up Rostec.

Yury Kovalchuk – symbolic weakening with the departure of son Boris Kovalchuk from 'Inter RAO' for the position of head of the Accounts Chamber, which has a high status but few resources; successful acquisitions in business.

Mikhail Mishustin – managed to hold on to the post of prime minister, but with difficulty; replacement of first vice-premier (a counterweight to the premier) – Andrey Belousov, who is stronger in the professional sense, for Denis Manturov, who is stronger in personnel management.

Igor Sechin – achieved a bureaucratic victory with the confirmation of the new composition of the Presidential Commission for the Fuel and Energy Complex, reaffirming his influence over Russia's energy policy. However, he faced setbacks in the shipbuilding sector, particularly in his efforts to divest from it.

Sergey Kiriyenko – loss of control over the State Council and expansion of his sphere of responsibility to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Vyacheslav Volodin – reshuffles in the leadership of the State Duma imposed from above; weakened control over 'United Russia'.

Sergey Shoigu – scandalous loss of the Ministry of Defence's patronage pyramid.

Probably not a single one of the patrons can be considered to be an unequivocal winner. All of their positions have weakened to one or another extent; Sergey Shoigu suffered a complete defeat.

Score: 2 – substantial development

- The replacement of institutional heads with loyal personal servants or overseers altered the political structure, reducing the relative independence of institutions and integra- ting them more fully into a unitary pyramid of control.
- Alongside this vertical consolidation, some horizontal coordination networks wea-kened (such as the Security Council), while others were strengthened or newly created (such as the State Council or the Maritime Board).

The state of society

The war has scrambled the structure of Russian society: in its third year now, the number of beneficiaries is just as large as the number of losers – 20–25 per cent of the population each. In 2024, 22 per cent of respondents reported an improvement in their financial situation, while 23 per cent said it had worsened – a decidedly noteworthy ratio for Russia, where since 2015 the majority have consistently reported a decline in their circumstances. 35 per cent of those surveyed are expecting an improvement in their situation in 2025. In 2022, only 12 per cent of respondents were optimistic, while 54 per cent expected their situation to deteriorate.

Among the 'losers' are the modernised, educated strata of society, as well as public sector employees not involved in supporting the war effort: low-level civilian bureaucrats, municipal workers, employees of the social sphere, healthcare and education – all of which are to a considerable extent 'female' professions. Pensioners – also predominantly women (higher life expectancy, earlier retirement) – have suffered financially due to inflation.[13]

Among the winners are skilled and unskilled manual labourers, whose traditionally low incomes increased several-fold due to a scarcity of manpower; employees of the security structures; the technical intelligentsia associated with defence industry; the actual participants in combat operations and persons equated thereto (their social profile and economic situation will be discussed in detail in 'The shadow of war' chapter); family members of military service personnel.

We can assume that the significant rise in wages in traditionally 'male' sectors of industry and the high payouts to participants in the military operations, taken all together, are leading to a significant increase in the gender gap in both incomes and status.

THE WINNERS: SHORTAGE OF LABOUR RESOURCES, DEMOGRAPHICS, MILITARY EXPENDITURES

Numerically large generations have been alternating with numerically small ones in Russia's demographic structure ever since the Second World War, creating a variety of social problems. The population as a whole is shrinking but the older-generation segment is rising at an ever increasing pace. According to Rosstat's data, in 2023 the proportion of workers over 50 years of age comprised 30 per cent of total employment. The average age of the workforce in 2023 was 42.1 years.[14]

Both the birthrate and the influx of labour power from abroad are dropping at the same time in 2023 and 2024. The fertility rate (number of children per one woman) fell from 1.78 in 2015 to 1.41 in 2023 – one and a half times less than needed for replacement (2.1). Rosstat had forecast the rate to fall to 1.32 in 2024. However, the 'preliminary' data released in March 2025 reported it at 1.4 – a figure that appears doubtful, given the marked gap between the forecast and the reported outcome.[15]

The sanctions-driven decline in the rouble exchange rate, along with a surge in hostility towards migrants following the terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall in the Moscow Region, has led to a noticeable outflow of migrant workers. As of 1 October 2023, according to the understated official figures of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, there were around 6.5 million foreign citizens in the country, including around 740 thousand illegal immigrants.[16] According to expert estimates, up to 600 thousand migrants from Central Asia, who comprise 90 per cent of the foreign workforce, left Russia in 2024.

As of December 2024, official unemployment in Russia stood at a record low 2.3 per cent, which bears witness to a shortage of labour.[17] According to Bank of Russia data, 73 per cent of enterprises are experiencing a lack of personnel.[18]

The situation on the labour market is also exacerbated by the Ukrainian territories occupied in 2022 (unaccounted for in Rosstat's forecasts), where there is a predominantly elderly population. 'War' emigration of skilled specialists and the outflow of working-age men to the war are intensifying the problem, all the more so because the Ministry of Defence is interested in professionals who are in short supply – drivers, tractor operators, repairmen, and so on.

In order to mitigate the personnel shortage, in December 2024 the Ministry of Economic Development prepared draft changes to the Labour Code: in particular, it is being proposed to raise the limit on overtime to four hours per day and 240 hours per year. The extra hours above 120 per year permitted today will be paid at a double rate.

The deteriorating labour situation is affecting not only the civilian sector, but the military-industrial complex as well. Nine out of ten shipbuilding enterprises, which are working primarily on state military contracts, are experiencing problems with skilled workers and engineers. The greatest need is for machinists, milling machine operators, and grinders. Likewise, there are not enough welders, fitters, and engineers. This has led to a significant rise in wages for both skilled and unskilled manual labour – along with an increase in the social status of the corresponding segments of the population.

Large sums are being paid to contract soldiers heading to the war, with around a million people having been to the front. These high payouts are putting pressure on the labour market – even the police are now experiencing a significant shortage of personnel: the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) needs another 174 thousand rank-and-file employees (19 per cent of the entire staff).[19] The MIA is prepared to hire people without an education, bypassing the standard qualification procedure. The shortage of personnel at the MIA had been observed even before the war, but it has been rapidly growing in recent times. In November 2022, reports spoke of a shortage of 90 thousand personnel; by May 2024, that figure had risen to 152 thousand.[20]

THE LOSERS: DESTRUCTION OF SOCIAL CAPITAL, EMIGRATION, THE POLITICAL SHAKEUP OF SOCIETY

Before the war, university-educated individuals and younger generations reported higher levels of life satisfaction than other social groups. But since the first year of the war, neither a university education nor youth has made much difference. If before the war, pensioners were more satisfied with their economic situation than other strata of the population (by virtue of the low baseline effect – memory of the crisis decades), then by the second year of the war, this advantage had been reduced. The general sense of physical and mental well-being of ethnic Russians (86 per cent of the sample) noticeably improved in comparison with representatives of ethnic minorities (calculations according to data from the Russian longitudinal monitoring survey).[21]

Emigration and repressions have weakened the educated and most progressive strata of society. Research on the 'war' wave of Russian emigration shows that those who have left tend to be socially active, hold progressive views, and are generally better educated and more sought after on the global job market than the Russian population as a whole. (For more details, see the OutRush data.[22])

But repressions and prohibitions affect not only the educated and democratically oriented minority. The social cohesion of society as a whole is reduced, while social bonds deteriorate from horizontal ones to vertical ones. This process is unfolding at all levels – from the dismantling of regional elites and their absorption into a single, centralised federal power structure, to changes in everyday social life. Even at the individual level, traditional horizontal networks of mutual support are being replaced by patronage relationships, shaped by a constant sense of dependence on – and deference to – the state.

Before the war, a greater number of social connections tended to correlate with lower trust in the authorities.[23] Now, however, Putin's supporters retain more opportunities to participate in civic associations, while the former 'vanguard' has become increasingly atomised.[24]

The prohibition and blocking of Facebook and Instagram, and the repressive practices on the internet as a whole, have led to a situation where network communities of all kinds – from mutual-interest clubs, fandoms, and informal sports associations to mutual support communities for mothers of small children – have ceased to exist or have gone into closed-access mode.

The largest of the mothers' communities, numbering 150 thousand participants, was shut down by decision of its organisers after the State Duma adopted a law in November 2024 prohibiting 'child-free propaganda'. From the moment the law entered into force, any public discussion of difficulties connected with motherhood can be interpreted as propaganda of a prohibited ideology and lead to fines in an amount of up to 400 thousand roubles ($5,000) for private persons.[25]

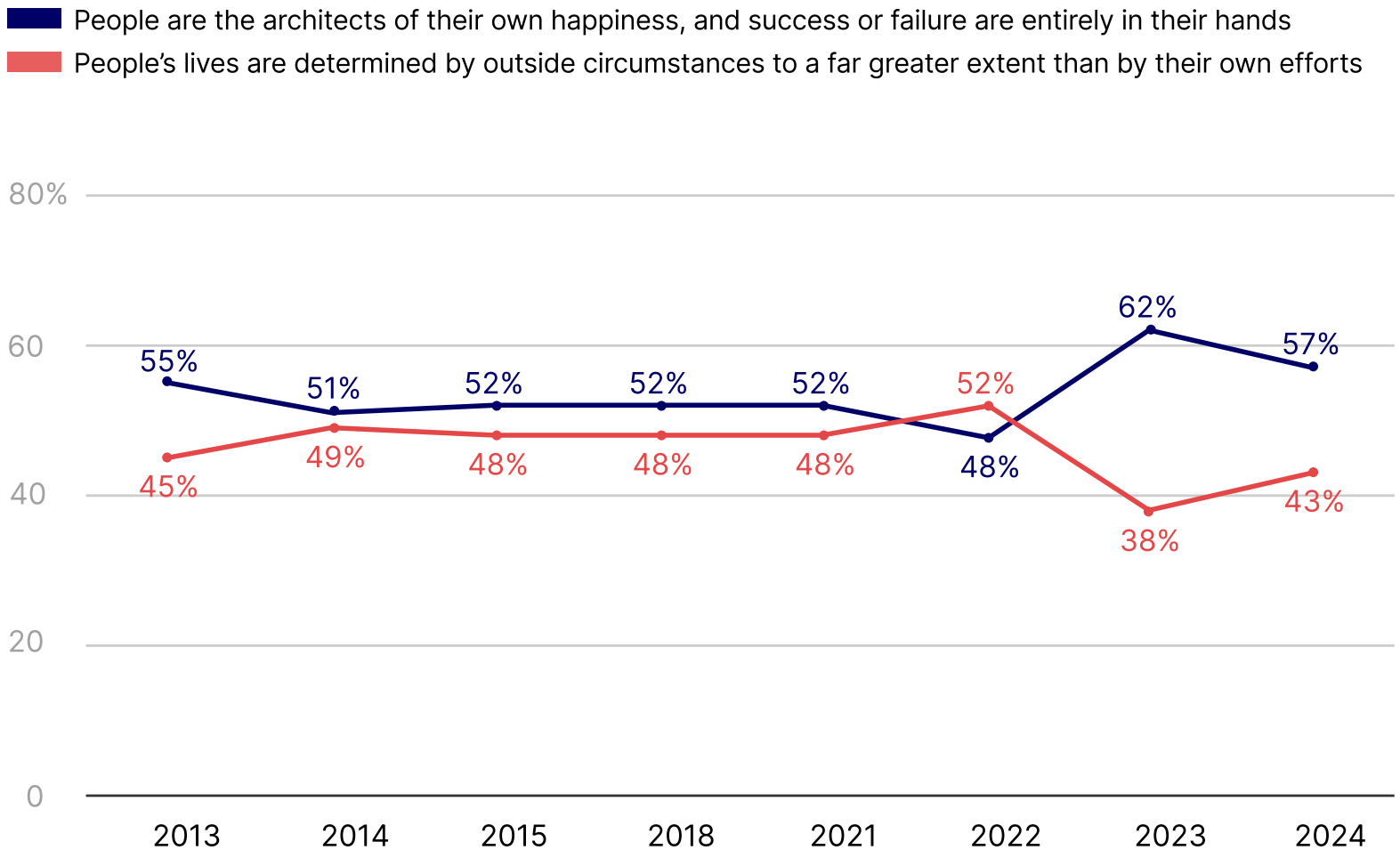
The ban on LGBT 'propaganda' (including the designation of the non-existent LGBT movement as extremist) and on so-called sex change 'propaganda' not only hinders public discussion of socially significant issues, but also dismantles existing social capital and undermines the society's social cohesion. This is described in greater detail in the chapter 'Repression: society'.

Not only the quantity of social ties is dropping, but so is the quality of social connections and their diversity. An ideology of conservatism, traditionalism, and anti-inclusivity is gaining the upper hand in public opinion. The beneficiaries of the changes in civilian life associated with the war have turned out to be those same strata of society that had felt themselves 'left behind' in the 2000s and 2010s. A bottom-up modernisation of society was taking place in those two decades, brought about by a rise in prosperity, adaptation to the capitalist way of life, the spread of new technology, and contact with world mass culture.

The values of initiative, self-realisation, capitalistic individualism are losing meaning – demand is growing among all generations for stability (from 43 per cent in 2019 to 70 per cent in 2024), and for customs and traditions (from 42 per cent in 2019 to 64 per cent at the end of 2023; data for 2024 have not been published).

Below is an example based on the data of the Federal Scientific-Research Sociological centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences (see Fig. 7).

FIG. 7. DYNAMICS OF CHOICE IN ALTERNATE PAIRS OF AFFIRMATIONS REFLECTING ORIENTATION TOWARDS AN EXTERNAL OR INTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL, 2008–2024 (%)



Source: Federal Research Sociological Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences (FRSC RAS)

Militaristic sentiments among Russians are not all that strong. According to research by independent sociologists, the majority of those surveyed would not support a second wave of mobilisation (57 per cent) and would support a decision by the authorities on the immediate cessation of combat operations (78 per cent).

Nearly three quarters of the participants (73 per cent) in that same survey consider that Russia is moving in the right direction, but judging by how lukewarm their support is for the war, they are approving not so much the military actions as those social changes that have accompanied them in civilian life.[26]

The existence of a large quantity of beneficiaries of the war on the one hand, and the deterioration of the social fabric on the other, not only explain the absence of widespread anti-war sentiments in Russian society, but also make the appearance of organised social protests against the war in the next year or two unlikely. It is equally difficult to expect a mobilisation of the elites under the current circumstances.

Demographic problems and fear in the face of migration create a temptation both for the federal and local authorities to encourage grassroots xenophobia and anti-inclusivity. For example, a law was adopted in 2024 that prohibits enrolling migrants' children in schools unless they speak Russian. Reproductive coercion is likewise encouraged by the authorities. All these are elements of a programme that resonates with older and less educated segments of society far more strongly than the regime's imperial foreign policy.

Score: 3 – radical change

- There were noticeable shifts in the social structure, including changes in the status of entire social groups.
- Social capital deteriorated, accompanied by a shift away from values of development and diversity toward more socially conservative ones.
- The regime began to form a new base – both socially and ideologically.

Conflicts within the elites

In most cases, conflicts are not signs of system failure but part of how the system functions. They reflect shifts in complex internal balances during periods of transformation and serve as a means of adapting to changing circumstances. However, a distinction should be made between conflicts that remain within normal limits and those that go beyond them. In many cases, conflicts orchestrated by the Kremlin – both within institutions and between them – are not signs of dysfunction, but deliberate tools of control, used to restrain and balance competing actors by setting them against one another.

The conflicts increased in both number and visibility in 2024. This phenomenon has several causes and effects:

War as a norm of life. Life in conditions of war has turned from a state of emergency into 'the new normal'. Long overdue personnel decisions have been carried out. Conflicts within the elite have resulted in the displacement of officials and the consequences of such displacements. The Kremlin's dissatisfaction has moved from the strictly military sphere – the most closed one in wartime – into the civilian sphere that supports the war machine. The sanctions pressure on Russia is increasing, and the economy is being shifted onto a military footing. As a result, the redistribution of assets owned by foreigners and 'disloyals' has intensified, favouring the state and individuals deemed to have proven their loyalty.

Package appointments. In order to avoid acute conflicts within the elites and sudden upsets of the balance between the main groups, the Kremlin is wary of making individual appointments to important posts – instead, package appointments are practiced. An exception was made for Putin's personal appointees who are not part of the main elite clans – such as Valery Pikalev, head of the Federal Customs Service, and Irina Podnosova, chair of the Supreme Court.

The dismantling of the Ministry of Defence. A brutal dismantling has taken place of the greater part of the previously influential clan of Sergey Shoigu, who displayed ineffectiveness in military operations. This allowed for the resolution of two sometimes smoldering, sometimes blazing systemic conflicts after the unfavourable start to the war for the Kremlin – the conflict between the FSB and the army, and the conflict within the military itself.

The removal of the Shoigu clan from the Ministry of Defence and the appointment of Belousov from the government marked a further step in simplifying the regime's

political setup – reducing the independence of power centres and moving away from the *dipole* model, where two rival blocs were used to keep each other in check.

Intended to give the Kremlin greater control over key institutions, these 'dipoles' were used to trigger and sustain manageable conflicts within the leadership of major bodies – whether in the FSB (Alexander Bortnikov vs. Sergey Korolev), the Security Council (Nikolai Patrushev vs. Dmitry Medvedev), the Ministry of Transport (Vitaly Savelyev vs. Alexander Neradko), or the government as a whole (Mikhail Mishustin vs. Andrey Belousov).

TABLE 3. THE MOST NOTICEABLE CONFLICTS IN THE ELITE IN 2024

	Political technologists	State decision-makers	Siloviki	Business	Regional politicians
Political technologists	Replacement of 'United Russia' leadership	Government reform	Purges in Ministry of Defence		
State decision-makers		Dispute about Central Bank rate		Cases concerning re-nationalisation	
Siloviki			Purges in Ministry of Defence	Taking of property (Rolf, Makfa)	Repression (Samara Region, Krasnodar Krai, etc.)
Business	Pressure on labour migrants; arbitrary taking of property	Dispute about Central Bank rate	Wildberries	Wildberries	
Regional politicians	Law on local self-administration			Vologda Region vs. Mordashev, Samara Region vs. Avetisyan	

Source: The NEST Centre's internal assessment

It is worth noting that the conflict matrix (see Table 3) primarily highlights areas where tensions are already visible. Public information on many potential conflicts is limited, and the absence of such information does not necessarily mean the absence of real conflict.

Business – especially the private sector – is the most vulnerable group, coming under pressure from all sides. The absence of political technologists' conflicts with business in the matrix does not mean they are not taking place; but rather that representatives of the security services are the visible face of pressure on business. Regional elites, meanwhile, are in a weak position relative to all other groups, which is why conflicts involving them rarely escalate into open confrontation.

The most high-profile conflict of the year, which revealed the structure and functioning of the system for the public to see, was the story involving the biggest Russian marketplace, Wildberries. Two high-ranking officials from the Caucasus republics and influential businessmen acting as 'fixers' clashed violently – even to the point of a shootout in central Moscow – while the heads of the security services and senior leadership, including Putin, were quietly involved behind the scenes.

In June, Wildberries unexpectedly made an announcement about a merger with the leading Russian outdoor advertising operator – Russ Group. The well-known Dagestani billionaire-senator Suleyman Kerimov, who was behind the deal, had organised a meeting for Tatyana Bakalchuk, the holder of 99 per cent of the shares in Wildberries, and Robert Mirzoyan (Russ), first with the head of the Presidential Administration, Anton Vaino, and later personally with Putin.

Putin was handed a letter outlining a fantastical plan to transform Wildberries into a key platform for international settlements in roubles (bypassing SWIFT), a 'major competitor' to Google and Amazon across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the CIS, India, and China. The new company was supposed to increase Russia's GDP by 1.5 per cent. Putin marked the letter with a positive endorsement and put his assistant for economics Maxim Oreshkin in charge of overseeing the project. On 1 July, a meeting on advancing the company in markets abroad took place in vice-premier Alexey Overchuk's office.

Later in July, the parties created a joint venture: Wildberries received 65 per cent, and the owners of Russ 35 per cent. It was then that Tatyana's husband Vladislav Bakalchuk, owner of 1 per cent of Wildberries, declared that he was not in agreement with the deal. As a result, Tatyana's husband was removed from management of the business. Somehow, the Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov became publicly involved in the matter on the side of Bakalchuk, citing 'raider capture' of the Bakalchuk family business and trying to upstage the deal that had been already approved by Putin.

In September, Bakalchuk, with security guards, attempted to force his way into the head office of Wildberries in the centre of Moscow; an exchange of gunfire took place. Among the three dozen bodyguards from the Caucasus republics on both sides were officers and Kadyrovites from Rosgvardiya and regular Moscow police. Two people were killed and several wounded in the shootout resembling the corporate wars of the 1990s.

All of the participants in the shootout were taken into custody; Bakalchuk was immediately released; a part of the security guards applied to go and fight in the war and avoided criminal prosecution; the matter was swept under the carpet. No public statements from the authorities followed.

The new merged company is functioning normally, and according to one hypothesis, it is being prepared for sale to one of the biggest state banks. Kadyrov neither won nor lost. For him, it was less about challenging Putin's arbitration and more about securing his share of influence – in line with the forceful methods his entourage is known for.

The system is far less transparent in wartime, and conflicts within the elites rarely reach the public domain; therefore, the incident with Wildberries is an exception. The following developments, however, can be considered indirect signs of serious conflicts within the elite:

- The delay of the official advancement of Mikhail Mishustin as candidate for the post of prime minister in May.
- The dragging out of the confirmation by the president of national projects in September–December.
- The quiet reformatting of the leadership of 'United Russia' in June–December.
- The breakdown of the programme for the development of the aviation sector, which led to a series of personnel shuffles in the management of the United Aircraft Corporation (UAC) in November.
- The case of Boris Kovalchuk unfolded in several steps: in March, he was removed from his post as director general of 'Inter RAO', then briefly reassigned to a secondary role in the presidential administration. Later, as part of a round of appointments, he was named head of the Accounts Chamber – a position that appears to carry more symbolic status than real influence.

Of the five cohorts within Putin's bureaucratic elite, business has suffered the most from the outbreak of war and the sharp confrontation with the West. Its declining influence has triggered a wave of conflicts: between the *siloviki* and business (through de-privatisation and asset seizures targeting those who fled abroad); between regional elites and business (such as attacks on oligarchs Mordashov in Vologda Region and Avetisyan in Samara Region); and within the business community itself (as seen in the Wildberries case).

These disputes are typically resolved not through the courts, but according to unwritten informal rules – with arbitration handled by officials from the presidential administration and the government, and sometimes by Putin himself. The courts, like the *siloviki*, merely formalise decisions already made at the political level.

There were no visible winners among the principal elite groups; the point of the game was more likely to minimise losses. Shoigu's group stands out as the most affected – having suffered a decisive defeat. Other than this group, all main factions weakened to a similar degree, and the overall balance remained unchanged.

It was not the patrons of the large networks who came out winners, but rather specific individuals who are close to Putin and who comprise his 'extended family' – ones like Putin's first cousin once removed Anna Tsivileva with husband Sergey, former Putin's bodyguards Alexey Dyumin and Valery Pikalev, and the president's university classmate Irina Podnosova.

Score: 2 – substantial development

- The noticeable rise in elite conflicts in the public space has a whole series of underlying causes and does not point to the situation running out of the Kremlin's control.
- In the absence of public politics, conflicts remain hidden – increasingly resembling the Soviet-era image of 'bulldogs fighting under the carpet'.
- Serious disputes are arbitrated by Putin himself, and when some of these conflicts do surface publicly, it is usually with the primary aim of attracting his attention.
- The system has worked out mechanisms and internal rules by which bringing 'dirty laundry' out into the open by the elites is taboo and severely punished. A rare exception here is Ramzan Kadyrov who plays at public politics: it is not by chance that the most scandalous conflict of the year is connected with him.

Decision-making

Decision-making is the holy of holies of the Putin regime, and the shroud of secrecy over it is determined not only by the personalist character of the regime, but also by the fact that both Putin and a significant part of his inner circle come from a special services background.

2024 was a year replete with decisions, above all in the personnel sphere. After a lengthy period of abstention following the presidential elections, more decisions were adopted in a couple of months than in the previous two years of the war.

PERSONNEL DECISIONS

The personnel decisions, including ones that had been postponed for a long time, were adopted as a single package, retaining the balance of forces between the principal elite groups. This points to the Kremlin's serious concern that abrupt, individual personnel decisions by the 'ageing tsar' could lead to destabilisation. Despite the reduction in the influence of specific groups surrounding the Kremlin and representatives of the elite on personnel decisions, Putin's dependence on the existing alignment of forces within the elite has grown.

The political calendar has led to the overlap of a series of decisions accumulated ahead of the elections and the new presidential term, as well as a revision of several clearly unrealistic strategies adopted in 2022 but never implemented. As a result, many decisions with respect to Arctic Strategy, the Comprehensive Programme for the Development of the Aviation Sector, and the development of the Northern Sea Route remained unfulfilled.

The wartime management system that has taken shape — with its characteristic decision-making mechanisms such as operational headquarters, coordination councils, and thematic government strategy sessions — has remained in place. The only notable change is that Mishustin's coordination committee for supplying the armed forces has begun meeting less frequently.

The system of Putin's overseers became more widespread, be it the new chairwoman of the Supreme Court, Putin's university classmate Irina Podnosova or his first cousin twice removed Anna Tsivileva, appointed state secretary of the Ministry of Defence.

The lack of autonomy among individual units and strict top-down subordination deprive the system of flexibility and slow down decision-making.

In addition, reliance on internal communication channels and the absence of transparency result in ineffective decisions based on unreliable information. This is particularly noticeable in non-routine, crisis situations, such as the incursion by the Ukrainian army into Kursk Region in August.[27] The actions of both the authorities and the security structures were not just late in coming, they were chaotic, and not commensurate with the problems and threats.

Another – self-inflicted – crisis emerged in the business sphere due to the absence of clear rules and institutional mechanisms, with decisions relying solely on Putin's personal arbitration. This was the Wildberries incident, examined in the chapter 'Conflicts within the elites'.

The verticalised chain-of-command system of management continued to become overgrown with formats of coordination and horizontal interaction. A notable example is the Maritime Board under the leadership of assistant to the president Patrushev with its three councils: for strategic development of the Navy; for defence of the national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic; for development and support of the maritime activity of the Russian Federation. It appears that, as in the early years of Putin's rule under Secretary Sergey Ivanov (1999–2001), the Security Council has once again taken on the role of a strategic centre of power, with attention shifting towards the strategies developed within the Council.

In addition, there is a practice of appointing an official with broad powers responsible for a particular sector to address coordination issues and improve horizontal interaction, similar to approaches used in the United States. The role of a deputy prime minister, with the authority to issue directives to ministers, is a case in point.

The 'non-standard' sectoral vice-premiers who are close Putin allies and have broad coordination powers are:

- **Yury Trutnev,** responsible since 2013 for the Far East, and since 2018 for the Arctic as well.
- **Marat Khusnullin,** responsible since 2020 for construction and the regions, and since 2022 for the reconstruction of the occupied Ukrainian regions.
- **Vitaly Savelyev,** responsible for transport since 2024.
- **Nikolai Patrushev** with the Maritime Board, responsible for shipbuilding from 2024.

The decisions in 2024 were both quick and long in coming. The situation with the draft law on local self-administration can serve as an example of the breakdown in the workings of the system – adoption of the law was required under the constitutional reform of 2020. It was drafted by the heads of relevant Federation Council and State Duma committees and passed in its first reading back in January 2022.

The idea of the liquidation of one of the two levels of local self-administration, already tested out on several regions, evoked a sharply negative reaction in certain others, in particular in Tatarstan. The Kremlin took a time-out, and deputies returned to consideration of the document only in the autumn session of 2024. The second reading was at first scheduled for December, but was postponed at the last moment to 2025. As a result, the draft law was adopted three years after the start of discussions, but in a form that was less binding on the regions.

In the case of personnel, a gap can be observed between the time officials leave a post and the time new appointments are made – a long game of patience with cards laid to the side, as in the case of Boris Kovalchuk. He left the post of head of the 'Inter RAO' company in March, spent two months at a second-level post in the presidential administration, and only in May took up the job of chairman of the Accounts Chamber, which had been vacant from November 2022 to May 2024.

The place of the head of the Federal Customs Service was also vacant from February 2023 to May 2024. The decision on replacing the elderly chairman of the Supreme Court, Vyacheslav Lebedev, was prepared well in advance and realised in the blink of an eye – but only after his death in February 2024.

A rise in elements of populism is detectable: cautious playing to anti-elite sentiments in the military and in society with the removal of a collective allergen in the person of Shoigu and his team in the Ministry of Defence; the initiation of public conflicts between governors and business (Vologda, Samara, and Kursk Regions).

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DECISIONS

The presidential campaign encouraged populism and particular attention to public sentiment during the elaboration and promulgation of decisions that citizens are sensitive to. A parallel can be drawn between the decision on pension reform, promulgated right after the elections of 2018, and the decision on tax reform – with its meticulous media preparation even before the 2024 elections.

In the wake of the pension reform, angry voters rejected four Kremlin-backed candidates in gubernatorial elections – an unprecedented outcome since the return of gubernatorial voting in 2012. Retirement is often planned in advance, and the reform disrupted people's life plans. By contrast, employer-paid taxes are not widely perceived as personally relevant, which is why a painful overhaul of the tax system passed almost unnoticed.

A series of decisions by the Bank of Russia on raising the key rate in an effort to fight inflation was the raw nerve of 2024: the rate rose from 16 per cent to a record-high 21 per cent. Growing discontent with this Central Bank strategy was loudly and publicly expressed by major businessmen and government officials.

On 20 December, the Central Bank, having reviewed the options – leaving the rate unchanged or raising it to 22 per cent or 23 per cent – unexpectedly decided not to raise the key rate, even though the majority of analysts were predicting its rise. According to Bloomberg, bankers, enterprise managers, and government officials had been complaining to Putin about the Central Bank chairman, Elvira Nabiullina. Even prime minister Mikhail Mishustin told Putin that the regulator's actions were impeding the efforts of the government with respect to supporting an economy that had come under sanctions.[28]

In the course of an annual live call-in show on the eve of this announcement, Putin declared that the government and Central Bank were working to bring the rates of inflation 'back down to earth'. He noted that it was unknown to him what specific decision the Bank of Russia would take, but expressed the hope that it would be prudent and would correspond to the realities of today.

DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

In a personalist system, many serious decisions are formally validated by the autocrat's decrees. 1,132 decrees were adopted in 2024 – 667 that were published and 465 closed ones (41.1 per cent). It had been noted earlier that secret decrees may be dedicated to different questions, including awards to military people and pardons of convicts recruited into storm trooper detachments.[29]

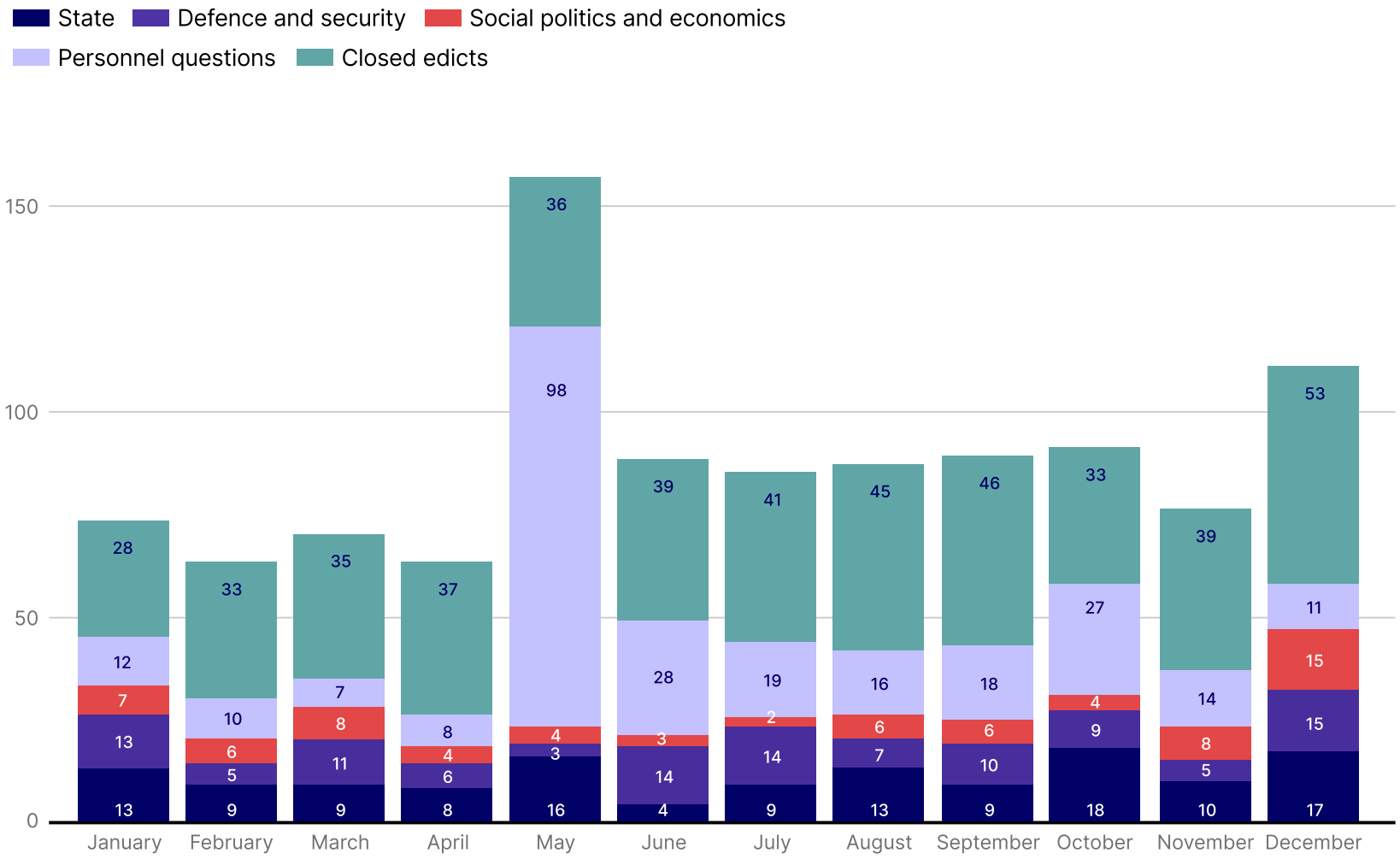
The overall number of decrees turned out to have been substantially greater than earlier (997 in 2023 and 996 in 2020), which, apparently, can be explained by the personnel shuffles and the reformatting of the government and the presidential administration after the elections. It is no coincidence that a record-high number of decrees was issued in May – 165, the two-month 'norm'.

Setting the awards (79) aside, nearly half of the public decrees are attributable to personnel matters (268), and the rest to matters of state (135), to defence and security (112), and socio-political and economic decisions (73) (see Fig. 8).

There were no drastic changes in the mechanisms for the adoption of decisions in 2024. All serious decisions, as before, are adopted by Putin; the opportunities for figures from his innermost circle to influence some specific decision have more likely diminished than increased. Although, as before, different variants of a resolution are worked on, and sometimes even prepared – in this case, Putin takes his cue from trusted expert officials.

Decisions are adopted in conditions of secrecy, without public discussion. A collective format for working out key decisions does not exist. Instead, Putin holds separate one-on-one debates on each of the variants of a decision with the principal actors.

FIG. 8. NATURE OF PRESIDENTIAL DECREES IN 2024



Source: The NEST Centre's assessment based on the legal acts database, kremlin.ru

Decisions in the socio-economic sphere are discussed monthly or bi-weekly in small circle meetings between Putin and key members of the government, and are announced either by Putin himself, or with references to him. Preliminary brainstorming can take place at the rare sessions of the presidium of the State Council (once or twice a year). Decisions in the foreign policy and military-political sphere are discussed under the radar – at annual meetings between Putin and the permanent members of the Security Council.

Score: 2 – substantial development

- There was an abundance of personnel changes and long-term planning in anticipation of the elections and the new presidential term.
- The authorities placed increased focus on revisiting previously adopted but only partially implemented decisions.
- They continued to adjust the decision-making system in light of the prolonged confrontation with the West and the impact of Western sanctions.
- A common thread running through decisions in the personnel sphere was the aim of preserving the existing balance between the principal groups in the elite and ensuring Putin's direct personal control over key administrative blocs and institutions.

The shadow of war

The Kremlin is expending great efforts to ensure that the war in Ukraine is perceived by citizens as a faraway military operation that has no direct impact on them. But the consequences of the war itself and of the forcible integration of the occupied Ukrainian territories are significant, varied, and palpable in all parts of the country.

It is possible to say that the 'shadow of war' has covered all of Russia and is gradually darkening. This includes the mounting human losses and the decline in the value of human life due to the progressing criminalisation of society, and legal nihilism – going off to war is being used as an official indulgence for suspects at all stages of an investigation and for convicted criminals. It likewise includes the 'Donbasisation' of Russia in the broad sense, i.e. the creeping spread throughout the country of the norms and practices of the semi-gangland 'people's republics'.

If at the start of the 2000s, OMONs [Special Purpose Police Detachments] from the regions of Russia and other professional security officials were being sent on half-year tours of duty in Chechnya, now a significant part of civilian officialdom is going through the experience of work in the occupied territories, especially young ambitious cadres. It is fair to assume that similar processes will be seen in the bureaucratic apparatus.

RECRUITMENT FOR THE WAR

The recruitment of rank-and-file combatants continues to draw primarily from a narrow social stratum – the working poor in smaller towns.

In 2024, the Kremlin chose not to repeat the experience of 'budget-friendly' compulsory mobilisation seen in September 2022. Instead, it turned to a range of alternative approaches to fill the ranks – some of them costly, but still less unpopular with society:

Contract volunteers. Payouts for entering into contracts and for participation in combat operations are constantly growing. The regions' key performance indicators are reduced for sending reinforcements, and they compete both in increasing regional payouts (up to four million roubles [$50,000] in individual cases) and in the creation of special privileges and benefits for participants in the 'special military operation' and members of their families.

Coercion of draftees into signing contracts. In 2024 up to 30 per cent of fixed-term-of-service conscripts in some units were coerced, including with the use of violence, into signing a contract immediately after taking their oath. Cases when officers forge the signature of a military serviceman on a contract are also known.

Sending convicts to war. Human rights advocates report a substantial stiffening of the regime not only in men's penal colonies, but in women's as well – with the aim of sending as many eligible convicts to the front as possible. It has become practically impossible for a prisoner whose age and state of health make them fit for combat to hold out against the pressure to go to the front.

Conscripting detainees. Since October 2024, it has also been permitted to send individuals under pre-trial investigation to the front – with their cases fully annulled.

North Korean soldiers. The sending to Kursk Region of 11,000–12,000 military service personnel from North Korea; plus the recruitment of citizens of developing countries, including by deceit, under the guise of recruitment for peaceful work.[30]

The Ministry of Defence calculates that 900 thousand people have signed contracts, and the 302 thousand people were mobilised in 2022. Experts believe the first estimate is exaggerated, but it is still reasonable to assume that around a million people have passed through the front – including current combatants, the dead, the wounded, and those who have been rotated out.

RETURNEES FROM THE WAR

There are very few returnees. The mobilisation of autumn 2022 has been declared open-ended, although in December 2023 the Ministry of Defence did report that of the 302 thousand reservists mobilised[31], 41 thousand had already been discharged after reaching the age limit (later raised) or due to health reasons.[32]

Similarly, the contracts of professional soldiers are viewed as open-ended until the end of the war. The contracts of the 'Prigozhin recruits' – prisoners originally enlisted into the Wagner private military company – had fixed terms and ended long ago. However, many of the returnees who received pardons either signed new contracts or were coerced into doing so under threat of arrest for real or fabricated crimes. As Wagner fighters, they are not entitled to the same benefits and payouts as other participants in combat operations.

Those currently fighting can return from the front only in a few cases: serious injury, desertion, the birth of a fourth child, or – somewhat paradoxically – if an officer records misconduct such as disobedience, breaking regulations, or anti-social behaviour, and agrees to terminate the contract. The main risk here is that there is a high probability of ending up in a punishment battalion, and not in the rear (real breaches of discipline are punished very harshly in the Russian army, not 'by the book').

Combined with the large payouts to contractors, these conditions create broad opportunities for corruption: the 'self-buyout' of wounded from a military hospital can cost up to a million roubles ($12,000).

Otherwise, it is entirely possible that a soldier who has not completely recovered from their injury and someone suffering serious effects from a wound could be sent back to the front.

The cost of arranging a contract termination through a commander for disciplinary reasons is harder to determine, but it is clear that corruption and the complex schemes needed to leave the front have given rise to numerous fraudsters offering to act as intermediaries. Theoretically, combatants are supposed to receive a short leave (up to two weeks), but this too depends on the goodwill of the commanders. Judging from the reports on the appearance of soldiers in frontline regions, it is possible to negotiate leave to be spent in the nearest population centre – something that can again hardly be possible without corrupt practices.[33]

The number of war participants who have returned is not all that large, but by September 2024, independent journalists had counted nearly 500 casualties, killed or gravely injured from crimes committed by them in civilian life. In most cases, the incidents involve assaults on relatives, close friends, neighbours, or fellow villagers – or disruptive behaviour in public places near the person's home.[34]

Among the perpetrators there are 246 pardoned or paroled ex-prisoners, and only 180 military service personnel of other categories. According to the highest estimates, former prisoners comprise just 150 thousand of the total war participants, while the 'Prigozhin' recruits with fixed-term contracts number 35–50 thousand at most. The very fact that this information has surfaced in the media and on social networks despite military censorship suggests that local communities view returning soldiers with fear and distrust – seeing their combat experience as an aggravating factor rather than a mitigating one, despite the stance of law enforcement and the courts.

In 2024, 'journeys to the front' became a mass phenomenon among Russian officials. They do not sign the usual contract with the Ministry of Defence – the one that prescribes a payout of millions of roubles – but a volunteer one, in which there is no payout. All other conditions remain the same as those for contract and mobilised soldiers: a monthly allowance of at least 210,000 roubles ($2,600), subsistence and material support, medical care, free public transport, and the opportunity to obtain veteran status.

A volunteer contract is not open-ended (until the end of the 'special military operation'); it is entered into for three months or for half a year. As a rule, the volunteer officials do not participate directly in combat operations, but are engaged in organising supply chain management, socio-political work, or, for example, the drone war far from the battle lines as a part of the BARSes [regional home guard militias].

Alongside combat veterans with low social capital – whom local communities are often reluctant to welcome or reintegrate – a broader group of privileged pseudo-combat veterans is emerging. This group is positioned to demand recognition and benefits, and to publicly represent war participants, effectively drowning out the voices of real veterans.

OFFICIALS ON THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

Even more widespread among officials is the tendency to acquire experience through relatively brief service on the occupied territories, or simply temporary assignment there, with a return to the metropolis to continue their career. As a rule, they return to a different region from which they had left, and to a higher position.

Over three years, hundreds of Russian officials of different levels have come through the occupied territories. Some were sent there for rotation work with the occupation administrations or to check up on mentee cities, districts, and military units. Others were counting on making use of the war as a trampoline for building a career or as a way of making amends for earlier 'transgressions'. There is a growing trend of officials relocating to the occupied territories to escape legal troubles.

Analysis shows that as of December 2024, a little less than half of the key public officials of the occupied regions with the level of vice-premier and higher were representatives of the local elite. In the case of the LPR and the DPR [the Luhansk and Donetsk 'People's Republics'], these are teams that have already taken shape over 10 years of 'independence'. In Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Regions, it is mostly Ukrainian officials who have gone over to the Russian side after the occupation. The majority (an increasing majority) of public officials are outsiders from Russia.

Nearly one in five officials whose biographies we have studied – seven out of 37 – had worked in the Russian Ministry of Industry and Trade. People who have come from the Ministry of Economic Development or the Ministry of Finance are visible as well. AThe composition of the other officials deploying to the occupied territories is quite varied – they come from different regions and different federal ministries.

The mechanism of mentorship is at work as well, when Russian regions send their personnel to mentee territories that have been assigned to them. For example, at the beginning of the war, Krasnodar Krai took mentorship of Kharkiv Region, and that is exactly where ex-mayor of Krasnodar Andrey Alekseyenko first went – before becoming prime minister of Kherson Region. Sevastopol took mentorship over Melitopol – the capital of the occupied Zaporizhzhia Region, and this could explain the large quantity of people from Crimea in the local administration.

Three of the officials who had worked in the occupied regions (five, if the 'Time of Heroes' programme graduates are taken into account) became governors: of Chukotka, the Jewish Autonomous Region, the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, and Omsk and Tambov Regions. This is half of the newly appointed governors.

It is mostly career-motivated officials who go to work on the occupied territories, in the expectation of rapid advancement. Remuneration serves as an additional stimulus: in the occupied territories, officials can earn two-three times more than in Russia.[34]

The average stay of an official in a 'new' region is approximately a year and a half. But the range is rather large: there are Russians who had been working in the Donbas even before the start of the full-scale war or who had arrived there soon after its start and are continuing to work there to this day, and there are those who worked less than half a year there.

A special question is the baggage in the form of behavioural norms and practices that the officials who have spent time working there bring back from the occupied regions. Here, for example is what the publication Meduza writes in this regard: [36]

> 'In the regional administrations and plenipotentiary representations of the president, there is concern about the behaviour of officials who had spent some time working on the occupied territories of Ukraine – and subsequently received a new appointment and returned to Russia.'

The fact of the matter is that on the annexed territories, the officials 'learn excessively uninhibited handling [even by the measures of Russian civil servants]' of budgetary money directed towards the territories' reconstruction. In conversation with Meduza, one of the regional officials calls what is happening on the conquered Ukrainian lands 'a bona fide school of corruption'.

An especially large number of such appointees who have passed through the occupied territories can be observed in the realm of education and culture.[37] Deep in the bowels of the so-called 'new regions', tens and hundreds of ambitious 30-40-year-old young people are being shaped by the life and professional experience there, and move on to continue their careers in Russia; there is reason to believe that they will soon become the core of the new management elite of Russian education and culture.[38]

THE 'TIME OF HEROES' PROGRAMME

In a presidential address on 29 February 2024, Putin announced that participants in the 'special military operation' must occupy leadership positions in many spheres of the country's activity. It is specifically they, and not those who got rich in the 1990s, in Putin's words, who are the country's true elite.

The next day, an announcement was made about the launch of a special educational project, 'Time of Heroes', on the basis of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration. This is the same 'forge of cadres' where Sergey Kiriyenko's new approach to personnel policy is being implemented – a place where candidates selected by the Kremlin for leadership roles in public policy are professionally trained and prepared. Other educational projects include 'Leaders of Russia' together with the 'School of Governors' (since 2017), and the recently launched 'School of Mayors' (2023).

By 17 May, as the programme's website reports, the first 83 participants in the 'Time of Heroes' were selected from over 44 thousand applications collected in a month.[39] Candidates for training had to meet the following requirements: Russian citizenship; higher education; experience at managing personnel; no record of convictions. The mass scale – real or made up – signifies that an important task was to ensure public visibility, and to reach every potential candidate (in conditions of war!).

The training programme, which began at the end of May, is intended to take two years, with four classroom modules, each lasting a month. First, they sent the programme participants on an icebreaker to the North Pole. Then, leading government officials and managers spoke to them, including the man in charge of the programme, Sergey Kiriyenko, deputy chairman of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev, vice-premier Marat Khusnullin, minister of foreign affairs Sergey Lavrov, and others.

The next stage of the training – practice-oriented internships in the presidential administration, federal ministries and agencies, the State Duma and Federation Council, regional organs of power, the largest state companies.

All the participants in the programme not only gain civilian specialisations, but also attend courses at the Academy of the General Staff of the Armed Forces. They are expected to make a final choice of sphere of activity, military or civilian, after completing the programme.

As early as September–October 2024, before the training had even concluded, the Kremlin appointed twenty programme participants to senior positions. The highest position – plenipotentiary representative of the president in the Urals Federal District – was received by Artem Zhoga, formerly a field commander, who last year was speaker of the parliament of the 'Donetsk People's Republic'.

Three participants in the 'special military operation' became senators: from Kursk Region, Crimea, and the Altai Republic. Several people came to work in the presidential administration. Some received positions in corporations: deputy chief of the department of social development at Russian Railways, advisor to the head of Rosaviatsiya [Federal Air Transport Agency], head of the Samara scientific-and-production centre for pilotless

aviation systems, advisor to the deputy director general of Rosatom. Many took up posts in the regions.

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In December 2024, Putin proposed expanding the 'Time of Heroes' project to the regions,[40] calling on members of the 'United Russia' party to become actively involved in this work and to more broadly engage war participants in party projects.[41]

In the regions, the authorities promptly started launching local analogues of the 'Time of Heroes' programme and simultaneously preparing positions in power for their future graduates. In Saratov Region, they introduced special deputy heads for patriotic work in the educational system at the regional and district levels. The head of Yakutia, Aysen Nikolayev, directed the heads of districts and municipalities to appoint war participants as their deputies for patriotic education. At least two participants of the 'Time of Heroes' programme have already become speakers of city councils in regional centres – in Nizhny Novgorod and Tomsk.

Graduates of the regional programmes typically move into second-tier positions in government – though not exclusively.[42] Since 2025, Moscow Region is offering war participants training in four directions: 'Civic activist', 'Manager', 'Specialist', and 'Entrepreneur'. A comprehensive programme for the rehabilitation of war participants is operating in Voronezh Region, offering training in 13 professions.

SOCIETY'S ATTITUDE

Neither the war in Ukraine itself nor its 'heroes' enjoy popularity in society. Based on the results of the recent elections in September 2024, war veterans actively promoted by the Kremlin received just 331 mandates out of over 30 thousand, including 313 mandates – the overwhelming majority – from 'United Russia'. 34 veterans made it through into new convocations of regional parliaments (this is more than 5 per cent of 659 mandates that were distributed at the corresponding levels in the 2024 elections), 46 into the city councils of regional capitals (7.5 per cent of 610 mandates), and another 233 into municipal organs (less than 1 per cent).[43]

The reasons why citizens are not inclined to vote for war veterans are connected in part with the contradictory tactic of the Kremlin itself, which positions the war in Ukraine

as something far away that is of little concern to ordinary citizens, and fears exploiting the topic of the war in elections because of its unpopularity.

The commercial model of 'buying' cannon fodder for the war, on the one hand, allows the Kremlin to avoid noticeable public dissatisfaction with the losses in the war, and on the other, makes the majority see the veterans as 'soldiers of fortune' who got lucky and managed to survive and make some money, and not as folk heroes who saved the Fatherland.

Society's engagement with the war remains low. According to data from a PROPA survey conducted in November (not yet published at the time of this report), only 13 per cent of respondents said they had relatives fighting (compared to 12 per cent in June). In other words, rank-and-file participants in the military actions are still being recruited out of more or less one and the same stratum of society. Judging by the social profile of a mobilised soldier published by the Ministry of Defence in December 2023, it is the provincial working poor with an average age on the order of 35 years.[44]

A series of repeat surveys were conducted throughout 2024. Russian social researcher Elena Koneva writes about them based on data from ExtremeScan. Respondents were supposed to respond to the question: 'If Vladimir Putin adopts a decision to withdraw Russian troops from the territory of Ukraine and begins negotiations on the cessation of hostilities without having achieved the originally stated objectives of the military operation, will you support or not support such a decision?'[45] The responses held steady at a level of 47–49 per cent (I support) and 30–33 per cent (I do not support) all year – this consistency alone is already noteworthy.

It should not be left unmentioned that, in Koneva's words, after the public position of the US president had started giving Russia hope for a significant victory in the war, support for peace – even peace at Putin's initiative – fell to 41 per cent in February 2025, while opposition to such a decision increased by nearly one and a half times – to 46 per cent.

In that same survey, 80 per cent of respondents consider that Putin is inclined to conclude peace (such is the current position of Russian propaganda) and only 10 per cent feel he is disposed toward continuing the 'special military operation'. What we see here is not genuine loyalty, but yet another form of opportunism: relatively neutral Russians place greater value on the prospect of a successful end to the war than on its swift conclusion – especially if it requires no effort on their part.

Score: 1 – limited development of previously formed trends

- Mobility within the civilian bureaucracy linked to the war risks spreading unlawful practices from the occupied territories to the rest of Russia. In the long term, it may also lead to a significant reshaping of the elite – particularly in the crucial areas of education and culture.
- Engagement with the war among Russians rose insignificantly, while the group of those who are engaged remains limited.
- Although aspiration for peace in society was rising throughout 2024, new data are showing that it was not serious.

Conclusions

In 2024, Russia experienced significant socio-political shifts affecting both the regime and society.

Putin's personalised system of rule was further consolidated over the year, but also became more vulnerable to external and internal pressures. It now rests on the absolute loyalty of elites who are united around the president but fragmented among themselves, and on a compliant, de-modernised society.

The regime remains mobile and adaptive. Constant fine-tuning of the political system in response to changing conditions and emerging challenges enables it to retain stability and address problems at all levels – local, regional, and federal. The war in Ukraine has contributed to this consolidation. The regime has so far successfully contained internal tensions, and the risk of elite fragmentation or, even more so, of state collapse appears lower now than before the war.

This 'monolithic' stability comes at a price. Increased control and further centralisation – including the integration of semi-autonomous pyramid institutions into a single Kremlin-led hierarchy – risks undermining the overall effectiveness of the system. Hyper-centralisation creates the potential for paralysis in emergency situations, as seen during the Prigozhin mutiny in 2023 and the Ukrainian incursion into Kursk Region in August 2024.

The most visible transformation occurred in the area of personnel policy. The year 2024 brought major reshuffles at the highest level – more reactive than proactive – and a notable expansion of the 'President Writ Large' pyramid, which absorbed auxiliary structures and outer administrative layers. Yet overall, the system continues to function according to established trends, maintaining existing models.

The regime is ageing, and this is reflected in senior appointments. With rare exceptions, no young officials are entering the top tier. Key power, law enforcement, and foreign policy institutions – all directly subordinate to Putin – remain under the control of long-serving figures. Systemic rejuvenation of the ruling class appears to be postponed for another five to ten years.

A qualitatively new model of elite appointments emerged in 2024. The majority of new appointees came not from state corporations or elite clans, but from Putin's 'extended family' – including relatives, members of his inner circle, aides, and others personally loyal to him. This suggests either preparations for a transfer of power or the beginning of the transfer itself. If this really is a transition, it resembles the late Stalin period, with the sidelining of established clans and the promotion of a generation of children and grandchildren from the president's personal orbit.

The regime continues to suppress all forms of grassroots organisation – even among loyal groups – and systematically destroys social ties. This approach undermines the flexibility and adaptability of the bureaucracy and casts doubt on Russia's capacity for stable development over the coming decades.

Two models of governance currently coexist within the regime:

- **The older, Putin-led model,** which lacks the ability to reproduce itself – this model underpinned all top-level appointments in 2024.
- **A more institutionalised model** associated with Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Sergey Kiriyenko.

Rather than competing, these models complement each other, each ensuring sufficient governability at its respective level. The existence of alternative mechanisms offers a degree of hope. The Putin model has exhausted itself – the 2024 appointments were one-off measures – and is expected to wind down within the current presidential term, which runs until 2030. When leadership change eventually occurs, the system, now transformed into a unified mechanism, will not require radical restructuring and, with adjustment, should be capable of operating in a normalised, peacetime context.

This anticipated reprogramming of the system, driven by the exhaustion of Putin's governance model, opens a window of opportunity for the West. To seize it, however, a coherent and adaptable strategy towards Russia must be developed – and revised regularly as the situation evolves.

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