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Russia's recolonization war against Ukraine: Deep-rooted social causes

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Abstract

Since 2022, the war against Ukraine has become a central pillar of the Russian political system, arising from the country's societal evolution in the post-Soviet period. A primary challenge during this era has been a recurring crisis of legitimacy. This paper argues that the recolonization war against Ukraine has served as a tool for the domestic legitimation of the established system. Utilizing data from Levada-Centr and OVD-INFO, the paper examines the role of warfare in system legitimation. It explores the social mechanisms by which Russia's external aggression helps mitigate domestic social tensions accumulated within its dysfunctional socioeconomic and authoritarian political system, providing this system with a "war dividend". Time series analysis reveals that the full-scale war against Ukraine has allowed Russian authorities to shift toward a new, higher level of system legitimacy, representing a new, relatively stable long-run equilibrium. Contrary to the author's initial hypothesis, low-intensity war generally exhibited a delegitimizing effect, with no statistical evidence of a new stable equilibrium in that instance. Furthermore, the state of peace had no statistically significant influence on system legitimacy.

Key words

Recolonization war, system legitimacy, Russia, Ukraine

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Resumen

Desde 2022, la guerra contra Ucrania se ha convertido en un pilar central del sistema político de Rusia, con origen en la evolución social del país en el período postsoviético. Una dificultad primordial en esta época ha sido una crisis recurrente de legitimidad. Este artículo argumenta que la guerra de recolonización contra Ucrania ha servido como instrumento de legitimación del sistema establecido dentro del país. Usando datos del Levada-Centr y OVD-Info, este artículo examina el rol dela guerra en la legitimación del sistema. Explora los mecanismos sociales por los cuales la agresión externa de Rusia ayuda a mitigar las tensiones sociales internas, acumuladas en su disfuncional sistema socioeconómico y autoritario, dotando a ese sistema de "dividendos de guerra". Un análisis de series cronológicas revela que la guerra a escala total contra Ucrania ha permitido a las autoridades rusas pasar a un nuevo y superior nivel de legitimación del sistema, representando un equilibrio nuevo relativamente estable a largo plazo. Contrariamente a la hipótesis inicial del autor, la guerra de baja intensidad tuvo, en general, un efecto deslegitimador, sin que las estadísticas revelen un nuevo equilibrio estable en ese caso. Aún más, el estado de paz no tuvo un efecto estadísticamente significativo en la legitimidad del sistema.

Palabras clave

Guerra de recolonización, legitimidad del sistema, Rusia, Ucrania

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1. Introduction

Russia's brutal war against Ukraine is frequently framed in the media as the result of irrational decision-making or an error by President Vladimir Putin and his close affiliates — implying that the war was entirely unexpected and divorced from Russian social structures. Although some academic research attributes the war to domestic factors and the political legitimacy of the regime (Ferraro 2024, Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2025), dominant public and political discourse remains focused on subjective personal aspects or foreign policy drivers.

Although, "Russia's war against Ukraine has profoundly reshaped Russian society" (Olimpieva 2024, 308), substantial evidence suggests this war is a link in a long chain of social transformation within Russian society dating back to the early 1990s. At that time, while Russian society initially embraced democracy and the market economy — and reacted negatively to the First Chechen War — it was subsequently challenged by radical political and economic reforms. The 1990s were characterized by a sharp decline in living standards, the loss of millions of industrial jobs, ideological collapse, and prolonged frustration for a population uprooted from its established lifestyle and belief systems. Although these shifts were largely inevitable results of the Soviet collapse, and despite the emergence of new opportunities, Russian society suffered significant social trauma. This constituted an intergenerational trauma, affecting not only the older generations but also their children.

Consequently, the beginning of the 21st century saw a new stage of transformation within a socially traumatized population. By 2000, a largely dysfunctional socioeconomic and political system had emerged. The legacy of the Soviet system — including decades of state communism, specific institutional traits, and urbanization patterns — exerted a significant impact (De Melo *et al.* 2001). Russian society failed to accumulate the social capital requisite for promoting successful reforms including a sustainable democratic system. The resulting system was characterized by a pervasive shadow economy dominated by "clans" and oligarchs; high levels of extra-legal violence and violent business takeovers; and a lack of property rights protections, forcing businesses into clientelistic relationships with politicians. The institution of a designated successor, Vladimir Putin, was solidified through state manipulation of elections and the redistribution of corporate resources.

A vast body of literature analyzes these systemic dysfunctions (Baumol 1996, Shleifer and Treisman 2000, Volkov 2002, Wedel 2003, Åslund 2007, Kosals 2007, Lane 2007, Sharafutdinova 2010, Ledeneva 2013). This system could not generate the socioeconomic or democratic development expected by reform-oriented segments of society. Simultaneously, Russians nostalgic for the "good old Soviet times" remained equally dissatisfied.

To cope with trauma amid this dysfunctional system, Russian society employed two contrasting strategies:

1. **Modernization:** characterized by productive entrepreneurship, pro-social behavior, and integration into international markets and cultures.
2. **Transgression:** a strategy of ressentiment focused on restoring imaginary "traditional values" and a colonial/imperial mindset.

After 2000, the second strategy gradually intensified, becoming the dominant paradigm in Russian politics. It invoked Russia's colonial and imperial past — both Soviet and pre-Soviet — through ideological constructs such as the "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*) and "Russia as a great power." This narrative sought to position Russia as a top-tier international player, competing with and even surpassing the USA. For example, by 2023, 80% of Russian respondents identified Russia as a great power, compared to only 30% for the USA; these figures were reversed in 2002 (Volkov 2024).

Nevertheless, the modernization strategy persists, and the post-Soviet period has been marked by the tense coexistence of these two conflicting paths. This tension challenged system legitimacy, leading to a constant state of crisis. While legitimacy crises also exist in democracies (Studebaker 2022), those systems primarily rely on free and fair elections to re-legitimize themselves (Rothstein 2009). In Russia, however, this instrument was compromised by systemic electoral fraud (Enikolopov *et al.* 2013, Bader 2016, Kobak *et al.* 2018, Harvey 2020, 2022) as the authoritarian regime consolidated.

As a consequence, the citizenry has become alienated from politics. In a 2023 Levada-Centr poll, 64% of respondents stated, "I am not interested in politics, and I still cannot influence politics" (Levada-Centr 2023, 83). Furthermore, only 19% of respondents in 2023 believed presidential elections were entirely fair — a sentiment consistent with trends throughout the 2000s. Consequently, the system was forced to seek alternative tools for self-legitimation.

Scholarly literature on regime legitimation strategies (e.g., von Soest and Grauvogel 2016) identifies six claims used in post-Soviet Eurasia: ideology, foundational myth, personalism, international engagement, procedural mechanisms, and performance. While the Russian authorities employ most of these, I argue that political repression and war constitute two additional, significant strategies. While the state does not explicitly frame these as legitimizing tools, they function to mitigate the hidden, large-scale social tensions generated by Russia's dysfunctional system.

In this paper, I examine the role of war as a tool of system legitimation. I first operationalize the concept of system legitimacy using empirical data available since 2000. Next, I assess whether war has served as a legitimizing tool based on empirical evidence. Finally, I analyse the social mechanisms of warfare underpinning this process of legitimation.

2. System legitimacy

I utilize the term "system legitimacy" as an analytical umbrella, encompassing regime legitimacy, political legitimacy, and the legitimacy of other core components of the Russian social order. This approach allows me to address the legitimacy of the social system as a holistic entity.

Emile Durkheim and Max Weber provided the contemporary foundations for studying the legitimacy of authority and the state. They explored the social roots of sustainable political order beyond mere coercion, explaining why citizens comply — or fail to comply — with the law and the political regime. Weber famously identified citizens' belief in the prestige of authority as its primary basis, categorizing three major sources of legitimacy: tradition, charisma, and legality (Weber 1964[1920]).

Durkheim, meanwhile, argued that social order is a product of state-citizen interactions (Durkheim 1962[1928]). Crucially, he distinguished between the Western and Russian trajectories: in the West, social order emerged bottom-up, characterized by a society relatively autonomous from the state; in Russia, order was established top-down, with the state playing the primary role in constructing the social fabric (Durkheim 1998). Later in the 20th century, Carl Schmitt (2004[1912]) analyzed the tension between legitimacy and legality, demonstrating that a regime can be legal yet illegitimate, or vice-versa — a conflict that generates social friction and can even culminate in war.

Over the last several decades, extensive research on legitimacy has been conducted across disciplines including political science, economics, management studies, law, criminology, public administration, anthropology, and sociology (Tyler 1990, Tyler and Huo 2002, Johnson *et al.* 2006, Gilley 2006, Michalski and Gow 2007, Butler 2012, Mazerolle *et al.* 2013, Tankebe and Liebling 2013, Johnson and Watson 2015, Melé and Armengou 2016, Geis and Schlag 2017, Giannini 2018, Schoon and DeRoche 2019, Finlay 2019, Peter 2023, Lippi 2024). These studies identify numerous determinants of political legitimacy, including governance quality, ideology, and procedural justice. In some cases, war is examined in relation to political elites' efforts to legitimize warfare itself.

However, while extensive research on legitimacy has spanned disciplines from political science to criminology, war is rarely analyzed as a proactive tool for systemic legitimation. Most existing studies focus on democratic societies where the monopolization and limitation of violence are central to development (North *et al*. 2009). In such frameworks, violence must be strictly controlled and exercised only for legitimate ends; it is not viewed as a mechanism to generate legitimacy for private or group interests. Using it as such would be to risk a "war of all against all."

In electoral democracies, actors seek legitimacy to win elections. In Russia's highly centralized authoritarian system, however, legitimacy is a resource that can be partially substituted by the "resource of violence." If legitimacy declines, repression against opposition groups can maintain stability, bypassing demands for change. Yet, this substitution has limits. If legitimacy falls below a critical threshold, the system risks a sudden, total collapse — a phenomenon described by Yurchak (2006) as: "Everything was forever, until it was no more." Unlike multiparty systems, where a loss of legitimacy for one actor allows for their replacement by another, a centralized authoritarian collapse is systemic.

The Russian leadership and elite remain haunted by the "geopolitical disaster" of the Soviet collapse in 1991 (Putin 2005) and even the 1917 Revolution. As the leader of the Russian communists, G. Zyuganov recently stated in his speech in the State Duma: "We've told you ten times - the economy is bound to collapse. The first quarter was a complete disaster. If you don't urgently take financial, economic, and other measures, then in the autumn we'll face what happened in 1917. We have no right to repeat that" (Quoted from: Bennetts 2026).

This catastrophic mentality — which mirrors cognitive patterns of "all-or-nothing thinking" and "catastrophizing" found in the general population (Gajniyarov 2026) — renders system legitimacy a high-stakes priority. While short-term fluctuations are manageable, a long-term decline serves as a "canary in the coal mine" for systemic

failure. Therefore, in this paper, I specifically examine the influence of war on long-run system legitimacy.

The Global South and the post-Soviet space lack the political experience that the West possesses. They haven't possessed the effective mechanisms for controlling violence, rooted in a liberal market economy, democracy, the rule of law, and a peaceful culture of compromise. Notably, Russia's relationship with war has evolved. Shortly after the collapse of the USSR in 1994, most of the population was against the war in Chechnya: as Mickiewicz (1997, 256-7) mentioned based on surveys of FOM-INFO, "The Russian public was not asked its permission to go into Chechnya. Well before the Russian government began its effort to oust Dudayev, Russians were opposed. In August 1994, 67 percent said Russia should not send its troops there; 14 percent said yes, and 19 percent did not know. During the conflict, polls both in Moscow and throughout Russia had pretty much the same numbers: from 58 to 63 percent opposed the war and many fewer supported it." However, public opinion gradually evolving: the attitudes towards the Second Chechen War were more favorable (end of the 1990s-beginning of 2000s), war against Georgia (2008) supported 78 percent of the respondents, and only 13 percent were opposite (*Military conflict in South Ossetia* 2008), and the war in Ukraine also was supported by most of the population. At the same time, by May 2025, the overwhelming majority of the population viewed the start of peace talks favourably (64 percent), compared with just 28 percent who wanted the war to continue.

Although imperial nationalism is one of the major drivers of the Russian invasion (Kuzio 2022), these data suggest that the Russian population does not possess an inherent, static imperial mindset, but rather a flexible one driven by complex social mechanisms. This mechanism can produce a domestic "demand for war" even in the absence of external threats, using warfare to offset internal social tensions.

Why does a repressive political regime like Russia's even bother to maintain its legitimacy, rather than relying solely on violence? I believe there are four main reasons for this.

First, market economy requirements, because unlike the Soviet Union, Russia has a market economy which requires certain legitimacy for domestic and foreign transactions ("Private-sector firms from autocratic countries face costs of illegitimacy in Washington, D.C., and professional corporate lobbyists charge such firms a fee premium, in effect, to pay for legitimacy.": see Kim and Siegel 2024, 131).

Second, "porous" social fabric. Despite some restrictions, Russia remains relatively open: citizens can travel abroad, study at foreign universities, form personal relationships with foreign citizens, and hold dual citizenship, among other rights. And a lack of legitimacy encourages brain drain and capital flight among a mobile citizenry.

Third, "vertical of power". The regime must recruit, retain, and motivate an elite, as well as control corruption and prevent their opportunistic behavior. In a porous society, a lack of system legitimacy makes controlling the behavior of resourceful elite actors prohibitively expensive.

Fourth, institutional dualism. As Brusis (2016) notes, Eurasian states operate through a dualism of formal and informal institutions ("Eurasian states are characterized by a dualism of formal and informal institutions that has been described with reference to

concepts such as 'neopatrimonialism', 'patronal presidentialism', a 'dual state' or 'substitutions'": Brusis 2016, 5). These informal practices rely heavily on the baseline of systemic trust and legitimacy to function efficiently.

My primary hypothesis is that war (both full-scale and low-intensity) serves as a long-run legitimizing tool for the Russian political system. I posit that full-scale war has a higher legitimizing effect than low-intensity conflict, while peace may have a de-legitimizing effect. I aim to determine whether war provides a sustainable, long-term boost to legitimacy, rather than a fleeting "rally 'round the flag" effect (see, about "rally 'round the flag" effect in Kazun 2016, Hale 2018, Erlich and Garner 2021, Seo and Horiuchi 2024, Kizilova and Norris 2024).

Next, I examine the system legitimacy in Russia from the second half of the 1990s to the present. I'll analyse the warfare (the wars Russia waged during this period) and its connection to the legitimacy. After that, I'll examine the mechanism that generates the internal large-scale social tension mitigated by the wars.

3. Data and methodology

To operationalize the concept of legitimacy, I follow Schoon (2022), who proposes three defining characteristics based on a synthesis of theoretical and empirical literature: actors' expectations, assent, and conformity. In this framework, a system is deemed legitimate if it meets public expectations, enjoys public support, and secures compliance with its orders and policies.

Measuring legitimacy in an authoritarian context presents significant challenges. The sociological surveys on the system support include sensitive questions, and they require a sufficiently long-time window and granular data to allow for a robust statistical analysis of the impact of war.

3.1. Measuring assent and expectations: the Levada-Centr data

To measure systemic legitimacy, I utilize data from Levada-Centr (www.levada.ru), Russia's oldest independent sociological research organization. I focus on a long-standing, representative national survey question: "Is Russia developing in the right direction or the wrong direction?" Respondents choose between:

- Right direction
- Wrong direction
- Difficult to say

The political neutrality of this phrasing is a significant methodological advantage, as it minimizes respondent sensitivity while capturing a broad understanding of the established social order. Furthermore, answers to this question correlate strongly with support for key political institutions (the Presidency, the Government, and regional leadership), as well as general socioeconomic situation. My dataset comprises 339 monthly observations spanning from July 1996 to May 2025.

This question reflects the two mentioned characteristics: public expectations and assent. The percentage of those who chose to answer that Russia is developing in the "Right direction" shows the degree to which this development is in line with public

expectations and its assent to this development, i.e., the scale of legitimacy. And vice versa, the percentage of those who chose answer "Wrong direction" shows the level of illegitimacy; whereas the percentage of those who chose "Difficult to say" demonstrates uncertainty in legitimacy.

3.2. Measuring conformity: OVD-INFO data

The third characteristic — conformity — is operationalized using data from OVD-INFO (https://ovd.info/en/front), which documents politically motivated protests and criminal cases initiated by the Russian justice system. I calculated the monthly frequency of protest actions; a higher frequency indicates lower public compliance and, by extension, diminished systemic legitimacy. This variable represents inconformity, with 159 observations available from December 2011 to May 2025.

3.3. The legitimacy index (L-index)

I constructed the Index of Legitimacy (L-index) in two steps:

1. I calculated standardized z-scores for both the "Right Direction" survey responses (Z-score1) and the frequency of protests (Z-score2).
2. I applied the following formula, using a multiplier of 10 for dimensional clarity:
3. *L-index = ((W1* Z-score1 – W2* Z-score2))*10.*

The weights (W1 = 0.62, W2 = 0.38) were derived from the observed ratio (1.6) between "Right Direction" and "Wrong Direction" responses, reflecting the empirical balance between conformity and inconformity.

3.4. Factor and control variables

The factor, War, is categorized into three states (see Table 1): Peace (no conflict; variable Peace), Low-intensity war (variable Low_ints_war), and Full-scale war (variable Full_War).

TABLE 1

Period	**Value**	**War/Peace Phase**
7-8.1996	3	First Chechen War (it started from 12.1994)
9.1996-7.1999	1	Peace
8.1999-3.2000	3	Second Chechen War, Full-scale phase
4.2000-7.2008	2	Second Chechen War, Insurgency phase
8.2008	3	War against Georgia
9.2008-4.2009	2	Second Chechen War, insurgency phase
5.2009-1.2014	1	Peace
2.2014-1.2022	2	Annexation of Crimea, "Russian Spring", Low-intensity war in Donbass
2.2022-5.2025	3	Full-scale war against Ukraine

Table 1. Classification of war and peace periods.

There are two specifications for this variable. First, as mentioned above, quasi-quantitative, and, second includes three binary (dummy) variables: Full-scale war=1, else=0; Low-intensity war=1, else=0; Peace (no war)=1, else=0.

Control variables:

- *Economic Indicators:* Monthly consumer inflation (Consumer price index, end of period, percent of end of previous period; variable: Inflation), and changes in average monthly accrued wages (variable: MV_change). Both variables sourced from the 2025 *Short-Term Economic Indicators* of the Russian Federal Service of State Statistics.
- *Propaganda Intensity:* Operationalized through Google Trends data reflecting the prevalence of derogatory, Nazi-style lexica against Ukrainians (*Khokhly* and *Banderovtsy*) in Russian cyberspace since 2011.

3.5. Data analysis

I employed two analytical stages. First, an ANOVA compared mean legitimacy across peace and war periods. Second, I utilized a Single-equation Error Correction Model (ECM) to assess long-run equilibrium relationships. I used ECM with structural break test for war. The ECM, deriving from an Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) model where short-run effects are captured by first differences and long-run equilibrium relationships by lagged levels (Pesaran *et al.* 2001, Casini and Perron 2019). The speed of adjustment toward equilibrium was reflected by the error-correction term (Engle and Granger 1987). The three models were calculated for three different factors (Full_War, Low_ints_war, Peace) using the same dependent variable and the same set of controls.

The econometric specification for ECM is as follows:

$$\Delta L_t = \alpha + \sum \beta_i \Delta X_{i,t} + \lambda L_{t-1} + \sum \delta_i X_{i,t-1} + \sum_{j=1}^{4} \phi_j \, \varepsilon_{t-j} + \varepsilon_t$$

Where ΔL_t means how much L_index change from one period to the next;

α – Intercept**,** baseline change when all other variables = 0;

$\sum \beta_i \Delta X_{i,t}$ – Short-run dynamics; it captures immediate (short-term) effects

λL_{t-1} – Error-correction mechanism (core of ECM); λ= speed of adjustment; it measures how fast the system returns to equilibrium

$\sum \delta_i X_{i,t-1}$ — Long-run relationship; it defines the equilibrium level of L_index and captures structural/persistent effects

$\sum_{j=1}^{4} \phi_j \, \varepsilon_{t-j}$ – Autoregressive correction: lagged residuals (AR terms) which fix serial correlation and capture unobserved persistence; not substantive variables which improve validity of inference

ε_t — Error term, i.e. random shocks not explained by the model

Fully expanded version with exact variables:

$$\Delta L_{index_t} = \alpha + \beta_1 \Delta Inflation_t + \beta_2 \Delta MW_{change_t} + \beta_3 \Delta Banderovthy_t + \beta_4 \Delta Khohly_t$$
$$+\lambda L_{index_{t-1}} + \delta_1 Inflation_{t-1} + \delta_2 MW_{change_{t-1}}$$
$$+\delta_3 Full_{war_{t-1}} / Peace \,/ Low\_ints\_war_{t-1}$$
$$+\phi_1 \varepsilon_{t-1} + \phi_2 \varepsilon_{t-2} + \phi_3 \varepsilon_{t-3} + \phi_4 \varepsilon_{t-4} + \varepsilon_t$$

For each of three models, several robustness checks were conducted. The concerns about serial correlation in the baseline OLS specification were addressed by estimating an

autoregressive error structure. While the initial model exhibited significant residual autocorrelation (Godfrey LM tests significant up to AR(4)), the re-estimated model incorporating AR terms eliminated this issue (all LM tests insignificant), and the Durbin–Watson statistic improved to 1.99-2.5.

War was modelled as a structural break entering the long-run component, reflecting its role in a persistent shift in legitimacy. The model was estimated to use maximum likelihood with autoregressive errors to address serial correlation. Diagnostic tests (Durbin–Watson, Breusch–Godfrey, and heteroskedasticity tests) were conducted, and inference relies on heteroskedasticity- and autocorrelation-consistent (Newey–West) standard errors. Long-run validity was assessed via the error-correction term and joint Wald tests.

4. The results

4.1. General trends

Figure 1 illustrates the longitudinal responses to the question: *"Is Russia developing in the right direction or the wrong direction?"* from 1996 to May 2025.

The data in Figure 1 reveals a cyclical pattern since the early 2000s, characterized by periods of stagnation followed by sharp "spikes" in respondents' opinions (comparable to the cycles of legitimacy observed in Argentina by Turner and Carballo 2009).

Figure 2 presents the "net opinion effect" — the percentage of "right direction" responses minus "wrong direction" responses. Since 2000, the magnitude of these spikes has increased nearly threefold, rising from 17 to 47.4 points, while periods of stagnation have become less severe. So, over time, the "war dividend" (the war's system-legitimizing effect) increases significantly, as indicated by public opinion data.

However, these data alone do not fully capture systemic shifts. Unlike the raw opinion metrics, the L-index incorporates both public assent and conformity (measured by politically motivated protests). As shown in Figure 3, relying solely on opinion data tends to overestimate systemic illegitimacy in peacetime and overestimate legitimacy during the full-scale war against Ukraine. However, this figure also shows a "war dividend," albeit on a smaller scale than based on raw public opinion data.

4.2. Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics for the period since 2011 (Table 2) indicate an overall increase in verbal support for the system, with "right direction" responses averaging 54% (up from 45% for the 1996–2025 period). Conversely, this same period saw a rise in public protests and an acceleration of political repression, particularly after Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 (Political Prisoners. Memorial 2025).

FIGURE 1

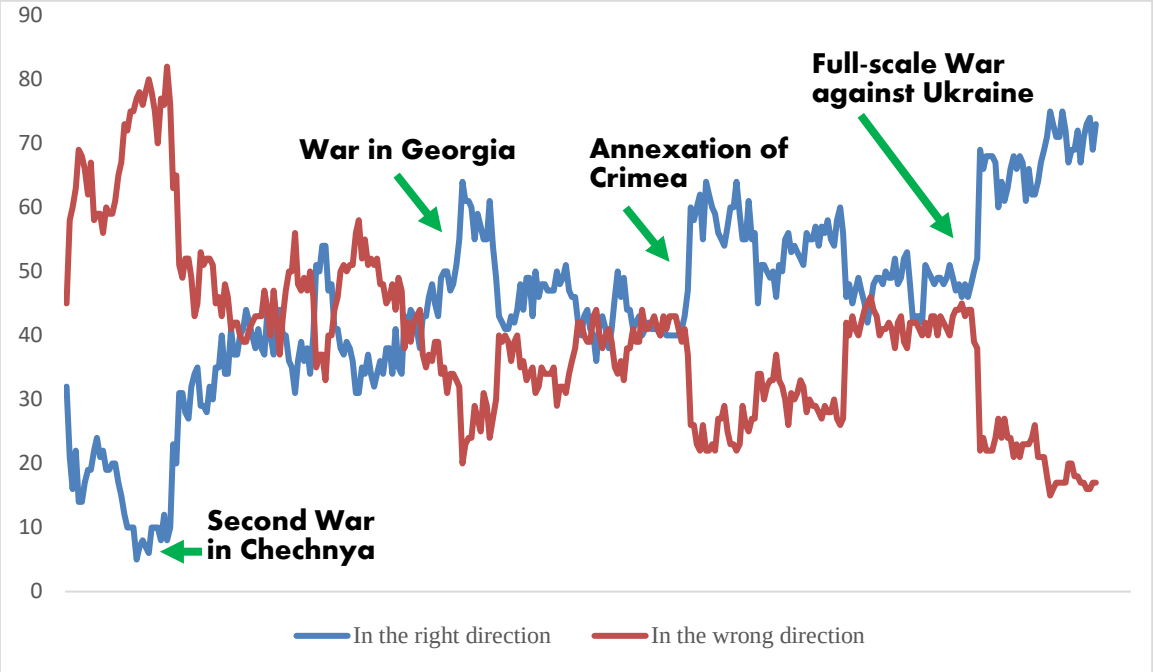

Figure 1. Opinions on Russia's development from 1996 up to May 2025. (Ssource: Levada-Centr, https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/assessment-of-situation-in-the-country/, the notes with arrows about wars are the author's.)

FIGURE 2

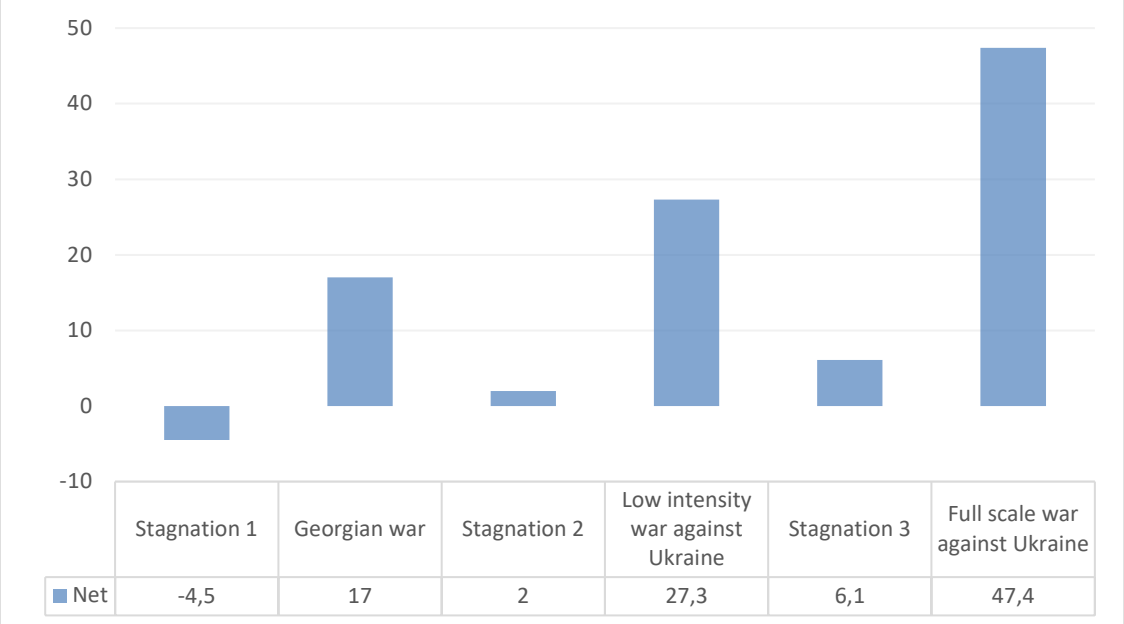

Figure 2. "Net opinions" on Russia's development: percentage of those who answered that Russia is developing in the right direction minus percentage of those who think that Russia is developing in wrong direction.

FIGURE 3

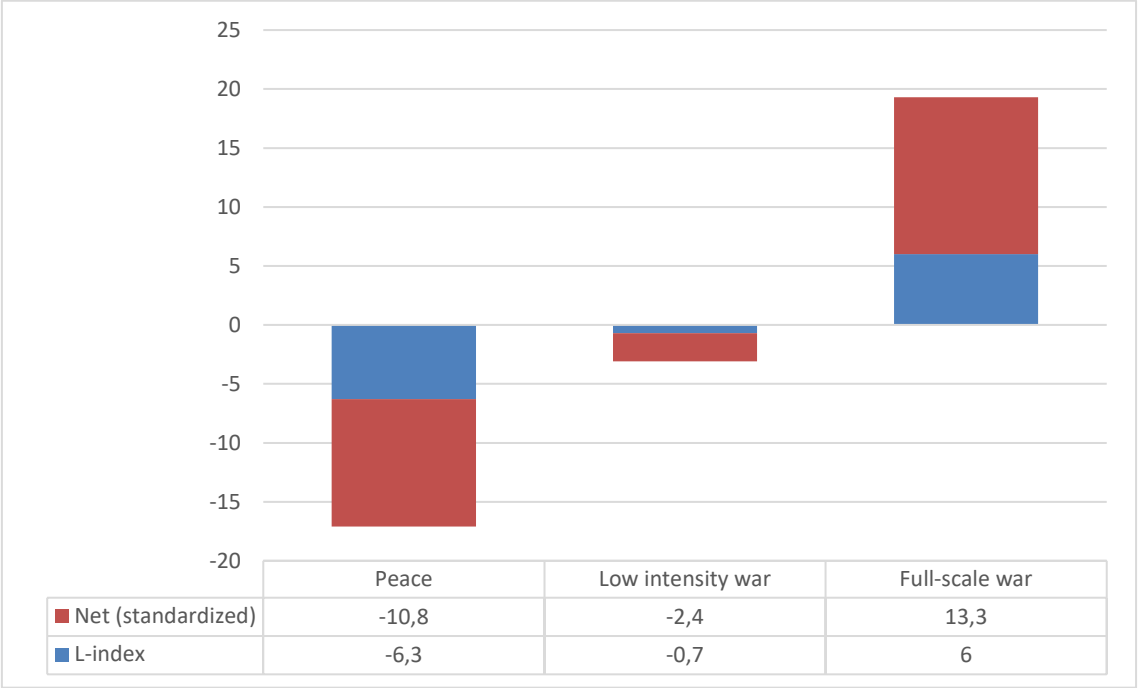

Figure 3. "Net opinions" on Russia's development (standardized*10) and legitimacy index (L-index) from 2011 to May 2025.

According to these data (Table 2), all variables except changes in monthly wages during the period from 2011 changed relatively smoothly with limited dispersion.

TABLE 2

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Inflation	159	99.5	107.6	100. 6	.7
Wages	159	68.3	713.0	104.9	50.3
Russia is developing in Right direction	159	38.0	75.0	54.0	9.6
Russia is developing in Wrong direction	159	15.0	46.0	32.1	9.0
I don't know the direction of development	159	7.0	21.0	14.0	3.7
L-index	159	-18.5	14.9	0	6.5
Khohly	159	6.0	100.0	19.8	14.6
Banderovthy	159	0	100.0	4.0	9.8

Table 2. Descriptive statistics.

4.3. ANOVA analysis: war vs. peace

The relative length of war/peace periods was still stable between two periods, from 1996 and from 2011. It is worth noting that the period of "pure peace" was only a bit longer than a quarter, and more than half was low-intensity war.

ANOVA results (Table 3) confirm a statistically significant difference in the L-index between war and peace, with legitimacy being substantially higher during conflict

periods. The quantitative measure of the relationship between war and legitimacy, Eta, is 0.608 (Eta Squared is 0.370) and statistically significant (Sig. <.001).

TABLE 3

L-index			
War/Peace	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Peace	-6.3	26	1.7
Low-intensity war	-.7	95	4.6
Full-scale war	6.0	38	7.6
Total	0	159	6.5

Table 3. Differences in L-index between war and peace.

4.4. Error Correction Model (ECM) findings

I estimated three ECM models to isolate the long-run influence of full-scale war, low-intensity war, and peace on system legitimacy (Table 4).

The existence of a stable long-run relationship for full-scale war was confirmed by the negative and significant error-correction term. This confirms the existence of a cointegrating relationship and indicates that deviations from equilibrium are corrected over time. The joint significance of the lagged level variables was further supported by Wald tests, reinforcing the interpretation of a well-defined long-run equilibrium linking the dependent variable (L_index) with its covariates. Modeling full-scale war as a structural break reveals a persistent positive shift ($\lambda \approx -0.08$, $p<0.05$), increasing the equilibrium level of legitimacy by 16.1 points (Table 5).

In contrast, low-intensity war appears to have a delegitimizing effect. The coefficient is negative and marginally significant ($\beta \approx -0.58$, $p < 0.05$), implying a potential long-run equilibrium decline of -17.8. However, the error-correction term for low-intensity war is statistically insignificant, suggesting that under these conditions, legitimacy dynamics are not anchored to a stable equilibrium, and shocks may persist without correction. Finally, the influence of peace on system legitimacy was found to be statistically insignificant, suggesting that peacemaking does not serve as a driver of legitimacy in the current Russian sociopolitical context.

TABLE 4

Model	**Full-scale war**		**Low-intensity war**		**Peace**	
	Estimate	Approx Pr > |t|	Estimate	Approx Pr > |t|	Estimate	Approx Pr > |t|
Intercept	0.31	0.99	-20.87	0.54	-35.53	0.31
d_Inflation	-1.04	0.02	-1.01	0.02	-0.97	0.03
d_MW_change	0.003	0.54	0.001	0.79	0.0001	0.98
d_Banderovthy	-0.02	0.73	-0.02	0.70	-0.008	0.85
d_Khohly	0.01	0.76	0.02	0.72	0.011	0.82

L_L_index	-0.08	0.02	-0.03	0.21	-0.03	0.32
L_Inflation	-0.007	0.98	0.21	0.53	0.36	0.30
L_MW_change	0.003	0.70	-0.001	0.82	-0.004	0.50
L_Full_war	**1.35*** **	**0.003**				
L_Low_ints_war			**-0.58** **	**0.049**		
L_Peace					**-0.13**	**0.76**
AR1	0.45	<.0001	0.46	<.0001	0.44	<.0001
AR2	0.25	0.02	0.27	0.009	0.24	0.02
AR3	0.05	0.62	0.07	0.50	0.04	0.67
AR4	0.16	0.07	0.18	0.05	0.16	0.07

Table 4. Summary of the three models on war's influence on legitimacy (L-index is a dependent variable; the values are rounded).
Significance levels: *** p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05; n.s. = not statistically significant.

TABLE 5

War/peace	Error-correction coefficient (λ)	Lagged war coefficient (δ)	Implied equilibrium shift ($-\delta/\lambda$)	Statistical support
Full war	−0.0842**	+1.3519***	+16.1	Strong
Low-intensity war	−0.0328 (n.s.)	−0.5834*	−17.8	Weak
Peace	−0.0310 (n.s.)	−0.1342 (n.s.)	−4.3	None

Table 5. Long-run equilibrium effects of war regimes on legitimacy (ECM estimates).
Notes:
Results are based on single-equation ECMs with AR corrections.
The implied equilibrium shift is calculated as $-\delta/\lambda$, representing the long-run change in L_index (system legitimacy).
Estimates and p-values are drawn from the corresponding ECM outputs.
Significance levels: *** p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05; * p < 0.10; n.s. = not statistically significant.

4.5. The paradox of low-intensity war

The delegitimizing effect of low-intensity war (2014–2022) is initially counterintuitive. As shown in Chart 4, this period was highly volatile: an initial legitimacy "surge" in the first two years (mean +1.1) was followed by a prolonged recession (mean -1.5).

This suggests that low-intensity conflict creates an unstable legitimacy environment. For the Kremlin, a return to a "truce" or "ceasefire" likely represents the least desirable option, as it risks reverting the system to this adverse, volatile state. In the current Russian context, a "frozen conflict" may be perceived by the authorities as more destabilizing than either full-scale war or a theoretical long-term peace.

FIGURE 4

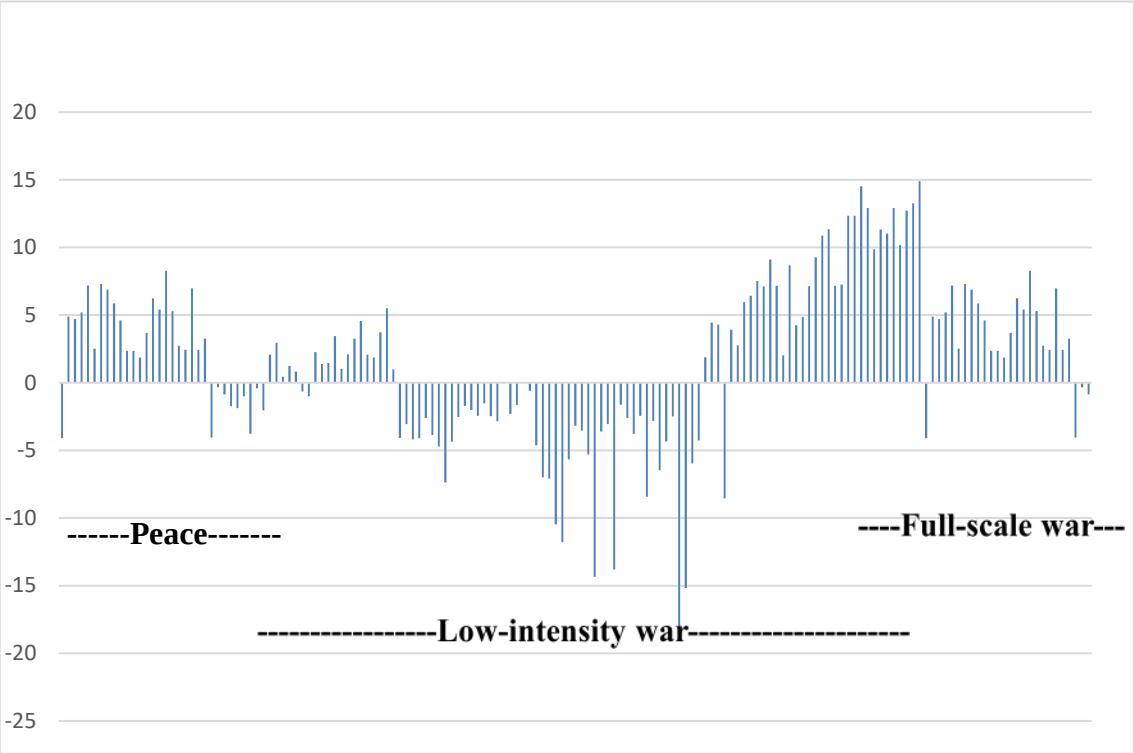

Figure 4. System's legitimacy (L-index) distribution in period of 2011-2025.

5. The social mechanism of warfare in Russia

The data suggest that full-scale war generates more than a transitory "rally 'round the flag" effect; it produces a profound, long-lasting impact on systemic legitimacy by shifting it to a higher, relatively persistent equilibrium. I contend that this conflict is not merely the result of arbitrary miscalculations by the leadership but reflects deep-rooted systemic imperatives. In the current sociopolitical and economic landscape, the system "produces" war to satisfy unmet institutional demands.

5.1. Latent crisis of legitimacy

The social mechanism of warfare (Figure 5) describes a configuration of latent social factors that interact to precipitate conflict. In an authoritarian system characterized by a lack of competitive elections, functional parties, free media, and a vibrant civil society, social tension remains largely hidden.

FIGURE 5

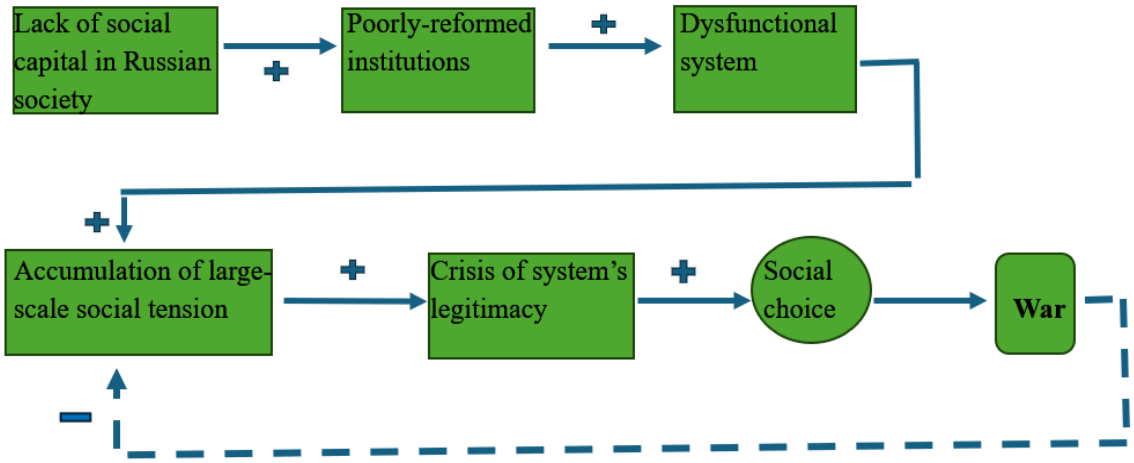

Figure 5. Social mechanism of warfare in Russia.

Nevertheless, this tension precipitates a latent crisis of legitimacy, manifesting through interpersonal distrust, alienation from public interests, cynical attitudes toward institutions, elite corruption, brain drain, and massive capital flight. This represents a form of hidden social disintegration. For ordinary citizens, this manifests as a lack of motivation to engage in pro-social or career-oriented activities, often leading to deviant behaviours or substance abuse. For managers and elites, it creates a "problem-solving burden" — an inability to inspire employees, drive innovation, or overcome bureaucratic hurdles.

5.2. Warfare as an offset to social tension

Social disintegration in such a context is characterized by unspecified social dissatisfaction scattered among myriad social groups, territories, and organizations. In their everyday life, people don't realize the deep-rooted causes of this dissatisfaction. However, in a democratic society with a functional multi-party system, free press, and open parliamentary debates, a social mechanism is in place that facilitates the expert and open public debates that enable people to identify these root causes, attribute their dissatisfaction, challenge authority, and, at the end of the day, reform the system. In the repressive and relatively closed Russian society, all significant decisions are made secretly by the elite beyond public debates and control. This allows the elite to avoid meaningful conversation with society and to replace it with propaganda. That enables the elite to manipulate the national agenda and present the war as the most pressing national goal to avoid reforms.

War functions as an offset to this disintegration by forcibly intensifying social integration, thereby mitigating the problem-solving burden for managers at various levels and easing social discontent. I identify four primary mechanisms through which this is achieved.

First, forced integration and coercive solidarity: the state utilizes the "emergency" of war to implement repressive measures. From the start of the full-scale invasion through January 2025, 69 coercive bills were submitted to the State Duma (OVD-Info 2025) and only few of them were rejected. These legal measures facilitated new repressive policies, from organizing the chain of concentration camps for Ukrainians at Russian territory

(see Applebaum 2023) to Internet shutdowns (Domańska and Chawryło 2025) and repressions at book publishing market (De Ruiter and Schneider 2026). These changes represent a regressive transition from organic to mechanical solidarity, reversing the developmental trajectory described by Durkheim (1984[1893]).

Second, negative consolidation through propaganda. Invasive propaganda using so-called "NecroSpeak" (Arkhipova 2024), pro-military and nationalistic, promotes an ideology of the "Unique Russian Path", "Traditional Values", and "Besieged Fortress" (Goode 2023, 2025, Laruelle 2025, Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2025). By utilizing both state media and informal "Z-bloggers," the regime seeks to reduce the alienation between the citizenry and the state through the identification of common external enemies.

Third, new socio-economic dependencies. War creates new opportunities for specific groups including unprivileged and marginalized people: defence sector employees, businesses acquiring vacated foreign assets, and military families receiving high compensation in underdeveloped regions, and military people occupied some "lucrative" positions like military registration and enlistment office. This creates a vested economic interest in the continuation of conflict.

Fourth, institutionalized denunciation and obedience. The state has revived the institution of denunciation (Schmies 2023, Boll-Palievskaya 2024), a hallmark of the Stalinist era (Goldman 2011). This institution provides the system with an efficient mechanism of informal control of obedience to newly established laws as well as some newly emerging ideological norms (compliance with the "traditional values", loyalty to the military, and to goals of the "special military operation" or the like). Simultaneously, such a social setting creates new dependencies on the state and locks people into small circles of family and close friends whom they can trust. This setting is hostile to outsiders, and toxic to civil society and unsanctioned grassroots social activities.

5.3. The self-destructive nature of war-driven legitimacy

While war serves as a short-term remedy for the elite, it introduces myriad dark externalities that eventually erode the very legitimacy it seeks to bolster.

Mass casualties and resource depletion because of war make the system increasingly self-destructive over time. Additionally, the resulting social consolidation is marked by xenophobia, aggression, and a decline in social capital, which is a "dirty togetherness" (Wedel 2003). For example, there is evidence that an increase in war casualties has a delegitimizing effect; however, this is true only for the "Russian-sounding names. Minority death announcements are not statistically related to protests" (Duvanova *et al.* 2023, 19). "Dirty togetherness" leads to antisocial norms becoming deeply ingrained in the culture, where they can persist for generations.

War gives rise to many new social pathologies. The return of disabled veterans, the militarization of civilian institutions (healthcare, education, economy, and criminal justice), and rising violent crime create new social tensions that counteract the initial legitimizing effect of war. It leads to new social tensions and potential protests and creates new challenges for policy-makers at all levels.

Finally, war, providing the elite with an excuse to ignore the demand for institutional reforms, deepens the country's systemic dysfunction and preserves its backwardness.

Moreover, some researchers argue that Russia has returned to totalitarianism and is developing a "neo-totalitarian" regime (Wegren and Slider 2025).

The longer the war goes on, the more negative effects on legitimacy will accumulate. Therefore, by any means, war can provide society and the elite with only fragile legitimacy. The longer the war, the more fragile this legitimacy.

Thus, this means the process of system legitimacy erosion over time (see on the analysis of the erosion of legitimacy in Hurrelmann *et al.* 2005 and Mollica 2011). So, I can expect that war as a tool for the system's legitimation will be less and less desirable for the Russian elite and Russian society. However, the process of legitimacy erosion is gradual, it can take many years, even decades.

There are a lot of other ways for legitimation of a system, so why did Russia choose such a way for tackling the crisis of legitimacy, like waging the war? Together with the global ambitions of the Russian elite, there are significant domestic factors that made this relevant. The coping strategy of the Russian population traumatized by the hardships of reforms was the disillusionment with democracy and the West (Carnaghan 2001, Gel'man 2015, Sokolov *et al.* 2018, Brovkin 2024). Russian society started searching its path for future in the past. For example, in 2021, 46 percent of respondents in Russia, answering on question why they regret the collapse of the USSR (almost 2/3 were regretted as it was in the 1990s) chose the option "People lost sentiment of belonging to great power", whereas in 1999 only 29 percent chose it (Levada-Centr 2021). So, Russian society chose "Make Russia great again" and addressed the country's colonial/imperial legacy, where war played a prominent role in social integration.

6. Conclusion

In contemporary Russia, war plays a significant systemic role. In other words, Russian authorities have a "war dividend". My ECM analysis confirms that full-scale war has shifted the regime toward a new relatively stable, long-run equilibrium of legitimacy. Conversely, low-intensity conflict proved delegitimizing and volatile, while peace had no significant impact.

This explains the logic behind the Kremlin's 2022 shift from low-intensity conflict to a full-scale invasion: it was driven by the system's overall interests in enhancing its legitimacy. In effect, Russia's dysfunctional authoritarian system creates a demand for war, and the invasion of Ukraine was the response to that domestic demand.

As such, I must distinguish between the **causes** of the war (non-military, domestic systemic crisis) and its **objectives** (military, the conquest of Ukraine). This leads to a sobering conclusion: even if Russia's military objectives are achieved, the root causes of the war — the systemic dysfunctions — will remain. To eradicate these causes, radical political and socioeconomic reforms are required, not territorial expansion.

At the same time, this war-driven system legitimacy has a self-destructive nature and, providing the authorities with the "war dividend", it has massive negative social externalities. The current path creates a **vicious cycle**: the erosion of war-driven legitimacy leads to accelerated repression and further resource extraction, which in turn leads to the new legitimacy crisis. Given Russia's vast resources and repressive apparatus, this process may endure for decades. Ultimately, the "Make Russia Great

Again" narrative, rooted in a colonial/imperial legacy, has replaced democratic modernization as the primary mode of social integration.

Now, war merely conceals the true causes of social dysfunctions in Russia, wastes time, and delays solutions until the system collapses under the weight of accumulated pathologies. Unfortunately, by then, the window for measured reforms will have closed, and the next "shock therapy" will be needed. And finding a realistic pathway toward a new, non-violent legitimation mechanism remains the most pressing task for further socio-legal research.

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