

Policy Paper

FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR RUSSIA:

An Optimistic, but Realistic Outlook

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Executive Summary

The current dictatorship in Moscow does not reflect a deliberate choice of the Russian people. It is the result of a swift and coordinated power grab on the background of strong economic growth in the early 2000s. Russian society has shown little appetite for aggressive imperial policies over the past years, and the pro-democracy movement has been far stronger in terms of street protest potential than all other political forces.[author_box]

The present regime is unlikely to switch course as long as Putin remains in charge, but once he is gone, democratic change is much more likely than further radicalization. The only thing which holds back softer policies is Putin's personal worldview and his prejudices after nearly a quarter of a century in power. Removing this constraint will be a significant factor stimulating liberalization. The cost of maintaining the current imperialist path will be enormous, while initiating liberalization offers huge benefits. The largely opportunistic elites are likely to make a rational choice and take a softer course.

Projections of a disintegration of Russia similar to the breakup of the Soviet Union are largely baseless. Russia's national republics would face enormous challenges in establishing viable sovereign states while they lack the level of national consciousness that fueled the Soviet constituent republics' aspirations. Current trends among non-Russian ethnicities to speak up for self-determination and autonomy are helpful to achieve real federalization, but those demanding complete independence typically lack broad popular support.

While a functioning democracy may still be a long way ahead for Russia, basic preconditions like demand for democracy and a clear rejection of the usurpation of power are there. A majority of future-oriented Russians overwhelmingly supports a democratic form of governance. It is essential that the democratic West learns from past failures and supports Russia's next attempt for democratic change instead of snubbing it.

Discussing possible scenarios for the future of Russia after the current war is not easy. As traditionally with Russian political debate, it is heavily dominated by the status quo: a ruthless and lawless repressive regime without moral boundaries and with significant resources still at its disposal, and a passive population which has seemingly lost all habits of even remotely independent political behavior.

However, it is worth to recall several things. The Russian political system has been changing like a rollercoaster in the past 50 years, despite permanent claims by the “perpetual status quo” party that if “Brezhnev-style socialism will last forever”, then “democracy will last forever” – now the same things are being said about Putin’s regime, albeit it has many problems sustaining itself. Resources are scarce and depleting, the monopolistic dirigiste economy is not working, China has no interest in strategically investing into the global rise of a new Russia. The population is weary after a decade of declining living standards – Russians on average are at least 15 per cent poorer than they were before the 2014 annexation of Crimea – and it can be clearly seen that Putin’s popularity went into steady decline after 2008, which he was able to correct only with extreme measures like the annexation of Crimea (whose popularity boost didn’t last too long) and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine of 2022. The current system is clearly incapable to offer Russians any viable way forward, let alone a vision of the future.

All this means that changes will come.

Let us look in more detail at what might possibly happen.

The status quo with Putin or another figure at the helm

To begin with – obviously, there will be no political changes in Russia while Putin maintains control. During his 20+ years in power, Putin has destroyed the elite in the classical political sense – those whom commentators call “the elite” are largely totally dependent people without their own political base, who are very afraid of being persecuted by Putin and therefore unable to act independently. He has also destroyed the organized opposition, de-politicized the majority of the population and scared it to death with repressions. Putin believes that he can maintain control indefinitely and has built a complex system to defend himself against any potential plots and coups (that is a topic which deserves a separate analysis, but we omit that for now).

Regardless of what Putin thinks about his mission, goals and his role in history, it is clear that he has developed a pattern: he believes that he knows better than anyone else, that he is a unique leader of global scale that was able to weather many years and difficulties without being subjected to permanent rotations like the leaders of other countries and even other political heavyweights inside Russia (his belief in his own “uniqueness” is a factor that very significantly drives his thinking now), and it is safe to assume that he won’t change while he remains in charge.

But one way or another, Putin will be gone at some point. After that happens, there are significant reasons to believe that his followers – although initially maintaining a facade of the similar consolidated imperialistic regime – will attempt a notable turnaround in domestic and external policies. The reasons for such an assumption include the following:



- The great majority of Putin's elite are pure opportunists not bound to a particular ideology. There are notable exceptions – like National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev and maybe a few other top “ayatollahs” – but they are a minority and do not possess the means for an ultimate consolidation of power. Patrushev is 71 years old, he has neither charisma nor popular legitimacy (unlike Putin in 1999–2000), and it will be very hard for him to personally consolidate power Putin-style (after all, Putin's power consolidation was to a great extent based on public support of him as a young energetic leader). The rest of Russia's ‘elites’ do not adhere to any particular ideology or values and have been noticed for many ideological twists and turns throughout their career (which can be easily tracked). There will be no deeply entrenched motives for them to stick to Putin's ideology.
- The costs for the elite associated with a continuation of the current course will be enormous, whereas the benefits of a political turnaround are clear.
- Putin's elites are well aware of the lasting popular discontent with most of their social and economic policies. Essentially, the population is pacified only by the domination of Vladimir Putin's personal authority that was built over the course of more than 20 years. None of the newcomer rulers will have similar legitimacy and public authority to be able to promote an unpopular course and unpopular decisions.
- There is no bottom-up popular demand for an aggressive imperialistic course from Russian society. Both the aggression against Ukraine of 2014 and the all-out war against Ukraine of 2022 caught the Russian public by complete surprise; pre-aggression opinion surveys did not suggest any demand for that. Even against the background of significant popular support for Putin's war (which is also highly nuanced, but we omit this discussion here), most Russians believe that peace negotiations are the best way forward. Most opinion polls show that, however skeptical Russians are about the West, they would still predominantly prefer normalization of relations as opposed to protracted standoff.
- Maintaining mass political repressions to quell public discontent currently proves to be a costly option. It is not excluded that the new post-Putin rulers may still take that road, but since they don't have the same ideological motivation as the rulers of countries like Iran or North Korea (see above), a simple cost-benefit analysis offers tempting motives to at least seriously consider a softening of the course.

All these factors show that it will be very difficult for authoritarian post-Putin rulers to maintain his current isolationist and imperialistic course – the costs will be significant, whereas the benefits of a policy turnaround are huge. To continue Putin's aggressive course would take a set of staunch dedicated ideological figures – like the Iranian ayatollahs. But the Russian ruling elite doesn't have many such characters, as said above, it is made up mainly of purely opportunistic people, who probably want to change the policy course, but are too afraid to inflict Putin's wrath. They are no “ayatollahs” or Muslim scholars, nor were they baptized by North Korean Marxist priests. So “status quo” as such is probably the least plausible option. However, it is reasonable to assume that the ruling elite will try to preserve control over society, and to maintain a de-facto similar regime, simply removing the most aggressive policy instruments. Similar developments have happened in the Central Asian dictatorships – like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan – where the new leaders who replaced dictators Islam Karimov and Nursultan Nazarbayev have kept the old consolidated authoritarian rule in place, at best paying some lip service to “political and economic changes” and trying to persuade the West and their own populations that “enough change has taken place” and, save for cosmetic adjustments, authoritarian rule should remain in place.

The main question is whether the post-Putin authoritarian government will be able to sustain a slightly reframed Putin system after he is gone. Two major factors strongly work against this:

- On the one hand, basic popular dissatisfaction with the system is enormous. That can be seen in many polls and past electoral behavior; essentially, in the past 15 years, popular support for the Putin system and Putin personally has steadily declined, always trending towards record lows. Only extreme adventures like the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and launching an all-out war against Ukraine in 2022 were able to restore it. The Russian people deeply despise the current system and want change. It will be very hard for a post-Putin nomenklatura to maintain order without major repression; on the contrary, rulers who will initiate change will enjoy a significant boost in popularity – just like the governorship of Sergey Furgal in Khabarovsk in 2018–2020, which saw the dismantling of the political monopoly of the United Russia party and was met with universal acclaim and cheer across this Far Eastern region.
- On the other hand, it will be very difficult to contain forces demanding radical change of the system, not just cosmetic adjustments, without totalitarian repression. The opposition forces are quite popular, they are not “marginal” by any reasonable standards. When protests were still allowed, street rallies for Alexei Navalny and others were more numerous than any of the systemic political forces. When allowed on the ballot, Navalny supporters and other viable opposition candidates had easily shown ability to attain support of at least 20–30 per cent of voters, often well beyond Moscow. A key example here is the participation of Sergei Boyko, a close Navalny ally, in the mayoral elections of Novosibirsk – the biggest Russian city east of Moscow in 2019:

Boyko finished second with almost 20 per cent of the vote, only narrowly avoiding a runoff, doing better than most candidates from the “systemic” parliamentary parties. Forces demanding radical democratic change are big in Russian politics even today – for instance, the reach of Alexei Navalny’s Youtube channels in 2022 rose to above 30 million unique viewers from Russia. These forces simply won’t let political liberalization end up as cosmetic window-dressing.

Because of this, a post-Putin government will most certainly face severe pressure for real political change and will most likely be faced with the choice of either quelling this with brutal force or to succumb to it, even against its will (a “Gorbachev scenario”). It remains an open question if the new government will be willing to begin its rule with the unrestrained use of force against society while it lacks Putin’s legitimacy, but one thing is very clear: it will be extremely difficult, both in terms of resources and legitimacy, to contain bottom-up demand for liberalization without extreme brutal force. Don’t forget that Putin’s authoritarian consolidation came on the background of enormous economic growth and the accumulation of huge financial surpluses and reserves – carrots much more than sticks – something a new government will be totally lacking.

The two much more realistic scenarios are:

- “Cosmetic” liberalization getting out of control against the will of its initiators (Gorbachev scenario);
- Agreement with more radical opposition forces on peaceful transition to democracy.

In short, an immediate transition to democracy after Putin's departure seems unlikely due to the system's inertia. A more realistic scenario might be developments like in Romania after Nicolae Ceausescu's death in 1989, when the old elite essentially maintained control until the 1996 Romanian general election, or South Korea after the departure of Chun Doo-hwan in 1988, when the ruling group initially maintained power but ended up with full transition to democracy in the early 1990s.

Scenario I – Radicalization of the Regime

It is a very popular game to tickle one's nerves with assumptions that "whoever comes after Putin will be even more radical, more aggressive, more nationalist". To a significant extent, such assumptions have served as a basis for Putin's political strength – many people remained loyal to him, because they were afraid of what comes next. Here are some thoughts explaining why the radicalization of the regime after Putin is an unlikely scenario.

First,

history. After World War II, Russian politics have generally drifted towards more moderation – with Putin being the only exception so far. Stalin's death was followed by Khrushchev's thaw. Even the restoration of seemingly more conservative rule under Leonid Brezhnev was accompanied by the signing of landmark treaties – on arms control with the US, and the 1975 Helsinki accords, and characterized by stagnation (*zastoy*) – making it a much less repressive era than the 1950s and 1960s. The two attempts of restoring more hardline policies – the Andropov-Chernenko era of 1983–1984 and the August 1991 coup attempt by Communist party hardliners (both episodes probably resemble Putin's conservative restoration) both failed due to a visible lack of resources to sustain repressive policies.

The August 1991 coup is remarkable in this regard. This was a clear attempt to scrap the perestroika policy of liberalization and to sharply radicalize the regime exactly in the same way that many pundits fear a possible post-Putin scenario. The coup failed miserably, to a large extent because most actors – including most members of the elite – simply did not believe that the self-declared State Committee on the State of Emergency could sustain the troubled social and economic situation in deep international isolation, and chose not to back it (to do nothing often is a very effective way to assist regime collapse).

Essentially, the period of relative tightening 1983–1984 was followed by liberalization and perestroika for similar reasons – the Communist party rulers understood that they simply had no sufficient resources to sustain the hardline policies, while changing course offered significant benefits. The burden of protracted war in Afghanistan also played a role: it forced even hardliners like Andropov to seek a way out as early as 1982, when the then freshly elected Communist Party leader sought talks with Pakistani leader Zia-ul-Haq during Brezhnev's funeral. Gorbachev's liberalization course, which began in 1985, was not an impromptu decision but had been brewing within the ruling circles for some time.

However imperialistic some Russian political leaders may seem at this moment, they are capable of understanding the cost-benefit analysis of hardline policies vs. liberalization. The rational choice is clear. The only thing which holds back the softening of policies is Putin's personal worldview and his prejudices after nearly a quarter of a century in power. Removing this constraint will be a significant factor stimulating liberalization, not further radicalization.

Second,

there is almost no popular demand for radicalization in Russian society. Parties with radical agendas never fared well in Russian politics during the past three decades. Even the ruling United Russia party, which dominates politics, presents itself as the “moderate” alternative to others. Public support for Vladimir Putin was always based on the notion of resisting the prospects of more radical forces coming to power. Even in the current environment, with all the anti-Western public attitude, the majority of Russians would say that they prefer normalization of relations with the West over protracted confrontation – and such a majority has been solid over many years. While a majority of Russians say in the polls that they support Putin’s war against Ukraine (“special operation” in official phraseology), about 80 per cent of “supporters” use defensive, not offensive, narratives to justify their stance: either they claim that Ukraine was committing genocide against the Russian-speaking population in Donbas, or that “Ukraine’s potential NATO accession was a military threat to Russia”. Both narratives are untrue, but state propaganda was quite successful in promoting them.

Even at the height of imperialist fever in society, openly imperialist parties like Nikolai Starikov’s Fatherland or Yevgeny Fyodorov’s National Liberation Movement (known by its Russian acronym NOD) are neither visible in the polls, nor are they gathering significant grass-root support – their rallies attract no more than hundreds of people – nothing compared to the six-digit turnout at opposition rallies of recent years. Well-known imperialist pundit Alexander Dugin has tried for over 30 years to build a political party or movement, but never succeeded; his rallies never gathered more than 1,000–2,000 participants, which can be easily tracked on Youtube.

Third,

as said above, Putin’s elites are overwhelmingly opportunistic, and hardline “ayatollahs” like Security Council Secretary Patrushev are a minority. So, neither history, society nor the elites offer any serious indication that Russia is headed towards radicalization in the future.

The Russian post-imperial syndrome is greatly overvalued and bloated by pundits. Of course, it exists to some extent, but in the early 2000s, Russians were visibly happy with their position in the world, public views of the West were predominantly positive, people were busy with enjoying unprecedented economic growth and integration with the outside world. Some post-imperial resentment did exist, but arguably to a much lesser extent than in, say, post-imperial Britain or France. For until 2014 and the annexation of Crimea, restoration of empire was never a factor in public politics – even the moderate success of nationalist Rodina party at the 2003 State Duma elections, where it received 9 per cent of the vote, was largely driven by its anti-oligarchic social agenda rather than by nationalist slogans. The far-right “Russian marches”, usually held on November 4th, attracted significantly smaller crowds than pro-democracy rallies – not to mention that maybe half of all Russian nationalists are anti-imperialist and many of them have been fighting in Ukraine against Russia since 2014.

The current post-imperial sentiment is mainly due to 20 years of massive propaganda and while it has resulted in Russians being ready to repeat TV narratives, they are not likely to do anything to help “restore the empire”. Efforts to mobilize significant volunteer manpower to fight against Ukraine since 2014 failed miserably; the „partial mobilization“ announced by Putin in September 2022 was the de-facto admission that attempts to recruit large numbers of volunteers for the war had failed. When speaking about potential future radicalization of Russia,

commentators often mention the paramilitary units under the command of thugs like Yevgeny Prigozhin, the founder of the Wagner mercenary group, or Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. But these people have no weight in the Russian decision-making system; the combined manpower of their armed personnel barely exceeds 20,000, which is not nearly sufficient to seize power, because it is nothing compared to the state security apparatus.

As a matter of fact, the emergence of this type of non-government ultra-conservative paramilitary units – so-called Black Hundreds (черносотенцы) – is usually the sign of a faltering empire, when the central government feels that it is no longer capable of maintaining control without the assistance of non-state paramilitary units terrorizing the domestic population and outsiders. Both in the early 20th century and in the late 1980s, Russian paramilitary groups proved unable to save the crumbling empire. The ultranationalist Russian National Unity movement (known by its Russian acronym RNE) and its forerunner Pamyat (Memory) never managed to establish themselves as popular political forces. The conservative restoration in Russia under Putin happened as a top-down exercise pushed from the rulers, not as a grassroots bottom-up movement. To sum up – while radical forces do exist in the modern Russian political spectrum, it will be extremely hard for them to (1) get a grip on power, given limited armed personnel and lack of inclination of the society to support radicals; and (2) lead Russia towards any kind of political, social and economic success — their headwinds will be enormous, while their resources for maintaining a radical regime are very limited. Even if they somehow manage to declare themselves rulers of Russia, they will fall into an August-1991 style putsch trap – society will not believe in their success, and they will lack active support.

Scenario II – Democratic Change

Most of the analysis suggesting that lasting democratic change will be impossible in Russia is based on wrong assumptions and actually ignores basic facts on the ground.

First,

there are the references to the flawed democratic experiment of the 1990s. It is very strange to assume that if a nation was unable to build a functioning democracy after just one attempt, it will never be able to do this again. Just one attempt is obviously not enough to draw fatalistic conclusions. Moreover, on closer inspection, Russia's democratic experiment of the 1990s was not at all that unsuccessful as widely perceived by critics. By historical standards, it was relatively successful because Russia remained a partially free country for about 15 years (it was ranked "partly free" by Freedom House until 2005). Such a lasting period of democracy has never happened in modern Russian history. Russian democracy was built under extremely difficult conditions – the collapse of the Soviet economy was arguably the worst economic failure since the beginning of the industrial age, and the price of oil, Russia's main export commodity, was just \$16,70 per barrel on average during the years of Boris Yeltsin's presidency.

The current dictatorship in Russia was established as a swift and coordinated power grab on the background of strong economic growth in the early 2000s, not as a result of deliberate un-democratic choice by the Russian people. Russians have always resisted the restoration of autocracy, and the pro-democracy movement has over the past years been visibly far stronger in terms of street protest potential than all the country's other political forces. The 1990s created spaces of freedom that were never fully eliminated by Putin even after two decades of repressions. Pro-democracy politicians, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens remain in the country in



significant numbers, and their hour will come. Without the 1990s, the establishment of a significant pro-democracy movement in Putin's Russia would not have been possible. It is fundamentally wrong to make determinist conclusions about Russian society based on the difficulties of the 1990s and the subsequent imposition of authoritarianism.

Second,

from a historic standpoint, Russian society has always sought democracy, only to be quelled by brutally oppressive dictatorships. The last decades of Tsarist Russia were dominated by demands for political liberalization, for a constitution that limits the powers of monarchy, and for a transition to a parliamentary republic (brilliantly summarized by historian Orlando Figes in his book "A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution: 1891–1924"). After the monarchy fell, Russians enthusiastically elected the Constituent Assembly with a non-Bolshevik majority, only to see it forcefully quashed by the losing Bolsheviks, who subsequently established the Soviet Union on the basis of territories seized by the Red Army by force, not according to the free will of its peoples. When the Soviet system gradually moderated after Stalin's death, signs of popular demand for democratic change were obvious, from Khrushchev's thaw to Gorbachev's perestroika, ultimately culminating in the majority of Russians voting for the pro-democracy forces in 1990–1991 and accepting the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 without any meaningful protests.

Third,

from a more modern perspective, the genuine bottom-up demand for democracy from Russian society has never gone away. While the majority of Russians currently say that they do not favor Western-style democracy as a role model for their country (disclaimer: 20 years of propaganda also has something to do with this), there is considerable evidence that Russians in general are in strong favor of a much more democratic governance system than Putin's. For the past 18 years since Putin abolished direct gubernatorial elections, about two thirds of Russians consistently supported the restoration of direct popular elections of regional governors, city mayors, heads of local districts without any administrative "filters". That is a strong public rebuttal of the very foundations of the system of governance that Putin has built.

Whenever regional or local politics resulted in (rare) real electoral competition with unpredictable outcome, voter turnout in those regions greatly surged – meaning that there is a strong unsatisfied demand for competitive politics. Otherwise, with little or zero electoral competition, voter turnout at all elections plunged to historic lows in recent years – indicating that Russians do not approve of the totally administratively managed political system created by Putin.

In 2020, people all over the far eastern Khabarovsk region protested in large numbers against the dismissal and arrest of the recently elected opposition governor Sergey Furgal. Although Furgal had participated in many elections before without ever becoming a particular local hero, people in Khabarovsk voted for him in order to dismantle the dominance of Putin's United Russia party in the region. Interestingly, the mass protests in Khabarovsk displayed zero imperial and anti-Western slogans, but there was a sizable presence of pro-Belarus (where mass protests erupted at the same time) and even pro-Ukraine slogans — so much for Russians' "hopeless nationwide imperialism".



Various polls asking Russians on whether they are satisfied or not with the current political order suggest that the majority of people are deeply dissatisfied with the fact that they have no say on how political decisions are made and that they long for basic rule of law, which was totally destroyed by Putin. In other words, they want democracy.

The widespread regional protests of recent years on various topics – often about environmental issues – have shown a great ability of Russians to self-organize and defend their rights in defiance of tough pressure from the authorities. Despite brainwashing and repression, Russians have not lost their basic democratic instincts.

There are no notable political forces in Russia that advocate abolishing democracy. Some of those who do – like Starikov's Fatherland or Fyodorov's NOD – are not visible in the polls, and their rallies gather hundreds of people at best, as said above. The Kremlin pays great attention to maintain the facade of "inclusive democracy" on all levels. The ruling United Russia party holds (absolutely unnecessary) primaries just to make sure their voters don't feel like the choice was already made for them. The Communists, who openly sympathize for the totalitarian Soviet system and often run around with portraits of Stalin, are one of the most active participants of campaigns and rallies for free and fair elections and against voter fraud. Direct regional governors' elections were restored in 2012 as a result of the 2011–2012 protests and were never formally canceled again despite permanent rumors. The Putin system doesn't look like it is capable of totally dismantling the remains of democratic institutions – Putin knows that the population is not going to welcome this. People want to have their say – they're not "slaves" and "serfs" as some of the hawks in the West want to portray them.

Of course, it is a long road from having just basic democratic instincts to building a functioning democracy. Particularly given Russia's very limited experience in democratic governance, its predatory elites and hard legacy of consecutive oppressive regimes. But the material to build upon – basic demand for democracy and clear rejection of the usurpation of power – is there. It is also worth saying that, generally, the majority of future-oriented Russians – those hoping to open a business, making a career, getting better education, improving living standards for their families and children – overwhelmingly support democratic form of governance (more details can be provided). Those who are indifferent or happy with the centralized rule are quite passive politically, tend to drift along with the rulers' opinions, and are not inclined to independent behavior. In this regard, the position of the active minority can be critical to success – as was the case many times in other countries.

As was shown in the recent past, a dysfunctional state and economic difficulties tend to create a major opportunity for political change. That happened with Russia in the 1980s; the 1990s were another example, when a weak state produced yet another demand for a major reshuffling of the political system – although Putin used the public disappointment with the 1990s to strengthen authoritarian rule, something the Russian public never demanded and that was a clear overreach. But for the second time in the past 40 years, domestic turmoil produced a major change of the Russian political system.

As unlikely as it may look in today's circumstances, any shift in top power circles will immediately produce an opening within society for another democratic experiment. There is no guarantee for success; moreover, as said above, the ruling elite will contain democratic changes for as long as it can. However, several factors can make the next democratic experiment a success:

- There is significant bottom-up demand for democracy (and reconciliation with the West) from society, particularly from its active, future-oriented part.
- It takes enormous resources to contain pro-democracy aspirations in society with isolation and repression.
- There is vast experience from the 1990s democratic experiment available, which will be very helpful in avoiding more fatal mistakes, and in correcting the wrongs.

Again, success is not guaranteed, but the ground for another attempt to build functioning democracy in Russia is clearly present. Moreover, if Russia remains isolated and deprived of the chance of re-integrating with the democratic world, it will most definitely try to regroup, replenish forces, and strike the free world again.

Most likely, as mentioned above, democratic change in Russia will come in two stages, like in Romania after Ceausescu or South Korea after Chun Doo-hwan – first, the post-Putin elite will try to retain control, but afterwards, a larger pro-democracy movement will emerge, which the new government will find impossible to control.

Why Russia Won't Disintegrate like the Soviet Union

There is a lot of speculation about the possibility of a future break-up of Russia into a number of smaller independent states, similar to what happened with the Soviet Union. However, such assumptions are largely baseless for several reasons.

First, the situation is fundamentally different between the collapse of the USSR and present-day Russia. The national republics, whose demands for independence acted like a driving force for the Soviet dissolution, were dominated by their own unique non-Russian ethnicities, and most of them had experienced their own independent statehood in the past, which they simply wanted to restore (the Baltic States, Moldova and Georgia). It is a very different case in Russia, where no region has had independent statehood in the recent past – and it will be an obvious challenge to establish one.

Most of Russia's ethnic republics are dominated by the titular ethnicities in name only. For instance, in Buryatia, less than 30 per cent of the population are ethnic Buryats – the largest population group are Russians. In Yakutia, less than 50 per cent of the population are Yakuts, with Russians comprising 40 per cent. In Bashkortostan, ethnic Bashkirs only very recently have slightly overtaken Tatars to move from being the 3rd largest ethnic group to 2nd position, with slightly less than 30 per cent of the local population (Russians remain the largest ethnic group with 36 per cent); in the capital city Ufa, about half of the population are ethnic Russians, while Bashkirs make up just 17 per cent. That situation is very different from the breakaway aspirations of Soviet republics in the late 1980s.

When the emergence of independent states on the basis of Russian regions is discussed, one potential breakaway region often mentioned is Tatarstan. Indeed, in the early 1990s, Tatarstan was flirting with the idea of establishing its own statehood. However, if one travels to modern-day Tatarstan, it is very easy to see that the republic has managed to establish a significant degree of autonomy and self-governance under Russian rule – ranging from economic policy to even substantially autonomous foreign relations. The living standards in Tatarstan are



significantly higher than in neighboring regions dominated by ethnic Russians. There are simply not enough motives for Tatarstan to desperately seek independence – the republic has managed to establish contractual relations with Russia that let it enjoy a significant degree of autonomy. But should it try to break away, it will immediately learn about the difficulties of sustaining independence as a landlocked territory within Russia, totally dependent on a many times larger surrounding country for transit and logistics.

That is the key argument that is often overlooked by those speculating about a potential break-up of Russia. Most of the country's regions are landlocked and have no access to the sea (or at least to developed international marine routes – the Arctic Ocean is technically a sea, but it is a huge challenge navigating through it, there are hardly any major ports and transport routes). This will be an enormous obstacle to sustaining an independent economy. If Russia remains partly intact, it will create enormous logistical and transit difficulties for new independent economies.

If Russia completely breaks apart, without free trade and transit treaties, the situation may spiral into complete protectionist chaos. Not to mention that regional borders inside Russia were artificially drawn and are not internationally recognized (as opposed to the borders of the former Soviet republics), which may add political and conflict chaos and wrangling about which village belongs to whom. There are countless locations where a vital transport or infrastructure corridor between towns/villages of one region passes through another region; not to mention power infrastructure, where some power stations supply a number of regions without independent power generation and so forth.

In fact, there is surprisingly little detailed analysis both in the West and in Russia about the actual prospects of Russia disintegrating into independent states beyond just pure hollow speculation and lightweight comparisons to the collapse of the USSR. Actually, such lightweight speculation about “saving Russia from collapse in the late 1990s” has been a cornerstone of baseless Kremlin mythology about Putin's “unique role in Russian history”.

One of the few sober analyses in this regard is an article by US scholar Thomas Graham published in 1999 in “European Security” called “The prospect of Russian disintegration is low”. The title speaks for itself: Graham correctly argues, among other things, that the landlocked nature of most Russian regions and their lack of access to sea is the key obstacle for sustaining independence. His conclusion is that there is very little risk of separation of most regions from Russia in the future, except probably for the North Caucasus and the Kaliningrad region.

Whether this actually may happen or not, the North Caucasus and Kaliningrad comprise only about one per cent of Russia's territory, which means that even their separation can hardly be qualified as the country's “break-up and disintegration”.

Speaking about the North Caucasus, it is worth noting that generalizing the prospect of separation of local republics from Russia with just a reference to the experience of Chechnya in the 1990s is an exaggeration. The North Caucasian republics other than Chechnya have always demonstrated different attitudes to relations with Russia. That is a lengthy topic, but in general, the populations of these republics do not believe that they will be able to sustain independence without economic support from Moscow, which is why they have always been among the staunchest supporters of centralized power. Both at the Soviet Union referendum in March 1991 and in various elections that took place since, the North Caucasian republics have demonstrated



dominating solidarity with the central government in Moscow (Chechnya was the only North Caucasus republic which did not participate in the 1991 referendum).

There are various reasons for different North Caucasus republics to prefer remaining part of Russia: Ingushetia is afraid of being swallowed by Chechnya; North Ossetia is actually a predominantly Christian, non-Muslim republic; Dagestan, Karachay-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria have complex ethnic make-ups and tensions, which risks major conflicts and wars once Russia ceases to be the connecting tissue holding the multi-ethnic balance together.

Efforts to extrapolate the 1990s Chechnya breakaway attempt onto the whole Russian North Caucasus seem overblown and ignore the actual context. Despite all cultural differences with the rest of Russia, there are no viable separatist movements in these republics. Chechnya is also a very complicated case: there was significant opposition to independence in the republic before June 1993, when Dzhokhar Dudayev chose to crush those groups by force; many people in Chechnya would clearly not favor another attempt to turn the republic into a Sharia dictatorship (but that is a separate complex topic). Another important factor is that, according to the author's personal experience from traveling across various Russian territories and interviewing their residents, the regions east of the Urals are very worried about the prospect of becoming independent states, because they believe that they will not have sufficient political and economic power to counter Chinese dominance and will inevitably become vassals of Beijing. This prospect looks horrifying for residents of these regions, which is why they see remaining part of Russia as the only option. If this is taken into account, speculation about a breakaway of Russia's eastern regions seems totally implausible. There are some current trends among non-Russian ethnicities to publicly speak up against the war in Ukraine and lean towards larger self-determination and autonomy – which are good trends as far as the future goal of real federalization is concerned. None of the influential ethnic groups and NGOs, however, are seriously talking about anything beyond federalization, more autonomy and more self-governance – except few individuals who do not have broad popular support.

Conclusion

To sum up: extreme scenarios like the radicalization of the post-Putin regime, Putin's successors maintaining a similar hardline regime indefinitely and a break-up of Russia do not seem plausible. There are simply not enough political resources nor popular support to make them sustainable. A fast and successful democratization of Russia also does not appear realistic: the post-Putin elites would want to maintain their ongoing grip on power Central-Asian style, while society is too weak and scared to speak up (and even understand what they really want). But they will have a hard time and will lack the resources to maintain Putin's current course, which effectively leads to self-attrition. Once they make policy U-turns, it is realistic to expect popular discontent and demands for more significant political changes.

In this regard, it appears that the most relevant examples for comparison are post-Ceausescu Romania or post-Chun South Korea. Iran and North Korea, which are frequently mentioned, are probably not too relevant examples for two reasons:

- Iran and North Korea are extremely repressive regimes to a degree unknown in Russia since the Stalin era. As a matter of fact, North Korea was founded in 1945 by Stalin's generals, and remains the only living dinosaur of the Stalinist Jurassic Park in the modern world. Russia is very different from that. The Iranian regime faces constant mass

protests, which are harder and harder to contain every year, and with diminishing power of Russia as Iran's key supporter, it will be harder to sustain the regime further – which means that we haven't seen the end of the Iranian story yet.

- Iran and North Korea were always relatively poor countries, and never experienced such a major downshifting that Russia is experiencing now due to sanctions and the withdrawal of Western businesses. In this regard, the most relevant international example of a despotic regime cracking from the pressure of sanctions is probably not Iran or North Korea, but apartheid-era South Africa, where sanctions, despite having less economic effect than the current measures against Russia, had a strong negative psychological impact of international isolation on the minority white population that helped to accelerate change (see, for instance, "Sanctions on South Africa: What Did They Do?", Philip Levy, Yale University, 1999).

Overall, another attempt for democratic change, following some years of transitional post-Putin authoritarian limbo, appears to be the most likely scenario of Russia's evolution. But it is essential that the democratic West learns from past failures and supports Russia's next attempt for democratic change instead of snubbing it. Ignorance and isolation will only reinvigorate the most extremist imperialistic forces and demotivate those seeking democratic transition – which will make Russia persist as a dark imperialistic power. The Free World simply cannot afford that to happen.

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