



Russia Today: Three Horsemen of the Russian Apocalypse

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As early as in the late 1980s, academic Nikita Moiseev remarked that Russia was entering a period of dusk that could, in equal measure, turn into a dawn or a decline. Today, there is hardly anybody left outside the immediate “Kremlin circle” (or for that matter even inside it) who would continue to believe in Russia’s dawn. A profound demographic crisis—simultaneously quantitative and qualitative—alongside the growing technology gap that separates Russia from the West as much as from the East, testify to the fact that Russia is drooping toward decline rather than being poised in anticipation of a new dawn. And, even though *drooping toward* does not necessarily lead to *dropping into*, estimates of Russia’s strategic development in the 21st century are almost unanimous in their pessimism, a pessimism that can hardly be deemed unfounded.

Scenarios of Agony

However, no consensus exists in assessing the *reasons* for Russia’s decline; hence, a multitude of scenarios exists for its future: every blueprint for a perspective development is necessarily based on understanding the reasons for the decline. The scope of this essay does not allow an overview of all possible reasons for Russia’s decline. I will therefore put forward a theory, which I personally consider the most credible (being of course fully aware that such an approach is necessarily subjective).

I believe that the most profound reason for the decline lies in the thinning of Russia’s “cultural layer” and consequent degradation of the elites, who turned out to be incapable of finding adequate responses to new historical challenges. (The reasons for this “cultural dystrophy” is a subject of a separate and extended discourse.) All other factors, including lack of democracy, general institutional weakness, corruption and the criminalization of society, are secondary.

The general “picture of decline”—its pace and other important parameters—largely depends on the pace of the elites’ further degradation. In theory, such a decline can be followed by an ascent

if, for some largely accidental reasons, Russia breeds a new “counterculture” and generates new elites who will, using a new trajectory, be capable of setting it into a new historical orbit. Although this scenario does not look very likely today, it cannot be completely ruled out.

It is, however, very important to understand that the current trend cannot be reversed without changing the cultural matrix. Without added “cultural value,” any political or social action (resistance) of the existing elites will not only fail to improve the situation, but, in all likelihood, will make it even more dangerous and unpredictable. Positive changes are possible only with the emergence of an alternative culture that can potentially grow out of either the mutation of existing elites or evolution of marginal countercultures.

Most probably, the situation in Russia will evolve according to one of three scenarios, which could provisionally be called “Ice Age” (prolonged and slow demise with no resistance from the elites), “Crash Landing” (quick and painful dissolution as a result of the internal struggle between existing elites) and “Alternative Russia” (transition through a period of rough historic turbulence and emergence of a new “Russian civilization” with new elites and a new cultural paradigm). The probability of each of these three scenarios will be determined by the intensity of the elites’ resistance to cultural degradation. The higher the resistance, the more turbulent Russia’s immediate future will be.

With that said, paradoxically, in the short- and mid-term perspective, the less promising the scenario, the more peaceful it will be for Russia itself as well as for the world community. And, conversely, the more hopeful the vision, the more unease Russia will bring to itself and the rest of the world. High fever is a sign of the body actively resisting an illness. But from a long-term perspective everything looks to be its direct opposite: the longer Russia’s internal conflicts remain unresolved, the more intense the agony of the finale will be.

The Ice Age

At present, the most likely scenario for Russia’s development is a lengthy period of “deep freeze.” The country’s current political regime is characterized by two seemingly contradictory qualities: It is stable but at the same time unsteady. Vladimir Putin’s Russia resembles a ball carefully poised on top of a parabola: If not touched, it will remain there forever (stability), but once pushed it will never return to its initial position (unsteady). The opposite occurs when the regime is steady but unstable, with the ball rolling inside the parabola: No matter how hard one tries to push it aside, it will inevitably return to the concave center.

The survival strategy for the regime is to protect—inasmuch as it is possible—its “ball” from any external jolts and internal perturbations. So far, the strategy has been successful and is likely to remain so for a long time. Internally, the regime is protected by low consumer standards of the majority of the population (the proverbial Russian endurance); and externally, it is safeguarded by its nuclear arsenal. Putin has proved a good student of Thatcherism: A weak government becomes especially vulnerable once it begins reforms. His credo is simple: No reforms, and by any means, avoid extremes.

Even though Putin is subject to all-around criticism, and in the eyes of many of his opponents the regime is all but a reincarnation of the Soviet-era “evil empire,” it has to be admitted that the reality is nowhere near many of these accusations. In virtually all of its actions, the regime tends to pursue a kind of “middle of the road” policy. It remains quite liberal in comparison with many other contemporary regimes (even in the post-Soviet space) and especially with those of the recent past. Freedom of speech remains on a relatively high level; repressions are isolated and selective.

Even in foreign policy, in spite of all its aggressive rhetoric and actions, the regime is driven exclusively by the necessity to maintain internal balance as a condition for its self-preservation. In reality, it has no global ambitions whatsoever of “conquering the world.” Putin’s policy is an endless game of poker, with bluffing as its predominant technique. Putin is quite open to negotiation and this negotiability is the main prerequisite for his regime’s survivability.

Putin is often forced to act “on the brink,” but at the same time, he is extremely watchful never to step into the verge. Russian history is full of paradoxes. Progressives consider Emperor Nicholas I one of the most hateful Russian rulers. However, after the Decembrist Revolt of 1825, for the next thirty years until Nicholas’s death in 1855, there was not a single execution in Russia. In the same way, Putin’s rule will one day be called Russia’s “Silver Age” (with Brezhnev’s stagnation being its “Golden Age”). This age can last much longer than many today would want to believe—it could extend to at least the entire length of Putin’s physical life.

In the absence of external threats (of which there are none), the lack of resistance from political elites becomes a prerequisite for the regime’s longevity. The regime is fully aware of this, and undertakes Herculean efforts not to make any sudden or abrupt movements that might shatter and/or polarize the elites. If it manages to remain successful in this, the *status quo* may last until the moment (most likely within the first half of the 21st century) at which Russia becomes so rotten inside that its political system will collapse relatively painlessly. The cause for the collapse may be completely negligible, even ludicrous, by today’s standards.

To all intents and purposes, Russia’s ill-wishers should by all means protect and cherish Putin and his regime. In fact, Putin is a genius of social euthanasia. Under the guise of an undemanding patriotic anesthesia, he helps Russia to die an easy and comfortable death without regaining consciousness and causing any problems to itself or its neighbors. The glacier will slowly melt, and a few more-or-less habitable islands will emerge from beneath.

Crash Landing

The problem with the above most likely “ice age” scenario is that with its materialization, political risks will grow exponentially: The regime will find it more and more difficult to avoid sudden or abrupt movements. For the above-mentioned reasons, these risks will remain latent—as long as the ruling elites maintain their suicidal unity. Their resistance is unlikely but not impossible.

Unfortunately, the resistance of existing elites within the current cultural paradigm will worsen rather than improve the present state of things. A split during a crisis would be disastrous. What

happens next is defined in technology as “an avalanche-like deterioration of a crisis.” A sudden “removal” of the regime would pose a much more formidable threat to Russia than its gradual mortification under bureaucratic pressure. Indeed, it would also constitute a serious challenge to the world at large.

Two opposing factions—“the right” and “the left”—are already quite visible within the ruling elite. A split could be initiated by either party, not at all necessarily by the adherents of democratic reforms. Internal (inside the system) opposition will begin seeking support in society. This, as has already happened more than once in Russia, will in turn vastly multiply the potency of the external opposition. In fact, the entire *perestroika* scenario was played out according to this pattern: Reformers within the Politburo bestowed upon the initially feeble and insignificant protest movement “most favored nation” status.

With the boat rocked, the regime will reveal its weakest link, relations between the federal center and the regions. Even today, as most observant analysts note, Putin’s one-way administrative system makes the central government largely dependent on local governors and elites. In response to fluctuations in the center, local authorities will increasingly champion the idea of autonomy by trying to ring-fence and protect their budgets. The Chechen conflict will reignite, and it is quite likely that the regime that began its life with the suppression of the Caucasus will find its burial ground in the very same Caucasus.

Things, however, will not end with the Caucasus; and the faux federation will start crumbling like a house of cards. Very quickly (within a few years), this huge country may break into several parts, each orientating toward a nearest major geopolitical platform. The primary, parental central Russia will in this case be reduced to a small, second-rate marginal state with the all-too-well-known symptoms of a failed state.

In the worst-case scenario, the newly minted heirs of the empire will find themselves in uneasy or even confrontational relations with each other, and we will witness Balkanization, or—in extreme cases—even Afghanization of the conflict. Against this background, Ukraine will appear a stronghold of European stability; a stepping-stone and proxy for Western policies. This will be its only chance to regain Crimea. The “crash landing” of a former “geopolitical strategic bomber” will of course be the worst scenario for Russia’s future development and will present a most threatening challenge to the world at large.

Alternative Russia

The existing elites cannot offer Russia any other scenario apart from “half-decay” or “decay,” with the difference between the two being only in the pace and intensity of disintegration. One cannot, however, fully exclude the possibility of new elites and a new cultural matrix emerging from cultural and ideological mutations. Mutations are inadvertent and unpredictable, and the probability of a favorable mutation is infinitely small. Without them, however, history would be much too straightforward and dull.

I would not discard the chance that once Russia embarks on a period of revolutionary changes, one of the now marginal countercultures could be capable of forming a new cultural matrix. In

the early 20th century, the Bolsheviks did exactly that by creating a radically new “Soviet civilization.” A descendant of a more general Russian cultural tradition, it nevertheless occupied a very distinctive niche of its own. This civilization managed to survive for over seven decades under most unfavorable conditions.

In this scenario, the decline of a decaying Russian civilization would become a prelude to the dawn of another, new one. The new elite will have to cut the Gordian knot of problems that it would have inherited from the old regime and that are insolvable within the imperial paradigm. Virtually inevitably, it will be forced to take a step no previous Russian regime could dare take in the course of the last 400 years. It will have to dismantle the imperial structure of Russian society and embark on a profound and tangible federalization program that would establish some twenty major, largely autonomous, and self-sustainable constituent entities.

This very risky turnaround, akin to a roller coaster loop, is about the only chance to preserve “Pax Russica,” not only as a cultural but political entity. Creating a Russian national state would require an extended transitional period with continual and not necessarily peaceful infighting between the old and the new. Democratization of the Russian state would be an overall general trend rather than its everyday reality. The world community, in spite of its selfish instincts, will have to exercise great wisdom and careful consideration to be able to discern and support the seedlings of a new Russia, for the very simple reason that preserving manageability and stability across such an enormous space are in the vital interest of all humankind. Admittedly, the chances for the realization of this scenario remain very small.

Russia Beyond the Horizon

Russia’s future is cut off from us by the horizon of our illusions, which does not allow us to accept its inevitable stride. In the long term, the three suggested short- and mid-term scenarios of Russia’s development (prolonged half-decay, instantaneous breakdown, and replacement of the cultural paradigm) are reduced to only the second two: break-up into several independent states and profound federalization.

The sooner Russia breaks apart, the more painful this process will be. To a large degree, the newly formed states will find themselves under the protectorate of neighboring Japan, China, Iran and Turkey. Central “parent” Russia will remain a part of Europe, but for a long time it will be the continent’s “sick man.” For a long time to come, control over Russia’s remaining nuclear arsenal will continue to be the world community’s major headache. While undergoing this agony, Russia can provoke military conflicts of varying intensity.

Today, a vision of an essentially new national statehood in place of existing Russia seems nearly utopian. However, it cannot be completely cast aside as a possibility. Preserving Russia’s national unity within existing borders is impossible without genuine federalization. If this happens, structurally Russia will transform into something between the United States and the European Union. For the world at large, preserving Russia’s unity remains without any doubt the least expensive and the least dangerous scenario.

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