

From Pacification to Generalised Politics of Fear: The Escalation of Emotional Manipulation in Wartime Russia

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of the Kremlin's emotional management strategies during Russia's war in Ukraine. Based on qualitative content and critical discourse analysis of 900 media and official texts (2022–2026), the study identifies a shift from targeted fear during the first years of the war to a total politics of fear, implemented towards the whole society, including previously depoliticised segments. The findings show that this shift was predictable under the framework of the emotional management cycle. The shift from emotional governance to manipulation creates structural constraints that limit available strategies, making the escalation of emotional manipulation and the move toward generalised fear a likely outcome. The article contributes to understanding how regimes structurally produce generalised fear in prolonged crises.

KEY WORDS: *emotional governance, emotional manipulation, politics of fear, authoritarian resilience, wartime governance, Russia's war against Ukraine*

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1. Introduction

As Russia's war against Ukraine has entered its fourth year, governmental emotional governance and emotional manipulation strategies implemented by the Kremlin towards Russian society have gone through significant changes. While using more emotional governance strategies during the first years of the war towards the previously depoliticised majority of the population, by the fourth year of the ongoing war, the emotional strategy had shifted towards more manipulative practices. The Kremlin has moved from selective fear and pacification to a broader campaign of fear reinforcement. Fear is no longer targeted, it appears generalised. This transformation also unfolds within a broader information environment shaped by disinformation dynamics in the context of the war in Ukraine [29]. This article focuses on why a regime that already maintains high emotional control over society expands fear beyond politically engaged minorities to society at large, including the previously depoliticised majority.

I argue that the reinforcement of the politics of fear in the fourth year of Russia's war against Ukraine can be seen as a qualitative shift from selective emotional manipulation toward generalised fear politics. This transformation reflects the Kremlin's need not only to recalibrate its emotional management strategy due to prolonged war fatigue and rising societal tensions, but also due to previously employed manipulation of hope. Earlier strategies, including the politics of pacification, targeted politics of fear, and the manipulation of hope, proved increasingly insufficient to stabilise the emotional environment in the fourth year of the war. After the replacement of politics of pacification with the manipulation of hope, the possibility of returning to governance-oriented emotional regulation significantly narrowed. Emotional escalation became structurally more likely than emotional cooling. Under these conditions, the expansion of fear across society emerged not as an isolated reaction but as the next stage in a cumulative and self-reinforcing cycle of emotional manipulation.

2. Theoretical Framework

In the existing literature, emotions are mainly considered at the level of individual perception, collective identity or elitist decision-making [15, 22, 16, 17, 18]. Much less attention has been paid to the institutionalised mechanisms through which states shape and regulate societal emotional states. In this article, this gap is addressed by conceptualising governmental emotional management as a cyclical and adaptive process.

Unlike linear interpretations, which view emotional mobilisation as a one-off effect, the proposed approach treats emotional management as a cyclical process. State actors not only trigger certain emotional responses but also constantly adjust their strategies in response to the effects these emotions have on society. Thus, the outcomes of previous strategies serve as entry conditions for subsequent decisions of governmental emotional management [24].

The cycle of state emotional governance begins with the formulation of regime objectives, related to ensuring regime sustainability, controlling the level of political activity and maintaining a certain type of public order [28]. In accordance with these objectives, the state chooses a specific strategy of emotional energy aimed at cultivating certain types of emotional states in society, for example,

- high-energy, pleasant emotions (such as feeling invigorated, confident, challenged, joyful, and connected),
- high-energy, unpleasant emotions (anger, fear, anxiety, defensiveness, and resentment),
- low-energy, pleasant emotions (such as relaxed, mellow, peaceful, tranquil, and serene),
- low-energy, unpleasant emotions (depression, exhaustion, burnout, hopelessness, and defeat) [20].

In the next stage, emotional signals are institutionalised through media, legal mechanisms, educational practices, public rituals and the style of political leadership [14, 2]. The repeatability of these signals leads to the formation of sustainable affective practices [33] and, in turn, to the formation of dominant background emotions. According to Damasio's definition, societal background emotions are long-term emotional states that shape a general sense of social reality [5]. Unlike short-lived emotions, background emotions function as an emotional environment in which individuals perceive the world, make decisions, and shape behaviours.

The societal background emotions that have formed directly influence cognitive and behavioural patterns. They determine the level of willingness to engage politically or, conversely, to be distant and self-limiting [21, 6]. These changes, in turn, lead to observable political outcomes such as protest activity levels, public mobilisation, regime resilience and change [19].

The key element of this approach is that political outcomes do not complete the process but return to it as feedback. The state interprets changes in societal behaviour and emotional state as signals of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of current strategies, and, on this basis, adjusts subsequent steps. Thus, emotional management is a continuous process of adaptation in which each new strategy is shaped by the effects of the previous one.

The emotional management cycle can be realised in 2 distinct ways: emotional governance or emotional manipulation. Emotional governance is a process of managing societal emotions, oriented towards the functioning of society [8]. On the contrary, the emotional manipulation is the deliberate use of emotions by political actors or institutions for individual, group or regime advantage [7, 12, 34].

The difference between them will be evident at all stages of the cycle, from the choice of emotional energy to the formation of background emotions, and in the consequences for civic agency. At the stage of emotional energy choice, emotional governance maintains balanced, stable emotional states without being overwhelmed by high-energy negative emotions. By contrast, emotional manipulation relies on more intense emotional configurations, including fear and anxiety, or artificially stimulated positive states, such as hope without agency.

At the time of institutionalisation, differences become even more vivid. In emotional governance, emotional signals allow for pluralism and feedback [24]. Whereas, in the logic of manipulation, institutionalisation aims to reinforce the homogeneity of emotional experiences and limit alternative interpretations [14]. Emotional signals are becoming more structured, repeatable, and normative [2].

These differences lead to distinct types of background emotions. In the case of emotional control, states such as calmness, moderate confidence, or controlled wariness predominate, supporting reflexivity and allowing for behavioural variability. In the context of emotional manipulation, by contrast, more homogeneous and stable background states such as chronic anxiety, fear, fatigue or, conversely, artificially sustained expectation of positive change are emerging [5]. Thus, through the formation of different background emotions, emotional governance and emotional manipulation will also lead to different behavioural and agency patterns, which will be further recalibrated by additional mechanisms of emotional governance or manipulation.

Unlike emotional governance, emotional manipulation is not a sustainable form of regulation of societal emotional states. Its key feature is internal instability, due to the nature of the emotional energy used and the way feedback is processed.

First, emotional manipulation tends to rely on high-energy emotions: both negative (fear, anxiety, anger) and artificially stimulated positive (hope, anticipation). Such emotional states require constant reproduction and reinforcement because they lack internal resilience. High-energy emotions are rapidly depleted or transformed, necessitating their constant regeneration through new signals and narratives.

Second, in an environment of emotional manipulation, feedback becomes problematic, often taking the form of fatigue, mistrust, tension, or hidden discontent. Unlike in emotional governance, where such signals can lead to policy adjustments, in the logic of manipulation, they are interpreted as a threat to the regime's stability.

Especially acute internal instability manifests in manipulations driven by positive emotions. Unlike in emotional governance, where positive emotions are linked to agency and real capacity for action, manipulative hope, joy, and anticipation are limited in scope. They form an expectation of positive change without providing real mechanisms for achieving it [4].

This configuration makes, for example, manipulation of hope structurally vulnerable. When the expected changes do not occur, a gap between expectations and reality arises, leading to frustration. Frustration, in turn, can lead to increased reflection and a reevaluation of what is happening. In an authoritarian regime, such a shift poses a potential threat, as it undermines mechanisms of depoliticisation and emotional stabilisation. Thus, the change from expectation to disappointment is a critical moment in the dynamics of emotional manipulation.

With positive emotions manipulation strategies losing their effectiveness, the regime faces the need to select new mechanisms of emotional management. However, this choice is structurally limited. The initial shift toward emotional manipulation is already accompanied by a contraction of the emotional repertoire, significantly narrowing the range of available strategies. Having shifted to manipulation, the regime cannot easily return to governance-based strategies without undermining the credibility of previously constructed emotional narratives.

In this situation, two interrelated factors drive the cycle's further development. First, there is the need to suppress cognitive reflection, which is intensified by frustration and accumulated emotional tension. Second, the regime will seek to minimise uncertainty and limit behavioural variability.

The most effective tool in this context is high-energy negative emotions, and first of all, fear. Unlike hope, fear does not require validation through real positive change. It functions as a self-sustaining state, enhancing caution, restraint, and avoidance [6, 21]. In addition, fear lowers cognitive complexity, promoting simplified interpretation and reactive behaviour.

Thus, despite the great interest in the role of emotions in the political process, existing studies rarely explain how emotional strategies escalate in protracted crises or wars. In particular, there is no theoretical explanation for the shift from selective use of fear to generalisation at the societal level, or why regimes tend to reinforce highly negative emotional states after shifting to manipulative strategies. This observation also builds on earlier research that examined the role of fear as a systemic feature of contemporary information environments [32], but not as a developing strategy. This article fills in this gap by offering a theoretical explanation of the internal dynamics of emotional manipulation. It argues that the shift from emotional governance to emotional manipulation creates structural constraints that narrow the range of strategies available to the regime and increase the likelihood that a generalised politics of fear will become the dominant mechanism.

3. Data and Methodology

The paper traces the emergence of the generalised politics of fear, based on the analysis of a dataset of 900 texts from the Russian main federal television channel (Channel One), the top three most cited Russian information agencies (RIA Novosti, TASS, and Interfax), and influential newspapers (Moskovsky Komsomolets, Kommersant, and the official newspaper Rossiyskaya Gazeta), official communications and speeches from the websites of the President of the Russian Federation (kremlin.ru) and the Ministry of Defence (stat.mil.ru). The timeframe of the analysis covers the fourth year of Russia's war against Ukraine (22 February 2025–22 February 2026).

Based on predetermined keywords, relevant articles and messages were extracted from the listed sources using the SCAN Interfax Monitoring System. The top 900 most relevant articles were then selected for further qualitative content and critical discourse analysis. Firstly, qualitative content analysis was used to organise and code the large dataset [25]. Using NVivo software, the material was coded according to predetermined themes as well as emergent categories that emerged during close reading [13]. This stage allowed for the reduction of the volume of data and identification of recurring patterns across sources. Secondly, building on the systematic coding, Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework [9] was employed to interpret the results. This framework conceptualises discourse as simultaneously a text, a discursive practice, and a social practice. In this study, the textual dimension was addressed through close attention to framing terms, silences, and recurrent tropes. The discursive practice dimension guided the analysis of how narratives were reproduced and circulated. Finally, the social practice dimension enabled the author to connect these discursive patterns to the broader governmental emotional strategy.

4. Results

As Russia's war against Ukraine enters its fourth year, the Kremlin's emotional management strategy has undergone a significant transformation. The politics of fear has always been one of the emotional management strategies implemented by the Kremlin towards Russian society during the war in Ukraine. However, in the first years of the war (1-3 years), the politics of fear was directed mainly at politically active groups - opposition, elites and regime supporters. The politics of fear has always been based on the employment of high-energy negative emotions, such as fear and anxiety, but during the first years of the war, it was more of a targeted and instrumental character. It was targeted towards the politically active part of society, excluding previously depoliticised groups (a special politics of pacification has been invented for

them). In an analytical sense, the politics of fear is a pure example of emotional manipulation, because the use of this strategy is directly related to suppressing the agency of targeted citizens and controlling the behaviour of specific segments of society [1, 30].

In parallel with the previously depoliticised groups, the politics of pacification was applied during the first two years of the war. Unlike fear politics, it relied on low-energy positive emotions - tranquillity, routine, and a sense of normalcy - and was aimed at maintaining social stability and preventing political involvement. This strategy is in line with the logic of emotional governance, as it operated in a mode that regulated society's emotional background without sharply escalating and maintained relative predictability and the manageability of everyday life. This strategy does not limit the public agency but maintains it at the previous level. While the agency level of the depoliticised groups was already very low, there was no real need to reduce it further with the additional manipulative strategies at that time [31].

At a later stage (3-4 years), the politics of pacification was gradually supplanted by the strategy of manipulation of hope, and then its reinforced form: the generalised politics of fear. Due to the prolonged nature of the war, the intensified drone attacks on Moscow, and the US authorisation for Ukraine to use long-range weapons to strike deep inside the country, the politics of pacification was no longer able to keep society in a state of indifference and inaction. At this point, the Kremlin is shifting from an emotional governance strategy towards the previously depoliticised majority to emotional manipulation tactics. The manipulation strategy, replacing the politics of pacification, used high-energy positive emotions such as anticipation and hope. However, the manipulation of hope strategy was not aimed at increasing society's agency but rather at providing positive emotions without requiring citizen participation, thereby shifting responsibility for the promised happy future to the government and leaving society dependent on external political decisions. Thus, manipulation of hope can be defined as an emotional manipulation strategy.

The shift from the manipulation of hope to a total politics of fear (the strategy implemented by the Kremlin since the fourth year of the war) was possible mainly because of the internal logic of the manipulation of hope strategy itself. Unlike emotional governance, the manipulation of hope relied on high-energy positive emotions that lacked real mechanisms for their realisation. Such a strategy is inherently unstable for the regime [4].

As the conflict drags on, the gap between expectations and reality becomes increasingly apparent. This leads to a buildup of frustration, which in turn encourages reassessment. For an authoritarian regime, this dynamic poses a particular threat. It undermines mechanisms of depoliticisation and increases the likelihood that citizens will try to rethink and understand the ongoing situation. Thus, the manipulation of hope not only loses its effectiveness but also begins to pose risks incompatible with maintaining regime stability.

Under these conditions, the number of available governmental strategies for emotional management is dwindling. A return to pacification or depoliticisation strategies would be inconsistent with the expectations that had been previously mobilised and could undermine confidence in state narratives. As a result, the regime finds itself in a situation where it can neither continue its previous strategy of hope nor return to more benign forms of emotional governance.

In these circumstances, high-energy positive emotions are replaced by the same high-energy negative emotions, first of all by fear [20]. Emotionally, the strategy remains at a high-energy level, with only the polarity of emotions changing, which makes such a transition the most logical and expected. Unlike hope, fear does not require validation through real positive change and can function as a self-sustaining emotional state. It reduces reflection, increases caution and limits societal agency [21, 6]. It is these properties that make fear not just an alternative strategy, but a logical continuation and culmination of manipulative logic.

Thus, in the next stage of the Kremlin's emotional management during the war, the politics of fear undergoes a qualitative transformation, moving from a targeted strategy to a generalised and total form that encompasses the entire society. Unlike the previous phases, in which fear was directed at specific groups (elites, political activists, and regime supporters), the fourth year of the war is characterised by its spread to broader social classes.

This transformation manifests itself through several interconnected mechanisms. First, the range of potential targets of fear is expanding. For the wider public, various new laws restricting internet usage and access to information have recently been introduced. These new laws aim to show that, from now on, the entire population can be prosecuted, even for visiting "wrong" internet pages. For example, the intentional search for "extremist" materials online, even when accessed via VPNs, has been criminalised, and advertising or promoting VPN services will also be severely penalised. These laws are broad and ambiguously worded, leading to multiple interpretations that further fuel fear among the population [10, 26].

Repression has also expanded. Even propagandists, bloggers, and media figures are increasingly included on lists of "foreign agents," "extremists," and "terrorists." This practice blurs the line between opposition and loyalty. It signals that no degree of public conformity guarantees safety [11, 26]. The inclusion of regime-adjacent figures on such lists reinforces the perception that punishment is unpredictable. Notably, a significant proportion of those designated as "terrorists and extremists" are minors [3]. This signals a shift toward generational intimidation. Fear is transmitted not only through punishment but through the demonstration that age, political experience, or prior disengagement offer no protection. In the first six months of 2025, 151 people were convicted in Russian courts for treason, espionage, and confidential cooperation with foreigners. This is twice as many as during the same period the previous year, and the highest number in the past ten years [27].

Second, fear becomes part of everyday life. Whereas it was previously concerned primarily with overt political activism, at this stage it is increasingly concerned with routine practices - the use of the Internet, financial transactions, and

interpersonal interaction [1, 23]. Thus, fear transforms into a stable background emotion that accompanies daily behaviour [5].

Third, the uncertainty and unpredictability of risks are increasing. Legal and discourse frameworks are framed in broad and vague categories, making virtually any behaviour potentially risky. As a result, the boundary between politically active and previously depoliticised groups blurs, and fear is no longer directed at specific targets but becomes all-encompassing.

The vagueness of legal norms and their selective application make it difficult for individuals to understand the permissible limits of behaviour. The lack of clear guidance means that fear begins to function as a mechanism for pre-emptive self-regulation: behaviour is adjusted not in response to specific sanctions, but in anticipation of a potential threat.

Finally, these processes lead to the internalisation of fear. As fear loses its connection to specific events and becomes routine, it transforms into a dominant background emotion that structures perception, decision-making, and behaviour [5].

We see that what began as targeted fear and broad societal pacification has evolved into a more pervasive and generalised politics of fear. And what is more interesting, according to emotional management logic, the prerequisite for such a transformation was the launch of the manipulation of hope strategy, the first total manipulative strategy directed at Russian society during the war in Ukraine.

5. Discussion

The analysis reveals an expansion of fear narratives across sources. Fear framing is no longer confined to politically engaged actors, but has moved from dissidents, elites, and activists to the broader population, including minors and citizens with ordinary digital behaviour and online search. Various new laws restricting internet usage and access to information are broad and ambiguously worded, leading to multiple interpretations that further fuel public fear. Legal and informational uncertainty became central discursive mechanisms, and emotional differentiation between audiences narrowed. Repressions are perceived as more unpredictable and as lacking mechanisms to avoid them. That all supports fear diffusion and makes fear embedded in everyday routine behaviour.

The shift to a total politics of fear in Russia in the fourth year of the war was not accidental. This article demonstrates that, within the cyclical framework of emotional management, the outcome was a logical extension of the previous emotional strategies employed by the Kremlin. The transition to a total politics of fear emerged from a structural shift from emotional governance to emotional manipulation, followed by a move from the manipulation of hope strategy, which employed high-energy positive emotions, to the total politics of fear, which uses the same high-energy, but negative, emotions.

Understanding emotional management as a cyclical process allows us to observe how the Kremlin continuously adjusted its previously implemented strategies (such as the politics of pacification and, later, the manipulation of hope) in response to societal reactions and behaviour. As soon as earlier strategies ceased to fulfil the regime's core objective - namely, keeping society inactive and politically disengaged - the government adapted its emotional management approach.

During the first three years of the war, emotional management strategies based on depoliticisation narratives proved sufficient to maintain social passivity and political disengagement. However, once the regime shifted to manipulative strategies, even those based on positive emotions such as hope, it became increasingly difficult to return to the framework of emotional governance. High-energy emotions tend to be self-reinforcing and cannot be easily replaced overnight, creating a situation in which the government is effectively constrained to continue relying on them.

When positive high-energy emotions lose their effectiveness, or, as in the case of hope, fail to materialise, the regime has little choice but to substitute them with other high-energy emotions, namely negative ones. This demonstrates that once initiated, emotional manipulation develops an internal logic of escalation and becomes increasingly difficult to control over time.

These results go beyond the Russian case. The dynamics revealed in the study show that the transition from emotional governance to emotional manipulation and then generalised politics of fear may represent a broader pattern implemented in various political contexts, especially associated with protracted crises, wars or high levels of uncertainty. In such circumstances, regimes that initially rely on strategies of depoliticisation and shift to positive emotional appeals are gradually becoming structurally constrained by their own emotional management decisions. As the effectiveness of these strategies declines, especially in the absence of tangible results, the likelihood of a shift to high-energy negative emotions, particularly fear, increases.

6. Conclusions

The Kremlin's emotional management strategies implemented during the war are mainly aimed at preventing the politicisation of processes, including societal dissatisfaction with the ongoing economic or political decline or difficulties caused by the war. Beginning with a politics of fear targeted primarily at the politically engaged segments of society (Years 1–3 of the war) and a politics of pacification aimed at the previously depoliticised majority of the population (Years 1–2), the Kremlin's emotional management strategies later shifted toward the manipulation of hope (Years 3–4) and the reinforcement of a politics of fear applied to society at large (Year 4). The sequential introduction and cumulative operation of these strategies demonstrate that emotional management is continually recalibrated in relation to the effort required to

achieve regime objectives. Whereas in the initial years of the war, pacification proved sufficient to keep the depoliticised majority distant from the conflict, allowing manipulative fear to be directed mainly at politically active groups, subsequent shifts in the third year of the war rendered pacification alone inadequate. This prompted the regime to adopt additional methods, including instrumental appeals to hope and the expansion of fear-based strategies to the broader population. The generalised politics of fear, thus, became a sufficient manipulative mechanism to control emotional societal stance during the fourth year of the war. This shift to the generalised politics of fear narrows the emotional repertoire available within the regime's communicative field.

The study has several limitations. It relies on discursive and institutional sources and does not include direct measures of individual emotional experience. As such, it analyses the production and institutionalisation of emotional signals rather than their psychological reception. The analysis captures a specific temporal phase in an ongoing conflict. The durability of generalised fear remains an open empirical question.

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