



Russia in Decline: Possible Scenarios

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Introduction

It is important to note at the beginning that the majority of Russian officials, as well as the majority of Russian people more generally, do not think that contemporary Russia is in decline. To the contrary, they believe that it is a state with the power to influence world politics in many parts of the globe. During Vladimir Putin's third presidential term, Russia reverted from efforts to become an "innovation state" to a much more familiar "mobilization state." The majority of Russians supported Putin's actions to annex Crimea, and they believe that Western sanctions against Russia for that action are unjust. As one person wrote on Facebook in 2014: "Early on I had many serious questions about President Vladimir Putin, but now, when our motherland is in danger, the duty of every honest officer is to unite around our supreme commander-in-chief."

Main Political Actors in Contemporary Russia

Today, in August 2016, it is possible to identify both real and potential actors on the political scene of Russia, from the conservative to the liberal ends of the political spectrum.

Two kinds of the most conservative actors exist in contemporary Russia. The first of them—Ramzan Kadyrov—is the official head of administration of the Chechen republic, which is in fact a very repressive regime in which only a few Russian laws are in force. Some authors have noted, by way of illustration, that the real conqueror in the second Chechen war was Kadyrov's clan, and that now Russia pays tribute to Chechnya because of it. A great deal of evidence exists that the assassination of opposition politician Boris Nemstov in spring of 2015 was organized from this region.

The second conservative actor comes from Russia's power structures, the so-called *silovki*. Alexander Bastrykin, head of the Russian investigating committee, is one of the most prominent among them. He is noted for recently proposing radical and partly anti-constitutional measures,

which, if realized, would transform Russia into a nearly totalitarian state. Other individuals and the power structure are less public in their declarations, but they advocate similar things.

These two actors come from the realm of political elites. In addition to them, we can mention a group of conservative intellectuals, for example, the geopolitical writer Alexander Dugin; the writer and “singer of Soviet imperialism” Alexander Prokhanov; the TV journalist and member of the council of the Russian president for civil society and human rights Mikhail Shevchenko; the president of the Academy of geopolitics General Leonid Ivashov: all of whom came together in 2012 to form the so-called Izborsky Club. Putin’s move to the right, which began in 2012, was stimulated in large part by these conservative intellectuals, whose ideas and proposals, along with those of other members of the Izborsky Club, contributed heavily to his thinking. The Izborsky Club itself was created in 2012 as an alternative to the much more liberal Valdaysky Club, at whose meetings Putin participated frequently. Later, Putin would move between these two centers of political ideas.

In addition to these conservative actors, we can add a fourth, one not from the ranks of the political elites or intellectuals but from the active participants of military actions in “Novorossiia”—in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of eastern Ukraine in 2014–2015: Igor Strelkov (Girkin). Strelkov, in the summer of 2014, was nominally minister of defense of the Donetsk People’s Republic, where he led thousands of volunteers who believed in the “Russian spring” project and who participated in the military actions for ideological reasons. Today, they have intense debates as to whether their activities, which caused the deaths of many of their friends, were in fact a mistake.

Yet another important group of Russian political actors are those satisfied with the contemporary Russian political regime. These are also the members of the so-called *silovki*; that is, main players in the military and other power structures who are involved in business activities that have resulted in their receiving a substantial profit from Russia’s positions. These principals maintain very close links with other groups of businesspeople who are exceptionally loyal to the presidential administration of Putin, and who are prepared to share their profits with Russian officials. Another stratum of powerful political actors—coming directly from the political elite—is found in higher positions in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of power as well as in the presidential administration itself, which is the highest form of power in the state. All three of the so-called opposition parliamentary parties (Communist Party of Russia, Justice Russia, and the Liberal-Democratic Party of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy) are part of this political elite. Their “opposition” is only perfunctory.

The breadth of liberal opposition in contemporary Russia is very narrow. The somewhat influential actors from this group belong to the so-called systemic liberals—for example, the former minister of finance Alexei Kudrin; former minister of economics and now head of the powerful Sherbank, German Gref; and even occasionally Deputy Prime Minister Arkadiy Dvorkovitch. A second group of liberal actors—pure political activists—are the leaders of the “Apple” (“Yabloko”) party (Grigory Yavlinsky) and of the more oppositional PARNAS party under the leadership of former minister Michael Kasyanov. Young Alexey Navalny, who received 27 percent of votes in the mayoral election in Moscow, in 2014, and his supporters are also part of this group of liberal political actors. The third subset of these liberally minded political actors are citizen activists, members of independent NGOs in social movements, which were part of the base of the substantial

opposition protests in the winter of 2011–2012, in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other large Russian cities. It must be noted, however, that many of these protest participants were leftist and nationalist activists. Now, in August 2016, some of these activists support Russia's contemporary regime as part of the so-called Crimean consensus, while others have no evident political leaders.

Possible Scenarios

When we try to draw out some possible scenarios for Russia's development, including scenarios of Russian decline, we can see a number of variants. We will use a standard model for forecasting these scenarios—negative, realistic and positive. Both the negative and realistic variants are likely scenarios for Russia in decline, but we can foresee some chance for other possibilities.

Scenario 1 (Negative)

Actors from the Conservative groups described above become the main actors on the political stage. Victory by Ramzan Kadyrov's group has little probability; therefore, this group may be liquidated, perhaps through the assassination of Kadyrov or as the result of a *coup d'état* in the Chechen republic, organized by other Chechen clans. These events may or may not be supported by Vladimir Putin, who has created his own system of "checks and balances" in which Kadyrov has been assigned an important counterbalancing role. We can see two variants of this scenario.

Scenario 1. Variant 1: Putin, together with loyal military groups, punishes those responsible for the death of Kadyrov. The situation then reverts to scenario 2.

Scenario 1. Variant 2: Conservative "*silovki*" responsible for the liquidation of Kadyrov isolate or liquidate Vladimir Putin, replacing him with someone from among their own leaders, for example, Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, who is very popular in the Russian population. Many political and economic leaders of the second ("pro-Putin") and third ("liberal") groups will not support such a *coup d'état*. Consequently, severe political repression will take place. Of this variant, we can imagine two sub-variants.

Scenario 1. Variant 2.1: The result of this *coup* will be similar to that of the attempted *coup d'état* in August 1991, the final trigger for the collapse of the Soviet Union. Leaders from some republics in the Russian Federation—and this may be, in the first instance, the president of Tatarstan—will set in motion movements and processes to exit from the Russian Federation. No strong, charismatic leader, as was Boris Yeltsin in August 1991, will be at the center of the opposition to the *coup*. Most likely, the Russian Federation will collapse into six or seven parts: the Far East, Siberia, Ural Republic, Russian Northwest, the Moscow region—all with different political regimes. Many of these new regimes will possess nuclear weapons, and some very dark scenarios are likely to emerge. Later, integration may be possible, but that will be another story.

Scenario 1. Variant 2.2: Disintegration will only be stopped by the use of extreme violence. A new political regime will be created in Russia—something near to the neo-totalitarian regime supported by the two conservative groups of actors noted earlier: intellectuals from the Izborsky Club and active participants of military actions in "Novorossiia." A new official ideology for Russia will be established to support these developments, perhaps some variant of a neo-Eurasian ideology. A

new constitution will be adopted, one that lacks any protections for human rights. The death penalty will be reinstated. In all likelihood, aggressive actions against neighboring countries, specifically Ukraine, will be undertaken as a kind of realization of “Novorossiya-2.” A very dangerous scenario will ensue, given the possible use of nuclear weapons during military action. This new neo-totalitarian regime will be destroyed eventually, in some way, as is every totalitarian regime, but doing so will increase the risk of a Third World War.

Scenario 2 (Realistic)

The contemporary political regime in Russia will be prolonged, with irregular power shifts from the west to the east, and vice versa. Political repression will not be particularly widespread. Borders with other countries will open, while members of the political opposition will take the opportunity to emigrate. Profits from oil and gas will be enough to guarantee some level of social security. While such benefits will dwindle over time, the population will remain quiet in the face of heavy television propaganda. There will be no serious changes to the constitution. In the international arena, the focus will be on the development of the Eurasian Union. Russia will leave the Council of Europe, although a special consultative status may be created for it, allowing it to engage in some kinds of demonstrations or imitations of Russia as a great power, probably along the lines of the current operation in Syria, but not more. Socially and intellectually active citizens will emigrate to Europe and the United States, and the possibilities for indigenous Russian innovation and development will become less and less. Russia will move closer and closer to the precipice of becoming a “loser state.”

This scenario will coincide with the prolonged leadership of Vladimir Putin. Therefore, the scenario will be limited by Putin’s health. In the case of his serious illness or death, the situation would likely change very quickly, and scenario 2 would quickly transform into scenario 1, variant 2, or into scenario 3. The probability of the first of them—the radical conservative scenario—would be reduced with the passage of time.

Scenario 3 (Positive)

Today (August 2016), this scenario seems somewhat fantastic, but we should recall the situation in the early 1980s, when no one could imagine the end of the Communist Party’s rule. Therefore, it would be prudent to imagine a situation that takes place in the Russian leadership similar to Gorbachev’s *perestroika*. It is of course extremely difficult to forecast the actual dynamics of events: Perhaps Putin himself might decide to transfer power to Alexi Kudrin or to German Gref; or part of Putin’s political elite could decide to transform Russia from a “loser state,” while Putin actually listens to them. A second variant of this scenario would see these decisions being taken by Putin’s successors. Yet a third variant might result in the appearance of a real political opposition with positions and influence: for example, if at the time of the 2016 election, the “Apple” party and PARNAS produce factions in the state Duma.

If scenario three is to be realized, it will have to be accompanied by the replacement of today’s TV propaganda with real information and honest political analysis. A special federation law concerning the rights and limitations of the activities of the administration of the Russian president will have to be adopted. The judicial system of Russia must be reformed in a way that produces

truly independent courts. The Russian parliament will need to be able to enforce its actions. Russian business will require real “rules of the game” based on law, not on the arbitrary decisions of officials. Proven anticorruption activity must take place. International politics will need to be based on the concept of partnership relations with other countries, with each respecting the national interests of the other. In this new climate, the socially and intellectually active Russians who emigrated earlier will decide to return to Russia.

This last scenario would not be described as “scenario of decline” for Russia, of course. And it is well worth keeping in mind, as our previous analysis has demonstrated, that the negative scenarios described above are not negative only for Russia, but for many other countries, too. A “declining Russia” is likely to be a very risky proposition for world politics.

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