

Experts' Scenarios on Russia's Future

S. Frederick Starr, ed.

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*Central Asia-Caucasus Institute
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Editorial correspondence should be addressed to the European offices of the Joint Center (preferably by e-mail.)

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Introduction

What does Russia's future hold? Of course, we don't know. For a century determinists of various persuasions claimed to be able to predict future developments. They believed that a very few key economic or social indicators *determined* humankind's future evolution. Nowadays all but the most diehard determinists accept that a broad range of factors contribute to the direction of change. We acknowledge that along with economic and social change, factors as diverse as the values and personalities of leaders, the dynamics of groups and bureaucracies, changing sources of energy, group and national psychology, and even changes in climate can all shape the future.

These and many other factors could affect the outcome of Russia's current war on the Ukraine and developments within the Russian Republic immediately thereafter.

Acknowledging that the future is indeed unknowable, it is nonetheless of great value to find out how a range of leading analysts perceive it. To which factors do they assign particular weight, and which do they downplay or ignore? Are there issues on which there exists a degree of consensus? And if there is consensus in any area, does it acknowledge the possible importance of what Donald Rumsfeld called the "unknown unknowns"?

To address these questions we asked many leading analysts and commentators to set down their views on Russia's future over the coming decade. We made a point of asking for their views on what *will* happen, and not what they believe *should* happen. This paper presents the thoughts of 25 respondents from 16 countries. Of course, the list could

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have been extended indefinitely to assure that all of the main perspectives would be represented. But *ars longa, vita brevis*. We are deeply grateful to those who found time to contribute to this compendium and acknowledge the good intentions of the many others who were not able to do so.

Some readers may find in these pages convincing answers to their questions about Russia's immediate future. Others may reject them all, while yet others—and these are our target audience—may be so inspired or infuriated by what they find in this collection as to lead them to pen their own prognostications.

Hiroyuki Akita

Nikkei Commentator on Foreign Affairs and International Security

Under economic sanctions from Western nations, Russia is deepening its diplomatic and economic reliance on China. While China is not yet seen as committing to providing lethal weaponry to Russia, it has initiated the supply of drones and military components. If this trend persists, Russia is inevitably headed towards becoming, in essence, a "satellite state" of China. In terms of national strength, Russia already stands as a junior partner to China, with a GDP and population merely constituting one-tenth of China's. Russia's GDP is smaller than that of South Korea and roughly on par with Australia's (with Australia having less than one-fifth of Russia's population).

The scenario of Russia falling into a subservient relationship with China is far from ideal for the global community. Russia could evolve into a more belligerent actor, heightening the risk of provocations against Western nations. Picture Russia as a formidable bear—unable to sustain itself and harboring uncertainties, such a giant bear is perilous. It remains in a perpetual state of vigilance, easily provoked, and prone to outbursts over minor stimuli.

This portrayal of Russia bears a resemblance to a "giant North Korea," facing global sanctions, deep economic dependence on China, and, despite such dependence, carrying persistent anxieties and irritations. While North Korea clings to nuclear weapons for its survival, the potential "North Koreanization" of Russia, possessing a significantly larger nuclear arsenal and superior technology, could have far-reaching consequences. Three negative scenarios come to mind.

The first scenario involves Russia assuming a complementary role in China's anti-American strategy. In exchange for economic support from China, the Kremlin may urge Russia to take actions aligning with China's interests in diplomacy and behavior, such as in the Taiwan issue. If a U.S.-China conflict were to unfold in the Taiwan Strait, China might seek some form of military support from Russia. While direct military intervention in the Taiwan Strait by Russia seems unlikely, Russia could disrupt the U.S. military in other ways, such as conducting large-scale military exercises in Asia if a crisis arises in the Taiwan Strait.

China may also seek deeper cooperation with Russia in geopolitical strategy, destabilizing the Quad (the United States, Japan, India, Australia) aimed at encircling China. This could involve warning Russia to halt the supply of military components to India, thereby increasing pressure on India.

The second scenario involves Russia's backyard in Central Asia and the Caucasus gradually being assimilated into China's sphere of influence. While China has been strengthening its economic influence in Central Asia, political and security cooperation has been approached cautiously due to considerations for Russia. However, if Russia becomes a subordinate state, China may unreservedly extend its influence into Central Asia, as evidenced by the meeting of Chinese and Central Asian leaders in late May 2023. This move signifies China's attempt to encircle Central Asia not only economically but also diplomatically and politically. China, no longer showing deference to the Kremlin, is likely to accelerate its influence in the Caucasus and Afghanistan as well.

If this trend persists, the geopolitical impact would be significant. Central Asia and Afghanistan, known as the Heartland, are strategic points in the Eurasian continent. In the early 20th century, this region was a

battleground for supremacy between the British and Russian empires. If China dominates the Heartland, it could potentially gain hegemony over the entire Eurasian continent.

The third is a longer-term scenario. This involves Russia becoming increasingly intolerant of being a subordinate state and strengthening its resistance against China, resembling a reverse version of the strained Sino-Soviet relations in the 1960s. Even in its weakened state, Russia, as a major power, holds strong pride. While it may tolerate being a subordinate state to China in the short term, it could become difficult in the medium to long term. As long as the Putin regime continues, Russia is unlikely to abandon its pro-China stance. However, if new leaders emerge in the future, they may explore strategies to distance themselves from China.

If Russia eventually distances itself from China, the honeymoon period in Sino-Russian relations is likely to shrink. Increased caution toward China in the Kremlin and among the Russian populace could lead to attempts to improve relations with Western countries.

While the cessation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine would be a prerequisite for a rapprochement with Western countries, it is not an impossible scenario in the future. In such a case, Sino-Russian relations would deteriorate, and tension along the Sino-Russian border would increase. This would force China to devote more energy not only to the Pacific but also to securing the safety of its northern border. For Asian countries and the United States exposed to the threat of the Chinese military in the Indo-Pacific, this could be seen as positive news.

Emiliano Alessandri

Associate Fellow, Globsec

Predicting Russia's future has proved to be an elusive quest for European and American policy makers. Whilst US containment policy during the Cold War era was predicated upon George Kennan's correct foresight that the USSR contained the seeds of its own demise, Sovietologists generally failed to anticipate the fall of the Soviet Union – a development that continued to look unfeasible even as the Berlin Wall came down in 1989.

And after the Soviet Union disintegrated, misplaced expectations guided transatlantic policy, the new conventional wisdom holding that post-communist Russia would increasingly align – interest- but also value-wise – with the West, the end of the bipolar era leading to one security community from Vancouver to Vladivostok and to a more democratic Russia. This vision progressively crumbled as, from the 2000s, President Putin linked the restoration of law and order at home to the reassertion of the Russian national interest abroad, a strategy that has deplorably combined revanchism with the revival of Russian imperialism.

Against this cautionary backdrop, 'imagining' rather than predicting Russia's future offers perhaps a wiser approach. And one way to start imagining Russia's future a decade from now is to contrast Moscow's vision of Russian greatness with the sobering realities ensuing the system-changing 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The latter marked a watershed moment in European and global modern history which President Putin infused with highly symbolic connotations, not just in terms of Ukraine's alleged importance to Russia's own identity but also when it comes to presenting the war as the frontline of a broader conflict – political,

economic, but also “civilizational” – between the East and the “collective West”.

If Putin’s double objective was to terminate Ukraine’s existence as an independent and sovereign nation in order to reassert Moscow’s hegemony over the Russian-speaking space while ushering a global realignment away from US dominance, the ill-executed military intervention has undermined the first goal irremediably. Irrespective of the exact military outcome, Russia has already ‘lost’ Ukraine, first and foremost at precisely the existential level Putin had invoked in his now [\(in\)famous 2021 essay](#) on the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians. The war has boosted a process which is questionably dubbed as “nation building” but is rather of national emancipation.

When it comes to the second goal, early predictions that Russia would be rapidly downgraded to a European version of North Korea have proved off the mark. Two years of war have weakened, but not isolated, Russia. [Much has been written](#) about Moscow successfully maintaining – and sometimes even strengthening – relationships with key actors in the Global South.

Yet, even when it comes to external relations, the picture points to growing challenges. Russia’s influence has been more seriously damaged as one moves closer to the core of the concentric circles around which the Kremlin has laid out its [foreign policy “concept.”](#) With its display of indiscriminate violence but disappointing show of military strength, the war has acted both as a warning and reality check for Moscow’s partners in the Commonwealth of Independent States, bringing Belarus into a *de facto* union but leading erstwhile close allies such as Kazakhstan to take some distance.

The war has also forced an unwanted prioritization in Moscow’s relations with its neighbors, Armenians being effectively abandoned as the Kremlin

failed to, or decided not to, play a major active role in the latest and decisive Nagorno-Karabakh crisis.

War-related reverberations are felt within the Russian Federation itself. If it is true that the Russian economy has not collapsed under unprecedented international sanctions, long-standing weaknesses – lack of diversification and sluggish innovation – are set to be aggravated by the process of decoupling from transatlantic markets. While in terms of sheer trade volumes, China is well placed to replace Europe and the West, Russia's technological decline will accelerate over the coming years, further undermining its position in global value chains.

The costly war, moreover, is exacerbating the need to compensate those affected by adverse economic conditions – a process that is giving the Russian authorities even more control over the Russian economy while at the same time making state finances more strained, even at a time of historically high energy prices. It is no secret that some ethnic groups have borne the brunt of the war effort. The management of inter-ethnic tensions may become increasingly challenging as a result.

Meanwhile, worrying societal trends are widely expected to continue, from poverty levels to declining life expectancy, reflecting a society that has not bounced back from the post-Soviet trauma. These problems are likely going to be intensified by a burgeoning Russian diaspora, a diverse but sizable group of Russian citizens which is depriving an already stagnant workforce of much needed talent.

Many of the dissenting political voices are also based outside of Russia due to the new levels reached by internal repression. In recent months, there have been efforts to gather around a vision of a non-imperialistic and democratic Russia. However, even if – based on solid historical precedent – the outcome of military failure was to be political change, it is hard to

envise the emergence of a strong Russian civil society any time soon. This would require a radical transformation in the social contract rather than a leadership change only. It is a distinct possibility that ten years from now Russia could be headed by an equally or more autocratic ruler, especially if an increasingly costly war were to threaten the unity of the Russian Federation itself.

Even as the West faces internal challenges and a cluster of international crises, global realignment may not necessarily end up serving Russia well. Already a junior partner of China, a decade from now Moscow could be forced into suboptimal international relationships exactly at a time when centrifugal tendencies may gain traction in its own space. From a transatlantic perspective, preventing the unorderly disintegration of the post-Soviet space becomes therefore as critical as preserving a free and independent Ukraine.

Anders Åslund

Senior fellow at the Stockholm Free World Forum and Adjunct Professor, Georgetown University

Russia's current trajectory is unsustainable. Vladimir Putin's hard dictatorship impedes any development. The economy has stagnated since he started his first war on Ukraine in 2014 and no modernization is possible. Also, the population is stagnating and Russia's best and brightest flee. This dreary situation is reminiscent of the 1980s, but an unsustainable situation can last for a long time.

For the future decade, three alternative scenarios appear plausible. One is the Brezhnev scenario: Stagnation continues, and little happens. The second scenario is disorder and internal strife. The third scenario is collapse of the Putin dictatorship and a transition to freedom.

The two obvious drivers of Russia's trajectory are political leadership and the war in Ukraine. No man can live forever, and Putin's strange behavior and extreme isolation suggest serious health problems, which can result in his sudden death, but the timing is hardly predictable.

The other driver is the war in Ukraine. Russia appears to be either losing the war or getting stuck in a stalemate. But when does it become perceived in Russia that its war in Ukraine has been a failure? For Putin, a bad war is better than a bad peace, so he has strong reasons to maintain the war for as long as he can.

Putin faces three important restrictions. First, he does not want to opt for an all-out war being worried about popular reaction against full mobilization. Second, the Western financial sanctions limit the amount of

money he can spend on the war. Presuming that all the classified budget expenditures are being directed to the military, Russia will spend 10 percent of GDP on the war in 2024 and can hardly go higher, while Ukraine devotes 22 percent of its 2024 GDP on the war. Third, the Western technology sanctions render Russia increasingly technologically backward.

Russia and the Soviet Union suffered four important war defeats, the Crimean War 1853-56, the Russo-Japanese War 1904-5, World War I 1914-18, and the war in Afghanistan 1979-88. Each of these wars resulted in domestic convulsions and liberalization. Russians can take large long-lasting losses, but eventually something breaks. The Soviet Union claimed to have lost 15,000 soldiers killed in Afghanistan during nine years, but it has lost at least ten times as many in Ukraine. Something is likely to also break this time, so the proverbial hardliners in the wings are not to be feared. They are few and exist only because of Putin. When infamous hardline war criminal Igor Girkin was arrested, only a score of people protested.

Some plausible drivers are strangely missing. The potential for domestic unrest appears limited at present and for the foreseeable future. The opposition is either jailed or has fled the country. It is impossible to organize any political opposition given Russia's effective repression. The remaining threat is sudden disruption, as the Evgeny Prigozhin march on Moscow in June 2023 or the anti-Semitic riot in Dagestan. The average dollar wage has halved since 2013, but no popular unrest has ensued. Russia has some ethnic minorities, but they are primarily located in Northern Caucasus and seem to have no broader implications.

Looking a decade ahead, Putin is unlikely to remain in power, either suffering from some health calamity or losing power because of his disastrous war in Ukraine. Therefore, the Brezhnev scenario seems implausible, while it reigns for the time being.

The second scenario of disorder and internal strife appears more likely. It would reflect what happened after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953. Currently, Russia is ruled by the Security Council of thirteen members. Its Secretary Nikolai Patrushev is one year older than Putin and an even more extreme nationalist. His ambitious son Dmitri is minister of agriculture. If Putin were to die, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin would be the interim president, according to the Constitution, but he keeps a low profile and carefully avoids talking about the war. A third force is the brothers Yuri and Mikhail Kovalchuk, who are possibly the closest to Putin and also extreme nationalists, but without official positions. These characters may fight it out for a long time under the carpet.

The third scenario is the August 1991 scenario: A group of obsolete characters claim to have seized power, but lacking legitimacy and authority they just lose out. A road to democracy opens up. Then it is vital to kick out the whole old establishment and abolish the old security organs, as was not done in 1991. In the longer term, this appears the most probable scenario, for which the Russian opposition abroad needs to prepare.

Pavel K. Baev

Nonresident Senior Fellow- Foreign Policy, Center on the United States and Europe, Brookings Institution

The long war with Ukraine has delivered Russia to such dark dead-end that it takes a flight of analytical imagination to chart a way out. Extrapolating the 2022-2023 trajectory is hardly a useful exercise because it leads only to progressive deterioration and degradation with diminishing sustainability. The point of departure for a set of different trajectories is clear: the end of the reign of Vladimir Putin. The Russian autocrat has made himself the core of the war problem, and without removing this core, beginning a solution is not possible.

The technicalities of this removal cannot be elaborated upon, but two historical analogies are informative: the peaceful revolution of February 1917, which ended the reign of Tsar Nicholas II, and the death of Josef Stalin in March 1953, leading to a squabble for power among his courtiers. What is significant about the first one is that the Provisional Government failed to find a way out of the disaster of WWI and was terminated by the Bolshevik coup. The second one tells us that even without a regime change, the domestic and foreign policy course can be significantly altered.

What is striking about the political regime that Putin has built since 2000 is that its corrupt bureaucratic nature is incompatible with waging a protracted conventional war. Rent distribution used to be the prime modus operandi of this maturing autocracy, and presently, the imperative to channel the bulk of petro-revenues to military needs leaves many elite groups dispossessed and discontent. The allocation of vast budget resources to the degraded defense-industrial complex cannot make it

efficient or profitable, while the crucially important oil-and-gas industry suffers from sustained under-investment.

The profiteering regime cannot reinvent itself as war machine, and the widespread propensity to pretend that life continues “as normal” indicates that society is ready to embrace an end of the allegedly “existential” war. For the majority of polity, the only outline of desirable future is a return to the status quo ante February 2022, which to all practical intents and purposes is entirely unattainable. The path from a post-Putin to a post-war Russia is certain to be rocky and treacherous, while the pathfinders are certain to be familiar characters from the government and the security services, who would orchestrate retirement (in the broad sense of the word) of the ageing sycophants from Putin’s entourage.

Bargaining will be their preferred strategy, and the initial offer of ceasefire can be accompanied not only by symbolic gestures, like reopening of the “grain corridor”, but also by substantial compromises, like returning the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant under Ukrainian control. For any group of Russian powerholders, the key counterpart in this bargaining can only be the USA, and the main objective will be the relaxation of specific sanctions, including personal. Ukraine may be disappointed in the slow progress of Russian withdrawal and upset by exclusion from the bargaining. For the US-led coalition, the task of keeping the controversial peace process on track and preventing a new eruption of hostilities will require inventive diplomacy and sustained investments into rebuilding Ukraine.

A no less difficult task is set to be prevention of a breakdown of governance in Russia caused by the diminished legitimacy of the post-Putin leadership and resentment in the traumatized society against the sequence of retreats and concessions. The release of opponents of war and

prominent liberals from imprisonment and the return of some exiles will add to radicalization of domestic political arena. The government will have significant financial resources at its disposal, but the eroded monopoly on violence caused by the growth of various quasi-private military enterprises involves a high risk of violent turmoil.

External impacts can cause significant shifts in Russia's domestic political transformation, and one of the strongest could come from Belarus, where the dictatorial regime is set to be weakened by Putin's departure. Poland and the Baltic states will provide support for a new democratic revolution in Belarus, and this engagement is certain to be perceived in Moscow as a major infringement of Russia's interests. More impact could come from the Caucasus, where Chechnya has capacity for projecting military power in the neighborhood, while Georgia will explore opportunities for restoring its territorial integrity.

The war with Ukraine has shaken Russian polity and the forthcoming defeat is certain to deform key state institutions further. It has not, against many assumptions, produced a "pivot to China"; to the contrary, the extraordinary concentration of efforts and resources on waging the war has forged a volume of new connections to the West. The intensity of confrontation means that Russia's future will be profoundly influenced and perhaps even determined by the post-war evolution of its relations with Europe and the USA. Western policymakers will therefore have a greater capacity for making a difference in the outcome of Russia's struggle with its deeply rooted problems than is commonly assumed.

Iulian Chifu

Advisor to the Prime Minister of Romania for Foreign Relations, Security and Strategic Affairs, Founder of the Center for Conflict Prevention and Early Warning

Predictions or alternative scenarios are present alternative realities. I usually avoid predictions due to the high level of risk and uncertainty related to either unknown factors or impact of social or individual non-rational actions. But prospective studies are my field of expertise, and it comes with avoiding strategic surprise and covering as much as possible scenarios, including those with low probability but high impact, the ones often called “black swan scenarios.”

Discussing evolution in Russia following Russia’s war of aggression creates a number of variables: is it going to be a Russia without Putin or with Putin? How about *putinism*, the system that Putin created based on rivalries and groupings of the new type of boyars allowed to manage and exploit certain type of resources in the name of the state, paying benefits to the group of putinists around the President and an economy based on energy state giants exploited by *siloviki* at the same profiting the group and Putin himself. A balance maintained by the president that manages differences, spreads allowances, and distributes resources in exchange for full obedience and a clear revenue for his own benefit, under different forms.

Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, transformed into a war of attrition, a long-term, high intensity, large scale war, was a mistake. A mistake that emerged from bad intelligence and from decisions based on wishful thinking rather than pure and straight intelligence that Russia

does have. A combination of corruption, pride, dis-consideration of Ukraine and the Ukrainians, as well as of the actor-president that they chose. But after the first days and the obvious fact that the victory in a type of *blitzkrieg* will never occur, sufficiency and pride also played in the hands of the faith and Putin's Russia could not backtrack into any form of deal or peace. It went on even though that represented the failure and misery of Russia and the Russians for decades to come.

This actually links Putin to the war. It has been said that he directs the battle and imposes strategies and movements from his office or even his bunker, above all recommendations and advice from his military team. Maybe it is true, maybe in some moments the political decisions were above the reality on the ground and the possibilities of the Russian army. The fact is that I don't think that Putin could survive the war. But putinism will, and for the following reasons:

First, I think that at the end of the war, Putin will disappear from the first line of power in a desperate attempt to find those responsible and to feed the Russian people's expectations for change. How will change happen? One should not expect any explosion of public unrest or revolution, except if such a step happens with the support of the leading group around Putin and as a part of a coup. If Putin does not die of natural causes or is killed, the most probable outcome is that he will be replaced and sent on a pension and under the strict control of the new/old rulers, as happened with Khrushchev. In any case, in the period following the war a group of putinists will get rid of Putin. But putinism is a tough heritage that will last for some time.

So, I believe that after Putin, the most probable evolution will be that of maintaining putinism. Without the legitimacy and supreme power of Putin himself. We will have continuity without credibility, trust, or popular support because the new leader will not be Putin but will still be linked to Putin's system of power. Putinism will survive due to several

reasons. The most important one is the need for survival of Putin's elite and inner circle. This will produce more adaptation than transformation. The newcomers from the old elite of putinists of post-putinists will bring no transformative perspectives and will remain under the influence of the former regime. This too, will help putinism to survive.

Is putinism without Putin really possible? Especially without a skilled strategist around, it will be difficult to ensure the survival of the system. It could lead to adjustments that turn out like Gorbachev's application of Andropov's doctrines of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, which brought about the fall of the Soviet Union.

Another very clear argument for continuity and persistence of putinism is Putin's reign of more than twenty-four years. Like in the case of communism, putinism has created a strong and resilient footprint in Russian society that will need generations to be forgotten.

So, I think we will have 5-7 years of the survival of putinism and transformation of Russia's system of power by renovating it. I foresee stagnation more than reform, because of the impossibility of reforming a system linked to a personality without that personality alive and leading the way.

After this phase of transition with stagnation and without reform, we will see an accumulation of tensions and the emergence of the new elites, who will rise because of the putinists' weaknesses and failed effort to maintain power. But the putinists will refuse to grant a newcomer the power to make reforms and control the future. As a result, one can expect evolution, not revolution. However, larger developments on the world stage will have a massive impact on this elite.

Grievances and financial costs will mount. Culture will play a role as Russia's many regions demand autonomy, even separatism. Seeking their own way forward, charismatic leaders will arise. The rise of post-putinism will probably be chaotic, non-linear, improvisational, and "ad hoc." If such changes begin during the present war, Putin's successor will need to continue the war in order to gain legitimacy in his rule.

The evolution following these transitional phases will depend on how much of the old networks of power survives Putin and whether there is anyone who offers an alternative. Most probably we will see chaos based on the old reflexes of putinism, but without a strong man in the chair. The principles of power have to be reinvented. Nationalism will prove an attractive way forward, but this will push Russia towards the breaking point. Models of development will play their role, especially if the world moves towards a polarity of the US versus China, democracy versus autocracy, market economies versus centralized state-managed ones.

It will be extremely difficult to reassert order following the putinist phase. It will likely lead to a combination of free market economics and state power based on the *siloviki* who continue to run the big energy companies. However, if this further transition occurs more than a decade from now, new forms of energy will produce more and more problems for Russia. With oil and gas less valued by the global market, a technologically poor Russia will have little with which to face the developed world. However, the return of Russians who are now in the diaspora could play a positive role, although they will be preceded by a wave of adventurers.

Luke Coffey

Senior Fellow at Hudson Institute

The Soviet Union did not collapse in 1991. Of course, the Soviet Union ceased to exist as a legal entity after 1991, but the collapse of the USSR is still happening today. A quick examination of the region proves this. The two Chechen Wars, the ongoing Russian military presence in Moldova's Transnistria region, Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and subsequent occupation, Russia's annexation of Crimea and war in the Donbas in 2014, the on-and-off border skirmishes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh, are just a few examples showing that the dust has not settled.

History has the ability to condense time, so when historians 200 years from now write about the *era* that was the collapse of the Soviet Union, these aforementioned events, among others, will be seen as part of the process of a collapse that will be measured in years, if not even decades.

However, future historians will likely describe Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine as the most consequential moment of the Soviet Union's collapse. When the war in Ukraine will end is unknown. Russia has undeniably suffered a major blow to its economy, devastation to its military capability, and degradation of its influence in regions where it once had clout. If there is a Russian military defeat in Ukraine, the geopolitical consequences will be severe. The borders of the Russian Federation will likely not look the same on a map in 10 or 20 years as they do now. As the ongoing collapse of the Soviet Union plays out, policymakers need to start planning for the new geopolitical reality across Europe and Asia.

Planning for such an outcome is not straight forward. Policy experts and intelligence analysts are not fortune tellers. It is impossible to predict exactly how Russia and the broader region will emerge after the final collapse of the Soviet Union. However, it is prudent to make some baseline planning assumptions on which future policy can be planned and formulated. Failing to do this would amount to geopolitical negligence on the part of decision makers. When thinking about what a Russia might look like in the coming decades, there are six assumptions that can be made to help prepare policymakers.

Firstly, Russia will further fragment. The dissolution of the Russian Federation, whether *de facto* or *de jure*, could shatter Russia geopolitically. This further fragmentation will likely not be as straightforward or “clean cut” as the emergence of the 15 new states after the legal dissolution of the USSR in 1991. Policymakers should assume that further fragmentation of Russia will be more like Chechnya in 1994 (brutal conflict) than Estonia in 1991(peaceful and straightforward).

Secondly, certain Russian regions will have a significant population of unemployed combat veterans, and this could influence ensuing power struggles. A sizeable number of Russia’s soldiers in Ukraine are from just a few regions of the Russian Federation. Tens of thousands of young men from ethnic minorities will have combat experience from Ukraine and will return to their home regions with little economic or social future. Many of these regions have been prone to independence movements and insurgency in the past. This could make internal conflict more likely.

Thirdly, China and Turkey will try to fill the power vacuum across the region. Russia’s war in Ukraine has already led to a decrease in influence in the Eurasian region. After witnessing the devastating military blow Ukraine has delivered to the Russian armed forces, the states of the former Soviet Union are feeling more confident to act in ways that are less geopolitically aligned with Moscow. Before February 2022, this would

have been unthinkable. China and Turkey will compete for influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus where Moscow has traditionally had a lot of clout. Competition may occur in the Russian Far East too. It is up to Western policymakers to formulate a strategy to deal with this pending reality.

Fourthly, there will be a proliferation in the number of “private armies” (e.g., Wagner Group) or sub-national armed groups (e.g., the Chechen 141st Special Motorized Regiment, commonly referred to as Kadyrovites) if the Russian state collapses. These groups and their leaders will become important powerbrokers in a post-Putin Russia—especially in a society that will have tens of thousands of veterans from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The antics of the Wagner Group in June 2023, when it took over the headquarters of Russia’s Southern Military District and then started its march to Moscow, was just a small taste of what could come.

Fifthly, in the immediate aftermath of President Putin’s regime, whoever replaces him will be just as nationalistic and authoritarian. The US and its partners should learn the failed lessons of the 1990s and not waste resources trying to transform Russian society, economy, or government into a Western-style democracy. Attempts failed in the 1990s and would likely fail again. Policymakers should instead humbly acknowledge the limits of Western influence to create a democratized Russia. Western policymakers should stop hoping for a “moderate” Russian leader who wants peace with his neighbors and reforms at home.

Finally, Russia will be back. Regardless of how bad Russia’s defeat in Ukraine might be, and regardless of how degraded the Russian economy and military will become as a result, Moscow will never abandon its imperial designs, especially on eastern Europe. After the end of the Cold War, many policymakers hoped for a so-called “peace dividend” in

Europe. Based on this hope, multiple administrations reduced military spending and decreased America's force posture in Europe. But the peace dividend never materialized, and the US and its allies were underprepared for Russia's aggression in recent years. America should not make the same mistake now.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has changed the security situation in the North Atlantic region in a way not seen since World War II. The Eurasian landmass will not fully feel the consequences of Russia's invasion, especially if Ukraine is victorious, for years. Policymakers need to recognize the historical magnitude of the situation and start preparing accordingly.

Paul Goble

Former Special Advisor to the Secretary of State; Former Senior Advisor to the Director, Voice of America

Ever more people around the world recognize that the Russian Federation is on its way to the dustbin of history, but most of them assume that the coming disintegration of that country will resemble what happened in 1991. While there are some elements likely to be in common with the events of 30 years ago, the future disintegration of the Russian Federation almost certainly will not be like the quick and easy divorce of 1991 but resemble instead the vastly more complicated, difficult, and in part, quickly reversed results of the events of 1918 when Russia earlier fell apart along ethnic and regional lines only to have much of its territory reunited under Moscow's yoke because of divisions among its opponents and the facility with which the Bolsheviks exploited them.

Understanding why the events looming on the horizon are going to be fundamentally different than those of 1991 and fundamentally similar to those of 1918 is critical not only for the peoples involved and the strategies they should adopt but also, and perhaps especially important for, other governments who are again going to face a greater challenge than three decades ago. One that they need to meet in radically different ways, lest the gains of disintegration be lost by a reintegration made possible by the outsiders doing just enough to contribute to the rise of a new kind of patriotism, but not enough to achieve what the outsiders in fact hoped for then or now.

Obviously, these differences between now and 1991, the similarities between the present situation and 1918, and the consequences for both

those immediately involved and those who want to help them are numerous and ramified and far too large to cover in a single comment. But there are at least five major reasons in each case that merit mention and that serve as a warning against fighting the wrong war – as all too often happens with politicians as well as with generals.

Among the reasons that 2024 will not be like 1991, the following five are especially important:

- First, in 1991, almost everyone knew what the prospects were as far as the numbers of countries that would emerge from the disintegration of the USSR and what their borders would be. Now, no one has any idea how many states will arise from the demise of the Russian Federation, with numbers running from one – the Kremlin's preference – to more than a 100.
- Second, ethnicity is not going to be overwhelmingly primary factor in the future that it was in 1991. Regions and sub-ethnic groups are going to play far larger roles.
- Third, at least in principle, the disintegration of the USSR took place according to the Soviet constitution. The future disintegration of the Russian Federation will not have that advantage – or alternatively that constraint.
- Fourth, in 1991, Russia had a leader committed not to using massive force to preserve the status quo. Gorbachev was not prepared to drown opposition in blood. Does anyone think that Putin is the same?
- And fifth, and perhaps most important, in 1991, the non-Russians had an ally in Boris Yeltsin who was prepared to have the non-Russian republics leave for the Russian Federation to be on its own. Obviously, there are some Russians who think the same way now; but there is absolutely no one in a position of power in Moscow who does.

Among the reasons that 2024 will resemble in some critical ways 1918, the following five are especially important:

- First, in 1918, the Russian state had disintegrated and various groups small and large sought a place in the sun, but the two most important forces were those who wanted a single country either like the past or a new one.
- Second, regional identities in 1918 were far more important in much of the country than ethnic ones.
- Third, like in 1918, Moscow remains committed to recapturing the entire periphery; and outsiders, including the West are divided between those who favored a weak but single state and those who feared a strong state that had gotten rid of what for many was ballast.
- Fourth, because outsiders were divided, they collectively did just enough to tar those Moscow opposed and to open the way for a Red patriotism that ultimately allowed Moscow to defeat most but not all of those who sought to form their own countries.
- And fifth, the diversity of the structures first created from below and then destroyed by Moscow's reoccupation was so daunting that many outsiders viewed the restoration of order as more useful than it was, failing to see that the restoration set the stage for repression and imperial revenge.

And among the reasons that those outsiders who want to help the peoples of northern Eurasia achieve freedom, peace and democracy need to recognize, the following five are especially important:

- First, the West needs to recognize its mistake in 1991 when it proclaimed just about everyone a democrat and assumed

privatization of the economy would solve everything, including weaning leaders from aggressive and repressive tendencies.

- Second, for all the problems that disintegration of the Russian Federation will inevitably involve, if the goal is to eliminate repression and imperial revanchism, that is the only way forward in the case of many areas.
- Third, the West, as well as the non-Russians and many regionalists, must recognize that there will be some Russian state left at the end of the decolonizing and de-imperializing effort. That state must be a democracy and a federation. Otherwise, it will be a threat.
- Fourth, the West must recognize that its role will have to be far larger than it has ever been in the past and far more invasive, as far as many in Russia will view it. Managing that will not be easy; but failing to do so will only postpone problems rather than prevent their reemergence.
- And fifth, the West must promote cooperation amongst Russians and non-Russians rather than assuming that this is impossible. If that doesn't happen, then there is a very real danger that 2024 will end not as 1991 but as 1918 – and that will be a tragedy for everyone.

(Note: *An earlier version of these reflections was prepared for presentation at the Sixth Forum of Free Peoples of PostRussia, Washington, D.C., in April 2023. A Russian-language translation of those remarks is available at [region.expert/1918-1991/](#).*)

Fariz Ismailzade

*Director, Institute for Development and Diplomacy at ADA University,
Baku, Azerbaijan.*

Our region is going through tectonic changes. First, we saw the liberation war of Azerbaijan over its occupied territories in Karabakh. These internationally recognized lands of Azerbaijan were occupied by Armenia for more than 30 years. The war resulted in Russian peacekeepers entering Azerbaijani sovereign lands. Then began the Russian-Ukrainian war or, as some people call it, “all-European war.” And now we see drastic escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

By some estimates, these escalations are all harbingers of a possible World War III, where the deep interests of the West and the East collide.

We in Azerbaijan follow these developments with great concern, especially the military activities on the Russian-Ukrainian front. Some pundits believe that the end result of the Russian-Ukrainian war will have severe implications not only for Ukraine and other former Soviet republics (as well as states of the Eastern and Central Europe), but also for Russia itself.

Russia's stability and predictability, as well as democratic development are important for the entire region. We saw instability during the 1990s with the rise of crime inside and outside of Russia, but also the rise and rapid spread of separatist movements in the Northern Caucasus. There also occurred the rise of radicalism, terrorism, trafficking in illegal arms, and general chaos along Russia's borders and on its periphery. These developments posed serious dangers for the nations of the South Caucasus and should not be repeated. Moreover, an unstable Russia today presents

the risk of nuclear war and the misuse of a nuclear arsenal, including its illegal sale, transportation, and transfer to criminal groups.

Many in Russia like to state that their country is fighting with NATO, not with Ukraine. Indeed, NATO members are helping Ukraine, and if this military assistance is reduced Russian forces might advance further and more successfully on the battlefield. This raises both the issue of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty and of the assertiveness of Russia's diplomatic and military powers in the so-called "near abroad."

At the same time, a Russian success in Ukraine might create similar scenarios in other states of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, which could occur through direct military action by Russia or through various proxy groups and ethnic separatists.

Finally, either the success or failure of Russia's military adventure in Ukraine could create new rival forces within Russia itself, with each such force trying to capture power by the use of their various ideologies, foreign and security policies, military capabilities, and views on the future development of democracy and civil society in the country.

Russia has for the moment survived the shock of western sanctions and has been able to reorient its economy towards other export markets as well as develop import-substitution through local production. However, the sanctions have hurt the long terms perspectives of Russia to develop innovative technologies, conduct scientific research, and engage in further oil/gas explorational works. Russia has also experienced a severe outflow of human and financial capital.

At the same time, Russia's financial reserves helped the government to stabilize the economy, seek new partners in the Middle East and Far East, and develop new supply-chains. Many nearby countries help Russia avoid sanctions, thus diminishing the effect of Western sanctions, at least in the short-term.

The world has changed since the Cold War, and the rise of China, India, and the Middle East has given Russia a chance to reorient its oil and gas export routes and seek financial gains as world energy prices continued to rise. Thus, the West's initial hope of bringing Russia to its knees did not materialize.

Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus generally present an interesting connectivity opportunity for Russia to connect its railway system with those of Turkey, Iran, and the broader Middle East, as well as Pakistan, India and other countries of Southeast Asia. It is not a coincidence that Russian officials are pushing to open the Zangezur corridor via Azerbaijan and Armenia as well as for the new railway connection between Azerbaijan and Iran. This would open new transportation routes for Russian companies to enter Southern and Eastern markets in the Eurasian landmass.

It is most likely that the Ukraine war will be frozen, and the world, again, will be entering a new cold war period, with Russia aligning itself with the broader Orient, e.g. China, India, Iran, Turkey, thus creating a power alternative to the West. In such a scenario the South Caucasus will serve as a connectivity platform for the new geopolitical alliances. One should not expect Russia to democratize and enter Euro-Atlantic community due to its deep-rooted fear and antagonism towards the West.

Michael Kimmage

Professor of History at the Catholic University of America, Non-resident Senior Associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies

Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022 will prove the single most important act of his presidency. It will leave a deep mark on Russia, dictating two separate outcomes, both of which, should they come to pass, will be intended on the part of President Putin. The first is a permanent state of confrontation with Ukraine and with the West. The second is that whichever leader succeeds Putin will be supportive of the Russian war effort, which Russia will be strong enough to sustain but not strong enough to terminate on Russian terms.

Russia has pinned itself to a long war in Ukraine. The war has further encouraged a westward move on Ukraine's part, and it has built the hope – in the West – that Ukraine will one day belong to both the NATO alliance and to the European Union. The integration of Ukraine into the “institutional West” would be a difficult development for any Russian leader to accept. It would entail the end of any meaningful role for Russia in Europe's security architecture, except on the margins of Europe: in the Balkans, in Moldova, in Belarus and in the South Caucasus. Even if Russia has been unable to make sustained battlefield gains since the summer of 2022, it will push on with its war in Ukraine. By continuing with this war, it will ensure deeply hostile relations between the West and Russia and between Russia and the West. Such tension will not be compartmentalized, and it will therefore structure Russia's global position. In Africa, in Asia and in the Middle East, Russia will subordinate its foreign policy to the

aim of prolonging the war in Ukraine, doing what it can to build a network of sympathetic or at least willing partners (preeminently with China) and trying to capitalize on anti-Western sentiment, on divisions within the West or simply on Western weaknesses wherever and whenever they materialize. A near state of war between Russia and the West will reverberate throughout Europe, and it will have countless international reverberations, of which higher inflation and less “globalization” will be important instances.

As the war becomes a permanent feature of Russian life, so too will it be a permanent feature of Russian politics. Putin will ride this war to the end of his career, building it into his bequest to Russia’s future political order. Should Putin die in office, should he seek a successor, should he be pushed from power, the shape of Russian governance may change. Not every aspect of “Putinism” will endure, but ability to wage war – ability to wage war against Ukraine – will be a key criterion of leadership. It will determine who enters the Kremlin after Putin, and it will determine the core objectives this new leader will have. Whether autocratic or oligarchic, Kremlin leadership after Putin will have two basic tasks. The first is to preserve the existing instruments of repression, the absence of civil liberties and the vehicles of government propaganda such that a conformist center to Russian society can be preserved, composed ideally of two parts enticement (the ideal of national assertiveness) and one part compulsion. The state will show Russians the path forward: those who deviate from this path will feel the wrath of the state or more simply the non-inclusion in society. The second task is to maintain the “right” degree of militarization – to ensure that the war can be run, to keep wartime morale at an adequate level, to enshrine the Russian state as a historically justified protector of Russia, whether this is the Russia of its internationally agreed-upon borders or some other Russia, which spills over into Belarus,

Ukraine and into other countries. Too little mobilization and the war will falter. Too much mobilization and empowered entities might threaten the state's monopoly on violence, as happened in June 2023, when Yevgeny Prigozhin staged a mutiny.

Through the war, Putin has found a way to fashion a form of government that is likely to survive his already long tenure in office. On paper, everything is set to go on, the February 2022 war, a break with the past but also a source of continuity. The wild card in this set-up is not so much the Russian people, who have fallen in line behind the war. Nor is it the Russian elite, which owes its power and prosperity to the Putinist system. It is the personality and character of the man or group of men who will acquire power when Putin passes from the scene. Nobody may be up to the job, or ambition may induce a struggle for power. This mix of power, war and uncertainty evokes the world of Shakespeare's plays. Heavy is the head that wears the crown.

Stefan Meister

Head of the Center for Order and Governance in Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia, DGAP

Within the next decade, Russia will become more closed, more totalitarian and learn to live with a long war. Russia's economy, society, and regime will have adapted to the war and live in its own reality. Since the West is not ready (and not able) to close all gaps on sanctions and support Ukraine to win the war, there will be sufficient resources to prolong the war for some time and keep the regime in power. Even if Putin dies during this period, the ruling elites will have an interest to go on with the war, which keeps the West as an external enemy and helps to distract from economic decline. For the Russian ruling elites, the war is not only about Ukraine but also about halting the decline of the empire. It has become a key source of the legitimization of the Putin system. Even if there is a power struggle after Putin's possible death, the interest to keep the Putin system running is shared by key actors.

Within the next years, the isolation of Russia will grow, and domestic repression will further intensify. This creates a lock in effect for society, between state propaganda and repression, where there is no space for alternative development paths. While those who disagreed with the war or further mobilization have left the country, the overall majority of society and the elite have adapted to the new situation. It will become more difficult to leave the country for anybody. Anti-Western discourse and the traditional value paradigm will play a key role in Russian education. The Russian state will further progress in creating a "Runet," where it can control all societal communication and will step by step introduce a social

scoring system based on the Chinese model which will create a new framework for societal control.

Russia has shifted to a full-fledged war economy and the regime has no interest to change this situation because it would mean an economic shock and legitimization crisis. Therefore, the war has become important for regime stability, and to end it would increase economic costs and conflicts in the elite. As a result, there is a redistribution of resources and income connected with the war between regions, different parts of society and the elite. There are groups which benefit from the war, especially the poorer part of society which is rather apathetic and paternalistic. In the economy we observe a further renationalization of companies and assets. Assets of Western companies as well as Russian private enterprises are completely nationalized and redistributed among the loyal elites. Private companies are transformed into big holdings owned by the state, with additional tasks for the state and society.

We might see in some sectors of the economy investments from China and Arab countries but since no property is safe, only an agreement with the president will provide security for these investments. That means further degradation of the Russian economy, no competition or innovation, technological degradation, and strong dependency on foreign technology. Russia will step by step decouple from Western technology and will rely more and more on China and other Asian states but also on low quality solutions from Iran. That means income of people will decline, Russian society will become poorer and even more dependent on the state. Russia will strengthen its political and economic ties with China, Turkey, African and Arab Countries.

Post-Soviet countries are becoming more important for Russia in terms of circumventing sanctions, investment, as markets but also for trade and transit. Russia will have to compete increasingly in Central Asia with China, in the South Caucasus with Turkey, and in Eastern Europe with the

EU. But it will use informal ties, corruption, and the interest, especially of authoritarian elites, to stay in power and to keep influence. Russia will have less and less to offer to these countries but still sufficient to keep some influence. It will fuel conflicts and a zone of instability to impact the security of these states and it will be more flexible in making deals with authoritarian leaders. Russia will play a key role in the transformation of regional orders in different post-Soviet regions with an interest to keep authoritarian leaders in power. Especially organizations like SCO and BRICS will be more important for Russian external relations.

For Europe and the USA, the consequence is that Russia will stay an unpredictable threat which will become weaker but able to be a destructive power. It will be more decisive and active in reordering Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the Black Sea region than the West is; all three are key regions for the interaction between Russia, China, and Turkey. As long as the West is not decisive in its support for Ukraine to win the war, Russia will use the war to weaken unity in Western societies and undermine Western relations with countries of the so-called Global South.

Alexander J. Motyl

Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University-Newark

The next decade will be exceedingly turbulent for the Russian Federation. Regardless of the outcome of Russia's genocidal war against Ukraine, the Russian polity will be unstable and civil conflict, even civil war, will be very likely. If Russia wins the war, instability will be greater. If it loses, it will be less.

Vladimir Putin committed a strategic blunder by invading Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The war revealed that the Russian military, though large, was second-rate. The war also weakened the economy, by de-modernizing, isolating, and making it more dependent on China; weakened Putin and his regime; and demonstrated to the non-Russian nationalities within Russia that the Kremlin was neither omnipotent nor omniscient.

When Putin finally departs the political stage—whether as a result of a coup or natural conditions—the hyper-centralized political system that he so assiduously constructed will not be able to survive. Replacing the great leader will be difficult, and the power struggle that follows his demise will—in time-honored Russian fashion—likely last for years and not for months. During that time, politics will be fractured and chaotic, as elite clans jockey for power and appeal to potential constituencies within the broader population. Once the “masses” get involved, the likelihood of conflict, both peaceful and violent, will rise exponentially. Civil strife will be inevitable, as many Russians take to the streets to demonstrate, while some use the opportunity to assassinate competitors. Under such unstable conditions, it becomes perfectly possible, indeed likely, for such nations as

the Chechens, Dagestanis, Ingush, Yakuts, Bashkirs, and Tatars to demand and appropriate greater sovereignty, perhaps even independence. Moscow, supported by the local Russian populations, will fight back. But with the armed forces weakened by the war, the outcome of the fighting will be unclear. Some non-Russians may succeed in separating; most may be crushed. In either case, the Federation will become different, resembling a loose confederation of disparate regions and statelets under the uncertain leadership of a weakened and fractured Moscow.

Things will get worse if Russia wins the war. Victory—whether measured by Ukraine’s defeat or by Russia’s retention of the currently occupied Ukrainian territory—will only boost the regime’s legitimacy and popularity and thereby convince Russian elites, with or without Putin, that continued expansion is both desirable and obligatory for a uniquely endowed civilization such as Russia. Belarus will likely be reduced to a Russian province. Every effort will be made to make Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Kazakhstan Russian pawns. An invasion of Estonia and Latvia, ostensibly to rescue the Russian-speaking minorities from Baltic “Nazis,” is likely as well, especially as Ukraine’s defeat will have demonstrated that NATO’s bark is worse than its bite.

All of this sounds like good news for Putin’s Russia, were it not for the fact that expansion in the absence of an economy capable of sustaining it will quickly lead to overreach and the emergence of national liberation struggles, followed by Russian defeat and withdrawal. In such dire circumstances, the regime will fall, and the Russian Federation’s non-Russian peoples will have every reason to seek safety via independence from a collapsing empire.

Conditions will be better only if Russia loses the current war against Ukraine. Some coalition of conservatives and democrats will likely seize

power and seek some form of normalization with Ukraine, Russia's neighbors, and the West, and attempt to undo the enormous damage done by decades of Putinism to Russia. Much will then depend on whether Russia experiences post-imperial economic collapse à la Weimar Germany in the 1920s and the Russian Federation in the 1990s. If it does, the conservative-democratic coalition will be blamed for Russia's ills and a new strongman is likely to appear and only hasten Russia's decline. If, miraculously, Russia manages to avoid this sad fate, then the chances of a transition to some form of political "normality" will greatly increase.

In any case, the bottom line is this: ten years from now Russia will be a mess. Whatever the scenario, China, and quite possibly some of Russia's neighbors, will be emboldened to attempt to annex Russian lands. The Chinese already lease a territory the size of Ukraine and may decide to keep what they possess. Depending on how its postwar economy develops, Ukraine—with one of Europe's best armies—may decide to retake some of the territories that it lost and, not inconceivably, attempt to seize the Kuban. Kazakhstan will be tempted to encourage its remaining Russian population to leave. Poland and Lithuania could conspire to take Kaliningrad oblast, while Japan may target the Kuril Islands currently under Russian occupation. The result would be an unstable Russia progressively losing the territory it had acquired during its imperial expansion in past centuries.

Russia will therefore survive until 2034, but it will be smaller, weaker, poorer, and more unstable.

Ghia Nodia

Director of the International School of Caucasus Studies, Ilia State University

By invading Ukraine, Putin set his country on a course that runs contrary to the previous three centuries of its history. After the war, Russia will need a new identity. What it will be, depends on the outcome of the war, global geopolitical trends, and Russian developments. Each of these variables is hard to predict.

Since Peter the Great's rule in the early 18th century, Russia's overarching project has been to be recognized as an important European power. Until the end of Communism, this ambition was mainly met, though in different ways.

Having played an essential role in defeating Napoleon, Russia became a key player in the European "concert of nations" (a geopolitical precursor of the current European Union) as one of the three pillars of a conservative "Holy Alliance" together with Prussia and Austria.

The Communist revolution temporarily isolated Russia from the West, but the second world war and its outcome thrust it back into the center of European affairs. The Cold War could be seen as a stand-off between the liberal West and autocratic East; however, the Marxist ideology that Communist Russia represented was a Western intellectual product widely popular among Western elites, even in its Soviet iteration. Jean-Paul Sartre was an emblematic European public intellectual as well as a committed though inconsistent Stalinist. Communist Russia could claim to be an alternative Europe rather than a non-Europe.

In a civilizational sense, Russia was perceived as a conservative and autocratic periphery of Europe. At the same time, its cultural and intellectual elites constituted an organic part of the broader European society; the European cultural canon was hardly imaginable without great Russian writers, composers, and artists.

Paradoxically, it was the end of communism that eventually brought about a truly deep crisis of Russia's European identity. Having at least notionally embraced the Western liberal model of development, Russia appeared to come as close to the West as never before. However, it also failed to find a status satisfactory to its self-esteem. The West was happy to accept Russia as a "normal" part of the international order and even recognized its special importance by inviting it to prestigious clubs like G8. However, Russians craved for an even greater role, maybe akin to what they had in the nineteenth-century "concert of nations". They could not accept being treated as a larger but somewhat less developed Poland that happened to have gas, oil, and nukes.

The problem was not that the West took advantage of its weakness and unnecessarily "humiliated" it, as Russians claimed, and some Western commentators concurred. Russian ambitions just did not correspond to its resources, implying its economic or military might, and soft power. There was nothing tangible on which Russia could base its claim for a special status.

This laid the ground for a deep anti-western resentment that Putin decided to base his policy on. He became obsessed with challenging the West; eventually, this escalated to the invasion of Ukraine. In the process, Russia also fumbled for a new international status that might look satisfying for the current power elite: being the avant-garde of the global anti-western coalition. Quite a few non-western countries bought the Russian narrative of the invasion of Ukraine being part of a struggle against Western colonialism.

However, this spin is only a pale replica of its Cold War status as the chief adversary of the liberal West. Russia has no resources or ideological foundation for leading the “anti-West” in the long run. It is doomed to play second fiddle to a much more powerful China. Thanks to the war, China and some other countries involved in the game of challenging the West, such as Turkey, improved their balance of power with Russia. In fact, the war further demoted Russia’s status.

This cannot be acceptable even for Russian nationalists, not to speak of the more Western-leaning part of the Russian public. But what can be the alternative? Objectively, the preferable option would be to give up a project of making Russia great again for the status of a free, developed, and respected country, one among others. This would require a change of regime and a large part of the political elite, as well as rebuilding relations with the West.

How feasible is that? Germany's turnaround after WW2 might serve as a model. Could something like this happen in Russia? There are good grounds for skepticism. A crushing military defeat, comparable to that suffered by Germany, might help, but it is hard to foresee. Can Russians (not just Putin) give up on fantasies of neo-imperial grandeur without that? This is a big question.

Provided the outcome of the war is ambiguous, implying no clear victory for either side, we may continue to live with a resentful, defiant, and inherently aggressive Russia, dangerous for its neighbors and the international order. Its specific international position will depend on changing the balance of power between the West and its numerous challengers, as well as among the latter.

Andrey Piontkovsky

Russian scientist, political writer, and analyst

It turns out the brilliant Andrei Amalrik was correct. Writing in the late 1960s, Amalrik predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union: “Just as the adoption of Christianity extended the Roman empire for 300 years, the adoption of communism extended the Russian empire for a few decades.”

The USSR could have collapsed a little earlier or a little later, according to many different scenarios. But when the religion of communism died out – first in the souls of its priests, then in the souls of the congregation—the Soviet theocratic regime was doomed.

The Russian Federation, the largest fragment left of that collapse, has suffered for thirty years from phantom limb pains, provoking one war after another in the post-Soviet space. The war in Ukraine will be its last.

We will inevitably be faced with a massive redesign of the Eurasian map, the details of which are extremely difficult to predict. There are, however, certain near-term developments that could lead to Russia’s defeat in its illegal war with Ukraine. These developments exist, to my mind, in a rather narrow corridor of the possible.

Blinken’s “Iron Curtain” [speech](#) on September 13, 2023, and his work on Biden’s address to the UN General Assembly have demonstrated that the US “deep state” within the administration has finally gained the upper hand over advocates of the “No defeat for Russia” approach (the Burns/Sullivan group).

The US has also overcome the remaining hurdles (which they themselves put in place) to shipping weapons to Ukraine which will lead to its victory on the battlefield.

All the key figures in Putin's mafia system of power are now realizing that defeat is inevitable. As soon as the blitzkrieg failed, these people were forced to reckon with this very outcome. As they did so, we witnessed a dramatic shift in the personal principles and delusional geopolitical ambitions endorsed on February 24, 2022 to a much more important, practical concern: "How can I save my scalp, stay in power, and keep my massive real-estate portfolio in a country that has lost a war?"

Based on my observations, a group of people thinking precisely along these lines formed at the very top of the power structures in Russia, and they have access to arms. The flashiest of the pundits, with Prigozhin's approval and working in coordination with them, were told to prepare the public, especially its ultra "patriotic" Z segment, for Russia's total defeat and for a return to 1991 borders. And who would be blamed? Shoigu and Gerasimov, with Putin on the list for later, of course, thanks to the serious mistakes he also made on Ukraine.

So just what steps will these people take in the military and political atmosphere we see developing? They certainly cannot sit back and do nothing as the Crimean Bridge is destroyed, the front lines crumble, and Russian ships and planes are bombed by American fighter jets. If that happens, no one in the West will want them to act as negotiators. What is more, there will be tens of thousands of resentful conscripts who survived the conflict. These conscripts, like their peasant ancestors 106 years ago, will converge on the capital cities, torch their landlords' estates on Rublevka, and follow the murdered Prigozhin's instructions "to beat the shit" out of local residents.

The first post-Putin government in Russia will consist of a bunch of lowlifes, undoubtedly war criminals to boot. For this government to form, they will need a trigger, and this trigger could turn out to be the ZSU's first psychologically significant success (liberating Tokmak or Bakhmut, for example). The Russian Himmlerites will then offer Ukraine an immediate cease-fire and negotiate to organize a withdrawal of Russian troops to 1991 borders. This solution would save the lives of tens of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers in the final stages of the war. And what will Russia's new leaders ask for in return? First things first—personal immunity from prosecution for war crimes.

Not long ago Lavrov-Ribbentrop babbled incoherently at the UN about recognizing Ukraine's territorial integrity at its 1991 borders. Was this not a first attempt to pivot, albeit clumsily, in this very direction? Ribbentrops have no love for the gallows.

Among the US's dubious assets are people like Tom Graham, who only recently sat at the same table with the Putinites and assured them that the US needs, and will continue to need, a strong Russia to create stability along its periphery. He and other such dubious luminaries can at least sound out the intentions of their Russian friends and even nudge them in the right direction.

Herman Pirchner, Jr.

President, American Foreign Policy Council

The Ukraine-Russian war is likely to end in the next year or two. Regardless of whether it ends with Putin still in power, or with Russia retaining Ukrainian land, the Kremlin will have to address a range of pressing problems.

- *Independence movements.* Will Russia's post-war military be able to cope with a new Chechen War, or with uprisings that could arise in other parts of the Russian Federation?
- *The personal fortunes of Russia's elites.* The lifestyle of Russia's elites is now severely hampered by Western sanctions. Their continued unhappiness with this state of affairs will threaten the stability of a post-war Russia. That unhappiness would be an even bigger problem for a post-Putin leadership struggling to consolidate power.
- *A dysfunctional economy.* Hundreds of thousands of Russia's most sophisticated workers have left the country and will not return. Sanctions are preventing the importation of parts necessary for Russia's manufacture of both civilian and military products. Many supply gaps can and will be filled by purchases from China. But Beijing, sensing Russian weakness, will drive a very hard bargain on both sales and purchases.
- *Shrinking international influence.* Countries once subject to the Kremlin's influence, such as the Central Asian states, will be more capable of saying "no" in response to Russian pressure in the future. The political influence that accrued to the Russian government as a

result of its energy trade with Europe has evaporated, and is unlikely to return. The lackluster performance of Russian military equipment in its war with Ukraine, meanwhile, likely means fewer sales of Russian arms to third countries.

- *Domestic reaction to an ill-conceived war.* By the time the war ends, Russia may have suffered more than 400,000 casualties. That grisly figure means that a large percentage of the Russian population will have known someone killed or injured as a result of the Kremlin's war of choice. Almost all will have a friend or family member who served in the war – a state of affairs that will make it much harder for internal Russian propaganda to keep the population passive. This means that there will likely be a need for Russia's rulers to find scapegoats, with inevitable internal purges and political reshuffles.

The Kremlin's efforts to deal with these problems can be expected to take one of three paths.

Greater internal repression, accompanied by an aggressive foreign policy, could well be the course chosen either by Putin or a post-Putin Russian leadership. One can also imagine the combination of greater internal repression accompanied by efforts to lessen tensions with other countries. However, either scenario would only postpone the day when the problems described above would have to be addressed. A more difficult situation will arise if Russian repression does not stem its internal instability, and the Kremlin is faced with the choice of risking its hold on power by moderating its foreign policies or unifying the country by promoting tensions with the West – perhaps beyond the ability of either country to control.

Another potential avenue is serious internal reform. Yet major societal change is inherently dangerous because reforms need time to work and may make matters worse in the short run. Therefore, even if reforms in Russia are headed for success, there will be a window in which opponents

can effectively claim that those efforts are leading the country to disaster. A reform-minded Russian leadership may not be able to hold onto power under such circumstances, and is likely to look for help wherever it can be found. At that time, the United States (and the West more broadly) will have to engage in a “risk/reward” analysis based upon the Russian regime’s ability to survive and to successfully implement the promised reforms. This calculus, moreover, is likely to become an ongoing exercise, as the Russian government zigzags between success and failure. If reform efforts ultimately succeed and Russia enjoys a sustained period of economic growth, the world will need to watch to see if Russia’s newfound prosperity becomes the basis for more aggression against the West or a greater embrace of international norms.

The final, and most likely, possibility is the incompetent execution of either of the preceding options. This would lead to internal disorder that would likely cause Moscow’s leadership to avoid external problems as it focuses on various threats at home. Those threats could go well beyond the problems described above, and include China’s demographic expansion in Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East (both of which were parts of China until Russia’s imperial expansion in 1858 and 1860). If as few as 10 million Chinese moved into Russia’s Far East, they would constitute a majority of the population there, and Russian sovereignty would become an open question. Depending upon how such events unfold, America may opt to be a bystander to these events, or become actively involved in them.

Mark G. Pomar

Clements Center for National Security, University of Texas, Austin

Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 not only unleashed a major European war that aimed to strip Ukraine of its sovereignty and national identity, but also resulted in the destruction of Russia's own fledgling civil society. Tracing its origins to the human rights movement in post-Stalin Soviet Union, Russian civil society came of age under glasnost and grew into a prominent social role in the 1990s. Though atomized, it was able to establish such highly respected organizations as *Memorial* and the *Sakharov Center* and to set up thousands of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that dealt with social issues, ranging from health and environment to educational and cultural projects.

This inchoate civil society represented, if only symbolically, a "new Russia," that would be open to the West, liberal in orientation, and keen on establishing democratic norms and practices. To support this indigenous effort at building democracy, western governments and foundations provided generous support to Russian NGOs, universities, and cultural organizations. For example, at the height of western funding in the early 2000s, my organization, IREX, had a large office in Moscow, several affiliate offices throughout the Russian Federation, and a budget in the millions, primarily in the form of grants from USAID, the US Department of State, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Independent Russian organizations received further support from Western media organizations, notably the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, that had supported Russian civil society from its earliest days and were now able to operate news bureaus in Russia. The hope was that over time

Russian civil society would garner national support and develop institutions that would ensure a functioning democratic society.

The assault on Russian NGOs, and especially their western supporters, began shortly after Vladimir Putin became president in 2000. Initially, the Russian government used bureaucratic means to harass civil society organizations, often requiring detailed and expensive registration procedures, but with the beginning of Putin's third term as president in 2012, the assault was in full force. Notably, the Duma passed legislation, including the *Foreign Agent Act* and the *Undesirable Foreign Organization Act*, that severely restricted the activities of all independent civil society organizations. By 2015, virtually all foreign donor organizations left Russia; by February 2022, virtually all independent Russian organizations were closed. Russian civic activists independent journalists faced either arrest or emigration. Russian civil society, as we have known it over the past several decades, is no more.

In late 2023, Russia is facing a grim future. It has severed its political and economic ties with democratic countries, reoriented its economy toward authoritarian regimes, and by eviscerating its civil society has made its citizens yet again dependent wholly on the state for their livelihood.

Hence, what can we expect to see in the next 10+ years?

- The Putin regime has created a police state with deep roots in Soviet and Tsarist history that will seek to control an atomized society by calibrating the level of repression needed to maintain civil order. Given its control of all domestic media, this police state will likely outlive the current president.
- If economic conditions worsen or the war in Ukraine is perceived as a failure, there will likely be demonstrations or even riots. But

because there is no civil society or independent media in Russia, these disturbances will not lead to any meaningful political change. Contrary to the hopeful predictions of some Russian opposition figures, notably Vladimir Kara-Murza, there will be no spontaneous “outburst of democracy.” For democracy to take root, Russia will need a new generation of activists willing to “work the soil,” much like the early dissidents did in the 1960s and 1970s.

- Since a “police state mentality” is at the core of Russian history, a potentially democratic Russia will need to develop a new vision of its statehood and role in the world. Unlike Ukraine that seeks to be part of Europe, today’s Russia is mired in post-Soviet imperialist nostalgia for outdated Russian nationalism and “traditional values.” Neither is a path forward. Only a vibrant civil society could shape a new vision for Russia, and that society has been thoroughly destroyed.
- Because Russia is nominally a federation that includes many different nationalities, a repressive Russian nationalist state will likely engender rebellions in the outlying regions, especially in Tatarstan and the Caucasus. This could lead to the breakup of the federation, along the lines of what occurred in 1991 when the USSR dissolved.

In summary, Russia will remain a closed, xenophobic country that will resort to ever harsher repressive measures. Political change will come only because of an economic collapse or the dissolution of the federation along national lines. Neither portends an evolution toward democratic rule.

William E. Pomeranz

Director of the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute

The war in Ukraine will have legal consequences – both international and domestic – that will hang over Russia for years to come. Several broad steps are already in process to ensure accountability, but this requires new laws to be enacted and enforced.

Thus, no matter when and how the military hostilities cease, Russia's reintegration into the rules-based order will not be forthcoming, as happened to large degree after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia has already been removed from the Council of Europe and its European Court of Human Rights, various free trade agreements, the global banking system and much more. Several further legal actions await Russia: whether the assets in Western (and primarily European banks) will be seized as reparations to pay for Ukraine's recovery and the 100,000 pending cases in Ukraine on war crimes and other crimes against humanity. Finally, the charge of the crime against peace (aggression), a critical indictment at Nuremberg but largely forgotten after World War II, is in the process of being updated and will potentially serve as the most relevant crime to pursue against Putin and Russia's leaders. This issue most likely will not be resolved until after the war – and although I do not foresee Putin accidentally traveling to the Hague, the search for justice will hang over Russia for many years to come.

So, one future scenario envisions that Russia's war crimes will be litigated (in a court and venue to be named later) that will leave Russia – either on individual level or collectively – as permanent defendants.

But the Russian legal system confronts other challenges as well, most notably whether it can defend the advances under Russian law that have occurred over the past 30 years. These reforms – on property rights, private law, and human rights – remained under constant pressure but have found their constituencies and defenders. I will address these resilient but still precarious changes in the order outlined above.

The Right to Property: This was a perennial problem from Imperial Russia through the Soviet Union. The peasantry was emancipated in 1861 without individual property rights. Stolypin’s “wager on the strong and sober” provided property rights to peasants, but he said he needed 20 years to solidify these rights; he only got five before he was assassinated. In 1917, the Provisional Government put off land reform until after the Constituent Assembly. That body lasted one day until it was shut down by the Bolsheviks.

As the historian Richard Wortman persuasively argued, property rights have never been considered a fundamental civil right in Russia. But the right to property was front and center in the 1993 Russian constitution, and despite many prominent political cases that violated the right of property (i.e. Yukos) many Russians now own their apartments, dachas, and businesses. And Putin has not rolled back this right, even though he has not always defended it.

The Advancement of Private Law: Parts 1 and 2 of the Russian Civil Code were never formally ratified by the Federation Council. Nevertheless, they became law in 1995 and 1996 because of several legal loopholes and political miscalculations. The codes were largely borrowed from European civil law countries because Russia had no strong expertise on the subject. In short order, Russia became familiar with the major foundations of civil law: contracts, corporate law, ownership. The transition has not always been easy, and Putin has used corporate law to promote state corporations as opposed to private companies with individual shareholders. Russia also

created its own unique brand of corporate raiding that had more in common with extortion than Western practices of merger and acquisitions. Nevertheless, Putin presided over the enactment on Part 3 (Inheritance and Private International Law) and Part 4 (Intellectual Property), of the Russian Civil Code as well the passage of the 2001 land code. Russia now has almost thirty years of transactional experience and Putin has never disowned this legislation.

The Emergence of Independent Professional Lawyers: The Yeltsin era saw the rise of the bar and other independent jurists who defended corporate clients as well as human rights activists and independent journalists. These lawyers practiced in national and regional courts in Russia, as well as in Strasbourg before the European Court of Human Rights. In all instances they responded to a growing bottom-up demand for professional legal advice from the Russian citizens. Thus, a cadre of lawyers emerged – in Russian and western law firms – that quickly became involved with major litigation and mediation – something that was noticeably absent in the Soviet Union.

One cannot overstate the risk that lawyers exposed themselves to. And that danger has only grown during the late Putin era and his decision to leave the European Convention on Human Rights. The recent arrests of Navalny's lawyers for treason have created a growing concern of a further crackdown on lawyers, and many human rights lawyers have now left the country. But if one looks forward, there is a potential scenario that in a post-Putin world, Russia will turn to these domestic lawyers to rebuild the legal system. They will undoubtedly be considered renegades and face resistance – from judges, prosecutors, government attorneys – but these lawyers are well-versed in the everyday practice of international,

commercial, and domestic law and represent a historically overlooked starting point for Russia's long-held aspiration to become law-based state.

In conclusion, Russia can turn both to its recent and more distant past to find examples of substantive legal reforms. In today's environment, however, Russia will not only have to revamp its legal institutions but also rehabilitate its exiled lawyers, journalists, and dissidents, many of whom have been tagged with the dubious foreign agent label.

Furthermore, Russia will have to make these changes while facing various international tribunals of indeterminate length and severity. Finally, Russia will have to embrace legal procedure over the arbitrary enforcement of laws.

The path from isolation to redemption will be a long time coming. Whether Russia possesses the political will to implement these legal changes – and uphold them under various political pressures – remains the enduring question.

Dosym Satpayev

PhD, Kazakhstan Risks Assessment Group

The creation of a mobilization military economy will reduce the number of intra-elite players to two main groups surrounding Vladimir Putin, whose actions will determine the future of Russia in the medium term.

The first group includes the security forces, consisting of two competing structures: the army and the special services, where there will be both “hawks” and “realists”. The first will be interested in continuing the war, especially since it will become part of a large illegal business. “Realists” will understand that this is a zero-sum conflict that could provoke new areas of tension within Russia.

At the same time, the failed revolt of Prigozhin is an important and long-term benchmark of evolving sentiments among supporters of the war, which may also have an impact on the future political situation in Russia. The growth of discontent among the combatants as the war drags on and the lack of strategic successes will create popular “field commanders” some of whom, sooner or later, will enter into politics, as it was in the 1990s with General Aleksandr Lebed. Large support groups can form around these “field commanders” from both mobilized military personnel and demobilized combatants, as well as their families. This process may become more active after Vladimir Putin's departure and intra-elite power struggles; when Putin's entourage will either try to use the “soldier emperors” as an additional tool for mobilizing society or enter into confrontation with them, which may provoke additional zones of internal political conflict. The growth of great-power chauvinism in Russian society, which, before and after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, was

mainly aimed at finding external enemies, will eventually become the main ideological mainstream among the Russian population as the basis for the militarization of Russia. This, in turn, may lay the foundation for interethnic conflicts, which will be joined by inter-religious tensions as Islamophobic sentiments grow, creating additional areas of tension, both with local Muslims and migrants.

The second group includes “technocrats”, representatives of the financial and economic bloc of the government, who participated in building a mobilization economic model in the face of sanctions. At the same time, the “technocrats” may be close to the “realists” from the group of security forces who clearly understand that Russia will not emerge victorious in the war that has begun and will have to look for a way out of this conflict with zero-sum. They can also find support among some of the oligarchs who will still try to escape from Western sanctions lists.

This does not exclude the possibility of establishing ties with a part of the liberal opposition abroad to increase their legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. But the counterweight for them will be not only the “hawks” but also those in power who, in the conditions of a sanctioned economy, will create their business empires under the “roof” of the security forces at the expense of “gray imports”. There will be a large business that will adapt to the long-term sanctions conditions, as observed in Iran, where quite wealthy business representatives strengthened their positions precisely due to various schemes of circumvention of sanctions with the participation of Iranian special services. For this group, a protracted war has a specific financial interest, and the Iranian economic model may be attractive, as long-term sanctions forced the restructuring of this country's economy, preserving its ability to participate in regional politics through its proxies.

However, since the main directions of Russian raw materials supplies will mainly go to China, which will also bind many sectors of the Russian

economy to itself for many years, Beijing will try to influence domestic political processes in the country through its lobby in government structures and through large businesses associated with special services.

Such a situation is unlikely to please the 'hurrah-patriots' and some security forces, who will see this as a danger to the country's sovereignty. This, in turn, may provoke an increase in anti-Chinese sentiments among a part of society. But it will be important for China that the war does not lead to the collapse of the current regime in Russia so that the country does not weaken too much in the post-Soviet space and does not fall apart. For China, it is important for Russia to maintain control over its nuclear weapons and the possibility of long-term use of Russia as an instrument of confrontation with the West. After all, China does not benefit from the victory of Ukraine, as Beijing will consider it a victory of the collective West. Therefore, it is also important for China that after Putin's departure, pro-Western liberal forces do not appear in Russia, or that "technocrats" do not become strong and seek to turn Russia in a Western direction again. Consequently, China will be ready to support any political force in Russia that guarantees stability in the country and is not associated with the liberal opposition.

Regarding Russia's neighbors, the prospect of Russia becoming a long-term satellite of China also puts the neighboring countries of Central Asia in a vulnerable position. In the event of a conflict between China and the United States over Taiwan, there is a risk of forming a closer military-political alliance between China and Russia, with the former as the leader and the latter as a vassal. This will deal a serious blow to the attempts of some Central Asian countries to pursue a multi-vector policy, as Beijing and Moscow will demand their participation in this alliance. Moreover, just as Kazakhstan and other countries in the region have already become

part of the sanctioned, military economy of Russia, assisting it with “gray imports”, China’s creation of a wartime mobilization economy will affect political and economic processes in the region.

On the other hand, the ability of China and the West to refrain from conflict over Taiwan will also increase the security of Central Asia. The failure of the blitzkrieg in Ukraine, the prospect of a long war, the need for “gray imports” through Kazakhstan, as well as the voiced guarantees of territorial integrity to Kazakhstan from Turkey and China, push back the threat of Russian “chaos exports” (definition of Vladislav Surkov) in Central Asia. Any attempts by Russia to implement its “chaos export” in the region, either as a tool of pressure or as a direct encroachment on someone’s sovereignty, will not be supported by China, which, at the moment, is extremely hostile to any destabilization of the situation in Kazakhstan and the entire Central Asian region. It is important for China to maintain the status quo in relations with the countries of the region, where local ruling circles must also guarantee long-term domestic political stability, including for the effective functioning of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Evgeny Savostyanov

Senior Vice President at Sistema Mass Media, Former Head of Moscow KGB

The problem can be divided into three parts: Russia under Putin; a transitional period after Putin; and Russia's further development. Prognoses of the future must focus on post-Putin Russia.

The Crimea-Donbass adventure of 2014 predetermined Russia's development as a country that shifted from the Metacivilization of Competition ("the West") to the Metacivilization of Dogma ("the East"). It also set the course for Russia's future. Two unknown parameters remained: China's fate and the prices of hydrocarbons.

If China successfully withstands Western opposition, Russia is doomed to become its younger, heavily armed brother (a scenario akin to "Greater North Korea"). If Xi's risky, if not retrogressive, policy leads to the country's downfall (which I believe is inevitable), Russia will have to remain in geopolitical isolation for a long time (a scenario akin to a "Shrunken USSR"). The pace in either of these directions will be inversely proportional to oil and gas prices.

As long as Putin remains in power, it will be impossible to exit this crossroads. Even tactical successes on frontlines or in politics (such as supporting Trump or weakening the European Union) won't fundamentally change anything. Russia will be isolated from the West and lose influence in its immediate neighborhood. A defining characteristic of this period will be aggressive special operations aimed at undermining Western unity, including achieving decisive success in Ukraine. Bringing

Ukraine into NATO will ensure peace and stability on the NATO-Russia border, but it won't make life easier for the Russian people.

If the first scenario of post-Putin Russia is determined by China, the second will be shaped by the struggle within Putin's circle. The key developments will include a struggle between:

- the gradually weakening old “elites of plunder,” who have become very rich thanks to Putin and have lost a lot due to him and Western sanctions, but still hope for a return to normal relations with the West; and
- the new “frontline elites” who hope to rise on their animosity toward the West and the old elite. The longer the war drags on, the greater the chances of success for this new elite.

As Putin learned from Prigozhin’s case, the new elites might strike from behind, and the old elites, while not helping, won’t betray either. A new uprising in the country is impossible until a serious rift occurs within the ruling class. Because Putin’s favorites fear each other and the new elite more than anyone else, they will tolerate him until repression begins. In the event of a defeat in Ukraine, a conspiracy by military figures who understand that they will be made scapegoats is possible, although unlikely.

In the public sphere, the weakening of revanchist-imperialist sentiments will continue. Nationalism, and even Nazism, will be on the rise. A counterbalance will come from the growing assertiveness of the Sunnis, whose numbers in the country and its southern neighborhoods are rapidly increasing.

There won’t be an economic catastrophe in Russia. Instead, there will be militarization, gradual regression, and degradation.

I believe the critical year for this period will be 2024.

The transitional period of “Russia after Putin” will be determined by how Putin steps away from power, whether through force, quasi-legal means, or physiological reasons.

In the case of a forceful removal of Putin, some regions may not accept it. Armed conflicts and a country split along the “Internal Destruction-Explosion” scheme could become possible. Accompanying processes would include chaos, lawlessness, and deterioration. Coordinated external intervention to control the nuclear arsenal would be inevitable in this scenario.

In the case of a quasi-legal removal of Putin (he won't leave voluntarily) or his death, a managed transitional process is possible. There will be a sharp shift in foreign policy: de-escalation of the conflict in Ukraine and attempts to normalize relations with the West¹. Within the country, a power struggle is inevitable, based on allegations of corruption against rivals.

As a result:

- If the old elites hold their ground, a period of "Thaw" may occur, with a likely decline once the winner is determined. There may be attempts to promote a contemporary Orthodox class-based paternalism.
- The emergence of a national-fascist state could happen if the “frontline elites” triumph.

During this period, the displacement of hydrocarbons from the global energy balance will accelerate, and the declining demand for Russian resources will expedite the economic deterioration of the country.

At some point, the qualitative and then quantitative degradation of the economy will reach a level where it becomes impossible to satisfy the demands of regional elites with federal subsidies. The country will begin to disintegrate following the “Surface Destruction – Melting” pattern, with the secession of the North Caucasus republics. The Russian core of Russia will stand. With one caveat: the growth in number and aggressiveness of the Islamic population in Russia could pose a serious challenge to the exhausted and demoralized Russian people. The approximate duration of this stage is 4-10 years.

Russia’s further development will depend on the outcomes of the two previous stages.

Russia's alternative to new democratization, which will begin as a top-down revolution, may be a prolonged isolationist stagnation in the spirit of the USSR from 1945-1953.

Russia will not be able to become a bridge between the West and the East for a long time, let alone a part of the North. It will be a logistical dead end, and investing in it would be pointless.

The gradual return of Russia to modernity will be hindered by the deep residual indoctrination of the population and negative demographic trends. The primary focus will need to be on countering the internal and external expansion of Sunni Islam.

However, in the case of global or continental upheavals (in Europe), Russia has a chance to become an “island of stability,” as it was during the time of the French Revolution and Catherine II.

In the event of China's triumph, the fate of Trans-Ural Russia will be similar to that of Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region or North Korea. The fate of European Russia will be disintegration into several protectorates. The rejection of transit for Siberian hydrocarbons to Europe will accelerate the processes of disintegration.

Inal Sherip

Minister of Foreign Affairs of the government in exile of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria

The dynamics of power and political strategy in Russia could unexpectedly turn upside down. A likely scenario is that Ukraine, having acquired a sufficient arsenal, would initiate an effective offensive, as a result of which, Russia would be forced to agree to negotiations on Ukraine's and its allies' terms. Such a turn of events would be the natural consequence of the self-serving disengagement from reality and isolation that Putin demonstrated at his December 14, 2023, press conference and which has been deliberately conditioned by his advisors.

The looming Ukrainian counteroffensive and the flight of Russian troops from the battlefield in 2023 forced Putin to dismiss a number of senior military officers and to make various adjustments in management. His cancelling of a press conference reflected his recognition of the depth of the crisis. The current confidence that he expressed at the most recent press conference seems to be an illusion in light of Moscow's military and economic difficulties. Instead of solving problems, Putin is choosing a path of self-reassurance and the reassurance of those around him. Such a reaction indicates his lack of understanding of the scale of the problem. Only another crisis is likely to force Putin to realize the seriousness of the situation and to take effective steps, as happened last year.

In spite of such maneuvers, at a certain point Putin will realize that he teeters on the brink of disaster. He will have to recognize that his rule will end under the pressure of his closest advisors. Seeing the hopelessness of the situation, they will demand his resignation, arguing that Ukraine and

its allies, in light of his deeds, is the likely outcome of his case before the International Criminal Court, and will categorically refuse to include him in any dialogue. Putin, whose desire to save face and to preserve his place in history is paramount, will step aside in the hope of remaining not just a footnote in Russia's history but as a symbol of its unyielding spirit.

However, should Putin decide to cling to power and preserve the armor of presidential immunity, his entourage may resort to drastic measures to preserve their own survival. A new leader will then emerge from Russia's political aristocracy. Sharing the aspirations of the current elite, the new leader will represent the continuity of power under the guise of turbulent change.

In my opinion, under either case the old methods of governance will remain unshakable, like the laws of physics.

The next phase in the Kremlin will start when the FSB attacks Chechnya in hopes of achieving the success achieved by Putin a quarter of a century ago. The FSB hates Kadyrov, considering him an uncontrollable and dangerous fool, but Putin has protected him. Once Putin is gone the FSB and armed forces will announce a Third Chechen War and kill Kadyrov. This will confirm the standing of the FSB and army and also distract the public from Russia's military failures in Ukraine and from the subsequent humiliating diplomatic negotiations. By using an iron hand to enforce civic peace in Chechnya, Putin's successors will repeat Putin's success, earning thunderous applause from the grateful Russian people.

The new leadership will seek to restore order and will implement reforms in Chechnya, so as to signal to the West its decisive rejection of past despotism and human rights violations. They will parade Chechnya as a beacon for the truly democratic forces in Russia and as the symbolic start of a new order in Moscow based on freedom, justice, and new relations with the West.

Russia's new leader or leaders can justify their Third Chechen War either by citing Ramzan Kadyrov's attempts to secede from the Russian Federation or by the chaos that will inevitably flare up there after his sudden demise and the subsequent internal clan struggle for power. The scenario may change, but the essence remains the same, for Chechnya has always been a convenient excuse for internal manipulations within the Kremlin.

Reports of yet another order being established in Chechnya will be met with ovations among the Russian population. Some democratic forces will hail it as marking the end of Kadyrov's provocative actions and immoral lifestyle. Indeed, Chechnya's centuries-long struggles with Russia, has taken root in the collective memory of the Russians as an archetypal tale. The Caucasian wars and endless conflicts have become part of the subconscious heritage of every resident of Russia, reproducing from generation to generation as a cautionary myth about a troubled region. It is there, ready to be exploited once more by a new but still cynical Kremlin leadership.

In the end, the essence of the Russian system will remain unchanged. Although it may change outwardly, even to the extent of again sacrificing Chechnya on the altar of strategic interests, its fundamental mechanisms and structures will remain untouched. This is due to the absence of a force that could offer resistance. In Russia itself, the groundwork of a democratic society capable of real change in the modern world has yet to be formed.

James Sherr, OBE

*Senior Fellow, International Centre for Defence and Security, Tallinn
and Associate Fellow, Russia & Eurasia Programme, Chatham House,
London*

Until the outcome of Russia's war against Ukraine is clear, predictions about its future will be conjectural and unsound. Russian victory in this war can take a multiplicity of forms. Whatever its form, Moscow and Kyiv will recognize it when they see it.

Globally, the consequences of such a victory would be far-reaching. Inside Russia, they would be dramatic. Victory would be Putin's vindication; the regime would become stronger. The defeat of Ukraine and the humiliation of the "collective West" would be portrayed as the greatest victory of Russian arms over the "anti-Russia" since 1945. It also would vindicate Russian *passionarnost'* — pride in trial and sacrifice — and be presented at home and abroad as proof of Russia's 'moral' superiority over its "decadent" adversaries. A formalized "compromise", aka Minsk-III, might have similar consequences, even if they unfolded in slower motion. Both would allow Moscow a prelude, a *peredyshka* (breathing space) to securing the broader objectives set out in its "draft treaties" of December 2021. Therefore, victory is likely to sustain the militarisation of the economy as well as the autocratic political system.

Only the conclusive defeat of Russia would present a clear path to Putin's demise. But would even that accomplishment pave the way to a post-Putin regime? The distinction is vital. Leaders die. But a regime lives in power structures, elites, and mindsets.

Putin has been in power for more than twenty years. The combined tenures of Gorbachev and Yeltsin lasted a mere fifteen. Much of that period was turbulent. With the exception of the CPSU, traditional pillars of the Soviet system — the former KGB, Ministry of Defence, General Staff — were neither disbanded nor subjected to serious transformation. By 1995, under various guises, they had begun to restore their former influence. Moreover, some “new” centres of influence, e.g., the “privatized” energy companies, were autocratic and monopolistic in ethos; others, notably the Russian Orthodox Church, reinforced blatantly imperial and reactionary mindsets regarding “Russian civilisation” and the liberal-democratic world beyond it. For these reasons, Yeltsin’s Russia was a schizophrenic entity. After Yeltsin’s demise, Putin’s ‘restoration of the administrative vertical’ and ‘strict promotion of Russian national interests’ responded to the mood of most elites and much of society.

However he leaves power, Putin will leave powerful residues behind him: first, the baronial elites and structures over which he presided; second, a highly atomized society, largely indifferent to matters that do not touch their lives directly; third, large numbers of people who inhabit a culture of violence, who are capable of using arms and who, in conditions of defeat are likely to be unruly and vengeful; fourth, specific regions, more or less ethnically defined, with deep traumas and powerful grievances.

Hypothetically, we can envisage three alternative futures following a Russian defeat.

A ‘Technical’ Leadership. It is eminently possible that Putin’s immediate successors (e.g. Mishustin and/or Sobyanin) will distance themselves from the overtly autocratic, visceral and millenarian features of Putinism and present an image of moderation, conciliation and competence. Such a leadership would be defined by its limitations. At best, it would preside

over a “government of the lobbies”. Soon if not immediately, it would face the “question of power” and the eternal Russian answer: if authority is not created, there will be none. In practice, this is likely to force new leaders into compromises with retrograde forces.

Smuta (turmoil, upheaval) could follow immediately upon a Russian defeat, or it could evolve out of the dynamics set out above. Invariably, the course of *smuta* is unpredictable, and the actors that dominate its opening stages might be reconstituted or moved aside by its end. Only two things are clear. First, the outwardly cohesive and implacable “force ministries” would be eroded and possibly torn asunder (as the Prigozhin affair arguably foretold). Second, it would create new traumas for ordinary people, that vast majority who have managed to stay below the radar and preserve islands of private stability under Putin’s dispensation.

A liberal ascendancy. Although it receives the most attention in the West, it is the least likely outcome. In Russia, civil society is not only repressed, it is (in marked contrast to Ukraine) largely absent. The self-proclaimed “democratic opposition” is divided within itself. Russia neither possesses strong indigenous democratic elites, let alone links between them and ordinary citizens, not to say trust between them, that would alter this situation. (Alexey Navalny, who for a brief moment appeared to break this mold, has been singularly reluctant to collaborate with other opposition figures, let alone treat them as equals). Moreover, in only the rarest of cases (e.g. Chechnya and Ingushetia) has the ethnic factor proved to be an effective base of mobilization.

The outlook is not encouraging. The precondition for the emergence of a Russia at peace with itself and its neighbors is a revolution of the mind in Russia itself. There is little sign of that.

S. Frederick Starr

Chairman, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, American Foreign Policy Council, Washington.

Phase One: More of the same, with Putin persisting and with ever more bellicose rhetoric from the Kremlin; deepening financial stress caused by falling revenues from energy; mounting social unrest which is met with force; and growing resistance in the non-Russian regions, especially Chechnya. Overall, the stalemate on the front line continues, with increased loss of life on both sides accompanied by steady erosion of Russia's equipment and logistics and renewed Ukrainian war materiel. Putin's hasty and ineffective measures to alleviate the situation fail, as social discontent mounts. By focusing its attacks on transport and logistics Ukraine steadily erodes Russia's position in Crimea.

Phase Two: The destruction of the Kerch bridge or Russia's "tactical" retreat from a major contested area gives rise to a quiet but de-facto putsch led by elements of the military and FSB (Patrushev/Bortnikov?) This could be announced by Putin himself and masked by claiming it is simply a shuffling of power at the center. Few will be fooled, as the new arrangement leads to a further hardening of Kremlin rhetoric and actions, similar to what occurred in 1991, with some of Putin's successors following him in threatening the use of nuclear arms. Putin, though re-elected, is increasingly marginalized.

The aggressive and costly use of troops gives rise to renewed resistance among Russian soldiers and their wives and families and to calls in non-Russian regions for autonomy or secession. Simultaneously, mounting demands are heard from regions within Russia for decentralization,

elected local councils, etc. Hard-liners choose to respond obliquely, by means of actions in Chechnya. By forcefully removing Kadyrov from power and replacing him with a more “normal” and manageable successor, the new leaders not only flex their power before local forces elsewhere but hint that a new order throughout the country is possible ... though unlikely.

Phase Three: This phase will begin with the start of a step-by-step withdrawal from Crimea, again masked by language about “retrenchment,” and the further decay of the army’s will to fight. This leads to the partial implosion of the FSB-sponsored putsch and discrediting of its leading members. Russia undertakes a step-by-step withdrawal from certain Ukrainian territories with an effort to hold onto at least one major city in the Northeast. The ensuing erosion of civic order within Russia will take many forms, but will eventually bring to the fore a new group of aspiring leaders in Moscow. These will include unlikely partnerships of dissident figures from the military and security arms, but also alienated Duma members, provincial governors (including those released from jail), returnees from internment, those Russians abroad who have attempted to form a government in exile, and outspoken publicists and intellectuals. This will create a de facto diarchy, with die-hards from the FSB and National Guard sharing power with self-proclaimed forces of “society.”

The resulting standoff between these new forces and the tattered FSB results in a fragile agreement combining strict central control over security, keystones of the economy, and budget, but concessions to the regionalists in the form of elective governors and local councils. Russia is now prepared to reopen contacts with the West but unwilling to make major strategic concessions. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose!*

Phase Four: A new equilibrium will eventually be reached, combining elements of Putinist centralization with more pluralistic social, regional,

and intellectual forces. The Eurasian fantasy erodes as urban Russians of the rising generation reengage with Europe and seek thereby to reduce their over-dependence on China. The Eurasia Economic Union is reconstituted but fails to gain traction due to Russia's weakened economic and political might, while the Common Security Treaty Organization dies. Administrative concessions are introduced to meet at least some of the demands of localists but only Chechnya succeeds in gaining sovereignty. The Kremlin hails the new order as true federalism and renames the country as The Russian Federal Republic. Meanwhile, surviving oligarchs and holdovers from Putin's security apparatus renew efforts to reconstitute the old hyper-centralized order but are opposed by members of the rising generation.

Sergey Sukhankin

Senior Fellow at The Jamestown Foundation, and Advisor at Gulf State Analytics

A very high level of unpredictability and special role of accident – so-called “wild cards” – in Russian history renders the task of forecasting Russia’s long-term development particularly complex. Yet, given its historical experience and the immutability of certain pivots that are still holding the Russian state together, certain forward-looking assertions about the Russian future – as a combination of past experiences and currently unravelling trends – can be made.

I base this analysis on the notion that Russia will avoid complete collapse and disintegration. This scenario – the ideal one for both neighboring states and Russia itself – is unlikely to materialize primarily because the West does not seem to be ready to embrace the idea of Russia’s collapse and complete disintegration. In my view, most likely, the war in Ukraine will be settled not on the battlefield but at the negotiation table – primarily due to the lack of will of the West to supply Ukraine with weaponry needed in quantities required as well as allowing Russia to evade sanctions – which will allow Russia to preserve its statehood and avoid rapid collapse and disintegration; and Putin’s regime (perhaps, in a modified form) and its successor(s) to survive.

In my view, Russia’s development in the next several decades will go through the following stages: a slow political and economic dilapidation coupled with accumulation of internal conflict potential will lead to a series of internal shocks/conflicts and a partial disintegration of the state. Subsequently this process will pave a way to the re-emergence of Russia –

with the help of the West – as an assertive and aggressive great regional power. This process is likely to go through the following two main stages.

First, slow dilapidation and (potential) partial disintegration. The image of ease with which Russia is overcoming Western economic sanctions and a next-to-zero reaction of the Russian society on the mounting military losses is a mirage, which conceals multiple signs of creeping internal destabilization. The Russian economy – already defunct and stagnant as is clearly visible in the Russian regions where the living standards are plummeting rapidly – remains afloat primarily due to the partial evasion of sanctions, booming prices of commodities and large masses of the population leaving the country (creating an illusion of stability in terms of unemployment).

With economic sanctions remaining intact, the Russian economy will continue to recede, and this will become visible in large cities as well. Emigration of young and educated Russians – which is likely to increase; in case emigration channels are severed from the inside, the lack of motivation and social apathy will have even greater negative effect on society and the economy – along with the debilitating effect of the war, would create a situation somewhat similar to the late Soviet Union. A combination of social apathy, plummeting living standards, and technological stagnation will plunge Russian society into an abyss of violence, ethnic hatred, and contempt for the ruling elite. As a result, Russia will implode under the burden of growing protest in large cities and secessionist trends in ethnically non-Russian regions, which, in certain areas (such as North Caucasus and the Volga region) could lead toward low intensity armed conflicts.

Depending on the posture of the West and the course of action chosen by the Russian government in power, this could result in either post-1991

situation (the subordination of the regions with preservation of control over them by Moscow) or their secession from Russia (the least likely scenario).

Second, re-birth and rise to prominence. The specter of Russia's complete collapse – in Western intellectual thought to be accompanied by a civil war that would have a spillover effect on the entire Eurasian continent and beyond, as well as fear of nuclear weapons (as well as conventional arsenals) winding up in the hands of international terrorists – would prompt Western countries to provide assistance to the new political regime that would emerge on the wreckage of Putin's Russia. A combination of the fear of Russia's disintegration, Russia's natural resource wealth, (still) large consumer market, access to strategic transportation arteries such as the Northern Sea Route (its importance is going to skyrocket in the coming decades) would prompt the West – somewhat similar to previous historical examples that include, among others, the post-Crimea war period, the 1920s, the 1940s and the early 1990s – to overlook crimes committed by Russia and its population during the Putin's era and return to the model of "business as usual" in dealing with Moscow. This will have the most dangerous consequences for Russian society and its neighbors.

This approach is based on a deep misunderstanding of the nature of the Russian state (which is an empire by origin) and its population with its blurred identity that has *always* been attracted to a "strong hand" and tends to blame external forces (or so-called national enemies inside the country) for the lack of progress. Once Russia overcomes an acute phase of economic and political crisis and internal destabilization, the path followed by the post-1991 Russian state is likely to be repeated in one way or another. Whatever economic progress that ensues will be limited, due to deep cultural traits and the lack of entrepreneurship. Russia's leadership will follow the same path as the last two emperors of the Romanov's dynasty, Josef Stalin, and the post 2003-04 Vladimir Putin. Growing

conservatism, anti-Westernism and re-militarization will become the key drivers of domestic development. There will be renewed efforts to project power on neighboring countries and to mobilize domestic hatred toward Western countries. These will be the key drivers of foreign policy. If this scenario materializes, in the next two to three decades Russia will be drawn into another military conflict with one of the neighboring countries.

Ilter Turan

President of the International Political Science Association and Emeritus Professor of Political Science at Istanbul Bilgi University

At a time when Russia is engaged in a war with Ukraine and maintains a military presence in Syria, Russia's future role in global politics poses an important question. Speculating about answers for the foreseeable future, we might offer two observations about how Russia relates to the world. First, historically Russia has vacillated between being European or Eurasian. Excepting brief intervals when becoming integrated into the European order has been attempted, Russia has perceived itself as being a Eurasian country, whose interests are not confined exclusively to Europe. This choice is likely to continue, placing the country in a competitive relationship with both Europe and the US. Second, Russia was the only multi-national empire that survived the First World War by adopting communism, but it failed to maintain its empire, it collapsed in 1991. The Soviet policy elite that made the transition to becoming the Russian policy elite has failed so far to adjust to the reality that the Empire and the superpower status that was a part of its global standing are gone. Russian policy makers appear committed to reconstituting Russia as a superpower that prevails in the global system.

At the moment, Russia is cooperating with China to develop BRICS into an alternative to the global economic and to a lesser extent the political order that the US built after the Second World War. A large number of countries, many of the Global South, that are unhappy with the current global order find its criticism attractive. Yet, the plan to develop BRICS to replace the current system is fraught with difficulties. To begin with, some current and

potential members of BRICS such as India and China have competitive relations with each other, implying that there will be limits to how closely they can cooperate in challenging the current global order. Second, some BRICS members, e.g. Brazil and India, see it as an additional resource for expanding their global economic interactions, not as a replacement of current order. Third, current and future BRICS members will constitute a heterogeneous group of countries.

The more powerful among them will likely pursue their distinct interests, thereby undermining the ability of the group to act together or maintain an internally harmonious relationship. Fourth, there will be clashes of interest among members. There are some potential conflicts between China and Russia. Possessing the second largest economy in the world, possibly moving to the top sometime soon, China will likely claim to occupy a position comparable to that of the US. It is unlikely that Russia will acquiesce to Chinese domination. Furthermore, China's Belt and Road project will likely penetrate economically and politically areas that Russia considers its zone of influence, perceiving China as intruder. Fifth, the Russian economy is too modest to allow it to become the major country that gives direction to how BRICS evolve. In conclusion, while Russia will work with China to challenge the US, the cooperation is not based on solid foundations and therefore may not last long, e.g. more than a decade or two.

Recognizing that earlier bipolarity cannot be reconstructed and Russia would not be in its command if a new bipolar system were constructed, Russia often projects a future characterized by multi-polarity. The desire not to be tied to a single pole is widely shared and conditions do not favor the evolution of a bipolar system. I would expect the evolution of a peculiar system of multi-polarity (more accurately multi-regionalism) that

is permeable, of low cohesion and multi-centered. Permeable means being able to establish links with differing intensities with others in the regional grouping, low cohesion implies pursuing policies that do not conform with maintaining the unity of the grouping and multi-regionalism suggests that countries may simultaneously join more than one regional grouping. Multi-polarity would allow Russia to become a party to several regional groupings and try to establish a prevalent position in them.

Three factors will prove problematic for Russia in managing the multi-regional relationships. First, Russia tends to overestimate its economic power. It does not have a big economy. Its economic means are volatile since much of its external income derives from exports of raw materials. Relying mainly on export income, it has failed to develop an expanding market economy. Sophisticated growth has been achieved only in defense industries for which the market is limited and increasingly competitive. Therefore, Russia's economic power may become less and less relevant as an instrument of foreign policy. Second, failing in other means, Russia tends to rely on weapons, including the nuclear, in its foreign policy, but nuclear deterrence is likely to stand in the way of using these weapons. Finally, authoritarian leadership likely to continue in the foreseeable future, thus rendering succession and therefore political change less predictable. Radical policy changes are always possible.

Andreas Umland

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs

The Kremlin recently indicated that Vladimir Putin may stay as Russian President until 2030. Beyond this, he could, after the 2020 change of Russia's Constitution, prolong his rule even further. It nevertheless seems unlikely that he will still be in power in ten to twelve years. Too many complexities have accumulated by now to expect a long gerontocratic rule by him and his coevally entourage.

The most obvious and immediate risk factor for Putin's rule is the Russo-Ukrainian War. If lost, Putin's legitimacy and regime will come under stress, and may crumble. The swift and largely non-violent acquisition of Crimea in 2014 was the high point of his rule. Conversely, a protracted and bloody loss of the prized peninsula would become its nadir and possible end.

Additional risk factors for the current Russian regime are linked to further foreign challenges, for instance, in the Caucasus. Economic recession and its social implications, ecological and industrial disasters, or domestic political instability are other potentially dangerous factors for Putin. The summer 2023 Prigozhin mutiny and autumn 2023 Makhachkala riots signal a loss of internal control not seen in previous years. Putin's health too may be in decline – though we cannot know for sure.

Whatever the case, Putin will be out at the latest by 2036, and perhaps, much earlier. The million-dollar question is what then happens to Putinism? Can the current regime survive with a new supreme leader, or

novel collective leadership continuing Putin's legacy? Or will the Putin System collapse more or less spectacularly?

This is not only an intriguing question for political analysts. It is also a challenge for Russia's citizens as well as foreign, economic, and cultural policy shapers and makers across the world. Should Russians and non-Russians, foreign governments and private investors, national and international organizations prepare themselves for political continuity or radical change in the planet's largest country?

Some Russia watchers expect an orderly transition of power within the current political elite and structure. This would probably mean a prolongation of today's form of domestic governance, and foreign behavior. In this scenario, some adaptive evolution from within the current system – but not its overthrow – may happen. The regime could degrade towards an even more centralized and increasingly neo-Stalinist one. Or it could return back to the proto-democracy of the late Yeltsin presidency.

How informative are the historical lessons and international comparisons on which such assumptions are based? Tsarist and Soviet Russia have multiple times transferred power to a new leader within authoritarian or totalitarian contexts. Other post-Soviet regimes too have managed to change their leaders while preserving their autocratic systems as well as high elite continuity.

However, these earlier Russian or other post-Soviet transitions may be dissimilar from the future Russian one. The past and non-Russian transfers happened within certain formal or informal institutional constraints inherited from the distant or recent past. Among them are dynastic principles, one-party government, or consociation of regional clans. Monarchical, communist, patriarchal, or other inherited traditions provided certain ex- or implicit guidelines. They directed, limited, and reassured actors involved in the negotiation and implementation of the power transfer.

How strong are various Russian formal constraints, and informal rules of behavior still today, however? What is the real significance of Russia's Constitution and laws, on the one side, as well as of the elite's esprit de corps, peer respect, and political friendships, on the other? Is either one of these formal and informal institutions or a combination of them capable to moderate a peaceful transition as well as to stabilize a new equilibrium? These questions are key to Russia's future, yet not easy to answer.

Over the last 24 years, Putin & Co. have systematically watered down, subdued, or perverted most Russian official institutions. Whether national elections or private property, the Russian Orthodox Church or Constitutional Court, mass media or political parties – these and other Russian structures, networks and milieus have become compromised. They have suffered from manipulation, instrumentalization, derogation, infiltration, etc. Even Russia's most prominent and powerful office, that of the President, has an unclear status since the strange presidency of Dmitry Medvedev in 2008-2012.

Russia's last three leadership successions were, one might remember, all contested and not fully predetermined. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev's nomination as General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee happened only after considerable bickering within the Politburo. In 1991, Boris Yeltsin competed for the new post of Russian President in elections that included a range of alternative candidates – from Vadim Bakatin to Vladimir Zhirinovsky. Several times thereafter, Yeltsin was on the brink of being pushed out of power. In late 1999, Vladimir Putin and his new Unity party faced a formidable political opponent in the form the Fatherland party, in State Duma elections. Only after Fatherland's poor performance in the parliamentary elections did Russia's oligarchic clans rally behind Putin as presidential candidate in 2000.

These power transfers included both official measures and informal interactions. They were channeled through certain inherited and accepted procedures including more or less meaningful elections in 1991 and 1999. The question is: what will the informal method or/and public mechanism for determining Putin's successor or team of heirs be? The Russian succession problem is a multivariate one and its solution blurred in several ways.

What are the main challenges that will face Putinism II? It is unclear what the stakes are for each of the actors who have some degree of political influence and economic stake. What exact repercussions will the choice of this or that new leadership have for the key stakeholders? Can they improve, keep, or lose positions, influence, property, or/and freedom? And, if so, how high are the stakes? Could some even lose their lives?

These questions are not only difficult to answer for observers, but also for the protagonists themselves. Under Putin, the behavior of the Russian state has become characterized by arbitrariness and limitlessness. Some stakeholders may see the succession question as an existential one and accordingly push their candidates with vengeance.

Second, it is unclear which persons either will or won't be able and willing to make a bid for the presidency or, at least, for inclusion in a new collective leadership. There may be several men and women in the Russian elite who are, already now, considering their candidacies. Some may have sufficient political and/or economic resources to go for a or the top post. Others may have ambition, but insufficient clout and money.

Who will be allowed by the FSB and Russia's other armed agencies and ministries to take part in a contest for succession? Will the different "power organs" be able to easily agree within and among themselves who is in and who is out? And what happens if there is no consensus?

Should Putin suddenly quit or die (or be announced dead), Russia's Prime Minister, currently Mikhail Mishustin, would become acting President, according to the Constitution. Given the example of Putin's advance from Prime Minister to Acting and then full President in 1999-2000, Mishustin could suddenly become a political heavyweight. Yet, Mishustin is neither a well-connected *silovik* nor a prolific public figure. His lacking home power and continuing low profile are, one suspects, the very reasons he got and holds his post. Possible future Prime Ministers under Putin may have similar qualities. Conversely, a new head of government from the power agencies and/or popularity would be a *de facto* nomination for the president.

A related third question is: Who will constitute the "selectorate" that will nominate a presidential candidate to be acclaimed nationally by means of a vote with pre-determined results? Will it be the Security Council, or an either smaller or larger circle of people? Who, if anyone, will set the limits on this circle of kingmakers?

Even if a selectorate is established in one way or another, what happens if the selectors cannot reach consensus on their preferred new president or collective leadership? In particular: what happens if entire clans, ministries, or agencies push different candidates? Could it even happen that powerful members within the selectorate take opposing ideological positions?

Normally, in such a situation, one would recommend letting the people decide. Yet, popular votes have not been democratic for more than two decades in Russia. Putin's "elections" are designed to produce national confirmation of the pre-determined leader rather than to allow free and fair competition of independent political parties.

The winner of a Russian presidential election is chosen in advance and not by way of voting. To suddenly hold nation-wide elections with an undetermined outcome would contradict patterns of behavior ingrained over two decades by thousands of public servants, party functionaries, media workers, and police officers. It may be outright impossible to conduct real elections for national, regional, and local bureaucrats tasked to organize them without some prior preparation or/and outside help.

In sum, there is triple uncertainty in the process of leadership transition – about the height of the stakes for the elite members, the circle of permitted presidential candidates, and the exact shape of the selectorate. Solution to none of these issues is currently institutionally pre-framed. Neither a party central committee nor an assembly of regional clans nor an accepted dynastic principle nor any other widely accepted procedure can authoritatively settle them.

Such indeterminacy does not necessarily imply a chaotic transfer of power or even civil war. It makes a disorderly interregnum, however, more likely than a smooth slide into Putinism 2.0. How far possible confrontations between powerful stakeholders could escalate is unpredictable. To assume, on the other hand, that conflicts during the power transfer can be avoided may be too optimistic.

Instead, a new kind of “time of troubles” may currently be in the making. Should the transition away from Putinism 1.0 be disorderly or even violent, the outcome is unlikely to be Putinism 2.0. Political predictions are notoriously difficult and unthankful to make.

Yet, one can already now say that Russia’s institutional dearth is potentially dangerous for all parties involved. Russians and non-Russians should prepare for a messy succession process. Russia’s future political regime will probably be different from the current one – whether more totalitarian or democratic than the Putin System.

Geir Westgaard

*Senior Adviser and former Vice President, Equinor; former Norwegian diplomat.**

In the oil and gas industry, we have used scenarios for decades to depict alternative futures and plan what comes next. I will go out on a limb here and present you with one rather gloomy scenario. It reflects Russia's reversion to the mean (orthodoxy, autocracy and nationality) after nearly two decades (1985-2004) of being much less dictatorial and much more conciliatory. In other words, Russia anno 2034 will not be radically different from Russia today.

Even if Putin has left the scene by 2034 – most likely for health reasons – the regime in Russia will not have changed much. The Russian elite remains more or less the same. It has supported Putin's use of history and turn to the past – especially to the Soviet victory in World War II – as a primary source of regime legitimacy. It has also bought into Putin's ideology of imperialism and revanchism, in which the war against Ukraine is central. And the bulk of the Russian population is proud of the fact that the country has been “restored as a great power” to be respected and feared. In short, Moscow's conflict with Ukraine and the West is not just Putin's war. It is Russia's war. Yet, the leadership knows that however submissive, inert and fatalistic the population may seem, there are limits to how much it is prepared to sacrifice for the sake of Russia's imperial greatness.

This means that Russia's relations with the West, especially Europe, will not be much better in 2034 than in 2024. Today, in the words of Thomas

* This note has been written in a personal capacity.

Graham, “relations are scraping the depths of Cold War antagonisms”. They have not been so hostile since 1983, the darkest year of the second half of the Cold War. A decade from now, the war in Ukraine will have further weakened Russia politically, economically, and militarily. This will increase paranoia and insecurity on the part of the Russian leadership, probably leading to more nuclear saber rattling and attacks on Western critical infrastructure. And it certainly won’t disabuse the Kremlin of the notion that the war against Ukraine is a proxy war with the collective West, led by the United States.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine almost two years ago represented a dramatic assault on the European order. This assault may not have been decisively defeated by 2034, especially not if Donald Trump is elected U.S. president again come November. The war in Ukraine is not likely to be “over” a decade from now. It may have evolved from a war of attrition to more of a frozen conflict. But this only means that the line of demarcation between Russia and the West in Europe now runs through parts of Ukraine rather than through Germany as during the Cold War.

The conflict is still there. It could turn into a festering wound and flare up at any given time. Or Ukraine and its partners could embark on the road traveled by Seoul after the Korean War (1950-53). Being integrated into Western economic and security structures after the war, South Korea achieved phenomenal growth and development, as well as increased political stability and military security. Ukraine anno 2034 will not be a member of NATO. But it will have received important security assistance and guarantees from leading NATO and Western countries. Ukraine will also be in the process of concluding its EU accession process, which over the last 10 years has helped shore up the country’s economy.

S. Enders Wimbush

Distinguished fellow for strategic studies at the American Foreign Policy Council

In 2017, a colleague and I edited a volume of analytical essays entitled *Russia In Decline* (<https://jamestown.org/press-releases/jamestown-launches-russia-in-decline-project>) in which both Western and Russian experts described in poignant detail why any imaginable future for Russia is fraught with obstacles that today's Russian state probably cannot overcome without wholesale political restructuring, economic reform, and cultural regeneration. Russia's familiar pathologies and their implications—for example, demographic deterioration, economic withering, and political re-Stalinization—were explored in detail, as were growing weaknesses that receive less attention in the Western analytical community, for example the breakdown of Russia's knowledge economy, ethnic fracturing and intensifying regionalism beyond the Kremlin's control, technological mediocrity, and military degeneration. Several of these forces together would suggest that the Russian state is powerfully challenged. Taken altogether, they argue that Russia will eventually fail.

Since that volume appeared, I have seen no convincing analysis that the conclusions of these authors are mistaken. To the contrary, the evidence points heavily in the direction of Russia's state-threatening pathologies intensifying and deepening. In my Introduction to the volume, I warned that Russia's cascading decline made it more likely that Russian leaders would understand that their window to remain geopolitically competitive was closing rapidly, which would make Russian leaders less risk averse,

prone to place long-shot bets, and take more chances. Putin's leap into Ukraine in February 2022 underlines and vindicates that assessment.

In this sense, Russia's war in Ukraine is a revealing moment of Russia's past, suggesting more about what Russia will not become than the opposite.

Russia will not be Europe, or even European. The quantity and quality of Russia's educated and technological elite—Russia's knowledge economy—will not recover from its already sickened state, even if the legions of Russians who fled Russia to avoid the Ukraine debacle begin to return at some future moment. Russia will no longer have a "strategic partnership" with China, despite what their leaders assert; Russia will increasingly become—and be seen as—China's subservient energy colony. Russia's military will not be able to project power in any meaningful way, lacking human capital, leadership, and technological superiority. Russia's economy cannot diversify beyond its heavy reliance on hydrocarbons, which will continue to be transported eastward through easily interdicted pipelines. Russia will not remain geographically whole, as restive non-Russians yearning to jettison Russia's overbearing presence seek their own futures.

Indeed, future Russia will not be a large state, as the dwindling and aged Russian population will be forced to retreat into Russia's core space, entertain citizenship in nearby independent states, or accept sanctuary in Siberia's far eastern oases, which will interact politically, economically, and culturally more with China and Asia—and eventually appear on maps of China as its sovereign territory.

The Ukraine war helps to identify what is not likely to be part of Russia's future, but simplistic linear projections of what we already see as consequences of that conflict may obscure or divert our attention from the dynamics of the future geostrategic environment around Russia that will also shape what it can become. When we think about something's

“future,” we too often imagine that thing changing in myriad ways, while everything else stays static. But Russia’s geostrategic environment is already highly fluid and changeable. In any imagining, the future world in which Russia must compete will look little as it does today, and the shape and dynamics of this change will affect Russia’s evolution in unpredictable ways.

For one, the outside world will have more nuclear actors. This will compromise what strategists have long considered to be Russia’s security blanket: the ability to threaten nuclear retaliation. One of the lessons everyone has learned from the Ukraine war is that nuclear weapons matter, for deterrence if nothing else. Can one imagine Russia’s military rampaging through eastern Ukraine if the latter had not willingly given up its substantial nuclear capability in what most Ukrainians must now consider as a misguided gesture to post-Cold War non-proliferationist sensibilities? Russia’s periphery by 2040 will almost certainly contain more nuclear or nuclear-capable states. Iran is mostly there already; Turkey will follow, as will several Middle East, North African and Asian states, like Japan and South Korea.

What if demand for Russian hydrocarbons evaporates, for example from the introduction of new technologies, economies of use, competitive marketplace dynamics, or denial—all possible if not probable outcomes? With virtually nothing else of value to sell, Russia cannot survive that world.

How does Russia fit into worlds with new or altered alliances and relationships? What does a Russia of reduced assets and capabilities bring to BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or the Eurasian Economic Union, for example, beyond bluff?

In sum, it is hard to imagine a future for Russia in which it somehow manages to eclipse or abbreviate all of its threatening pathologies to find itself competitive in the rapidly reshaping world around it. Hopes that a Navalny-like figure will eventually lead Russia out of its swamp into a liberal democratic future so desired by the West seem terminally naïve even today, when somewhere near 80 percent of Russians favor Putin's war in Ukraine. Russian culture is either irreparably corrupted or stuck in an immovable torpor. Could another violent revolution arrest Russia's socio-cultural decline, assuming that one is somehow possible?

The Russia I imagine eventually fails as a state. Russia will still exist geographically and politically in some form, and there will still be Russians, of course. But the culture of this depleted Russia will be depressed, drunken, and dismal. Vibrant Russian culture may bloom in New York or Dubai, but it will be sparse in Moscow. Inside what will be Russia's shortened borders, it will be old, sick, poor, a heavily depopulated countryside, with urban areas burgeoning with non-Russians, many Muslim. Internationally, Russia will be an isolated strategic nuisance state: episodically contentious and combustible, with little strategic leverage, but the capacity to ignite larger conflicts. Why Russia will fail seems unambiguous; how it fails will demands a great deal of attention.

