



By: The Editorial Board

The ICC's indictment - a symbolic gesture that makes Putin hunted



The indictment and arrest warrant against Vladimir Putin issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) was probably the Rubicon no one in Russia even expected.

According to some assessments, it is a "highly symbolic step", but this symbolism could also produce very practical consequences, for which there were no conditions before the ICC's indictment.

Although it was one of the signatories of the Rome Statute of the ICC, Russia withdrew from this international mechanism in 2016, and has not recognised its jurisdiction since then. For now, this formal reason gives the Kremlin room for propaganda manoeuvring against the indictment and arrest warrant, and even for ridiculing the move.

However, this is not enough to cushion the current main effect of The Hague indictment. The court clearly stated that Putin is no longer legitimate, that no one is afraid of him, that no matter what the Russians do, his status is fundamentally changing.

The indictment does not only refer to Putin

The court did something that was unthinkable until now. It has moved into the area of political interests. The West has launched an offensive, which appeared in a form nobody expected.

In Russia, most people have become used to sanctions, and also become used to war. But no one expected that the West would "kill Putin politically".

The important effect of the ICC's indictment does not refer to Putin directly. People in and around the Kremlin now well understand that while they are not yet being declared war criminals, this could easily happen if they continue to follow the orders of an accused war criminal.

In autocratic power structures, such as in the

Kremlin, one "big" indictment, that is, political delegitimation, triggers a chain of mutual suspicions, where the door is wide open for betrayal: saving one's own skin, cooperation with the permanent International Criminal Court, and the collapse of the whole autocratic structure.

This is exactly what happened to the President of the FR Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic, who was indicted for crimes in Kosovo in May 1999.

As in the case of Putin, Milosevic was indicted in the middle of the war - in the midst of the NATO bombing campaign against the FR Yugoslavia.

An indictment for war crimes whilst a war is still ongoing, is a rare and somewhat risky practice. The defendants are rightly expected to become reckless when faced with legal prosecution, because they know that their trial is certain.

Russia and collective guilt

Throughout the history of Kremlin's global political manipulations, the Kremlin enjoyed sticking to the standard that all heads of state are legitimate so long as they continue to hold their position as a result of an election, even rigged ones, which no one could prove anyway.

Putin was able to play that legitimacy card because he himself was legitimate from a systemic standpoint.

In one single day, the world has turned upside down for Russia. Russia now faces being under the leadership of an accused war criminal.

Everyone taking orders from accused war criminals are potentially accused war criminals.

Although the ICC's indictment is personalised and refers to Putin and his Commissioner for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, it is inevitable that it acquire a collective dimension in Russia, since a huge part of the

population wholeheartedly supports the aggression against Ukraine and accepts its consequences.

Symbolically, the entire Russian world project has been proclaimed as criminal.

One of the important consequences of the indictment is the possibility that the establishment will now come after him, and Putin knows it.

These people do not want to live in North Korea. The warrant was a verdict not only for Putin, but for everyone around him. The warrant is a final warning and a clear message: remove the accused of war crimes, because otherwise, you could be accused yourselves.

The army and the intelligence bosses were not named in the warrant, meaning that they still have the chance to avoid Putin's destiny. Putin will now become the hunted.

His best way out is to relocate. China is often mentioned, and the installation of a successor who would maintain Putin's clandestine arrangements with China.

Complete international isolation

After the indictment, Putin faces even deeper isolation, as the accompanying arrest warrant orders all states that recognise the ICC to arrest him.

If not sooner, Putin will face his first big challenge at the end of August, when the BRICS summit, of which Russia is a member, will be held in South Africa.

Pretoria recognises the jurisdiction of the ICC, and will be tested on how it behaves if the Russian leader does decide to attend.

Perhaps South Africa will repeat its action from 2015, when it refused to implement the ICC's warrant for the arrest of Sudanese dictator Omar al-Bashir during his visit.

But perhaps in the new international

circumstances they will treat Putin's case differently.

Regardless of the fact that there are numerous obstacles to the implementation of the ICC's indictment, which makes this procedure "highly symbolic", it is a big step that has made the Russian leader an absolutely undesirable interlocutor, let alone a partner.

This indictment also delegitimises his country on the international stage, to the extent that even those who have maintained communication with Moscow, keeping neutral towards its invasion of Ukraine, will seriously consider whether to stay on that course.

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and particularly as a country that insists on respecting international treaties and documents, Russia has had an intractable problem with its own authority since last Friday, because its leader has been placed on an international wanted list.