ANALYSIS

# DIVIDES BEHIND THE FACADE OF UNITY

**Series “The Russian Crisis”. Paper #4**

**Greg Yudin**
February 2023

Despite the image of national unity that the Russian government strives to project, Russia is a fundamentally divided society, ridden by extreme inequalities and increasing polarization.

War magnifies territorial inequalities in Russia, with the poorest regions being more affected by mobilization and experiencing resource shortages.

Pressure from war limits the ability of the government to conceal and lull major inequalities, opening the room for demands for more justice within the country.

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# CONTENT

# DIVIDES BEHIND THE FACADE OF UNITY

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Military mobilization declared by Russian President Vladimir Putin in September 2022 has exposed a number of divisions within Russian society. While for many observers, Russian society appears unified and cohesive, the consequences of mobilization reveal deep contradictions that remained present but concealed for a long period of time. Now that the resources used for preventing conflicts and alleviating discontent become increasingly scarce for the Russian government, the cleavages within Russia start to surface and are likely to shape the dynamics of the country over the coming months and years.

This paper will address key dimensions of polarization and inequality in Russia, presenting Russian society as fundamentally divided. The existing and developing cleavages are likely to define the emerging political subjects, as well as their agenda. Looking at Russia as a complex, split and potentially conflict-ridden society helps avoid unrealistic expectations about the development of the country. Many commentators treat Russia during wartime as a singular geopolitical actor with clearly defined interests, assuming that behind the Facade of the political regime, there is a substantive societal unity making Russia resilient in a war of attrition and doomed to keep the conflictual trajectory even after the change in power. A more granular view is instructive in predicting what the key groups and interests are that drive the country and what their strategies could be.

The paper will first discuss the most prominent axis of conflict, the generational divide. It will be followed by several key dimensions of Russian inequality: economic, territorial, and ethnic. In the conclusion, the likely scenarios for the unfolding of major divides will be summarized, and the groups to address will be singled out.

## BUSINESS OF THE YOUNG?

Age turned into a differentiating factor in Russia roughly five years ago, so that already during the 2018 presidential election, it became apparent for the first time that Vladimir Putin is considerably more popular among older voters. Age division has persisted since then: during the 2019 local elections, 2020 constitutional plebiscite, and 2021 parliamentary elections, the young were increasingly disaffected with the President and his party, with the seniors being increasingly loyal. The middle-aged are located between the two extremes, being closer to the young in relatively calm periods but joining the seniors under pressure.

These tendencies can be illustrated with the polling data. A methodological precaution is in order: the validity of polling data in Russia is extremely low for a variety of reasons, and it is not advisable to treat the poll numbers as an indicator of the level of "support" for some politicians or policies[1]. However, the cross-section analysis and longitudinal comparisons make more sense. Fig. 1 demonstrates that year after year, respondents from different generations show consistent discrepancies when asked about major electoral events.

Figure 1.
**Polling data for age differences on key electoral events in 2018-2021**

| Age group | 2018 Presidential election | | 2019 Moscow protests | 2020 Constitutional plebiscite | | 2021 Parliamentary election |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Turn-out | Voting for Putin | Use of force by police was NOT justified | Turn-out | Voting for Putin | Voting for United Russia |
| 1 | 55 | 37 | 58 | 52 | 33 | 33 |
| 2 | 68 | 42 | 47 | 53 | 44 | 36 |
| 3 | 82 | 60 | 43 | 62 | 55 | 34 |
| 4 | 88 | 71 | 31 | 72 | 77 | 41 |

**Sources:** Public Opinion Foundation – for 2018; Levada-Center – for 2019-2021. In 2019, sampling was done in Moscow, and in other cases – nationwide sampling. In all cases, post-event polling is reported.

**Note.** For FOM data, age group 1 = 18-30 yrs., age group 2 = 31-45 yrs., age group 3 = 46-60 yrs., and age group 4 – 60+ yrs. For Levada-Center data, age group 1 = 18-24 yrs., age group 2 = 25-39 yrs., age group 3 = 40-54 yrs., and age group 4 – 55+ yrs.

In 2022, the same pattern remains in polling data on attitudes to the war, or the "special military operation", as Russian pollsters call it. In October, 54% of respondents aged 18-26 suggested that they would have

1 Some of those reasons are high nonresponse rates, perception of all pollsters as state representatives and, most importantly, spontaneous interpretation of polling as acclamation. See: Greg Yudin. Do Russians Support Putin? Journal of Democracy. 2022. 33 (3): 31-37.

reversed the decision to start the invasion if they had a chance to do so, whereas only 23% of those aged 60 and older would have done so[2]. Within the group 27-34, the share of those who are unhappy with the decision is still slightly higher: 44% against 39% of those who wouldn't have changed anything. While those numbers shouldn't be treated as the level of support or opposition to the war, it is still significant that those interviewed in different age groups diverge in their answers.

These discrepancies over age should be interpreted against the very basic fact that it is the young, rather than the old, who are supposed to go to the trenches in the first place. A line from a famous song by the late-Soviet band Kino rightly posits that "the war is the business of the young, a remedy against the wrinkles". According to the same poll, 78% of those over 60 years of age support the mobilization, while only 39% of the young (18-26) agree with them. For a very large number of families, this creates a situation where the grandfathers want their grandchildren to go fight, while the latter are not enthusiastic at all.

These divides reveal both political and cultural generational conflicts in Russia. The older generation holds power: the average age of the permanent members of the Security Council, the most powerful body in Russia, is 65, with two-thirds of them older than 67 years. The younger and the middle generations have almost no political representation and are removed from steering the country. The course is determined unilaterally by those who grew up and became established before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Among the consequences of this situation is a technological gap: the older generation has little or no mastery over new informational and communicational technologies, starting with the President himself, who famously rejects using the Internet. This leads to a discrepancy in information consumption: while the older generations exhibit a mono-channel consumption, relying on state-controlled TV only, the younger groups are more omnivorous, combine various sources of information and therefore display more diversity in their attitudes. While dependence on TV propaganda is often suggested as an explanation for the seniors' embrace of Putin's policies, it is also true that rejection of new ICTs is part of a wider phobia of the new and uncertain world that makes the older generations desire a return to safer and familiar Soviet environment, where Ukraine was part of the same country.

Even more importantly, the very limited use of communication technologies makes the older generation hardly familiar with globalization. Whereas the young are embedded in global cultural flows, the seniors keep inhabiting a world where beyond the borders of their country (or even their region) there is a sea of uncertainty. Only 25% of Russians report that they have a travel passport[3], and among the older generation, two-thirds have never left the territory of the former USSR[4]. While it is often true that different generations live in different worlds, the abyss between these universes in the case of Russians striking.

It is demographically inevitable that the share of people with very different cultural habits and experiences will rise and create additional pressure on the older generations to stick to power. Even if the theory that growing old entails developing more conservative views will turn out to be true in the case of Russians, the differences in socialization will certainly play their role. At this point, many Russian families live through very difficult cultural conflicts, with the old and the young having no language to communicate about the rapidly changing realities. As mobilization takes its toll, this conflict is bound to take a visibly political dimension, with the young and middle-aged generations laying their claim to power.

The Russian government understands these risks well. Its disconnection from the young results in difficulties with mobilizing troops, but also in the rise of protest potential within the country. Recent efforts to radically reorient the Russian education system towards military and ideological training should be seen in this context. Purges of universities and schools from disloyal students and instructors, the introduction of new classes (Talking about Important Things in schools and Fundamentals of Russian Ideology in undergraduate studies), the revival of Basic Military Training in high schools, radical militarization of school life (Lessons of Courage in elementary schools and kindergartens, featuring a display of weapons and meetings with the veterans of the Ukrainian war) – all of these measures amount to a full crackdown on Russian education and mean to regain control over the minds of the young.

2 Telephone poll of 1610 Russians conducted by the Russian Field group between September 29 – October 1. URL: <https://e1.pcloud.link/publink/show?code=XZsws8ZxVUq-H3UG5LVBvVrWiliJOminNj1V>

3 Levada-Center, September 2022. URL:<https://www.levada.ru/2022/09/08/poezdki-za-granitsu-4/>

4 Levada-Center, April 2016. URL: <https://www.levada.ru/cp/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Poezdki.pdf>

## CONTOURS OF CLASS CONFLICT

It is often ignored that Russia is one of the most unequal big countries in the world, matching or even surpassing the United States (see Fig. 2). With 1% of the richest controlling practically half of the country's immense wealth, Russia is bound to deal with the challenges of inequality. Russia stands 5th in the global rankings of billionaires with 78 billionaires holding Russian residence – 34 fewer than before the war[5]. So far, the country's ruling elite was able to stave off the discontent about the unjust system. However, such levels of inequality are very likely to generate social and political conflicts, and the tools to contain them might be no longer available.

Figure 2.
**Income and wealth inequality in Russia, USA, Germany, and Ukraine in 2021**

| | Top 10% share of income | Top 10% share of wealth | Top 1% share of income | Top 1% share of wealth |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Russia** | 47% | 74% | 21% | 48% |
| **United States** | 46% | 71% | 19% | 35% |
| **Germany** | 37% | 59% | 13% | 29% |
| **Ukraine** | 33% | 60% | 9% | 28% |

**Sources:** World Inequality Database

One of the patterns consistently observed in the polling data on attitudes toward war is that the poor appear to be more skeptical than the rich. According to a poll conducted by a pollster, Russian Field, after the mobilization started, individual wealth correlates with attitudes to war[6]. Using a standard measure of affluence, the study distinguishes between several groups. The least well-off are those who report experiencing difficulties buying basic provisions, and within this group, 44% would have reversed the decision to start the invasion if offered a time machine. The next group consists of those who can buy elementary provisions but struggle to purchase clothing – 39% of respondents within this group would have reversed the decision. Since this question aims to measure the attitude to war without asking directly about support for the President (a politically sensitive topic), one can see that embracing the war is more typical of the wealthier groups. In the group with the highest affluence (those who claim that they can afford all kinds of durables without resorting to consumer loans), only 26% would have reversed the fateful decision.

The composition of Russian society implies that affluence is primarily achievable for the representatives of the security apparatus (except some rank-and-file positions), higher- and mid-level bureaucracy, and a thin layer of white-collar workers in Russian or international corporations. Since elites tend to escape surveys anyway, this is the most affluent class that pollsters can reach. Its members are either directly dependent on the state (and therefore, take care of performing loyalty) or benefit from the current political-economic settings. Even in the midst of the badly going war, they harbor expectations that they will be better off soon, whereas the poor are increasingly pessimistic.

This brings us to actualize how war not only reflects but aggravates existing inequalities. The rich are generally shielded from the most unpleasant sides of war. They are at low risk of mobilization: partly because of being concentrated in Moscow and Saint Petersburg (see discussion of territorial inequalities below), but also because of being well-connected, enough to be exempted from duty. It also takes more time for them to feel the pains of inflation. Paradoxically, the vast majority of them is not even troubled by the travel restrictions: the richest bypass it through second and third citizenships, while security services officers have already been banned from traveling abroad a long time ago by the presidential decree.

On the contrary, the poor bear the double cost of war. It is quite clear that recruiting before the start of mobilization and after it tends to target the worse-off, who are less resourceful to resist the draft, but also more desperate to get a rare chance of upward mobility in a situation where almost all channels upstairs are blocked. The army is not able to equip the recruits with the essentials, and the struggling families have to purchase the equipment and even the weapons for their sons and husbands. Quite predictably, the poor are also experiencing the most significant decrease in their well-being, with the state being reluctant to support them or engage in wealth redistribution.

The striking wealth inequality is likely to develop into some sort of class conflict as the burdens of the war continue to be distributed unevenly across classes. Elites don't seem to be ready to sacrifice significantly for the cause of the war, and the ruling group would risk too much trying to attack them. Russia remains

5 Forbes' World Billionaires Ranking (https://www.forbes.com/billionaires).
6 Telephone poll of 1610 Russians conducted by the Russian Field group between September 29 – October 1. URL: <https://e1.pcloud.link/publink/show?code=XZsws8ZxVUq-H3UG5LVBvVrWiliJOminNj1V>

a very rare instance of a flat income tax rate[7] even in the middle of the war, and changes in the tax system are not discussed. While war has temporarily suspended the raising discussion of inequality within Russian society, it will probably contribute to a more heated standoff between those who belong to the global economic elites and those who have to pay for the military adventures of the former.

## MOSCOW IS NOT RUSSIA

The most prominent dimension of Russian inequality is territorial unevenness. Russia is an extremely centralized country with the mast majority of flows going through Moscow. With one-twelfth of the country's population, in 2021, Moscow accounted for 21% of the Russian GDP, more than 35% of funds in bank accounts, 27% of the consolidated budget economic expenditures, and 56% of the consolidated budget expenditures in urban development, according to economic geographer Natalia Zubarevich[8]. In 2021, Moscow was one of 13 donor regions out of Russia's 85, along with gas-producing regions and several others. This is aggravated by infrastructural centralization: road networks, airlines, and pipelines tend to converge in Moscow.

Although formally a federation, Russia is in reality a unitary state with regional elites being completely dependent on Moscow. Presidential administration nominates the candidates for the governorship (to be approved by popular vote) and oversees the elections in regional legislatures. This makes the governors completely loyal to the Kremlin, which is careful not to nominate politicians with dangerously strong ties to the region. In a very rare case of popular dissent, Khabarovsk region elected Sergey Furgal in 2018 against the incumbent. Despite trying to avoid being elected, Furgal would later become a popular leader with approval ratings surpassing those of Putin, and was jailed in 2020 for alleged murder. The ensuing multi-month massive protests drew nearly half of the region's population but resulted in the Kremlin forcing through an outsider governor with very low popularity and absolute loyalty to Putin.

This economic advantage of Moscow, cemented with political imbalance, generates remarkable hostility towards Moscow all across the country. It has shown itself over the last years in the rising movement for local politics: in many places, including Moscow (a city that probably suffers most from the overconcentration of power in the Kremlin), a number of citizens turned politicians were successfully running for local councils on the NIMBY or similar agenda, laying claim for the control of the land they live on. The Kremlin reacted by depriving municipal councils of their independence in the 2020 Constitutional plebiscite, effectively turning the local councils into parts of a unitary system of government. This, however, only increased the irritation toward Moscow's petty tyranny.

The mobilization is likely to increase these divisions significantly. From the start of the invasion, the Russian army and military companies were recruiting mostly outside Moscow and other large cities. There are three reasons behind this tactic: first, the likelihood of cajoling people into military service is much higher in poor regions with no rights enforced; second, the young in Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, or other large cities are far less willing to take part in the war; third, arming potential dissenters is potentially dangerous. In the first months of the war, there were no casualties of war in Moscow and very few in Saint-Petersburg. With the announcement of the mobilization, Putin recognized the limits of this strategy but continued sparing Moscow. While in many regions the share of recruited amounts to 10% of the adult male population, in Moscow it is significantly less than 0,5%. This creates a situation where the most resourceful city bears the least burden of the war, adding to the preexisting resentment.

Facing the challenge of drafting, the Kremlin has adopted the strategy of making the governors responsible for providing the troops for the army and essentials for the troops. Governors were in charge of assembling the volunteer battalions before the mobilization and took care of equipping the mobilized and compensating their families after the mobilization started. This resembles the solution taken in 2020, when Putin outsourced fighting the pandemic to the governors to avoid responsibility for the inevitable death toll, without providing them with many resources.

While this approach makes Putin less vulnerable to public discontent, it creates extreme challenges for the governors. Even though they are highly unlikely to rebel against Moscow (they were trained in personal loyalty to Putin), they also risk losing control over their regions if they don't resist Moscow's demands. Having now regional armies recruited and financed from regional budgets, they become more than merely Putin's lackeys. Importantly, the soldiers who are

7 In 2020, the 13% tax rate was amended by introducing a small step of additional 2% for those earning over 1 mln. roubles per year (€16,280).
8 URL: <https://www.rosbalt.ru/moscow/2021/12/23/1937064.html>

unhappy with the conditions of military training or the recklessness of their commanders, tend to complain to their governors, of all Russian officials, military and civil. The regions, therefore, assume control of their armies, creating a sudden element of extreme federalism in an otherwise unitary state.

Moscow mayor Sergey Sobyanin has also adopted an autonomous strategy: rather than preparing his own army, he attempts to dodge the requirements made by the Kremlin to appear as protector of the Moscovites. Given the general territorial asymmetry, these divergent gubernatorial lines can generate significant conflicts as the war takes its toll. Centrifugal tendencies can be expected to increase as regional elites start reconsidering whether they can rely on their newly established military units for strengthening their independence, rather than serving Moscow's adventurous plans.

## FRAGILE EMPIRE

The regional disparities are compounded by the surviving imperial framework of Russian territorial organization. While inequality between regions is a big challenge in itself, some regions are not like others: they have significant ethnic minorities. So-called "national republics", preserve their distinct identity. In a country with 80% of the population identifying as Russians, these elements are of particular importance, for general disparities are perceived here through an ethnic lens.

After the launch of mobilization, a wave of protests erupted in some of those regions, like Dagestan and Chechnya, and considerable discontent was also shown by people in Buryatia. According to a radical interpretation, Russia replenishes its army with predominantly non-Russian ethnicities. While it is dubious that ethnic profiling guides drafting, the disproportionate burden on the national republics and minorities, specifically, is in fact an effect of ethnicized economic inequality. Many of these republics are among the poorest Russian regions: Ingushetia, Tuva, Karachay-Cherkessia are heading the rating of the less affluent parts of Russia. Others, like Bashkortostan or Buryatia, have internal stratification: non-Russians tend to live in the countryside, are significantly worse off and lack opportunities for upward mobility. It makes them natural targets for mobilization.

This doesn't dispute ethnic discrimination in Russia, but rather points to its structural character. The national republics are a solution to the Kremlin's electoral tasks: called "electoral sultanates" by political geographer Dmitry Oreshkin, they provide an outsized part of votes for the incumbents during the national elections. Voting for the incumbent is usually above 70-80%, which makes the republics an important source of legitimacy for Vladimir Putin. Obviously, these votes mostly result from outright fraud or severe pressuring, which makes these regions different from other parts of Russia, where voter fraud is much less engrained and the results of the incumbents are much lower[9].

The elites of the national republics thus make themselves valuable for the Kremlin's vote hunt, benefiting from their ability to bus the people to the polling stations or forge numbers without risking public discontent. The national republics are therefore overrepresented in Russian elected bodies, providing the Kremlin with valuable resources (votes and support figures) in exchange for material benefits for themselves and their population. This strategy is best understood in terms of tribute relationships between Moscow and its quasi-colonial regions which are happy to please the imperial capital with numbers and receive money in return.

This same strategy was adopted during the war, with volunteers and draftees now serving as a precious resource to trade with the Kremlin, and it seemed to work for a while, boosting the standing of the governors. When mobilization started, the Kremlin predictably turned to these regions for the draftees, meaning to avoid drafting too many people from the large cities. However, the national republics were already depleted by the volunteer cajoling in the first months of the war, and over-drafting during the mobilization was too much for them to bear with. It was perceived as a breach of the tribute contract and prompted multiple protests.

The effect of these protests shouldn't be overestimated. They were unlikely to spread beyond these regions into a national resistance movement and were eventually suffocated. However, the breach of contract could potentially have long-lasting consequences. While all regions now subsidize their own armies within the imperial army, national republics differ from others in one important respect: ethnic homogeneity. Even though there is little talk of separatism at this point, should the republics put their al-

9 See a typology of Russian regions by voting behavior suggested by Kirill Rogov in his "Who's left overboard?" In: Greg Yudin (ed.) Quality of Political Representation in Contemporary Russia. A Report to the Convention of Local MPs. 2021 URL: <https://zemstvo-russia.ru/report>

legiance to Moscow in question, they now have their own ethnic units with combat experience and enough resentment about Moscow's attitude to them.

Ramzan Kadyrov's Chechnya is obviously the most likely case for such potential repurposing of the armed forces. Kadyrov enjoys unprecedented independence within Russia's unitary design, and his relationship with Russia is best interpreted as a personal union where he serves junior partner to Vladimir Putin. Kadyrov's rise in Russian public politics during the war clearly points to the fact that his significance for the Russian army secures him even more autonomy: not only is he able to publicly criticize Russian generals, but he successfully exerts public pressure on Putin to make the major military decisions. With his army being very loosely integrated into the structure of the Russian military, Kadyrov retains considerable military power to claim sovereignty if he chooses so.

However, the tendency is not restricted to Kadyrov, whose standing is obviously an exception in Russia. The head of Tatarstan, Rustem Minnikhanov, also engages in active subsidizing of the Tatar units within the Russian army. As opposed to many other national republics, Tatarstan is a rich region, but Minnikhanov chooses to use mobilization to arm his men, rather than dodging the draft. Several other governors are also trying to establish personal connections with the troops from their regions, even though they have far fewer resources for that at their disposal.

Possible fractures along the ethnic lines should be seen from the perspective of a prospect of larger imperial collapse. As tensions mount between Moscow and its internal colonies, the former colonial states that had gained independence with the dissolution of the Soviet Union are openly opposing Moscow's neo-imperial posture. An accident in Soloti, where two citizens of Tajikistan, apparently forcibly recruited into the Russian army, refused to go fighting and shoot several dozens of soldiers and officers over what seemed to be an offense of the Islamic religion, is quite characteristic of the current decay. In the eyes of the empire, both Tajiks and Tatars are supposed to be natural parts of the imperial army. However, former Soviet states reject this role, as manifested in clearly changing policies of the Middle Asian leaders towards Russia. Will the national republics follow the lead and start thinking of themselves as oppressed colonies and demanding more independence? The structural embeddedness of ethnic inequalities contributes to this scenario.

## WHY THIS HASN'T EXPLODED YET?

Some economists who managed to visit and study the Soviet Union in the 1980s, quickly changed their research question from "how can it stop working?" to "how it still works?". Given the magnitude of imbalances in the present-day Russian system, one may wonder why it is not collapsing.

While the Russian government has relied consistently on various sides of the imperial design to stave off critical threats, one particularly important instrument to prevent the cracks is money. Facing the growing discontent from the disaffected groups, the Kremlin is normally fast to come to governors' rescue with extra funds. These injections wouldn't normally remove the cause of the problem, but rather convince the protesters that it would be easier to take the compensation rather than insist on reforms. Those who resist being convinced, are offered repressions.

However, the wartime situation puts significant holds on the use of money to kill the fires. With the economy being damaged by sanctions and military expenditures rising constantly, the Kremlin has few resources to share with the governors. Many of them are already struggling to find resources to equip the troops, going as far as canceling the festivities on New Year's Eve to save funds. While the Russian economy in general is not on a brink of collapse, the funds that were normally dispatched to the trouble spots are severely limited. So far, governors have received very little help to address the new challenges. If potential conflicts caused by inequalities remained heretofore concealed, they are likely to surface soon. This will create a very different environment and incentives for the governors and local elites.

## CONCLUSION

Recognizing fundamental divides existing in Russia puts one in a position to make several conclusions:

- Far from being a unified society, Russia is a country ridden with extreme inequalities that are conducive to disunion
- Military mobilization exacerbates these inequalities. In the absence of enthusiastic support for the war, the additional burdens created by war are likely to result in internal conflicts
- The country is likely to get more polarized as the differences that were continually staved off by depoliticization, repression, and "helicopter money", become more apparent
- There is a significant intergenerational divide in Russia, with the war pushing the young to demand political representation
- Territorial discrepancies are the crucial dimension of economic inequality in Russia, resulting in the burden of the war being unevenly distributed between the regions
- The pressure created by war is likely to create inter-ethnic tensions, pushing the national republics towards greater autonomy from imperial rule
- The creation of military units supervised and supported by the regions contains a risk of inter-regional or inter-ethnic feuds in Russia
- The younger politicians, regional elites, and representatives of ethnic minorities are the figures likely to determine the future of Russia from a mid-term perspective

## ABOUT THE SERIES

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a turning point in the history of the continent. While the war is undoubtedly the most catastrophic outcome of the fundamental crisis in Russia, it is not the only one. **The Russian Crisis** is a series of papers, which are focused on events and trends affecting society, economy, and politics in the Russian Federation.

Due to Moscow's growing global isolation, intensified internal repression, mass emigration, severed international ties, disinformation campaigns, and rapid news cycles, it has become increasingly difficult to keep up with long-term developments in Russia. This project is dedicated to deepening the public discourse and aims to bridge the gap between fast-paced political reporting and academic research. By doing so, it strives to shed light on the multifaceted aspects of the crisis and encourage a more nuanced understanding of the complex challenges ahead.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND THE SERIES EDITOR

**Greg Yudin** is a political theorist and sociologist, affiliated with multiple academic institutions in Russia and the United States. He has contributed to the theorization of Russian politics within the current global trends, conducted fieldwork in Russia and beyond, engaged in methodological debates on studying and reading Russian society. He is active as academic researcher, author of commissioned reports and policy papers, and is a contributor to major media in Russia and abroad.

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Published by:
**Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.**
Godesberger Allee 149
53175 Bonn
Germany
www.russia.fes.de
E-mail: info@fes-russia.org

Editing Department:
International Cooperation Department,
FES Russia Programme

Responsibility for content and editing:
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# SUMMARY


Despite the image of national unity that the Russian government strives to project, Russia is a fundamentally divided society, ridden by extreme inequalities and increasing polarization. Generational divide, economic inequality, and territorial and ethnic divisions are aggravated by war and particularly by mobilization. These fractures contain the significant potential for transforming Russian society and are expected to become driving forces of change. War and economic sanctions drain the financial resources that federal powers and local governors require to prevent the fractures.

War magnifies territorial inequalities in Russia, with the poorest regions being more affected by mobilization and experiencing resource shortages. Governors are charged with recruiting and providing the military units with the essentials while they are on the frontlines, which affects the composition of the Russian army and creates conditions for the emergence of regional armies. Overdrafting among ethnic minorities breaks the agreement between national republics and the center, threatening to subvert the imperial framework. With ethnically homogenous military units, local elites obtain additional leverage in a possible confrontation with Moscow.

Pressure from war limits the ability of the government to conceal and lull major inequalities, opening the room for demands for more justice within the country. Anumber of disadvantaged groups can be expected to seek political subjectivity as the situation becomes increasingly dire. Among them are younger politicians, regional elites, and representatives of ethnic minorities. These groups are now dominated by the aged political class, embracing the imperial agenda and benefiting from existing structural inequalities. They are likely to drive the conflicts that might foster a different political agenda and contribute to political change.



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