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**ABSTRACT**
By calling for Putin's removal from power, Western officials and scholars magnify Russian historic fears of a state collapse. Worse, they magnify them by fueling the Kremlin propaganda machine and reinforcing Russians' reluctance to turn against their regime. Still, Putin will inevitably have to go someday. When that day arrives, however, it is all but clear what the future for Russia will be. Will Russia after Putin necessarily collapse? Or will Putin's successor turn to the West with a plea for peace and engage the country in reforms and modernization? History can still go either way. But by creating a huge police force to repel popular discontent, accumulating vast financial reserves to escape sanctions, and modifying the Russian constitution so the ruler can indefinitely remain in power, Putin has already laid the groundwork for whoever happens to be his successor to persevere in the current course of aggression – a course where the aggressor possesses the world's largest arsenal of nuclear weapons.

**KEYWORDS**
Putin; Russia; Russian history; Soviet Union; Ukraine; United States; cold war; NATO; nuclear briefcase

Before February 24, 2022, many observers in Europe and North America considered Russian President Vladimir Putin a ruthless but pragmatic autocrat. But after the murderous invasion of Ukraine, Putin comes across as an aggressive gambler, a believer in historical myths (Zubok 2022a), and a Nietzschean power-grabber (Radchenko 2022).

For many, especially in Eastern Europe, Putin came to be an embodiment of "eternal Russia": the country that has always been bent on conquest and therefore is dangerous. From Finland to the Baltic states, from Poland to Romania, many privately consider Putin's Russia as a successor to the Soviet Union and the Russian empire. The tsars and communist rulers were all the same: imperialists bent on colonizing and expanding. And Russian people "always needed a strong leadership."[1] This reductionist view, which equates Putin, Russia, and the Russian people, is in rapid ascendance inside Washington, D.C., too – from the so-called "national security state" to think tanks. As US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin expressed it: "We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine" (Rubin 2022).

This is Cold War language. In a secret doctrine – known as NSC 20/4 – that the United States adopted in November 1948, the National Security Council stated that the American security aim was "to encourage and promote the gradual retraction of undue Russian power and influence from the present perimeter areas around traditional Russian boundaries and the emergence of the satellite countries as entities independent of the USSR" (Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States 1948).

But does Putin really embody what Russia is about? Does a more advanced and stronger Russia always need to be a more aggressive nation against its neighbors? And would Putin's successor be pursuing the same goals as the current Kremlin ruler?

Not necessarily. Rather, when looking back three or even two decades ago, one finds out the opposite was true.

## "No Putin – no Russia!"

In December 1991, Boris Yeltsin, the first democratically elected Russian President, proposed to his Ukrainian and Belorussian colleagues that the Soviet Union should be dissolved. The breakup of the "totalitarian empire," Yeltsin and his associates believed, would make room for the construction of a newly democratic Russia, which would join NATO, get integrated into Western common markets, and live in peace and mutual economic prosperity with its neighbors, including other republics of the former Soviet Union – such as Ukraine. The KGB, the main security agency for the Soviet Union, was broken down and Colonel Putin lost his job.

In Washington, there was no consensus in the Bush administration on how to deal with this new Russia. Some, like then-US Secretary of State James Baker,

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wanted to support Russian democracy while also reducing Russia's nuclear arsenals through arms control. But US Defense Secretary Dick Cheney and others in the Pentagon argued that US strategy after the Cold War should be not to cooperate with Russia but, rather, to prevent its future resurrection as a US rival. This meant taking under American wing Russia's neighbors – Eastern Europe countries, Baltic countries, and even Ukraine – to protect them against any renewed Russian domination in the future. During the rest of the 1990s, the Clinton administration kept focusing on the future of the Russian state.

Clinton argued as follows: If Russia became democratic, then the whole region would be more stable. However, if Russia went rogue, there would be a slide back into dictatorship and confrontation.

In December 1999, Yeltsin stepped down and nominated Putin as his successor. At that time, the Russian state lay in ruins both economically and financially, and US-Russian relations got tense over NATO's use of force in Yugoslavia. Even then, however, backsliding to authoritarianism looked quite improbable to many observers in the West. Clinton and his entourage were not especially troubled by the fact that Yeltsin picked Putin as his successor. After all, the argument was, the new generation of Russians was getting accustomed to democratic institutions, regularly contested elections, and the freedom to speak, travel, worship, and become independently wealthy.

Putin was picked by Yeltsin because of his reputation for loyalty; Putin was in charge of protecting Yeltsin and his family against angry Russian nationalists and people who had lost so much during the Soviet collapse. As the new Russian president, Putin initially cultivated his democratic image, and even said in his electoral manifesto: "History proves all dictatorships, all authoritarian forms of government, are transient. Only democratic systems are lasting." Yet from the start he seemed to prefer authoritarian methods and viewed himself as Russia's savior. Early on in his tenure, Putin declared that his goal was to restore Russia's power and greatness.[2]

Putin seemed to even regret the collapse of the Soviet Union, although adding that those "who want to restore it have no brain."[3] As a sign of his allegiance to constitutional democratic norms, Putin even stepped aside in 2008 to let Dmitry Medvedev, then first deputy prime minister, serve as Russia's new President. This lasted only one term, however, with the turning point being the 2011 protests in Moscow.

The following year, Putin returned to the Kremlin and vowed to preserve Russian sovereignty against the "color revolutions" engineered, in his view, from Washington. His propagandists and associates denounced political liberalism as the road to chaos, with the hidden goal of disintegrating the Russian state and possibly dismembering Russian territory. Putin took full control of Russian television and then most of the media – which began to portray him as a shrewd and tough custodian of Russian statehood against increasingly aggressive adversaries. In 2014, Putin declared a hybrid war on post-Maidan Ukraine, seizing Crimea and supporting pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine's Donbas region. This was also the year when the sycophantic speaker of the Russian legislature, Vyacheslav Volodin, declared at the elite Valdai Discussion Club: "The West does not understand the essence of Russia. Russia exists as long as Putin exists. No Putin – no Russia."[4] Liberal-minded Russians dismissed it, but they were a minority. Instead, Russian propaganda exploited this slogan quite successfully – until recently.

Most of the Russian population took these words to heart, having numerous reasons to rally around Putin before and after the invasion of Ukraine. But one reason was cardinal: historical memory. A widespread perception among Russians is that their country is at war with the whole West and that this constitutes an existential conflict for Russia. There is also widespread fear that Putin's downfall would lead to the fall of the Russian state and lead to other "times of troubles" – the phrase used to describe the three most-remembered periods of statelessness and chaos in Russia: First, in the early seventeenth century when the Russians had to elect a new tsar, then the Russian revolution of 1917, and finally, what millions of Russians remember vividly, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. These historical events led to long periods of misery, violence, civic and ethnic conflict, lawlessness, and loss of status and security for most Russians. So, when Putin, to the surprise of all Russians, took them to war, their reaction for several months was not to recoil from him but rather to rally around him.

As this author observed from many conversations with Russians during those crucial months, when even well-educated people in Moscow or St. Petersburg said "Thanks, but no thanks" to calls on social networks or in Western media for Putin's overthrow. (They were able to access such sites by using virtual private networks to overcome the double information wall imposed by the West and by their own government).

It was difficult for Russians to conceive of the end of the war with Putin in power. Yet the uncertain future of Russia after Putin frightened them even more.

Until now, this tendency has worked out very well for the stability of Putin's regime – even after his invasion of

Ukraine. Putin's most well-known critic, Alexey Navalny, had attracted huge audiences with his revelations about the widespread corruption of Putin's regime. Despite being imprisoned in 2021 – and more recently, sent to a penal colony away from the internet – Navalny and his supporters immediately denounced Putin's war as aggressive, rooted in the regime's corrupt criminal nature. Yet all of their appeals to form an anti-war protest movement fell flat, and not only because of the fear of repression. Putin remained immune to Navalny's accusations of corruption, as well as accusations of war crimes (Wesolowsky and Coalson 2019). And according to polls, the minority that wanted Putin removed from power had grown smaller, not larger, as of March 2022.[5]

To sum up, Putin's war turbocharged uncertainty and anxiety in Russian society, not only among the elites but among the public at large. Russians did not want to change horses.

Western narratives, in contrast, totally ignored Russian historic fears. On the contrary, they magnified them. Those in the West who regard Putin's removal as essential to ending the war fueled the Kremlin propaganda machine and reinforced Russians' reluctance to turn against their regime.

And yet, inevitably, Putin will have to go someday. After all, humans are mortal. When that day arrives, will Russia really collapse as a state and as a country? Is it true that if there is no Putin, there would be no Russia?

There is no crystal ball. So, we are left with the only tool available: searching the past for clues, particularly the history of power successions and the changes they led to.

## Successions. Crises. Reforms

The succession in Moscow from one ruler to another worked very differently in different periods of history. Back in the times of the Russian empire, a strict law ensured that absolute power passed in the dynasty from father to eldest son.

Still, any succession from one ruler to the next opened a window for reforms. For example, take the case of the era in the 1860s known to historians as the Great Reforms, which occurred after the death of Tsar Nicholas I. That ruler lost the Crimean War, and his defeat revealed the rot and corruption of the Russian autocracy. His son and successor, Alexander II, subsequently abolished serfdom, alleviated censorship, introduced trial by jury, and launched industrialization. This important historical precedent may have great relevance to the future of Russia after Putin.

The next era of wholesale, rapid change – and problems of succession – occurred after the monarchy was swept away in 1917 by revolution. Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks built a communist dictatorship, supported by terror, demagogic promises, and redistribution of property. Under the communist regime, every succession of leadership became a colossal problem; it was impossible to select an heir in advance. The only thing clear was that Lenin was the leader and in control. But after he got sick, other Bolshevik leaders squabbled and fought. It took Joseph Stalin a few years of plotting and ruthless intrigues to make himself a leading disciple of Lenin and eliminate other contenders – first politically, then physically. From Stalin's perspective, the rationale for the murderous Great Terror of 1936–38 was clear: He eliminated any potential rivals and became a leader more absolute than Lenin had ever been.

Stalin's death in 1953 unleashed another succession crisis. The great tyrant left the Soviet Union with the atomic bomb, but also with an impoverished people and the impossible task of preparing for a war against the West. Nikita Khrushchev, once considered little more than a court jester in Stalin's inner circle, unexpectedly pushed aside other, much more visible and popular contenders. Khrushchev blamed Stalin and his accomplices for what he called "crimes against the Party and socialism." This was the second time, after the Great Reforms of the 1860s, when a succession led not to a greater tyranny but to reforms and relative liberalization. Khrushchev's reforms are well known and included the end of mass terror, alleviation of state bondage, partial emptying of the gulag, and a consistent course to put food on people's tables and give them decent housing and living conditions. Even though the communist regime was maintained, it lost its highly personified character and became much less murderous.

Khrushchev was ousted by a palace coup in 1964. Again there was a reform, mostly to improve economic performance. His successors were quick to blame all his mistakes, including constant brinkmanship with the West, on his "harebrained schemes." They criticized him for provoking the United States and triggering the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 which had almost launched a nuclear war.

The collective leadership that toppled Khrushchev lasted for a few years until the next leader emerged. Once again, another unlikely candidate, Leonid Brezhnev, with nearly zero revolutionary credentials, had climbed up the ladder of the communist party pyramid as a loyal Stalinist and long-time associate of Khrushchev. Brezhnev promised to rule calmly, steadily, and "to wage a struggle for peace" without any further

excesses or nuclear brinkmanship. As it turned out, Brezhnev kept his promise. His early rule became associated with a political détente between East and West, and much more laxity within the authoritarian regime.

Even in the middle of the Brezhnev years, hundreds of experts in the West were already trying to guess who could become the next Kremlin leader. There was even a group of Western experts, called "Kremlinologists," who perused Soviet newspapers and watched Soviet TV to check how the Politburo members would be ranked, and who stood next to the leader on Lenin's mausoleum during military parades on Red Square. Even a small change in the pecking order could mean a lot. Inside Soviet society, this guesswork became a butt of jokes and satire. Some would say that the easiest way to guess was to look at the bodily hair of Soviet leaders: bald Lenin was succeeded by a hairy Stalin, then by a bald Khrushchev, and then a hairy Brezhnev again.

Ultimately, Soviet rulers failed to solve the problem of succession. But mother nature did it for them.

When Brezhnev died in 1982, the aging Politburo selected KGB head Yuri Andropov, even though he was terminally sick from a kidney problem. When he died in 1984, the elders selected another old and sick man, Konstantin Chernenko. US President Ronald Reagan famously quipped at the time that he wanted to negotiate with somebody in the Kremlin but "they keep dying on me."

This period added to a widespread perception that the Soviet Union had lost its dynamism and was getting weaker in the Cold War conflict against the United States. To beat that narrative, in 1985 the Politburo chose its youngest ever and relatively inexperienced member, Mikhail Gorbachev, as the leader of both the Communist Party and the superpower. After minimal preparation, Gorbachev launched far-reaching and multi-front systemic reforms in what would become the last attempt to amend and adjust the communist system to modern realities. He also presided over the end of the Cold War with the West. But Gorbachev struggled to rein in the energy of discontent that had accumulated during previous decades, and refused to use force to remain in power. To his misfortune, Gorbachev's economic reforms emptied the stores instead of filling them with goods, which added to the universal frustration within the Soviet population. His rule ended in the demise of the communist system and the state (Zubok 2021).

After the Russian Federation became independent, it looked as if the problem of succession was finally resolved. The former party-state became a constitutional federation. Boris Yeltsin, and then Vladimir Putin, were elected president by nationwide direct ballot. Unfortunately, now that Putin has emasculated all state institutions to serve his regime of personal power, Russia is back to the old curse: the "fear of succession" has made its worst reappearance since Stalin's times.

This brief tour of Russia's history disproves the conventional narrative in the West of a country doomed to keep operating under an autocratic and aggressive regime. Yes, that sometimes happened – but only sometimes. The rest of the times, Russian rulers and elites reacted to the crimes and mistakes of their predecessors and learned some lessons from the recent past.

The elites and many everyday Russians, however, do not accept this lightly.

While supporting "the devil they know," they understand that it will inevitably lead to trouble in the future. Blind worship and mortal fear has conditioned them to think that the country's leader is irreplaceable.

This feeling was not seriously challenged among Russians until September 2022, when Putin declared his so-called "partial" mobilization of hundreds of thousands of people in order to continue his war in Ukraine. Most likely, the number of those who want Putin to leave now has been growing fast. Yet the majority still fear the great internal troubles that could come, and do hope a better way can be found to succeed him.

## Passing the nuclear briefcase

When the Soviet Union became a nuclear power, its supreme leader got a new symbol of ultimate might: a nuclear briefcase with a program that authorizes the launch of nuclear weapons. This briefcase was protected by two KGB officers holding the rank of colonel. The KGB controlled secure communication for nuclear control and command, but it had no role in the actual decision-making itself. The Soviet minister of defense had a similar briefcase and was supposed to second the top leader and order the military to launch nuclear missiles if ever decided to do so.

The first transfer of a nuclear briefcase must have taken place from Khrushchev to Brezhnev in October 1964. But there is very little publicly available information about it. Still, the transition must have been smooth, because the KGB was involved in the palace coup that put in power the next leader. The briefcase then changed hands multiple times after the death of Brezhnev – to Andropov, Chernenko, and then Gorbachev – with the two KGB officers always in back of the next leader.

The second most important figure in this procedure was the defense minister who, having no real political

power, still carried a huge executive responsibility. This minister, usually a top-rank military officer, was in possession of the second nuclear briefcase that allowed him to receive the leader's order and implement it. His selection, therefore, was of crucial importance. Khrushchev and Brezhnev entrusted this position to their closest friends and war buddies. (Once in power, Gorbachev used the first opportunity at hand to fire the old minister of defense, who owed nothing to him, and appoint a new minister, Dmitry Yazov, over the heads of many worthy candidates.)

The collapse of the Soviet Union illustrates the perils of this system when loyalty crumbles. Gorbachev had full trust in the KGB and the military to carry out his orders, only to be punished for his gullibility when the head of the KGB and the defense minister plotted against him. On August 18, 1991, Gorbachev was put under house arrest and sent to a luxurious villa in Crimea. Then the KGB disconnected all communication lines to Gorbachev's summer home, and the two KGB officers departed for Moscow – with Gorbachev's nuclear briefcase. During the three days that lasted the coup, both briefcases – and the entire nuclear commands and controls – were in the hands of KGB Chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov and Marshal Dmitry Yazov, who betrayed Gorbachev's trust.

Fortunately for Gorbachev – and the world – the coup failed miserably. Yeltsin, by that time elected the first president of the Russian Federation, led the resistance to the junta, and then picked up the baton of power that had fallen from Gorbachev's hands. For four months, from late August to late December 1991, Gorbachev remained formally the commander-in-chief, and the two officers with a nuclear briefcase eventually returned to him. But he was no longer on top of Russia's nuclear command and control. The new defense minister, Yevgeny Shaposhnikov, who was appointed after the failed coup, was loyal to Yeltsin and did not follow Gorbachev's orders. Gorbachev's nuclear briefcase remained his only symbolically, just like any other luggage.

These events behind the scenes, however, were not what the world was led to believe at the time. Yeltsin announced that Gorbachev remained the commander-in-chief and that the authority to use nuclear weapons would be shared by the leaders of the nine republics that agreed to stay in some kind of a federated Union. But in reality, this awesome power passed to Yeltsin and his loyal minister, Shaposhnikov.

US President George H.W. Bush was worried, and sent his secretary of state, James Baker, to Moscow to investigate. There, beaming with pride and pleasure, Yeltsin took Baker out for a secret chat. The Soviet nuclear arsenal, he told him, was safely in his hands – and in his hands only. Three other republics – Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan – had nuclear weapons on their territory. But their leaders had no access to nuclear command and control. They had nuclear "phones" installed, but these phones were only for consultation. Relieved to hear this news, the Americans encouraged the Russian leadership to transfer nuclear weapons from the other republics to Russian territory as soon as possible. In the eyes of the world, however, Gorbachev remained the Soviet commander-in-chief until his resignation on December 25, 1991. On that day there was a ceremonial passing of the nuclear briefcase: Yeltsin refused to go and sent, instead, Shaposhnikov. Marshal came with two colonels, on Yeltsin's behalf, to receive the ultimate trophy. Gorbachev solemnly complied. He did not know that his briefcase had long been a dud – disconnected and inoperable.

Remarkably, even after those dramatic events, the system remained practically unchanged under Yeltsin, as he continued to rule as the first president of a sovereign Russia. In early 1992, Yeltsin entrusted armed forces to the former commander of Russian airborne troops Gen. Pavel Grachev, who allegedly sided with him and the Russian government during the August 1991 coup. There were some attempts to follow the US example and put the military under strict civilian and legislative control. But each time, patronage and loyalty prevailed.

What did Col. Putin learn from this history? One thing is clear: Putin keeps a man whom he trusts – but also tightly controls – as his defense minister. In 2012, when Putin returned to the presidency, he appointed Sergei Shoigu to the job.

A decade later, Shoigu is still in charge and is now supervising the Russian military in its war against Ukraine. Some even see him as Putin's future successor.[6] Indeed, Putin seems to like Shoigu so much that he even began to go on vacation with him to Shoigu's Siberian homeland of Tuva – one of the last territorial additions to the Soviet Union under Stalin. According to rumors, on the eve of the invasion of Ukraine, Putin and Shoigu reportedly consulted shamans from Tuva – spiritual practitioners who sacrifice birds and animals to read the future. Apparently, the story goes, the shamans complied and said what Putin wanted to hear. So does apparently Shoigu. The defense minister is not an alter ego of Putin. Rather, Shoigu is his loyal shadow.

The story of passing nuclear controls during times of turmoil and uncertainty has one important takeaway. This works only if the command-control structure of the military remains intact.

## The day after . . .

The future of Russia is murky at best. Still, a clear variable that could define Russia's fate is the course and outcome of its war in Ukraine. Before he launched his "special military operation" in February, Putin did some preparatory work. He created a huge police force to repel any popular discontent, accumulated vast financial reserves to escape the inevitable massive sanctions, and modified the Russian constitution so he can rule until his death. These instruments are here to stay. They have served Putin and will continue to serve him and whoever happens to be his successor.

But Putin's plan of a swift invasion did not work (Miller and Belton 2022) – and turned out to be much worse than he expected. The circle of loyal ministers around Putin had predictably acted as "yes-men" to tell him what he wanted to hear. They also turned out to be inept administrators of his will, devoid of any initiative and creativity, capable only of following their misguided leader from one failure to another, just as in the past. Putin did not realize that the Ukrainian army would put up a valiant fight, that it would be a war of attrition, and that Russia would be sanctioned to such an extent that it would be cut out from much of the world's financial and economic markets. This certainly posed unprecedented challenges to the Russian leadership.

Yet, as I wrote elsewhere, Putin's excellent team of economists proved to be an exception from the general dismal rule in the autocrat's entourage (Zubok 2022b). They showed swift initiative and creativity, managing to prevent the immediate collapse of Russia's finances and economy, pushing back the "total financial war" that Western countries have declared against Moscow in retaliation for his war in Ukraine. But, from a long-term perspective, the financial war is also a war of attrition, and the future of the Russian economy appears very bleak. The longer the war drags on, the more likely that Putin's successor will inherit a severely damaged economy and a much weaker state than before the war.[7]

Observers often wonder why Putin refused to declare war formally and for months afterward to declare a general mobilization, instead of going undercover with a special military operation. The answer to this question is simple. Russia and then the Soviet Union declared mobilization twice in its history, in 1914 and in 1941, both times when the "motherland was in danger." Russia never practiced its universal draft since its inception in 1991, so the Soviet ideological, political, and administrative structures that could do it in the Soviet past have withered away. The Russian state still has not developed new structures for a draft since then. Instead, the old structures of mobilization decay and wither away.

Consequently, the sudden switch to mobilization – after many months of promises that this measure was not necessary – inevitably led to horrendous chaos, corruption, and arbitrariness that discredited the state and the leader. Hundreds of thousands of Russian men of military age rushed to leave the country (Financial Times 2022). This is a natural reaction of a post-industrial, highly de-militarized society to a sudden attempt to treat it as cannon fodder. Russian society for now is not fit for waging a long and total war. That is why Putin's army, particularly after losing its best cadres in the first months of the war in Ukraine, consisted previously of mercenaries. It is likely that forced conscription will soon be another of Putin's failures that will challenge his regime from the inside.

What is the chance that Putin's successor will turn to the West with a plea for peace and negotiations, and address the numerous problems inside the country with reforms and modernization? It is almost certain that the war will last for as long as Putin is in power. His bungled, mythologized reasoning was the primary trigger of this war. All of his career had been built on a step-by-step progression from rebuilding Russia's "greatness" to opposing the "perfidious West" that sought to destroy Russia. His speech explaining the need for mobilization and escalation of war remains firmly within this paradigm. The war, he said, is not against Ukraine, it is against the West whose "goal is to weaken, disunite, and ultimately destroy" Russia.[8]

In other words, Putin has driven himself into a very tight corner. In his dark messianic bubble, there are only two options: to win or to perish. Yet it is almost certain that the Ukrainians and the West will deny Putin the victory he covets. This leaves him without an acceptable option. Like a sleepwalker, Putin walks only forward, without bothering anymore to look for any exit way.

It is equally plausible that any future leader, who would probably come from Putin's inner circle or from the lower-level bureaucracy, would look for such an exit. As in the past, the next ruler of Russia would have one automatic advantage: an ability to blame the disaster and ignominy of a Russian retreat on his predecessor.

Will there be hope for a less anti-Western and more peaceful Russia – as it was in the 1860s after the Crimean war, briefly after Stalin's death, and most spectacularly under Gorbachev? The reincarnation of a "new Gorbachev" in the Kremlin would probably be the most appealing prospect for Western liberals and pacifists around the world.

Unfortunately, recent Russian history makes such an option highly unlikely. The most obvious factor against this scenario is that too many in Russia know how Gorbachev's foreign policy ended: in the collapse of their own country. Instead of a promised integration of Russia into a larger Europe and common security structures, they got – at least in the view of most Russians – a unipolar world where the United States decided who was on the "right side of history" and who was not.

Russian aggressive imperialists and Russian anti-imperialists may be sharply divided, but they agree on one thing: If Russia retreats and accepts defeat in Ukraine, its future will be no better than life under Western sanctions.

There will be no reservoir of sympathy for a future Russian liberal reformer in the West. Chances are that the views of those who see Russia as an eternal enemy will prevail in NATO and the EU, if and when they come to negotiations with the Russian regime after Putin. Finally, in this bleak future, the Ukrainian government, whoever is leading it by then, might make sure that Russia is humiliated, weakened, and made to pay huge indemnities for the damage Putin's invasion has caused and may still do. Even the Nobel Prize-winner Dmitry Muratov, while opposing the war, admits: "Ukraine will never forgive Russia" (Reuters 2022).

Much of this is what Putin sought when he invaded Ukraine. Putin is an avid reader of history, and he must certainly have thought about the future of Russia after him. Not unlike Stalin toward the end of his life, the current Russian leader may see future leaders of Russia trying to piggyback on his failures, distance themselves from his repelling legacies, cater to Western values, and give in to Western pressures. So, as some observers believe, Putin wanted to bond Russian elites by blood and make sure that his successors would not be able to extricate themselves from the Ukrainian "conquests" without unacceptable damage to their authority. His line to his entourage seems to be: "Better to hang together than be hanged separately. The Hague Tribunal is not far away!"[9] If history is any guide, Putin may have failed in waging war – but succeeded in entrapping Russia. Anybody who succeeds him will indeed be chained to his legacy and find it extremely hard to break.

Nobody can really tell how Russia can walk back to the status quo ante bellum without endangering its statehood and perhaps even its territorial integrity. Especially painful is the issue of Crimea: its annexation in 2014 boosted Putin's credentials and paved the road to the current war. The abandonment of this peninsula by any future ruler would cause a major political crisis at home and lead to the possible secession of other Russian territories. There is a marginal discussion in the West that speculates on the need to "decolonize Russia."

Irrespective of real possibilities for such a scenario, Russian authorities keep this option in mind, and this will constrain any future reforms post-Putin. There have been historical precedents in Russia when fears of secession prevented deeper modernization and reform: in 1863 the Polish Revolt cut short the great reforms of Alexander II, and a century later the revolutions in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968 made Soviet rulers abrogate their reformist zeal.

Stalin's successors were ultimately overwhelmed by the burden of the past – above all the Cold War with the West. The past might be also the main obsession of Putin's successors. They might be squeezed between a rock and a hard place: how to reform the regime without letting it be crushed.

The stand of the West and its leadership will be crucial on the day Putin goes, just as it was crucial when he decided to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russian fears of defeat and surrender are what the West capitalizes on now as the war drags on.

Perceptive observers will notice that, for understandable reasons, the West has created a clear path for Ukraine and Ukrainian citizens to get integrated into the European Union. But the West offers Russia and Russian citizens plenty of sticks, but no carrots. The promise of more sanctions on Russia, denial of entry for Russians to Western countries, a declining standard of living for Russians, huge reparations to be paid to Ukraine, and the prospect of trials and humiliation may look like fair and deserved retribution for the West. But for history buffs, it is all too reminiscent of the Treaty of Versailles for Germany in 1919 and, more recently, of the conditions imposed on a defeated Serbia in 1999.

Those historical moments also consisted of all sticks and no carrots. And many Russians, in their grim fatalism, may still decide that fighting is their only option. The flight from Putin today may turn into a Ukrainian victory and the demise of his regime. Yet Russian history always has another option in store. Despair and outrage at Russian defeats and the disorganized draft may transform into a long-term determination, grim prospects, and a fatalist stance as seen so many times in Russian history.

Any discussion of another kind of peace is currently impossible, given the moral and political climate in the West and the willingness to maintain Western unity in

the face of Russian imperialism. But absent some clarity on how to end this game of blood, Russian rulers and Russian elites after Putin will likely persevere in their current course of aggression – as long as they have the material and human resources they need, as well as the patience and the inherent fatalism of Russian society.

The fate of Europe and the world will remain hanging on a thread of contingencies, magnified by the huge number of nuclear weapons under the Kremlin's control.

## Notes

1. Eastern European politicians and journalists refrain, of course, from explicit historical and racialized statements, but one can see many expressions of this nature in social networks, such as Twitter. The phrase about the Russians always in need of the strong leader is from an interview of the Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas available at: https://www.blick.ch/politik/estlands-premierministerin-kaja-kallas-bietet-putin-die-stirn-wir-duerfen-kein-zeichen-des-zoegerns-zeigen-id17769969.html.
2. Vladimir Putin, "Russia at the Turn of the Millennium," December 30, 1999. Available at: https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/ilos/RUS2504/v14/russia-at-the-turn-of-the-millennium.doc. For more details see: Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Knopf, 2016); also Philip Short, *Putin* (London: Bodley Head, 2022).
3. https://aif.ru/politics/world/251189.(Original in Russian)
4. https://www.mk.ru/politics/2014/10/23/volodin-est-putin-est-rossiya-net-putina-net-rossii.html. (Original in Russian)
5. https://ridl.io/ru/boyatsya-znachit-uvazhayut/. (Original in Russian)
6. https://www.golosameriki.com/a/shoigu-putin/1590227.html. (Original in Russian)
7. For a pessimistic view of the current state and the future of the Russian economy see: https://fortune.com/author/jeffrey-sonnenfeld/.
8. http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390. (Original in Russian)
9. I owe this idea to Aleksander Baunov in his excellent interview "What Happens to Russia?" available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rY_XyEVHK5M.

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