



At Home and Abroad, Intimidation is Now Official Russian Policy

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In the first year of its war on Ukraine, Russia largely abandoned any attempt to preserve normal relationships with the international community. It broke relations with international institutions, retreated from cultural events, and made common cause with pariah regimes like Iran and North Korea.

Since then, Russian attitudes have taken an additional turn. Hate speech and extreme violence have become a form of strategic communication. The Kremlin seems to be spending less time justifying itself and more openly intimidating its opponents at home and abroad. As French analyst Nicolas Tenzer has put it, “The crime is the message.”

While Russian spokespeople still claim that Moscow wants to replace the “rules-based international order” with a fairer system for all, Russia’s day-to-day behavior seems more appropriate for a rules-free system—one where right is determined simply by muscle and the nerve to use it.

Such an attitude likely appeals to many Russian citizens, who have been told for decades that Russian President Vladimir Putin is restoring their country’s status as a superpower. They may feel that it is better for Russia to be strong and feared than to seek accommodation with what they see as an immoral and predatory West.

Russia’s tough posture also leaves Western nations flummoxed. In the West’s understanding of the world, nations accused of brutality are supposed to either apologize or offer convincing justifications for their actions. In many cases, Russia does neither.

This leads many Western politicians to essentially normalize Russian behavior, accepting that “this is what Russia does.” However, acknowledging this makes it almost impossible for them to endorse an agreement with Moscow to end the Ukraine war. The West would have to claim it trusts Russia to honor the terms of the agreement, even though it accepts that Moscow routinely flouts international law and basic humanity.

The main target of Russia’s intimidation policy remains Ukraine, where Moscow is now engaged in a new campaign to devastate electrical, water, and other services essential to the country’s population.

In May of last year, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov was still insisting, against all evidence, that Russia was not attacking civilian infrastructure. Attacks on such facilities can be a war crime, perhaps a reason for Peskov’s caution at the time.

But this year, with Putin and three other senior officials already indicted for war crimes, such caution seems no longer to be an issue. In March, Russia’s state-run RT television network posted photos and video of Russian attacks that it said caused “large-scale power outages across Ukraine.” The report detailed, region by region, the havoc Russian forces had caused. Putin said the strikes were a response to Ukrainian attacks on Russian energy facilities; however, Russia began attacking Ukrainian infrastructure long before any such Ukrainian strikes.

In the occupied parts of Ukraine, Russian forces also seem open about perpetrating violence. They “do not try to hide their brutal torture chambers, kidnapping of children, and summary executions from the local residents,” a November study reported.

Russia appears increasingly comfortable with violence on the territory of other countries, too. In 2018, when its agents poisoned ex-spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter in England, the Kremlin denied any responsibility. This February, Putin said the assassination of a Chechen dissident in Berlin, blamed on Moscow by German authorities, was the work of a “patriot.” Putin added coyly, “Whether he did that of his own volition or not, that is a different question.”

Inside Russia, a tolerance for violence has been growing as well. When torture by police was alleged in the past, authorities sometimes responded by firing police officers and filing criminal charges against them. But after the March 22 terror attack on a Moscow concert hall, a video surfaced online of one of the captured suspects being forced to eat his own ear, severed by a security officer. Another suspect had his pants pulled down and appeared to have electric wires attached to his genitals.

State television did not show those videos, and Russia’s human rights ombudsman obliquely expressed concern over them. But official media covering the suspects’ court appearance were reportedly told to focus on how battered they looked. There has been no sign of consequences for the security forces involved.

The grisly clips were not the only ones in Russia's online space showing brutality by pro-Kremlin forces. In November 2022, a video appeared of the slaying by a sledgehammer of a Russian who supposedly betrayed the Wagner Group. Last September, Ramzan Kadyrov, the Chechen leader who strongly backs Putin, proudly posted a video of his fifteen-year-old son slapping and kicking a prisoner accused of burning a Quran.

Such cases serve as a clear warning to Russians at home who might run afoul of the regime and its allies. Increasingly, war opponents, political dissidents, and LGBT persons have been accused of crimes related to terrorism and extremism. This equates their deeds in the public mind with those who perpetrate mass violence and may suggest they are worthy of equal punishment. The March death of opposition activist Alexei Navalny in an Arctic labor camp is yet another cautionary tale.

Even for non-political Russians, violence seems to be increasingly normalized. Official media deluge citizens with hate speech about Ukrainians and the West. At the same time, citizens are given constant reasons to ignore the devastation their country is wreaking on Ukraine. Such bifurcated messages can serve to justify violent acts while at the same time dulling empathy for their victims.

In recent months, domestic violence and street crime have risen in Russia, according to Russian specialists. Some blame militaristic propaganda and a "cult of cruelty." Soldiers who raped or tortured captives or developed PTSD will also be coming home. Some violent criminals who were freed to fight at the front have already been rearrested for crimes committed on their return, including murder and narcotics offenses. Weapons possibly smuggled from the war have filtered into Russian communities.

Serious crimes stemming from the war can presumably be controlled with sufficient effort by police. But the hate content on Russian television and the violence permitted by security forces is a choice by the nation's leadership. Putin, or his successor, will have to judge whether continued hate speech and repression are essential to prevent challenges to the regime or whether Russia would, in fact, be more stable with more freedom and less violence.

Western countries will also need to decide if they can continue to accept Russian brutality at home and abroad. If so, other authoritarian regimes will invariably see it as a model of what they can do—and get away with.