

Governance Through Uncertainty: Institutional Pressure on Russian Servicemen Refusing Participation in Crimea- and Ukraine-Related Military Operations

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Abstract

This article examines the institutional pressure experienced by Russian servicemen who refused participation in military operations associated with Crimea and Ukraine. Drawing upon documented testimonies, migration-related narratives, journalistic materials, and qualitative institutional analysis, the study explores how military refusal gradually transformed from a disciplinary issue into a politically sensitive category connected to loyalty, legitimacy, and state authority in contemporary Russia.

The article argues that refusal cannot be understood exclusively through legal or military frameworks. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent escalation of the conflict involving Ukraine, military participation increasingly acquired symbolic political meaning associated with patriotism, sovereignty, and national unity. Under such conditions, refusal became institutionally interpreted not merely as procedural disobedience, but as a potential sign of political unreliability and moral deviation from officially sanctioned narratives.

Particular attention is devoted to the mechanisms through which institutional pressure operates. The study demonstrates that coercion frequently functions through uncertainty, administrative ambiguity, reputational vulnerability, psychological destabilization, and anticipatory fear rather than solely through overt repression. Formal disciplinary procedures become intertwined with informal intimidation, symbolic stigmatization, and ideological pressure, producing environments in which visible disagreement is experienced as socially and existentially dangerous.

The article additionally examines the broader consequences of refusal, including migration, exile, identity fragmentation, adaptive self-regulation, and erosion of institutional legitimacy. The findings suggest that contemporary authoritarian systems increasingly govern not only through direct coercion, but through management of psychological conditions shaping how individuals perceive risk, visibility, and political belonging.

Ultimately, the Russian case illustrates how modern centralized governance systems rely upon symbolic management of loyalty and governance through uncertainty as mechanisms of political control.

Keywords

authoritarian governance; military refusal; Russia; Crimea; Ukraine; institutional pressure; coercion; migration; exile; institutional fear; adaptive self-regulation; military sociology

1. Introduction

The relationship between military obedience and political loyalty has acquired growing significance in contemporary Russia, particularly after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent escalation of military conflict involving Ukraine. In highly centralized political systems, military institutions frequently perform functions extending beyond defense and operational organization. They become symbolic structures through which the state constructs legitimacy, patriotism, and collective national identity. Under such conditions, refusal to participate in politically significant military operations may gradually cease to be perceived as an ordinary disciplinary matter and instead become interpreted as a challenge to symbolic political unity itself.

For many Russian servicemen, the events surrounding Crimea and Ukraine transformed the meaning of military service in ways that extended far beyond formal professional duty. Military participation increasingly became connected to public narratives of historical restoration, geopolitical confrontation, patriotism, and national solidarity. Official discourse presented loyalty not simply as obedience to command structures, but as moral alignment with the political direction of the state. This transformation significantly narrowed the space available for uncertainty, hesitation, or independent ethical judgment inside military environments.

At the same time, refusal-related conflicts rarely unfolded publicly or transparently. In most documented cases, individuals did not openly position themselves against the state or attempt immediate political confrontation. Many initially attempted quieter forms of withdrawal: resignation, transfer, avoidance of deployment, or reduction of visibility within the institutional environment. However, the institutional reaction to such attempts frequently extended beyond ordinary bureaucratic procedure. Administrative ambiguity, reputational pressure, informal intimidation, and ideological stigmatization gradually transformed professional conflict into a broader experience of insecurity and political vulnerability.

This article examines the institutional pressure experienced by Russian servicemen refusing participation in military operations associated with Crimea and Ukraine. The purpose of the study is not to establish legal conclusions regarding specific individual cases, but to analyze the

broader institutional mechanisms through which contemporary authoritarian systems regulate loyalty, visibility, and political belonging.

The article argues that refusal became politically sensitive because military participation itself acquired symbolic ideological significance after Crimea. Under these conditions, institutional pressure increasingly operated not only through formal disciplinary measures, but through uncertainty, psychological destabilization, reputational dependency, and adaptive fear. Individuals frequently found themselves unable to clearly determine where administrative disagreement ended and political danger began.

Particular attention is devoted to the concept of governance through uncertainty. The refusal-related trajectories examined throughout this study suggest that contemporary coercive systems often maintain control not solely through direct repression, but through the production of environments in which individuals cannot confidently predict institutional reactions or future consequences of visible disagreement. Fear becomes anticipatory rather than reactive. Silence, caution, and self-regulation emerge as rational survival strategies inside politically sensitive institutional spaces.

The article additionally explores the broader consequences of refusal, including migration, exile, identity fragmentation, and political estrangement. Many individuals involved in refusal-related conflicts were not originally connected to oppositional political movements. On the contrary, they frequently emerged from deeply institutional environments shaped by military education, patriotic socialization, and long-term integration into state structures. Their later alienation therefore reveals important tensions inside contemporary systems of centralized political loyalty.

Methodologically, the study combines qualitative institutional analysis with interpretation of documented testimonies, migration-related narratives, journalistic materials, and publicly available refusal-related trajectories. Particular attention is paid to recurring institutional patterns rather than isolated incidents. The article approaches these trajectories not simply as individual experiences, but as indicators of broader transformations affecting the relationship between military institutions, political legitimacy, and personal moral autonomy in contemporary Russia.

At a broader theoretical level, the Russian case contributes to ongoing discussions within political sociology, authoritarianism studies, military sociology, and migration research. The trajectories examined throughout this article demonstrate how modern centralized governance increasingly seeks not only behavioral obedience, but also symbolic and emotional conformity regulating the boundaries of legitimate political belonging itself.

2. Theoretical Framework: Governance Through Uncertainty

Research on authoritarian governance has traditionally focused on visible mechanisms of political control: censorship, direct repression, surveillance, imprisonment, and ideological

propaganda. (Arendt, 1973; Foucault, 1977) However, contemporary centralized systems often function through more diffuse forms of pressure embedded within ordinary institutional life. In many cases, individuals adapt their behavior not because they have already experienced direct punishment, but because they perceive uncertainty itself as dangerous.

This distinction is particularly important in military environments. Military institutions are built upon hierarchy, discipline, dependency, and collective identity even under politically neutral conditions. (Foucault, 1977) Once political loyalty becomes symbolically connected to military service, these institutional characteristics begin acquiring broader ideological significance. Refusal, hesitation, or attempts at withdrawal may then be interpreted not simply as administrative problems, but as indicators of unreliable political alignment.

The Russian environment surrounding Crimea and Ukraine illustrates this transformation clearly. Following 2014, military participation increasingly became associated with narratives of patriotism, national restoration, and geopolitical struggle. (Anderson, 1983; Snyder, 2018) Public discourse gradually blurred the distinction between professional military obligation and symbolic loyalty to the state itself. Under such conditions, disagreement became politically sensitive long before any formal legal conflict emerged.

This article approaches these dynamics through the concept of governance through uncertainty. The central argument is that contemporary authoritarian systems frequently maintain control not only through direct repression, but through the production of institutional environments in which individuals become unable to confidently predict the consequences of visibility, disagreement, or independent judgment. (Agamben, 2005; Bauman, 1989)

In such environments, uncertainty itself becomes politically functional. Individuals confronting refusal-related conflict often cannot clearly determine:

- whether institutional pressure is temporary or escalating;
- whether legal consequences are realistic or symbolic;
- whether visibility may attract security attention;
- or whether professional conflict may gradually transform into broader political vulnerability.

As a result, people begin regulating themselves preemptively. Silence, caution, emotional restraint, and strategic invisibility become rational adaptive behaviors. (Scott, 1985; Hochschild, 1983)

Figure 1. Cycle of Governance Through Uncertainty and Adaptive Self-Regulation

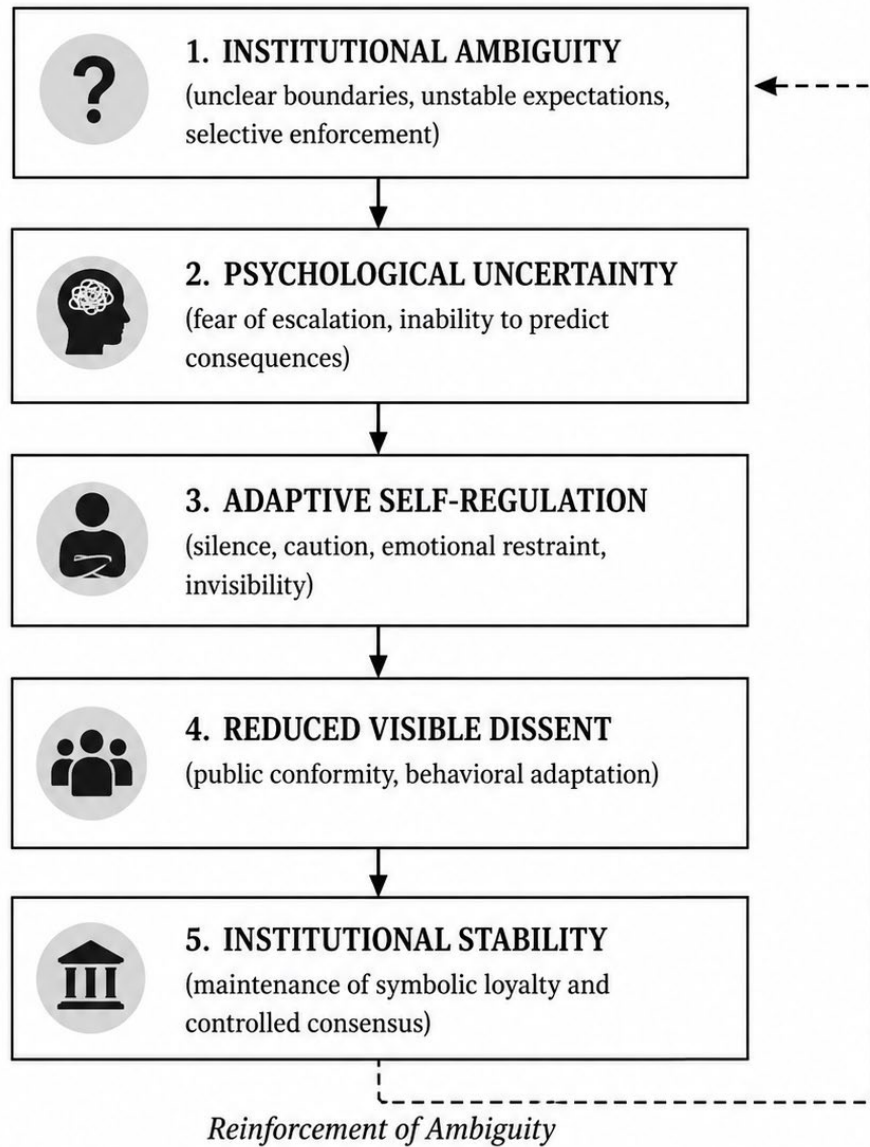


Figure 1. Conceptual cycle illustrating how contemporary authoritarian governance systems maintain institutional stability through ambiguity, anticipatory fear, and adaptive self-regulation rather than exclusively through direct coercion.

This mechanism differs from classical models of authoritarian terror. (Arendt, 1973) In highly repressive systems, punishment is often direct and explicit. In environments governed through uncertainty, however, institutional pressure frequently remains ambiguous. Administrative procedures coexist with informal intimidation, ideological rhetoric intersects with bureaucratic ambiguity, and individuals are left attempting to interpret unstable political signals without reliable institutional clarity.

The effectiveness of such systems lies precisely in this instability. (Bauman, 1989) When institutional boundaries remain unclear, individuals frequently become more cautious than direct repression alone would require. Fear expands beyond actual punishment because future escalation cannot be confidently predicted.

The article additionally draws upon broader sociological discussions concerning symbolic legitimacy and institutional conformity. (Foucault, 1977; Butler, 2009) The work of Michel Foucault remains important here, particularly his analysis of disciplinary institutions and internalized control. However, the contemporary Russian case demonstrates that disciplinary mechanisms increasingly intersect with symbolic nationalism, militarized patriotism, and politicized constructions of belonging extending beyond classical institutional discipline alone.

The analysis also relates to the work of James C. Scott concerning silence and adaptive behavior under coercive political conditions. (Scott, 1985) In environments where visible disagreement carries uncertain consequences, silence frequently reflects not ideological agreement, but strategic adaptation to perceived institutional risk.

At the same time, the Russian military context introduces additional dimensions that classical authoritarian theory does not fully explain. Military institutions possess strong symbolic authority within Russian political culture. Servicemen are expected not only to obey orders, but to embody ideals associated with patriotism, sacrifice, masculinity, and national unity. (Anderson, 1983; Jonsson, 2019) Refusal therefore threatens not merely operational discipline, but symbolic narratives concerning collective loyalty itself.

The article argues that contemporary authoritarian governance increasingly depends upon management of psychological conditions rather than solely direct force. Political systems seek not only behavioral obedience, but emotional conformity regulating how individuals understand loyalty, legitimacy, and citizenship. (Hochschild, 1983; Butler, 2009) Under such conditions, uncertainty becomes one of the most effective instruments of institutional control because it transforms fear into an ordinary element of everyday professional and social life.

The refusal-related trajectories examined throughout this study therefore provide insight into broader transformations affecting modern authoritarian governance. They demonstrate how centralized political systems increasingly rely upon symbolic management, adaptive self-regulation, and institutional ambiguity to preserve outward consensus while minimizing the need for constant visible repression.

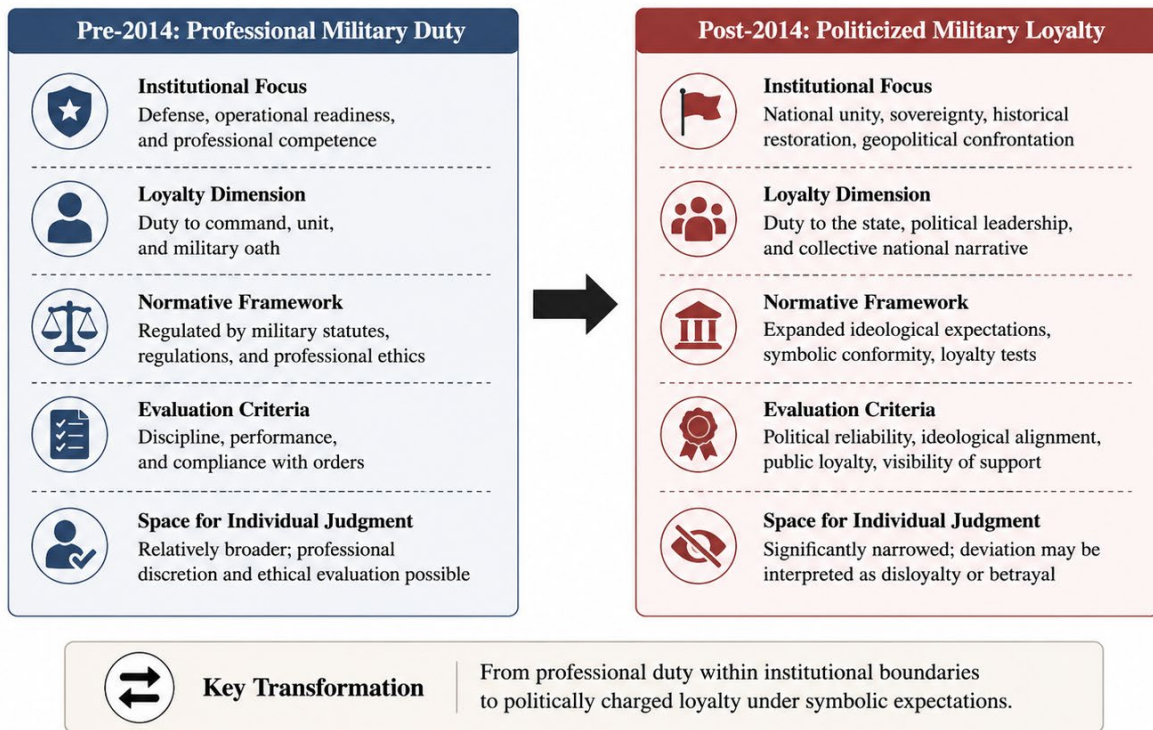
3. The Institutional Transformation of Loyalty After Crimea

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 significantly changed not only Russian foreign policy, but also the internal atmosphere inside military and state institutions. For many servicemen, this period marked the moment when military service began shifting from a primarily professional

sphere into an increasingly politicized environment where questions of loyalty, patriotism, and ideological reliability acquired new practical importance.

Before 2014, military professionalism inside Russia was still largely associated with operational discipline, command structure, technical competence, and institutional hierarchy. Political loyalty certainly existed as an important element of military culture, but it did not yet dominate everyday institutional identity in the same way it would later. Crimea changed this balance.

Figure 2. Transformation of the Meaning of Military Loyalty Before and After the Annexation of Crimea



Note. This figure illustrates how the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent escalation of the conflict involving Ukraine redefined military loyalty in the Russian Federation. Military service shifted from a primarily professional and institutional obligation to a politicized domain in which loyalty became inseparably linked to ideological alignment, national narratives, and public conformity.

Following the annexation, official rhetoric increasingly presented military participation not simply as state service, but as involvement in a broader historical and civilizational mission. (Snyder, 2018; Jonsson, 2019) Public discourse surrounding Crimea emphasized national restoration, geopolitical resistance, protection of Russian identity, and correction of historical injustice. (Anderson, 1983; Snyder, 2018) These narratives quickly penetrated military environments themselves.

Inside institutional culture, patriotism gradually became more operationalized. Expressions of loyalty acquired practical significance beyond ceremonial rhetoric. Neutrality, hesitation, or

emotional distance toward politically important events increasingly attracted attention inside environments where ideological alignment was becoming socially expected. (Butler, 2009)

This transformation did not always occur through explicit orders or direct political instruction. More often, it emerged gradually through changes in institutional atmosphere. Conversations became more politically charged. Symbolic language surrounding patriotism became more emotionally rigid. Public support for state policy increasingly appeared not simply desirable, but socially necessary inside many military environments.

Several refusal-related trajectories suggest that after Crimea many servicemen began experiencing a narrowing space for ambiguity inside institutional life. Individuals who attempted to separate professional military duty from political interpretation reportedly encountered growing difficulty maintaining such distinction. Military participation itself was becoming ideologically meaningful. (Anderson, 1983)

This process intensified further after the escalation of conflict involving Ukraine. Military institutions increasingly operated inside broader narratives of external threat, national confrontation, and patriotic mobilization. Under such conditions, refusal no longer appeared as an isolated disciplinary issue. It increasingly risked interpretation as evidence of insufficient loyalty, political unreliability, or moral weakness.

Importantly, many servicemen experiencing discomfort with these developments did not initially perceive themselves as political opponents of the state. On the contrary, numerous trajectories emerged from deeply patriotic and institutionally integrated environments. Individuals often attempted to preserve professional identity while internally distancing themselves from specific political or military developments.

However, contemporary authoritarian systems frequently struggle to tolerate such distinction. Once loyalty becomes emotionally and symbolically absolutized, independent moral judgment itself begins appearing suspicious. (Arendt, 1973; Agamben, 2005) The institutional environment increasingly expects visible alignment rather than silent professionalism alone.

This transformation affected not only formal military structures, but also the psychological experience of service itself. Servicemen increasingly operated inside environments where professional behavior could acquire political interpretation. Public silence, emotional restraint, and avoidance of sensitive discussion gradually became common adaptive practices. (Scott, 1985)

The atmosphere of uncertainty surrounding acceptable boundaries became especially important. Individuals often could not determine:

- which forms of disagreement remained professionally acceptable;
- where administrative caution ended;

- or when institutional conflict might begin acquiring political significance.

As a result, many servicemen reportedly began regulating themselves long before direct confrontation occurred. Adaptive caution became embedded within ordinary institutional behavior.

Another important aspect of this transformation involved the symbolic role assigned to the military itself within Russian political culture after Crimea. The serviceman increasingly became presented not merely as a professional state employee, but as a visible embodiment of patriotism, sacrifice, and national unity. This symbolic elevation strengthened the political sensitivity of refusal because disagreement inside military structures threatened narratives of collective consensus surrounding state policy.

Several refusal-related trajectories also suggest that attempts to leave military service after Crimea and during the Ukraine-related escalation increasingly encountered suspicion or administrative resistance. In such environments, resignation or withdrawal could itself become politically interpretable. Individuals attempting quiet institutional exit sometimes reportedly experienced pressure extending beyond ordinary bureaucratic procedure.

The institutional transformation of loyalty after Crimea therefore represented more than a change in political rhetoric. It altered the internal logic through which military identity, patriotism, and obedience were understood inside contemporary Russia. Military service increasingly became connected to symbolic demonstrations of political alignment, while uncertainty, silence, and adaptive caution became ordinary features of institutional life.

This transformation created the broader environment in which refusal-related conflicts later evolved. The mechanisms of pressure examined throughout the following sections emerged not from isolated disciplinary incidents alone, but from deeper institutional changes affecting the relationship between military professionalism, ideological conformity, and state legitimacy in contemporary Russia.

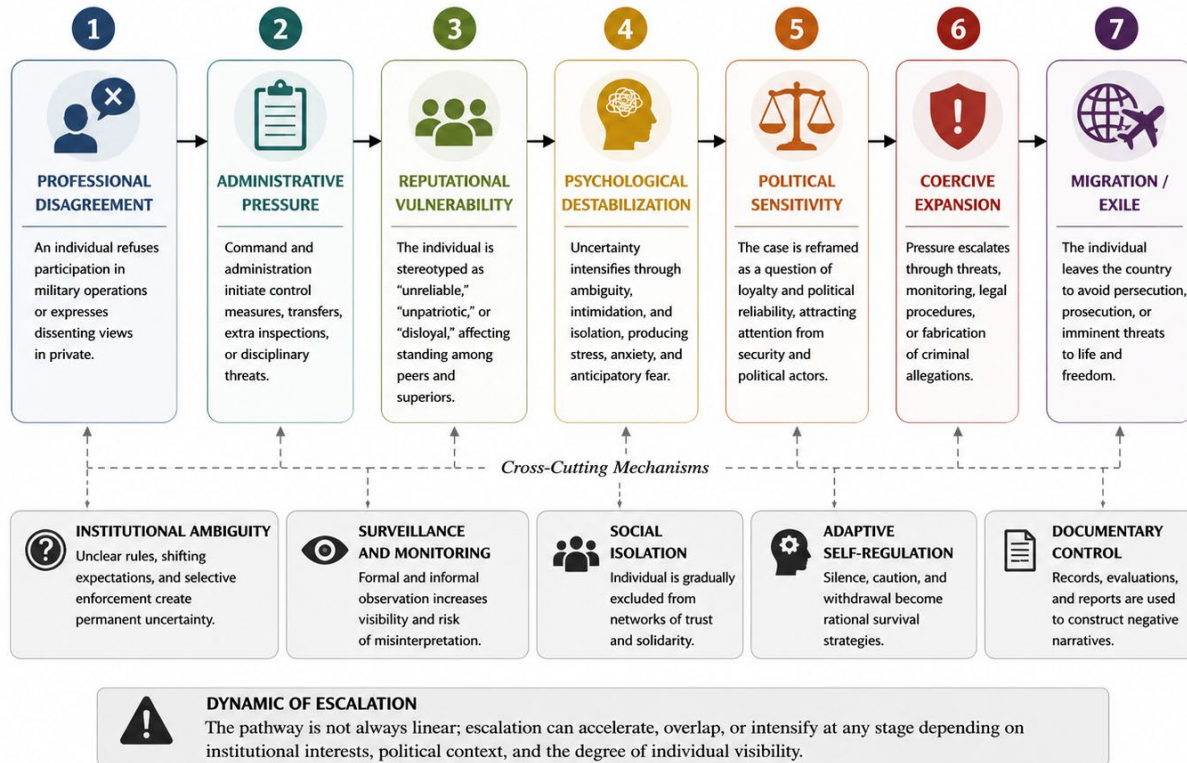
4. Mechanisms of Institutional Pressure

The institutional pressure experienced by Russian servicemen refusing participation in Crimea- and Ukraine-related operations rarely appeared in the form of direct and openly documented repression alone. In many cases, pressure operated through a much more ambiguous environment in which formal procedures, informal intimidation, collective suspicion, and psychological uncertainty became intertwined.

One of the most important characteristics of this system was the absence of clear boundaries. Servicemen often could not confidently determine whether a particular situation represented ordinary military discipline, unofficial pressure from command structures, or the beginning of

more serious institutional consequences. This ambiguity itself became one of the most effective mechanisms of control. (Foucault, 1977)

Figure 3. Institutional Escalation Pathway
From Professional Disagreement to Exile



Note. This figure illustrates a generalized pathway observed in numerous cases of Russian servicemen who refused participation in Crimea- and Ukraine-related military operations. While individual trajectories differ, the configuration of institutional mechanisms demonstrates recurring patterns of escalation.

In many refusal-related trajectories, pressure reportedly began not with explicit threats, but with conversations. These conversations were often intentionally vague. A serviceman might be reminded about responsibility, loyalty, future career consequences, or “how such situations are perceived.” Formal accusations were not always necessary. The uncertainty surrounding possible escalation frequently produced stronger psychological pressure than direct disciplinary language alone. (Bauman, 1989)

Administrative procedures also became an important instrument of destabilization. Problems with resignation requests, delays in paperwork, repeated procedural obstacles, contradictory instructions, or sudden bureaucratic complications reportedly appeared in numerous refusal-related situations. (Agamben, 2005) A serviceman attempting to leave military structures could gradually find himself inside an environment where even routine administrative processes became emotionally exhausting and unpredictable.

This form of pressure was especially effective because military institutions regulate multiple aspects of everyday life simultaneously. Housing, salary, career advancement, professional reputation, healthcare access, and social belonging often remain deeply connected to institutional stability. Under such conditions, conflict with command structures threatens not only employment, but an entire system of personal security and future predictability.

Several trajectories additionally suggest that institutional pressure frequently operated through atmosphere rather than explicit punishment. A serviceman might not receive direct threats while simultaneously experiencing obvious changes in treatment from colleagues, superiors, or administrative personnel. Conversations could abruptly become colder. Loyalty might begin appearing as an unspoken subject constantly present in the background of professional interaction. (Hochschild, 1983)

In highly hierarchical environments, such changes acquire significant psychological weight. Military culture depends heavily upon collective trust, reputation, and internal solidarity. Once an individual becomes informally associated with hesitation, refusal, or political unreliability, isolation may begin functioning automatically even without formal disciplinary action.

Another important mechanism involved reputational uncertainty. Individuals reportedly feared being perceived as unreliable, disloyal, weak, or politically problematic. In military environments where professional identity is strongly connected to collective notions of duty and masculinity, such stigma may become psychologically devastating even in the absence of direct legal consequences.

Importantly, the pressure often remained indirect enough to preserve plausible deniability. Formal institutional systems could continue appearing legally procedural while individuals simultaneously experienced intense psychological destabilization inside everyday professional life. This distinction is critical for understanding contemporary authoritarian governance. Modern coercive systems frequently function most effectively when institutional pressure remains difficult to isolate into clearly identifiable acts of repression. (Foucault, 1977; Bauman, 1989)

Several refusal-related narratives also describe the importance of constant uncertainty surrounding visibility. Individuals often became increasingly cautious regarding conversations, social interaction, digital communication, and expression of personal views. Some reportedly attempted to minimize contact with politically sensitive discussions altogether. Others avoided attracting attention inside military environments by becoming deliberately quieter and less socially visible.

This adaptive caution gradually transforms into self-regulation. (Scott, 1985) Individuals begin monitoring themselves continuously because they cannot confidently determine which actions may later become institutionally significant. Under such conditions, fear no longer depends upon

immediate punishment. (Agamben, 2005) It becomes embedded within ordinary professional behavior.

The role of collective pressure should also not be underestimated. In military environments, institutional loyalty is reinforced not only vertically through command structures, but horizontally through peer expectations and group identity. Servicemen refusing participation may therefore experience not only administrative conflict, but also emotional isolation from the collective environment surrounding them.

This process becomes especially powerful when patriotism acquires emotionally absolutized meaning. Once military participation becomes symbolically connected to national unity and moral legitimacy, refusal may begin appearing socially incomprehensible inside institutional culture itself. The individual risks being perceived not merely as professionally problematic, but as morally suspect.

At the same time, the refusal-related trajectories examined throughout this study suggest that many servicemen did not initially perceive themselves as engaging in political opposition. On the contrary, numerous individuals reportedly attempted to avoid open confrontation entirely. Their behavior often reflected efforts to quietly reduce involvement, preserve personal safety, or maintain moral distance without publicly challenging the institutional system itself.

However, environments governed through uncertainty frequently make such neutral positioning difficult to sustain. The absence of clear boundaries causes individuals to interpret even limited visibility as potentially dangerous. As a result, silence, caution, emotional restraint, and strategic invisibility gradually become normalized forms of institutional survival. (Scott, 1985; Hochschild, 1983)

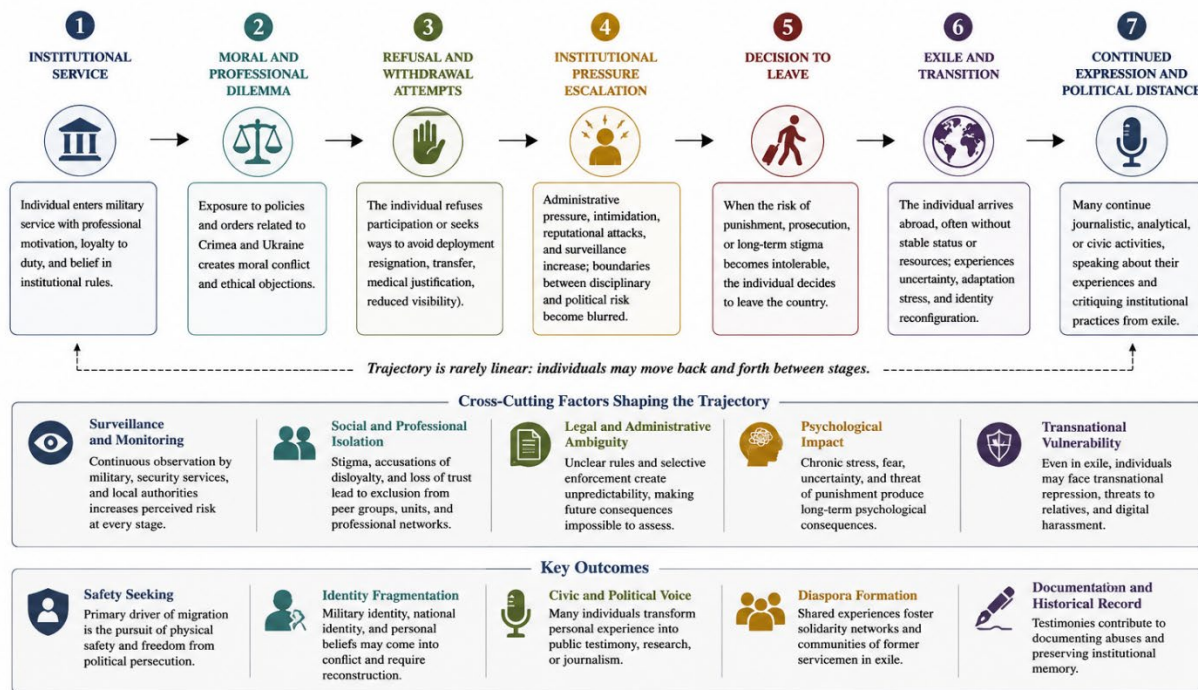
The mechanisms of pressure examined here therefore reveal how contemporary authoritarian governance increasingly functions through psychological adaptation rather than solely direct repression. Institutional systems do not always require constant visible violence when uncertainty itself successfully encourages individuals to regulate behavior preemptively. In this sense, the most effective form of pressure may not be punishment after visible resistance, but the gradual creation of conditions in which resistance becomes psychologically unmanageable long before it openly occurs.

5. Migration, Exile, and Political Transformation

For many servicemen involved in refusal-related conflicts, the institutional crisis did not end after resignation, dismissal, or withdrawal from military structures. In numerous trajectories, the conflict gradually expanded beyond the military environment itself and evolved into a broader experience of insecurity affecting professional identity, public visibility, social belonging, and eventually geographic displacement.

Importantly, migration in these cases rarely appeared as a sudden political decision. Many individuals did not initially perceive themselves as dissidents or political activists. On the contrary, several trajectories suggest that former servicemen often attempted for long periods to preserve ordinary civilian life while minimizing visibility and avoiding direct confrontation with institutional structures.

Figure 4. Migration and Exile Trajectory of Russian Servicemen Refusing Participation in Crimea- and Ukraine-Related Military Operations



Note. This figure represents a generalized trajectory based on documented testimonies, interviews, and case studies of Russian servicemen who refused participation in Crimea- and Ukraine-related military operations and subsequently left Russia.

However, uncertainty itself frequently made such neutrality unstable. Individuals reportedly began experiencing growing concern regarding possible surveillance, administrative vulnerability, reputational exposure, or future legal escalation. In some cases, even routine interactions with institutional systems gradually became psychologically stressful because individuals could no longer confidently separate ordinary bureaucratic procedure from potential political risk.

This atmosphere often produced a slow transformation of perception. Situations initially understood as isolated professional conflicts increasingly began appearing connected to broader political processes. Former servicemen who had once viewed themselves primarily through military or professional identity gradually started reconsidering their relationship to the state, institutional legitimacy, and public belonging more generally.

Several refusal-related trajectories suggest that migration frequently emerged not from ideological radicalization, but from exhaustion. (Hirschman, 1970; Gessen, 2017) Prolonged uncertainty, institutional pressure, emotional tension, and fear of future unpredictability gradually undermined the individual's sense of stability inside the existing environment. Leaving the country became perceived less as political protest and more as an attempt to restore psychological safety and personal control over everyday life. (Hirschman, 1970)

At the same time, exile often intensified political awareness rather than weakening it. Individuals entering migration processes, asylum systems, independent media environments, or exile communities frequently began reevaluating earlier experiences through broader sociological and political frameworks. Events that had initially appeared fragmented or situational gradually acquired structural meaning. (Pomerantsev, 2014; Gessen, 2017)

Journalism played an especially important role in some of these transformations. Former servicemen involved in media activity after leaving Russia often attempted to publicly describe institutional environments that previously remained hidden behind military silence and patriotic rhetoric. In these cases, testimony became more than personal narrative. (Scott, 1985) It became an attempt to reclaim interpretive authority over experiences previously defined exclusively through state narratives of loyalty and discipline.

This process carried particular symbolic weight because such testimonies emerged from individuals who had once been integrated into the institutional system itself. Their accounts complicated simplified representations of unanimous patriotic consensus surrounding Crimea and Ukraine. The existence of refusal-related migration demonstrated that institutional conformity inside military structures was not always as complete as official narratives suggested.

At the same time, exile rarely eliminated fear entirely. Several trajectories indicate that former servicemen continued regulating behavior even outside Russia. Individuals reportedly remained cautious regarding public visibility, communication, political expression, or discussion of military-related experiences. In many cases, concern for relatives remaining inside Russia intensified this caution further.

This persistence is sociologically important because it demonstrates how contemporary authoritarian pressure may continue functioning psychologically even after territorial departure from the institutional environment itself. Fear becomes internalized. (Foucault, 1977) The individual may physically leave the system while continuing to organize behavior around anticipated institutional consequences.

Another important feature of refusal-related migration involves the instability of identity following institutional rupture. Many former servicemen found themselves occupying ambiguous positions that did not fit conventional categories of either loyal patriotism or organized political opposition. Their trajectories often reflected fragmentation rather than coherent ideological transformation.

This ambiguity helps explain why many refusal-related migrants initially struggled to publicly describe their own experiences. Military culture traditionally emphasizes silence, discipline, endurance, and internal conflict resolution. (Jonsson, 2019) Public articulation of institutional pressure therefore frequently required individuals to cross psychological boundaries that had previously structured their professional identity.

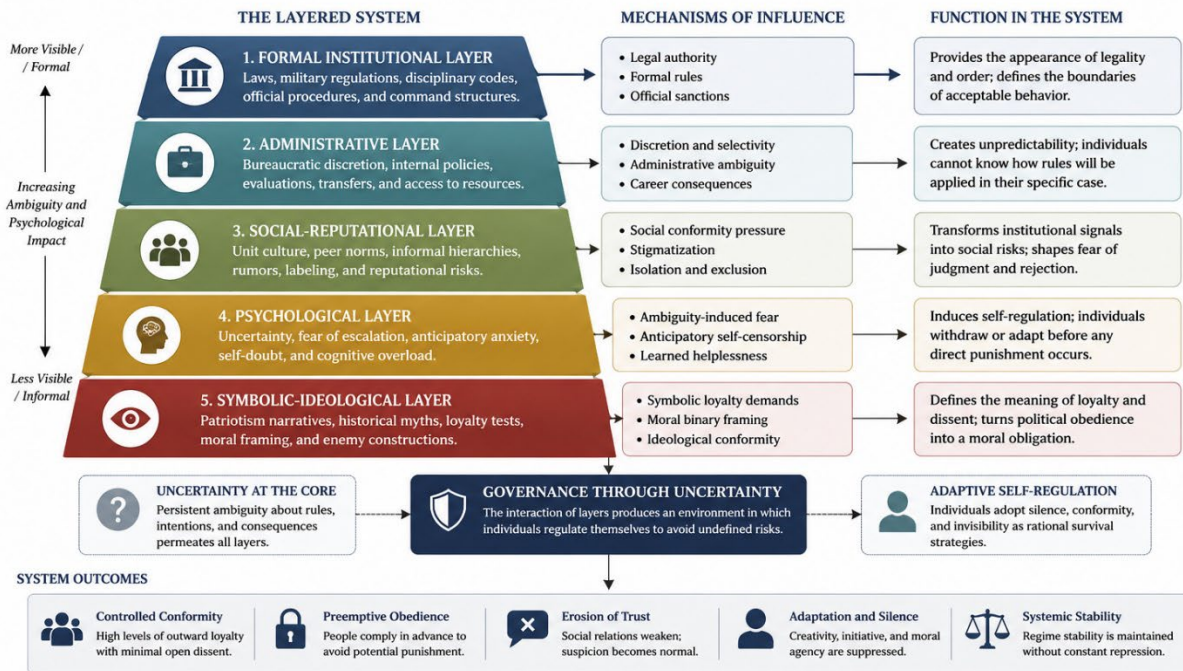
The migration dimension examined throughout this article thus reveals broader transformations affecting contemporary authoritarian governance. Institutional pressure no longer remains confined within national military structures alone. Through migration, exile, journalism, and transnational communication, refusal-related conflicts become incorporated into wider international political and informational spaces.

The Russian case surrounding Crimea and Ukraine therefore demonstrates how refusal may evolve far beyond disciplinary disagreement. What begins as institutional conflict inside military environments may gradually transform into migration, political estrangement, identity fragmentation, and transnational public testimony. In this sense, refusal becomes not only a military issue, but also a sociological indicator of deeper tensions between centralized political authority and personal moral autonomy in contemporary authoritarian systems.

6. Governance Through Uncertainty and Adaptive Self-Regulation

One of the most important dynamics visible in refusal-related trajectories is the gradual transformation of uncertainty into a permanent institutional condition. In many documented cases, pressure did not rely primarily on direct punishment alone. Instead, individuals found themselves inside environments where the boundaries of acceptable behavior became increasingly difficult to determine. (Agamben, 2005; Bauman, 1989)

Figure 5. Governance Through Uncertainty as a Layered System
How Ambiguity, Pressure, and Symbolic Control Interact to Produce Compliance Without Overt Coercion



Note. This figure presents an analytical model of governance through uncertainty as a multi-layered system. Layers interact dynamically rather than hierarchically; the less visible layers amplify the effects of formal institutions and make resistance uncertain, risky, and socially costly.

This uncertainty affected everyday professional life in subtle but psychologically significant ways. Servicemen reportedly learned to constantly evaluate not only what they said publicly, but also how their behavior might later be interpreted inside politically sensitive institutional environments. (Foucault, 1977) Conversations became more cautious. Emotional neutrality became difficult to maintain. Even silence itself could acquire ambiguous meaning.

Importantly, uncertainty often functioned more effectively than explicit threats. In situations where consequences remain undefined, individuals frequently begin imagining outcomes more severe than any formal warning might openly state. This creates a system in which self-regulation develops preemptively. (Scott, 1985; Hochschild, 1983) People adapt behavior not because punishment has already occurred, but because they cannot confidently predict where institutional escalation may stop.

Several refusal-related trajectories suggest that individuals increasingly organized daily behavior around avoidance of visibility. Some reportedly avoided political discussion altogether, even in private settings. (Scott, 1985) Others minimized social interaction, limited online activity, or attempted to remain professionally unnoticed inside military structures. In many cases, such caution gradually became habitual rather than situational.

This process is particularly significant in military environments because military culture already encourages emotional restraint, discipline, and adaptation to hierarchical authority. Under politically charged conditions, these professional characteristics may become absorbed into

broader systems of ideological conformity. The individual begins regulating not only behavior, but internal emotional expression itself. (Hochschild, 1983)

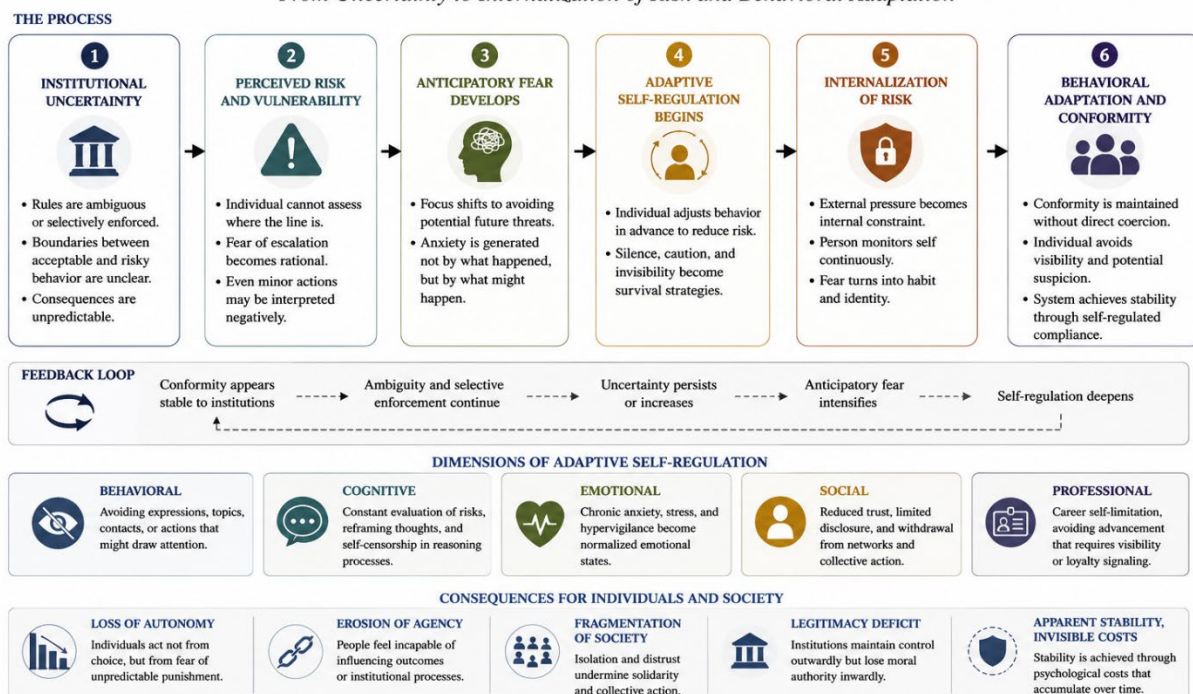
The psychological effect of this environment should not be underestimated. Constant uncertainty produces exhaustion precisely because individuals remain unable to establish stable expectations regarding institutional reality. (Bauman, 1989) Administrative procedures may appear formally legal while simultaneously carrying implicit political meaning. Routine conversations may suddenly acquire reputational consequences. Professional disagreements may unpredictably expand into broader questions of loyalty and trustworthiness.

In such systems, ambiguity itself becomes politically functional. Clear institutional boundaries would allow individuals to rationally evaluate risk and make informed decisions. Uncertainty, by contrast, encourages continuous caution because the potential scope of consequences remains undefined. (Agamben, 2005)

Several trajectories examined throughout this study suggest that individuals often experienced this uncertainty as a constant background atmosphere rather than a sequence of isolated incidents. Pressure was not always concentrated in dramatic confrontations. More often, it appeared through accumulation: ambiguous conversations, institutional coldness, bureaucratic obstacles, reputational suspicion, and the persistent feeling that visibility itself might become dangerous under changing political conditions.

Figure 6. Adaptive Fear and Anticipatory Self-Regulation

From Uncertainty to Internalization of Risk and Behavioral Adaptation



Note. This figure illustrates how uncertainty generates anticipatory fear, leading individuals to regulate their own behavior in advance. Through repeated cycles, self-regulation becomes internalized, strengthening institutional control without the need for constant overt coercion.

This environment gradually normalizes adaptive silence. Public conformity may outwardly appear stable even while significant internal distrust develops beneath the surface. (Scott, 1985) Individuals avoid visible disagreement not necessarily because they fully support institutional narratives, but because uncertainty transforms independent expression into an emotionally risky act.

At the same time, governance through uncertainty produces important long-term consequences for institutional legitimacy. People may continue formally participating inside institutional systems while psychologically distancing themselves from them. Compliance becomes strategic rather than genuinely integrated into personal belief. Over time, this distinction weakens trust not only toward particular institutions, but toward the broader political environment itself.

The refusal-related trajectories examined throughout this article therefore illustrate a broader transformation characteristic of many contemporary authoritarian systems. Political control increasingly depends not simply on visible repression, but on management of perception, anticipation, and emotional vulnerability. (Foucault, 1977; Butler, 2009) The most effective form of pressure may occur precisely when individuals begin regulating themselves automatically before direct coercion even becomes necessary.

In this sense, governance through uncertainty represents more than a temporary political tactic. It becomes a durable institutional condition shaping how individuals understand loyalty, safety, visibility, and personal autonomy inside contemporary centralized political systems. (Bauman, 1989; Agamben, 2005)

7. Conclusion

The refusal-related trajectories examined throughout this article demonstrate that institutional pressure directed at Russian servicemen associated with Crimea- and Ukraine-related operations cannot be understood solely as a matter of military discipline or isolated legal conflict. Rather, refusal emerged within a broader transformation of political governance in which loyalty, patriotism, and institutional legitimacy became increasingly interconnected.

The study has shown that military participation gradually acquired symbolic meaning extending beyond operational obligation. Following the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent escalation of conflict involving Ukraine, participation in military structures became tied to narratives of national unity, historical restoration, geopolitical confrontation, and political loyalty. Under such conditions, refusal increasingly ceased to function as ordinary procedural disagreement and instead became interpreted through categories of ideological reliability and symbolic belonging.

At the same time, the mechanisms of institutional pressure examined throughout this article rarely operated through direct repression alone. More often, pressure functioned through

uncertainty, ambiguity, reputational vulnerability, psychological destabilization, and adaptive fear. Individuals frequently found themselves inside environments where they could no longer confidently distinguish between administrative procedure and potential political danger.

This uncertainty proved especially effective because it transformed self-regulation into an ordinary survival strategy. Silence, emotional restraint, avoidance of visibility, and strategic caution gradually became normalized forms of institutional adaptation. In many cases, individuals regulated themselves long before direct coercive measures became necessary.

The article additionally demonstrated how refusal-related conflict frequently extended beyond military institutions themselves. For many former servicemen, institutional pressure evolved into broader experiences of migration, exile, identity fragmentation, and political estrangement. Importantly, these trajectories often emerged not from organized opposition, but from individuals previously integrated into military and patriotic institutional systems. Their later alienation therefore reveals significant tensions inside contemporary models of centralized political loyalty.

One of the central arguments of this study is that contemporary authoritarian governance increasingly functions through management of psychological conditions rather than solely through overt violence. Political systems seek not only obedience, but also symbolic and emotional conformity regulating how individuals understand patriotism, legitimacy, and belonging. Under such conditions, uncertainty itself becomes one of the most effective instruments of institutional control.

At a broader theoretical level, the Russian case surrounding Crimea and Ukraine illustrates how modern authoritarian systems increasingly rely upon adaptive self-regulation, symbolic management of loyalty, and institutional ambiguity to preserve outward consensus while minimizing the need for constant visible repression. The appearance of stability may therefore conceal substantial internal fragmentation, distrust, and silent disengagement beneath the surface of institutional conformity.

Yet the refusal-related trajectories examined throughout this article also demonstrate the limits of such systems. Moral uncertainty does not disappear simply because public expression becomes dangerous. Silence may conceal unresolved ethical conflict rather than genuine ideological consensus. Individuals continue searching for forms of personal autonomy even inside environments organized around political conformity and institutional pressure.

Ultimately, refusal becomes sociologically significant not because it immediately destabilizes state power, but because it exposes the fragile relationship between centralized political authority and individual moral judgment. The experiences examined throughout this study suggest that contemporary authoritarian systems increasingly confront a fundamental contradiction: the more strongly political legitimacy depends upon symbolic unanimity, the more dangerous ordinary human ambiguity becomes.

The Russian case therefore provides insight not only into military refusal itself, but into broader transformations affecting political power, institutional legitimacy, and personal autonomy in the twenty-first century.

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Final Author Note

This article does not claim to provide exhaustive empirical documentation of all refusal-related cases connected to Crimea and Ukraine. Rather, it proposes an interpretive sociological framework for understanding how institutional pressure, symbolic loyalty, uncertainty, and adaptive fear function within contemporary authoritarian governance systems.

The research should therefore be understood as a qualitative analytical contribution situated at the intersection of political sociology, migration studies, military sociology, and authoritarianism research. The Russian case examined here illustrates broader transformations affecting the relationship between institutional power, personal autonomy, political belonging, and psychological governance in the contemporary world.