

Crisis:

Russia

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Lilia Shevtsova and David J. Kramer



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This is a collection of articles published from 2011 through 2013 in *the American Interest*, *Journal of Democracy*, *Current History*, *Diplomaatia*, and *Yezhednevny Zhurnal*. Some of the articles were co-authored with David Kramer.

The articles reflect on Russia's current trajectory, its relations with the West, Western thinking about Russian civilization, modern authoritarianism and its Russian and Chinese incarnations, and the use of foreign policy for the preservation of authoritarian regimes.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 7 About the Authors
- 9 Letter to the Reader
- 12 What's the Matter with Russia?  
*Lilia Shevtsova*
- 20 Russia is Awakening: Will It Implode or Transform?  
*Lilia Shevtsova*
- 32 Doing Well By Doing Right. Some Mythbusting about U.S. Policy  
Toward Russia  
*David J. Kramer & Lilia Shevtsova*
- 41 Putinism Under Siege; Implosion, Atrophy, or Revolution?  
*Lilia Shevtsova*
- 54 Why Russia Doesn't Hold Keys to Syria  
*David J.Kramer & Lilia Shevtsova*
- 58 Ukraine, Russia, and Two Horses  
*Lilia Shevtsova & David J.Kramer*
- 62 Obama vs. Romney: Who Would Putin Pick?  
*Lilia Shevtsova & David J. Kramer*
- 67 Goodbye, America!  
*Lilia Shevtsova*
- 90 After the Elections, All Eyes on Georgia  
*David J. Kramer & Lilia Shevtsova*
- 94 The Next Russian Revolution  
*Lilia Shevtsova*

- 104 How Will Russia React to Obama, Round Two? It depends on which  
“Russia” we’re talking about  
*Lilia Shevtsova*
- 110 Germany and Russia: The End of Ostpolitik?  
*Lilia Shevtsova & David J. Kramer*
- 118 What the Magnitsky Act Means  
*David J. Kramer & Lilia Shevtsova*
- 125 The Crisis in the West... and How It Affects Those  
Who Have Not Become the West  
*Lilia Shevtsova & David J. Kramer*
- 130 Russia and China: Is the World Ready for Their Decline?  
*Lilia Shevtsova*
- 138 Here We Go Again: Falling for the Russian Trap  
*David J. Kramer & Lilia Shevtsova*
- 144 A Realist’s Response to an Idealist  
*Lilia Shevtsova*
- 150 The Agony  
*Lilia Shevtsova*
- 157 About the Carnegie Endowment

# About the Authors

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# Letter to the Reader

## On Russia and the West in Troubling Times

This is a collection of polemical articles published mostly in 2011-2013 in the *American Interest*, *Journal of Democracy*, *Current History*, and *Diplomaatia*. Some of the articles were co-authored by David Kramer.

The articles reflect on Russia's current trajectory, its relations with the West, Western thinking about Russian civilization, about modern authoritarianism, and about its Russian and Chinese incarnations, and the use of foreign policy for the preservation of authoritarian regimes. These reflections introduce a broader and more dramatic theme: crisis, as it is experienced by an obsolescent political and social system, and as it is experienced by a system in need of rejuvenation. In essence, these essays present the reader with a snapshot of the historical period in which we live.

The drama inherent in this period lies in the fact that the two predominant political and social models – authoritarianism and liberal democracy – are experiencing simultaneous crises.

These crises are different in nature. Authoritarianism is undergoing a period of decline and decay foreshadowing its demise as a civilizational system. The symptoms of this demise have become self-evident in the case of Russia. While China's authoritarian system still commands considerable social and political resources for self-preservation, there are growing indications that it, too, is gradually losing its vibrancy and resilience.

Western liberal democracy faces a different type of crisis – a crisis of renewal, at the end of which the West should arrive at a more advanced form of social and political organization. If it indeed occurs, this would not be the first time such a transformation has taken place. Western civilization also underwent processes of evolution as a result of the crises of the 1930s and 1970s. With any luck, it will do so again as a result of this crisis.

In other words, the present moment in global affairs is defined by a concurrent crisis of two civilizational paradigms. The fact that these crises are occurring simultaneously diminishes the chances of a successful exit from the authoritarian model. Russia is the first to suffer from this fact: Its system of personalized power is already bankrupt, but it

finds no other system to aspire to. Just think about it: How can Russian society find a way to freedom, competition, and rule of law when the West, which embodies these concepts, is itself intellectually and politically demoralized? But even if the current state of the European integration project and the modern capitalist model (as well as socio-economic conditions in the United States) are only temporary, they still seriously complicate Russia's exit from its authoritarian bind.

If crisis once again breathes new life into Western civilization as it has in the past, what price will the West and the world pay for this resuscitation? How long will the world have to wait for the West to reclaim its mantle of moral and political leadership? Finally, what will the new model look like?

If, in the end, society is incapable of reforming itself in any other manner, then we can look at periods of crisis in a positive light. After all, the price society pays to bring itself out of crisis is usually lower than the price it would pay if it were to remain mired in stagnation and decay.

So I hope the reader will remember to remain optimistic while reading the analysis presented in this book. Recognizing the problem is the first step to arriving at a solution. More importantly, it is both necessary and healthy to dispense with the illusion that we can respond to the challenges of the modern world by returning to the past. Russia cannot be saved by resorting to traditional authoritarian mechanisms; its relations with the West cannot be improved by having yet another go at its traditional modes of engagement; its authoritarian regime cannot reinvent itself with a mere change of leaders.

Naturally, the articles in this book focus mostly on Russia. I don't see Russia as just a country whose society is desperately struggling to find its way to freedom and rule of law; I see it as a test for Western civilization. Will the West be able to show the way to an alternative for Russia's system of personalized power? Can it articulate a new policy that will create a benign environment in which other states can make their transitions to freedom, rather than an environment that impedes their progress, as is often the case?

While the majority of these essays touch on Russia, many take up other subjects as well: the civil war in Syria and the world's inability to stop the bloodshed there; the twists and turns of Ukrainian and Georgian post-communist development; the causes of the present global democratic recession; President Barack Obama's foreign policy; and Germany's "*Ostpolitik*." All of these subjects, however, inevitably intersect with the broader reflections on the fate of global authoritarianism and the West's commitment to including a normative dimension in its policies.

You can treat these articles as testimony from the era we are still living in. We do not yet know when or how this era will end. You may find some of the views expressed here somewhat naïve and simplistic. Our

outlook on some trends may evolve in six months or a year as present-day trends evolve or, perhaps, as we become wiser. Look at these essays as the tail-end of an unfinished history – a history which will most likely determine our future.

I would like to thank the great team who prepared this manuscript for publication. I am grateful to Daniel Kennelly, who helped with editing, Leon Geyer for his help with translation, Natalia Bubnova for her assistance in the manuscript preparation, Veronika Lavrikova for shepherding the manuscript through the production process, and Yakov Krasnovsky for the book design.

# What's the Matter with Russia?

Lilia Shevtsova / *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 21,  
Number 1, January 2010

Postcommunist states have taken shape differently depending on the development paths chosen by the elites of the former communist countries. The Central and East European states have restructured themselves with liberal democracy as their foundation. By contrast, Russia and most of the newly independent states on former Soviet territory have reverted to various forms of personalized power. It seems to me that two circumstances ensured the integration of “New Europe” into liberal Europe: the ability of the elites of New Europe to reach a consensus on building their new states based on European standards, and the European Union’s readiness to accept New Europe into its fold.

Paradoxical though it may sound, the very fact of Russia’s existence was invaluable in facilitating New Europe’s transformation. The drive to escape the former suzerain laid the foundations of New European nationalism, which united left and right and legitimized the former Soviet satellite states’ decision to set their course toward Europe – a destination that they could reach only by taking the liberal-democratic road. Equally paradoxical, even as the New Europeans sought sovereignty from Russia, they were willing to cede some of their newfound independence to Brussels.

The West, in turn – acting not so much out of altruism as out of a desire to guarantee its own security – was ready to expand and integrate into its civilization the former communist countries that separated Old Europe from an inscrutable Russia still struggling with its own complexes. New Europe’s postcommunist history reveals an evolution that has not been easy. Essays published in the *Journal of Democracy* show that all the Central and East European countries encountered problems along the way.<sup>1</sup> But these were problems of how to put into practice the principles of liberal democracy. Nowhere was there ever a real question of abandoning the European rules of the game.

Russia’s circumstances could not have been more different: In Russia, the elite proved unable to reach a consensus on the direction of the country’s transformation and

<sup>1</sup> See Jacques Rupnik, “Is East-Central Europe Backsliding? From Democracy Fatigue to Populist Backlash,” *Journal of Democracy* 18 (October 2007): 17–25; Béla Greskovits, “Is East-Central Europe Backsliding? Economic Woes and Political Dissatisfaction,” *Journal of Democracy* 18 (October 2007): 40–46; Vladimir Tismaneanu, “Is East-Central Europe Backsliding? Leninist Legacies, Pluralist Dilemmas,” *Journal of Democracy* 18 (October 2007): 34–39.

the form of the new state, and the West never even considered integrating Russia into its orbit. This former great power thus reverted to its traditional matrix and became a serious obstacle in the path of the newly independent states' transition to liberal democracy. What stopped Russia from breaking free of its past civilizational paradigm? What was the balance between inevitability and lost historical opportunity in Russia's case? Is there hope for a future transformation in Russia? And why did Russia's elite, unlike that of New Europe, not have the resolve to change the rules of the game? The confluence of several elements helped to set Russia's course: the influence of history; the challenges of the transformation process itself, which proved too great for the Russian elite; the importance of leadership; and certain political factors that worked in favor of a return to the past.

In Russia, the interests of the state have traditionally taken priority over those of the individual, and centralization of power has always been bolstered by territorial expansionism and messianic ideology. In order to perpetuate itself, the Russian centralized state requires both a global mission and the recognition of its great-power status by the international community. These aspirations to greatness in turn encourage further centralization, thus creating a vicious cycle. After the fall of communism, a new Russian elite, convinced that Russia can exist only as a superpower, reiterated this claim to greatness and, in so doing, prevented the country from embracing a new vision of the state and forming a new identity.

Russia missed out on the period of liberal constitutionalism, the *Rechtsstaat*, which in Europe brought recognition of the importance of the rule of law. Russia never had what Ralf Dahrendorf called "the hour of the lawyer." Even Russian liberals have been guided by political expediency rather than by rules, relying on leaders rather than on principles. Having had no "hour of the lawyer," Russian society has been unable successfully to move to the next stages of liberal transformation: "the hour of the economist" and "the hour of the citizen."<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, all historical assaults on autocracy in Russia have invariably ended in its restoration. Both Alexander II's nineteenth-century experiment with "constitutional autocracy" and Nikita Khrushchev's "Thaw" of the mid-twentieth century were reversed, as each time the Russian elite feared that any attempt to liberalize the regime would undermine the foundations of the state. Moreover, the USSR was not shaken by revolutions like those in Poland (1956), Hungary (1956), and Czechoslovakia (1968). At the crucial moment in the late 1980s when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev threw open Russia's long-shuttered windows to the world, the country had neither a credible antisystemic opposition nor a contingent of pragmatists capable of functioning in an atmosphere of pluralism. History had utterly failed to prepare Russia, which

<sup>2</sup> Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990), 79.

had been closed off from the outside world for decades, for the changes to come. Moreover, Gorbachev's perestroika, which triggered the unraveling of the USSR, only reinforced fears among the Russian elite that further liberalization would bring about the collapse of the Russian Federation.

## The Challenges of Transformation

There has never in history been a task akin to the democratization of a nuclear superpower with imperialist ambitions. Not only did Russia have to give up its position as an alternative civilization, its spheres of influence, and its territorially integrated empire – it also had to radically alter the principles on whose basis its state and society were organized and it had to quickly build a new market economy. These simultaneous tasks proved difficult to reconcile. Dankwart Rustow, Robert Dahl, and later Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan rightly warned that a precondition of successful democratization is a stable state (“no state – no democracy”). In the early 1990s, Russia was in the midst of collapse, and democracy-building and market reforms did not make comfortable bedfellows. Moreover, Russia had to transform an unusual type of state – a nuclear petrostate.

In the Russian case, the primacy of the state has been legitimized with reference to real or (more often) imagined threats, both internal and external. Those threats had to be severe enough to justify the militarization of everyday life in Russia and the subjugation of the very foundations of society to militarist goals. In short, Russia developed a unique model for the survival and reproduction of power in a permanent state of war. This situation was maintained even in peacetime, which has always been temporary in Russia. The country is constantly either preparing for war against an external enemy or pursuing enemies at home. Russia has survived by annihilating the boundary between war and peace; its state simply could not exist in a peaceful environment. The militarist model has been used to justify the supercentralized state in the eyes of the people. Militarization made Russia different from other transitional societies and became a tremendous impediment to transformation.

All this, however, is not meant to suggest that Russia possessed none of the conditions conducive to setting forth on the road to freedom and political pluralism. At the decisive moment for postcommunist Russia in autumn 1991, Boris Yeltsin had a huge mandate for change from the Russian public. About 70 percent of Russians at the time supported liberal democracy. Many were unsure of what exactly democracy was, but they accepted it as both an ideal and a way of life. Thus Russian society at that time was not a hindrance to breaking with the old system.

Effective leadership could have mitigated the influence of history while compensating for the absence in Russia of some transformation prerequisites. As Juan Linz has put it, “We cannot exclude the possibility of transcending those conditioning factors by political leadership and political engineering.”<sup>3</sup> The East European states, India, South Africa, South Korea, and Taiwan have combined to prove that democracy can take root in non-European, non-Christian, and economically problematic countries, in agrarian societies, and in societies with a strong communist legacy – if the political leaders and other elites see democracy as best serving national (and personal) interests.

The leadership of Adolfo Suárez in Spain, F.W. de Klerk in South Africa, Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia, and Lennart Meri in Estonia helped to ease the democratic transition in their respective countries, each of which lacked a number of democratic prerequisites. Even a lack of democratically inclined leaders and elites need not prevent a successful transition, as Giuseppe Di Palma and Albert O. Hirschman have shown. Democracy can be built by pragmatists who recognize and appreciate the ruinous nature, not least for themselves, of an autocratic system. As Di Palma put it, “[the] nondemocrats of yesterday can become democrats, even convinced democrats.”<sup>4</sup>

There was a time when I believed that failures of leadership and the weakness of the Russian democrats were the crucial factor complicating Russia’s transformation into a rule-of-law state. Yeltsin, alas, was no Russian Suárez, and the Russian liberals and democrats were ill prepared to tackle the role that their counterparts in Eastern Europe played in the 1980s and 1990s. The lack of vision and of a clear agenda on the part of the new Russian political class (including liberals), combined with a mixture of naïveté, neurosis, brashness, and social insensitivity, did not exactly help Russia to adopt new values.

It took me some time and effort to understand that there was another key factor that prevented the Russian elite from forging a consensus about the new rules of the game, neutralizing the influence of history, and overcoming the systemic constraints involved in reforming a nuclear superpower. I have in mind the emergence in 1990, one year before the collapse of the Soviet Union, of an unusual political monster – the Congress of Peoples’ Deputies. This body was more than a parliament because, according to the constitution, it was the center of power in Russia.

After Boris Yeltsin was elected president, Russia acquired two new political institutions, both with democratic legitimacy and each fighting for a monopoly on power. One of these, the Congress of Peoples’ Deputies, was a vestige of the old Soviet state that declined to leave the political scene. The other was the presidency. The Russian political elite split, and various political forces dove head first into

<sup>3</sup> Axel Hadenius, ed., *Democracy’s Victory and Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 408.

<sup>4</sup> Giuseppe Di Palma, *To Craft Democracies: An Essay on Democratic Transitions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 210.



a dramatic struggle for dominance. It thus became impossible simultaneously to build a new state while reaching consensus on the new rules of the game. It was this power struggle between Yeltsin and the Congress that undermined Russia's chances for transformation in 1991–93. Beyond that, there were no insurmountable obstacles – at least not in 1991 – to elite agreement on the principles of the new regime and state building in Russia.

## The West and the New Russia

The West could have made a difference in developments in Russia, at least at the beginning. In the 1990s, Russia was dependent on international financial institutions and on economic assistance from the Western community and beyond. In addition, Yeltsin and his team were seeking integration with the West, which made them particularly responsive to Western advice and influence. European and U.S. leaders, however, were unprepared to launch an ambitious program for assisting Russia's transformation. By the time U.S. President Bill Clinton came to power in 1993 with a sweeping plan to help Russia, the window for democratization had closed.

In truth, all Western leaders made two grave errors: First, they relied on Yeltsin and believed that he would guarantee Russia's transition; second, they emphasized the economy while neglecting to push for political reform. They would have been more successful in shaping a democratic and market-oriented Russia if in 1991 they had advised Yeltsin first to organize new elections, adopt a democratic constitution, and build a new state based on the rule of law, and to move gradually on to privatization only later, when it could be shaped by newly developed political and legal institutions. Instead, Western leaders fell short with their advice and failed to persuade Yeltsin even to consider other options. Rather than serving as a transformational force in Russian affairs, the West legitimized the Russian system of personalized power.

Why is transformation so difficult now? The answer is manifold and includes Russia's hybrid regime, the ability of the Russian elite to imitate liberal democracy, the commodity factor (also known as the resource curse), and the efforts of the Russian elite to mobilize great-power status as a bulwark against liberalization. The hybrid nature of its regime allows Russia to operate in a gray zone. The country has failed to take on board liberal principles and to Westernize, but it also does not want to return to the classic Russian paradigm. This ambiguity serves to prevent clear choices and prolong uncertainty.

The elite's copycat democracy is another hindrance. In its attempts to imitate the rule of law, pluralism, and freedom while hanging on to top-down governance, the Russian elite is discrediting liberal principles.

The commodity factor keeps the Russian economy afloat and may create the impression of an economic success story, but in reality it prevents Russia's modernization. The continuing claim to great-power status is one more obstacle to Russia's emancipation. The political class continues to foster mass phobias and neuroses, insisting that Russia is fated for glory and a special destiny. Daydreams of being a superpower, on the one hand, and the image of Russia as a "besieged fortress," on the other, are again being used to justify personalized power.

Russia seems to be unable to move forward or backward, stuck between civilizations and historical epochs. Its future direction is unclear. Its present is full of incompatibilities. At home, there is a desire to disguise authoritarianism as democracy. Abroad, Russia lays claim to a partnership with the West, all the while openly opposing Western policies. Even as Russia regards itself as part of Europe and as sharing European culture, its political system remains alien to Europe and the West in general. The ruling tandem of President Dmitri Medvedev and former President and now-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin skillfully acts out a "good cop-bad cop" script that appeals both to traditionalists dreaming of restoration and to moderates and liberals hoping for a Medvedev "thaw."

Exercises in imitation are presented as pragmatism. But in reality, they point to the inability of the ruling class to leave the past behind. The latest survival technique of the Russian elite is the attempt to reinforce the status quo by demanding a revision of the international order that arose after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Simultaneously dogmatic and revanchist, the political class seeks to postpone an existential crisis and hopes to find a niche that will allow Russia to drift endlessly in indecision while coopting the West and using the West's resources to pursue anti-Western goals.

It may well be more difficult for Russia to Westernize itself than it would be, say, for China or for certain Southeast Asian countries. In considering the liberal-democratic transformation of Southeast Asia, Francis Fukuyama wrote that "traditional political Confucianism ... could be jettisoned relatively easily and replaced with a variety of political-institutional forms without causing the society to lose its essential coherence." In his view, Asian democracy could be built "not around individual rights, but around a deeply engrained moral code that is the basis for strong social structures and community life."<sup>5</sup> In contemporary Russia, the lack of a "deeply engrained moral code" and other mechanisms that could guarantee social coherence makes the task of building a new political system a more fraught and unpredictable exercise.

The failure of the liberal and democratic project is sometimes taken as confirmation that Russia is incapable of living in freedom. For those observers who see Russian development

<sup>5</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "The Primacy of Culture," *Journal of Democracy* 6 (January 1995): 12.

as cyclical – from liberalization to restoration and back again – or as the constant replication of a traditional matrix, the country’s inability to transform its system of governance is but grist for the mill. Both of these explanations reflect a fatalistic view of Russia as doomed to autocracy and facing only ruin should it depart from the autocratic path. My own narrative might seem to confirm that conclusion, but reality is more complicated. Russian history does not trace the path of a pendulum swinging between reform and counterreform; nor is it circular, though it often appears to be. Each successive liberalization moves Russia a little further forward, driving society toward greater openness. Successive restorations have not returned the country to its starting point; a little more freedom remains each time. The Putin restoration, for example, has not taken Russia entirely back to Soviet days. Rather, it is a backsliding toward autocracy that nevertheless leaves society to its own devices. The regime appears to be telling the population, “Do as you please, just don’t try to seize power.” Leaving society alone, giving it the right to seek its own salvation, is a significant advance in social autonomy in comparison to the communist period, when the regime aimed to keep society entirely straitjacketed. Russia thus experiences its cycles, but each time it does so at a different level and in a new historical context. Attempts to understand Russia’s developments with reference to tradition, mentality, and culture tend to be instructive, but they are insufficient to explain new aspects of Russian life or to provide a clue as to what the next stage might be.

The time is coming when the Russian political regime will be unable to provide what society demands of it: stability and living standards that rise – not merely back up to Soviet levels, but instead to levels matching those of the West. We may find that the period of the Medvedev-Putin diarchy is the last gasp of an authoritarianism whose return was made possible only by the pain of the Yeltsin reforms and the high price of oil. Together, these two factors may have artificially prolonged the life of a system that is historically doomed.

If liberal trends were cut short in the early twentieth century because society was not yet ready for freedom, the defeat of Russia’s liberal project in the early twenty-first century has more to do with the Russian elite’s unreadiness to risk losing power through political competition. We should not overstate the political maturity of ordinary Russians or their ability to follow the rule of law; they are still politically inactive and seem incapable of coming together to force the regime to take their interests into account. The people of Russia are, however, increasingly ready to move toward European standards and norms. They already consider themselves to be Europeans. They increasingly long to be rid of a corrupt and burdensome state and to experience the personal well-being that people in the West enjoy. Today, between 62 and 68 percent of Russian respondents say that they prefer liberal democracy to authoritarianism.

Even Russia's second-tier elite is starting to understand that their survival requires transforming the old state into one based on the rule of law.

Contrary to some predictions, the global economic crisis that began in 2008 has yet to hit Russia severely enough to force the elite to move toward a liberalizing exit. In fact, in responding to the crisis, the regime is just as likely to tighten the screws. Should that happen, Russia will once again miss the "hour of the lawyer," and a new cycle will begin, which may in turn bring the unraveling of the current state. The result would be a Russia with a new geographical configuration and an unclear civilizational dimension. Whatever scenario Russia pursues – stagnation and rot, state collapse, or a liberal breakthrough – an imperially minded Russia trapped in a state of decay is not historically sustainable.

# Russia is Awakening: Will It Implode or Transform?

Lilia Shevtsova / *Diplomaatia, Special edition,*

*May 2012*

Putin's return to the Kremlin will act as a powerful accelerator of revolutionary events, if only because his leadership means that the regime will not allow regime change.

Have you ever seen how a tsunami begins? The first wave comes slowly and subsides, then another one dies in the sand, and another one... until, after a treacherous lull, the water rises high and crushes everything in its way. This is what Russia may have in store – the country has passed the fork before which other options might have been (at least, theoretically) feasible.

Russia has once again failed to find a graceful exit from its centuries-long wanderings in the dark and is instead rushing along a familiar path of fury, rebellion, and revenge. Putin's return to the Kremlin and the ruling team's arrogant demonstration that they are prepared to rule indefinitely have buried all hopes of a velvet reform from the top, leaving Russia only one solution – pressure from below. Revolution has always been Russia's way of cleansing the scene for another cycle of personalized power, each time in a more ruthless and predatory form. It is still unclear this time whether Russia can free itself from its historical trap and find another way out of its predicament.

There is one certainty at least – the personalized power system is in decline. But many questions remain unanswered: will the agony end with rot that will sap the life of generations to come? Or will it implode? Will an alternative be found before the Russian Matrix collapses, or after it starts to disintegrate? And what price will Russians have to pay for the end of a phenomenon that has failed to bow out gracefully?

## Victory or defeat?

For the time being the Russian chattering classes are engaged in more down to earth discussions. "Who won and who lost?" is the question that Russians continue to debate after the apparent ebbing of December's tide of protest. The opposition community has triumphantly claimed that the December Movement changed the country

and that the authorities will be forced to back down, but the majority is gloomy, believing that the protests ended with failure; Putin has returned to the Kremlin to stay there forever.

Who is right? Let us look at the arguments of both sides. The optimists are ready to argue that pressure from the rallies will force the regime to deliver liberalization. “Look,” they say, “the Kremlin is adopting legislation on political parties, promising to hold direct elections for governors, and discussing the convening of a Constitutional Assembly.” Some optimists cannot contain their euphoria: “Stop whining,” they urge, “the opposition has been invited to take part in meetings with the president and opposition leaders are being allowed onto the television. And most importantly: there has been no repression! Onwards toward future conquests!”

I have to admit that this reaction baffles me. I cannot understand what the Kremlin’s “liberalization package” can change. Create competition? But between whom? The amendments to the party law approved by the Duma do encourage political competition – but among dozens of small fish. The regime is still protected by cast iron barricades in the form of the registration of parties by permit, the Justice Ministry’s ability to destroy any party under any pretext, and the Kremlin’s refusal to allow the formation of electoral blocs. The executive branch has retained intact the machinery for arbitrary rule and even made it more effective. So what should we rejoice in, I thought as I listened to the fanfares? The fact that the Kremlin takes pleasure in watching the hustle and bustle of the political arena while keeping all the party mice within the sights of the Justice Ministry’s gun?

The Kremlin spin doctors who suggested this elegant ruse should be congratulated – allow everyone access (the more the better) and at the same time keep everyone under tight control. Meanwhile, the masochists among the opposition can enjoy another gift from the Kremlin in the form of the law on the “direct” election of governors, although this, naturally, comes with a presidential “filter.”

Other evidence of the supposed thaw turned out to be a measured form of access to the political and media arena, but only for selected (by the Kremlin, of course) representatives of the opposition and civil society who have been allowed to attend meetings with the president, to sit on the presidential and government “councils” or to take part in carefully orchestrated (and always taped) political TV talk shows. This access is supposed to accomplish three goals: firstly, to create a more civilized image of the Kremlin bosses, making it possible for them to dine with Obama and other Western leaders without awkwardness; secondly, to discredit the opposition members who accept an invitation to sit at the table with the authorities, by making them look naïve or lightweight; and thirdly, to bring new conformists (who I call “adaptants” – people ready to adapt to any rules of the game offered by the authorities) into the sphere to serve the regime.

So far, the authorities' "all-enveloping" approach – its attempt to suffocate the opposition in its embraces – has been working. Some of the Kremlin's opponents have agreed to play the authorities' game and allowed the regime to lure them onto its playing field, where they have no chance of winning. The official TV channels showed Dmitri Medvedev listening attentively to the rally leaders at his residence (who would have imagined even a short time ago that such a thing would be possible!) creating a much more liberal image of the regime, but giving nothing in return. Television, with its skilled propagandists, has effortlessly turned the opposition into participants in some kind of free-for-all bazaar, leaving the audience perplexed: "Well, they are all the same!" The opposition and the protest leaders' desire to "reach out" to society at large through television has been understandable. But one could hardly dismiss the impression that they looked like virgins, lecturing in a brothel on the preservation of innocence, as the madam looked on.

Another example of the Kremlin's "embracing" tactics has been fighting corruption. It would be hard to be more perplexed: what kind of fight against corruption can there be, when the regime is only able to replicate itself with the aid of corruption?

It is clear why some representatives of the opposition and the protest movement have been trying to find grounds for enthusiasm, and why some of them have been willing to enter into a dialogue with the Kremlin. In a situation where the regime has not met a single demand of the December Movement, there is a natural desire to find at least some evidence that the people who took to the streets actually achieved something. Otherwise, they will stay in their kitchens next time and the energy behind the protest will evaporate.

Besides, I can imagine that some of the opposition figures and protesters may really believe that the authorities have sensed their own weakness and are ready to embark on change. And it is better to achieve such change by sitting around the table than by taking to the streets and making yourself the target of police batons. If this is the case, these hopes will have been a success for a regime that survives by inciting hopes. Meanwhile, political history has proved that hopes are merely disappointments delayed; the Russian opposition and protest leaders have yet to learn this truth. Hopefully, with Putin back in the Kremlin, ready to be tougher and less ambivalent than Medvedev, the opposition will have fewer pretexts for seeking friendship with the authorities.

In fact, there is nothing new in the Russian regime's response to the awakening society. It is all about flexibility in application: on the eve of Putin's inauguration, the ruling team decided to alleviate the discontent of the "angry citizen" with promises of liberalization. For those who don't believe in the Kremlin's promises, there are other measures of influence in the state's arsenal and the authorities will soon start to demonstrate more toughness – the Kremlin cannot allow

this liberal carnival to go on. Today's Russian rulers remember the experience of the Soviet Union – Gorbachev opened the window too far and the Soviet elite fell out. Putin's team has learned the lesson and they know too well the nature of the Russian system: any real liberalization could only disrupt its power vertical and the house of cards could start to crumble.

Does all of this mean that those who say that the first Russian protest movement of the century has ended in failure are right? They are wrong too – a black and white view does not make sense in the Russian reality. One of the paradoxes is that although the wave of protest has dwindled, the anger and frustration in society has grown, and without legal channels for its articulation, it is becoming more destructive for both Putin's regime and the system he personalizes.

### A political funeral? Not yet!

The patient may have woken, but he cannot yet leave the hospital where he has been kept for years, drugged and tangled. His keepers have rushed to silence him – if cajoling will not help they are ready to shackle him. But he is becoming more and more restless. And at some point he may become so agitated that he will destroy everything around him. At the moment, though, the patient seems ready to allow his keepers to calm him down. But in Russia impressions can be deceptive.

There are many factors that continue to mitigate the Russian situation and could keep both Putin's regime and the system limping on for an indefinite time. The key economic and political conditions for maintaining the Russian status quo are well known: the deep-reaching demoralization of society; the people's populist expectations, still looking with hope to the state; the squabbles and infighting among the opposition groups and their leaders; and the lack of a consolidated political alternative that could acquire a broad social base.

Other factors are well known by all Russia observers. I would highlight several that will definitely have far reaching impacts on Russia's future trajectory. The first is the Russian petro-state – the dependency of the country on commodities that has allowed the rentier ruling class to emerge, with its parasitic lifestyle and total lack of concern for Russian national interests. The petro-state still has the resources to guarantee the support of the paternalistically oriented social base that depends on budget handouts.

The second powerful hindrance is the leftovers of the neo-imperial mentality in the mindset of the ruling elites and in broad sections of the population, coupled with the existence of the institutional elements of the former empire in the current functioning of the Russian state: the unitarian character of the Russian "Federation;" the stubborn attempts



of the Kremlin to continue talking about its “areas of interest;” the “gas wars” with Ukraine and Belarus; the hot war with Georgia; the laments about NATO expansion and the attempts to force the world to agree with the Finlandization of the former Soviet space; and the building of the Eurasian Union (for what?). The fact that the Kremlin is not ready and would not in any case be able to pursue the idea of Soviet restoration, and tries instead to find more pragmatic means to pursue its agenda, does not mean that the Russian elite has erased imperialist longing from its mind.

There is only one reason for this: the personalized power system cannot reproduce itself without a desire to preserve great power status and areas of influence, the latter being the blood vessels for the former. I would even argue that in a situation when the domestic influence of the regime has started to wane, its desire to compensate for its internal weakness through a more assertive statist and neo-imperialist policy abroad could increase – at least this has always been the logic of the Russian Matrix as it fights for survival. The moment the Russian elite proves it has no ambition to influence other states and is ready to build a real Federation will be the end of Russian neo-imperialism. Today, however, even Russian liberals stop being liberals when they start to talk about Ukraine, the Russian-Ukrainian “brotherhood” and the “one nation.”

The third factor is the role and mentality of the Russian intellectual class. It is the “thinking minority” that has always been the engine of civilizational change. Joseph A. Schumpeter called it the “human material of politics,” that is, the people who take part in broader political life and “should be of sufficient high quality.”<sup>1</sup> Explaining what this quality means, Juan Linz mentions among several indicators, “the commitment to ... values or goals relevant for collectivity, without, however, pursuing them irrespectively of consequences.”<sup>2</sup> The Russian “political class,” by and large, is the plain antithesis of what both Schumpeter and Linz describe. The reasons for the demoralization of the intellectual elite remain to be analyzed: the lingering legacy of Communism (but why then have the new European elites and political class in the Baltic states managed to demonstrate “sufficient high quality”?) or the legacy of the 1990s when the new version of Russian personalized rule re-emerged under liberal slogans with the voluntary help of intellectuals?

The liberals’ hopes for reform from above, which became animated during Medvedev’s presidency, turned out to be just another myth. True, this was apparent from the very beginning, but this hope helped the hopefuls look liberal while at the same time being part of the court. Meanwhile, the authorities’ liberal rhetoric set against a nonliberal reality only made the public more cynical and mistrustful of the whole idea of reform and modernization.

<sup>1</sup> Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), pp. 290-291.

<sup>2</sup> Juan J. Linz, “Some Thoughts on the Victory and Future of Democracy,” in *Democracy Victory and Crisis*, ed. Axel Hadenius (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 421.

This is one of the results of Medvedev's presidency: one of the most cynical plots in recent Russian history that has not only helped to preserve the old leader in the shadow of an imitation one, but deepened the degradation of Russian politics.

The fourth factor helping to prolong the life of Russian authoritarianism is the widespread fear among various sections of the public that upsetting the status quo could lead to another state collapse. Not even the regime's opponents are ready for such a development. In reality, it is the Kremlin's policy of survival that undermines the Russian state and has already triggered the process of disintegration. The price the Kremlin pays to "pacify" Chechnya and the North Caucasus is evidence of the Russian state's fragility. The Kremlin's willingness to let local sultans establish their regimes there reflects the process of state atrophy. The dictatorship in Chechnya amounts to a form of Kremlin-sanctioned anti-constitutional coup. It is hard to believe that this construction, which goes against all common sense, can last: Russia is "paying tribute" to Chechnya, and at the same time positioning itself as a regional and even a global leader; such a construction surely contains the seeds of self-destruction.

The risk that a state constructed from incompatible civilizational pieces could fall apart is present no matter whether the regime liberalizes or strengthens its hold on power. One thing that is clear today is that Russia cannot transform so long as the North Caucasus problem remains unresolved. With the North Caucasus as it is, Russia cannot get itself in any kind of order or become a modern state.

The fifth and final factor is a phenomenon requiring serious analysis that, regretfully, neither Russian liberals nor Western observers, for reasons not difficult to guess, are ready to start. Those who have tried to raise this issue are viewed by the community, which prefers less divisive postures, as "radicals" or "idealists." The factor is the role of the West in helping traditional Russia to survive.

For starters, Western civilization, in the eyes of a significant part of the Russian population, has lost its role as the alternative to a personalized power system. Partly, this is the result of the current Western "malaise."

However, it is less the recent Western crisis that has delivered a blow to pro-Western moods in Russia, and much more the policy of Western governments with respect to the Kremlin, which is viewed as connivance with or even an open appeasement of the Russian political regime. For the first time, openly harsh criticism of Western policy toward the Kremlin can be heard from Russian liberals and democrats. I would expect my Western colleagues to say: "Come on! You are talking rubbish! What do you expect the West to do – isolate Russia? Stop trading or negotiating nuclear weapons cuts?" Of course, not – I am not so irresponsible or naïve. The Russian opposition and the liberal critics

of the West do not expect Western governments to fight for Russian democracy and freedom – this is an agenda for Russians. But in pursuing trade or security relations with Russia, the West can escape the brotherly embraces of Kremlin leaders. Western leaders can avoid presenting “reset” as something that it is not – as a strategic breakthrough rather than a tactical trade-off. No one coerces the Obama administration to take part in that sham offered by the Kremlin, the dialogue between the “civil societies” under the control of the Russian state official responsible for political crackdown.

Fears of imminent collapse, the lack of a new strategy and actors who would pursue it, and powerful entrenched interests force the Russian elite and intellectual circles to build new hopes for change within the current regime. Today they argue, under the pressure of the mood within society, the “new” Putin 2.0 will be forced to carry out reform, even if he is unwilling and therefore has to be supported. “Putin still could become a reformer and is capable of dexterous management under the pressure of tough reality!” the fans of Russia’s personalized power would insist. True, they can’t answer the question: if Putin was destined to become the transformer, why did he not transform Russia earlier? Certainly, leaders can change their previous course under the pressure of circumstances, but in Russia’s case it is a change from the personalized power system, and not simply a change of course and regime, that is needed. Russia needs transformation, not reform, to make the autocracy more effective. For transformation to succeed, Putin’s team would have to renounce its monopoly on power, which is the main source of the country’s degradation, and open it to fair and honest competition. They would have to perform political hara-kiri. Besides, if Putin really is ready for change, why did he not start with fair presidential elections?

As for the idea of modernization in the economic area only, the authorities have been attempting to pursue this policy throughout these last years, but with what results?

The West has made its own contribution to Russian mythology. The most popular has been the hope that Medvedev would be a reforming president, which even astute Western observers fell victim to. Brzezinski wrote about Medvedev as “the most prominent spokesman for the modernization-democratization school of thought.”<sup>3</sup> Other Western observers have even more grandiose plans for the Russian regime. Thus, Charles Kupchan believes that Russia may be “uniquely poised to help build bridges between the Western order and whatever comes next (!)” and Moscow could become “a particularly useful arbiter (!) in negotiating the shape of a post-Western order.”<sup>4</sup> This mythology not only helps the Russian Matrix to survive but distorts the Western view of the world.

<sup>3</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski admitted the existence of the “commercial stampe driven by the Western European businessmen (not to mention some former politicians), anxious to capitalize on Russia’s resources while indifferent to the importance of shared values,” Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2012) p. 146.

<sup>4</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, *No One’s World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 111.

## Suicidal statecraft

Meanwhile, the variables that have so far helped the Russian system to stay afloat are now accelerating its decline. The mechanism that Arnold Toynbee defined as “suicidal statecraft” has gone into action: the system, in attempting to deal with new challenges using old methods, is undermining itself. The Kremlin’s blatant manipulation of democratic institutions, such as during the 2011-2012 elections, that became trademarks of the Putin system erode the legitimacy of a regime that has no other mechanisms (in particular inheritance-based or ideological) to justify its continuation. The commodities-based economy also accelerates the system’s decay. Russia fits the same pattern of decline that has befallen other petro-states that did not manage to democratize before their commodities boom began. The fact that some petro-states in the Arab world (for instance, Saudi Arabia) demonstrate survivability, does not change the axiom. The Arab revolutions of 2011 have proved how fragile “petro-stability” can be. Tame, obedient institutions ensure an external calm, but the lack of channels through which the population can express its various interests leaves people with no choice but to take to the streets, thus further undermining stability. Putin’s return to the Kremlin means the growth of anger and the rejection of the regime even by social groups that had been submissive to the authorities, but are not ready to see Russia return to a Brezhnev type of degradation.

In our reflections on the Russian system’s future we should not forget one fact: Putin’s regime relies not only on the security and law enforcement agencies, but is made up primarily of people who have come from the special services or are close to them. They have repression in their genes. For the first time in Russia’s history, not only are the security agencies not under civil control, but they have established their own regime. This regime has nothing in common with either Praetorian Realism, which defines a scenario for imposing order on civil chaos in modernizing lands,<sup>5</sup> or Matrix Realism, but shares similarities with the army’s role in the institutional arrangements of the Arab states.<sup>6</sup> The Russian Praetorian security service officers turned bureaucrats serve one purpose – pursuing their corporatist interests at any price. Such regimes are not only doomed themselves but will also pull into the abyss the state they incarnate.

The authorities’ obsession with personal enrichment – especially among people from the security agencies – is another factor speeding up the regime’s decline. This obsession makes the regime more repressive, as it defends its rights to the assets it has gathered. But at the same time, this “commercialization” of the state’s repressive machinery undermines the system, as corrupt security agencies lose their

<sup>5</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “Political Order in Egypt,” *The American Interest*, May-June 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Springborg and Clement M. Henry “Army Guys,” *The American Interest*, May-June 2011.

ability to effectively protect it (the historical examples are illustrative: Sparta and the Ottoman Empire fell when the Spartans and Janissaries began to get involved in commerce and trade).<sup>7</sup>

The collapse of Soviet technical infrastructure is another sign of the looming crisis. It is ironic that Russia today continues to survive thanks to the USSR, but the planes, trains, ships, mines, roads, and industry inherited from the Soviet era are collapsing, exploding, and becoming unfit for use, while the post-communist regimes have not managed to build a new infrastructure to replace them.

Another confirmation of degradation is the intertwining of crime, business, and the law enforcement and security agencies that has become the key characteristic of Putin's Russia. Why can the authorities not clear their stables? Why do they save the rank and file perpetrators clearly fingered in the Magnitsky case, even at tremendous cost to the regime's own reputation? It is not that the authorities are implicated in each and every crime and need to dispel suspicions against them, but rather that any cleanout of personnel would undermine the power vertical edifice the Kremlin has built and would violate the regime's fundamental principle that in return for their loyalty, those who serve it are guaranteed impunity. This mutual backscratching between the authorities and the agencies at its service is pushing the system into its final stage of decay.

The Khodorkovsky and Lebedev case demonstrates another of the system's fundamental principles: wield a strong hand! This explains why, having made Khodorkovsky and Lebedev a demonstration of his total grip on power, Putin cannot now release them: their release would be perceived as the end of the Putin era. Business has become hostage to the system and can exist only if it plays by the system's rules. But even when it plays by the rules it still cannot protect itself from the authorities and law enforcement agencies, which engage in mass extortion.<sup>8</sup>

The authorities' passion for costly megaprojects, from the Sochi Olympics to the APEC summit and the soccer World Cup, is also a sign that the system has entered a dead end. No responsible government in a country with 22,9 million people living below the poverty line would take on such commitments. The Kremlin under Putin is following the typical logic of dictatorships, mobilizing the population through displays of grandeur.

The use of Western technology to help ensure the regime's continuity and monopoly has also exhausted its potential. Spreading the use of new generation technology requires a free society and free individuals. The pitiful attempt to establish a closed "modernization zone" in Skolkovo only confirms that the old model for perpetuating the regime no longer works, and Skolkovo itself looks unlikely

<sup>7</sup> The success of the samurai during the Meiji restoration could have been an argument in favor of Japanese uniqueness but for one fact: the Japanese ability to adapt to the Western rules of the game.

<sup>8</sup> The use of force against business has become a distinguishing feature of today's Russia (according to independent sources one in three people in detention is a businessperson, and one in six people in prison is a businessperson) and this makes it impossible to build an effective economy.

to have much chance of success now that everyone knows the hollow role played by its “godfather,” Medvedev.

Meanwhile, the Russian elite attempts to maintain balance in the country by creating phantom challenges and imitating responses to them. The Russian elite is battling NATO, preparing to counter a nuclear strike or even fight a nuclear war (see Russia’s Military Doctrine), attempting to keep control of Russia’s neighbors, and clearing the stage at home of any potential opposition, while preparing to fight the “Orange revolution” and defend the Motherland from the “fifth column.” The system, seen until recently as a highly adaptable mechanism, is losing its flexibility and becoming rigid. It risks turning into an inadequate organization responding to imaginary threats and becoming dangerous for its own population and the outside world. The Russian Matrix still can survive but it is losing its resilience.

Russia’s ruling class is not only depriving society of all that makes it viable, but is also setting a trap for itself. The most effective means that humanity has developed so far to ensure continued survival (including that of the elite) is free competition. The Russian ruling team’s attempts to secure a lifelong monopoly are a sign of its lack of confidence and its inability to govern a free society. A monopoly on power must be constantly defended and this makes it impossible for those who hold it to feel sure they can step down without fearing for their lives. The fate of rulers who have either lost or were forced into a desperate defense of their power in recent years cannot but worry Russia’s elite. The latest round of Putin’s power shows that the ruling team has decided to stake all it has and to keep playing, dooming the country to dramatic developments ahead.

One thing is quite obvious: a system of autocracy cannot (even if the leader wants it to) reform itself gradually from above. So, only one way is left – from below. Putin’s return to the Kremlin will act as a powerful accelerator of revolutionary events, if only because his leadership means that the logic of personalized power will not allow regime change.

Anyway, the logic of the agony has already started to work its way out. One can predict the authorities’ increasing reliance on force, or the threat of force, which masks not only their lack of confidence, but also the cracks in the very foundations of the system. When the Kremlin turns to broader violence, it will mean the last chapter in Putin’s narrative has begun. But whether it will be the end of the regime only, or the end of the personalized power system, is too early to say.

## Crisis and then what?

Meanwhile, discontent is spreading through society. The public showed no particular enthusiasm at the news that Putin was seeking

a new term in office: 31 percent of respondents approved of the move (these people make up the Putin regime's core support base), 20 percent were not happy with the idea, and 41 percent said they had "no particular feelings about it" (3 percent did not know).<sup>9</sup>

Putin's personal popularity rating still remains relatively high, but this "Teflon president" phenomenon can be explained: people in Russia realize that there is only one real institution in the country – the presidency – and so long as people are not yet able to solve their own economic problems, they are not ready to let Putin's rating take a tumble, fearing the chaos that might ensue. But their criticism of Putin's government and the country's general policy course shows that people have no illusions about Putin and his regime – 59 percent of the respondents view them as either people who "are thinking about their interests or weak and incompetent people" and only 23 percent believe that Putin and his team know how to solve the country's problems.<sup>10</sup>

If the Russian public are not increasingly weary of Putin himself, they are showing an ever clearer rejection of the system and its basic principles. Only 33 percent of respondents think that "power should be concentrated in one pair of strong hands," while 59 percent of respondents take the view that "society should be built on the foundation of democratic freedom."<sup>11</sup> People are showing increasing discontent with the situation in many areas of life. Most Russians think that the situation has worsened in all areas, with the exception of foreign policy (reflecting public support for Putin's neo-imperial course). Around 82 percent of respondents think that corruption in Russia has increased or stayed at its former level. Almost half of respondents believe they have lost rather than gained over the last years, although 51 percent of respondents say that "life is hard but bearable."<sup>12</sup> This willingness to endure and to look for ways to survive rather than turn to open protest is one of the main reasons for the country's apparent calm. Only 25 percent of respondents regard mass protests as a possibility, and only 21 percent are willing to take part in them. These figures may look small, but in reality they represent millions of people.

The public perceive the state and its security and law enforcement agencies as a hostile force. 73 percent of respondents think that the gap between rich and poor has widened over the last decade, 52 percent think that there are more thieves and corruption in the country's leadership now than in the 1990s, and more than half of respondents expressed certainty that elections are unfair.<sup>13</sup> All of this reflects society's alienation from the state authorities.

The Russian system cannot meet the domestic and external challenges. It is not able to guarantee the security and wellbeing of its population. It cannot even secure

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/07-10-2011/vladimir-putin-i-ego-tretii-srok>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/03-04-2012/rossiyanе-o-politicheskom-rezhime-i-lyudyakh-kotorym-prinadlezhit-vlast>.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/10-08-2011/o-blagopoluchii-naseleniya-i-demokratii-v-strane>.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/18-10-2011/krizis-v-rossii>.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/18-10-2011/krizis-v-rossii>.

the interests of its ruling class, which explains why its numerous representatives prefer to store their “golden parachutes” outside Russia.

One can only be struck by the cynicism of the Russian elite. Usually the first sign of decay is the failure of the elite: not simply their inability to change outmoded institutions but also their inability to perceive that a failure has taken place. In Russia the ruling elite understands the suicidal path they are on, but are unable to change it. On the contrary, the ruling establishment is busy trying to pass its positions to its children or friends, which means that it will defend the system until the end.

All this means that Russia has no means or time to escape the approaching political and social crisis. But a crisis will provide a chance for a political alternative to emerge and for the ruling establishment to fragment. If the opposition fails to use this chance, Russia will either enter a period of protracted rot, or its ruling elite will attempt to freeze the situation by turning to mass repression, which could be a temporary solution but would only defer the turmoil and revenge. Whatever scenario prevails (including liberalization), Russia will have problems in preserving its current geographical format.

The only way to transform Russia is to eliminate the old triad of personalized power, the integration of power and business, and imperial ambitions. But the political and social actors ready to start this process have yet to emerge. In theory, such actors could emerge from mid-level innovation-linked business, parts of the intelligentsia, and young people, but it is hard to see what prospects this process might have when the authorities constantly clamp down on or discredit any sign of opposition activity. In this situation it is possible that Russia will not manage to build a real alternative before the system openly disintegrates.

This would greatly complicate any attempts to set new rules based on liberal-democratic principles. The old system’s spontaneous collapse and public discontent could bring about a repeat of 1991 and the regeneration of the personalized system in new packaging cannot be excluded. Whatever the case, the system’s death agony is approaching faster than the political forces can find a peaceful exit solution. This makes Russia not only a challenge for its society but for the world as well.



# Doing Well By Doing Right. Some Mythbusting about U.S. Policy Toward Russia

David J. Kramer & Lilia Shevtsova / *The American Interest*, March-April 2012

December 2011 will be remembered as a tumultuous month in Russia, if not a seminal one. Observers both Russian and foreign were surprised by the December 4 Duma election, in which United Russia failed to muster 50 percent of the vote despite significant ballot box stuffing and voter fraud. More importantly, in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and dozens of other cities across the country, massive post-election protests caught most people – including Russia’s leadership – completely off-guard.

Perhaps we should not have been so surprised. For several years, Russia has been stagnating, at least politically, and in turn the political system has degraded and society has become demoralized. Vladimir Putin, representing the antithesis of his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, raised hopes for many Russians of a more stable and secure future. Indeed, most Russians were ready to close the books on the unhappy, chaotic decade of the 1990s. They longed for stability at home and recovery on the world stage, and Putin got credit for delivering both with the help of the second Chechen war and the soaring price of oil. But as Putin prospered from happenstance during his first two terms as President (2000–08), lately he and his own policies and judgments have suffered from it. The economy is stalled, neo-patrimonial corruption is rife, and assaults against human rights and sheer decency are on the rise. Above all, it seems, Putin’s little Potemkin village act with Dmitri Medvedev finally prompted a critical mass of Russians to take umbrage at being manipulated as though they were a bunch of gullible teenagers. When Putin announced on September 24, 2011, that he would reoccupy the presidency in March, according to a deal that had been worked out with Medvedev “several years ago,” that was the last straw.

After the September announcement but before the December 4 election, Putin was booed by thousands of spectators at a sporting event. Medvedev became the brunt of jokes on the internet and radio and was widely derided for a staged event at Moscow State University. Weeks before the election, polls showed that large numbers of Russian voters were itching for a chance to voice their displeasure with the party in power. On December 4, they scratched the itch, despite efforts by

nervous authorities to limit the damage by resorting to old tricks: denying registration to certain opposition parties, perpetrating other administrative abuses, and showering disproportionate and favorable media attention on United Russia. Similar efforts during previous Duma and presidential elections were met with general indifference, even a sense of resignation. Not this time, as the most politically dynamic part of the population – the so-called middle class, journalists, the intelligentsia, and youth – mobilized as never before. A Levada Center poll of those who attended the massive December 24 protest in Moscow revealed that 73 percent said that they were protesting to “give vent to their indignation over the rigged election” and “accumulated frustration with the state of affairs in the country and the policy promoted by the powers-that-be.”

The protest of Russia’s “angry class” (to describe it as a middle class movement does not fully capture the mood) has permanently punctured the aura of invincibility surrounding Putin and the system he erected. He has lost the support of the two cities crucial for the survival of any politician in Russia – Moscow and St. Petersburg – where, according to independent observers, United Russia secured barely 30 percent of the vote. (Nationwide, according to official results, United Russia obtained 49.3 percent.) Putin’s regime now stands delegitimized in the eyes of the most active and educated part of society.

Even more important, Russians seem to have rediscovered two crucial components of liberal political and civil life: morality and law. Debauching elections, tolerated for years, is now characterized as being both immoral and contrary to the rule of law (not to speak of its spirit). While large segments of society (between 30 and 45 percent of the electorate) still cling to Putin, his overall base of support is eroding. With the internet and social media now playing a novel, wild-card role in Russian democracy, Putin’s failure to secure victory in the first round of the March presidential election, which is unlikely but not impossible, could touch off a political freefall the bottom of which no one can predict. Even a Putin “victory” could touch off a political storm that could be the beginning of a systemic implosion, undermining his legitimacy for good.

## End of Illusions

In his final State of the Union address, Medvedev promised the return of elected governors, the liberalization of electoral legislation, and easier registration for new parties. Such offers would have been considered revolutionary in 2008, and had he implemented them while president, he would have left office properly deemed a reformer. No one takes these promises seriously now, seeing them for the distracting palliatives they are. Even the removal of Vladislav Surkov, the “gray

cardinal,” from the Kremlin’s presidential administration will fail to sate the appetite of those hungering for real change, especially given that his replacement, Vyacheslav Volodin, is a Putin loyalist known for his hawkish tendencies. The Kremlin’s time-honored gimmick of imitating democracy no longer works so well now that the scales have fallen from so many Russian eyes. They see clearly that the purpose behind Putin’s return to the presidency is to preserve the status quo, not upend it, as some wishful thinkers in both Russia and the West had hoped.

What if the authorities can no longer effectively manipulate Russia’s imitation democracy? Some believe that, with so much at stake in corrupted, stolen gains for Putin and those around him (in particular, the security apparatus), a crackdown is inevitable. Off will come the cloak of democracy theater, many predict. Putin, even more desperate to stay in power, will tighten the screws, employ repressive measures, and accuse the “enemy” West of trying to instigate a “color revolution” in Russia. The state media campaign unleashed against the new U.S. Ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, virtually upon his arrival in Moscow, confirms this anti-Western approach. On the other hand, some point out that the Kremlin needs to avoid being isolated from the West, especially when many individuals among the elite have personal and financial interests in Europe and the United States. They also understand that the state lacks the resources to maintain power in an emergency situation for a long period. And there are questions about whether the military and the rank-and-file in the security services are reliable enough to carry out a sustained crackdown.

Most likely, the Kremlin will experiment with a combination of instruments: imitation liberalization that does not endanger the kleptocracy’s holdings, selective repression, and a diplomatic campaign to persuade the West that the Kremlin is on the path of liberalization while at the same time warning outside forces against meddling in Russia’s domestic affairs. If that does not work, the crackdown scenario cannot be ruled out, especially given that 33 percent of the expenditures in the 2012–14 budget is earmarked for defense and other power ministries.

No one can know for sure what the Russian leadership will do, probably because that leadership itself has no definite plans. But one thing we do know: There should be no more illusions about the nature of the Russian regime and its leadership. The current Russian system is rotten to the core and incapable of providing broad-based economic prosperity, effective governance, or genuine security. Russia’s infrastructure is collapsing, social divides are deepening, ethnic tension is rising, and reserve funds now being used to ameliorate the most acute economic problems will be exhausted within a year.

If the regime is very weak, however, the opposition is not very strong. Russia’s recent political awakening by no means guarantees that the country will pursue a democratic path even if Putin and his associ-

ates are tossed from office. There is a strong undercurrent of ultra-nationalism and xenophobia in the country. Many protestors don't support any political party, or even necessarily democracy. They are simply against the powers that be, the party of "swindlers and thieves," as political and digital activist Alexei Navalny calls them. Once they go, if they go, there is no telling what will follow. One of the problems is that while people now oppose rigged elections and Putin personally, few grasp that the key problem is not a particular leader but the over-centralized system endorsed by the Russian constitution. Moreover, the protests may peter out simply because it is inherently difficult to sustain a movement "against" something without having a platform "for" anything.

While Russians may find themselves at wit's end, not all citizens of the Russian Federation will. If the atrophy or collapse of Putin's regime portends the implosion of the system, it may result in the disintegration of the state. The North Caucasus, most notably Chechnya, already lives outside of Moscow's control and could become a renewed battleground of separatism. Ultimately, avoiding such scenarios requires that the triad of personalized power, the merger between power and business, and imperial ambitions be broken and finally buried. The monopolistic conception of power that has plagued Russia for centuries must finally give way to a system that empowers Russian civil society, independent institutions, and the rule of law. The practical question, for Russians and those outside, is whether disaster is a prerequisite for real reform.

## The Role of the West

Russia's future, to state the obvious, will be determined by Russians themselves. But Western governments have a role to play at the least by not acting as feckless enablers of policies that simply cannot end well. During the Cold War, one could justify a policy of *raison d'état* because there were no alternatives. During the early post-Soviet period, one could justify a policy of friendly engagement with the Kremlin while ignoring signs of domestic deterioration and a declining human rights situation in hopes that Russia would genuinely liberalize in due course. That is no longer possible, or at least no longer justifiable. We are back to an original truth: We can gauge how a regime is likely to treat its neighbors by noting how it treats its own people. Millions of Russians, either through the ballot box or protests in the streets, have voiced their disgust with the current ruling clique, but that clique, though shaken, has given no sign of genuinely heeding the voice of the Russian people. The West cannot turn a blind eye, not out of a form of moral charity but because its own interests are imperiled.

The conclusion is clear: No more resets, no more benefit of the doubt. No longer can we pretend to wall off Russia's domestic developments from its foreign policy. Even before December 4, there were some positive signs from the West that values were not being sacrificed for other interests. The European Parliament regularly adopted resolutions calling on the Kremlin to respect human rights and rule of law, as did key members of the U.S. Congress. The push in both the U.S. Congress and in some European parliaments (and Canada's) for the "Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act," which calls for visa bans and asset freezes against Russian officials involved in the murder of 37-year-old lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, as well as other human rights abuses, happened before the latest Duma elections. As a result of this push, led by Democratic Senator Ben Cardin of Maryland, the U.S. State Department put some of those officials on a visa blacklist in the summer of 2011.

Alas, these examples have been the exceptions in the West. For years, going back to the Clinton and Bush administrations, many Western leaders have shown a reluctance to publicly raise concerns about the Russian authorities' crackdown on and suppression of civil society and opposition forces. What explains this reluctance to call things in Russia by their proper names?

To some, Russia's status as a major nuclear power and energy supplier with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council requires a more pragmatic approach. But that only explains the mere reluctance to raise democracy and human rights issues. The reality is that a number of Western leaders go beyond that to demonstrate their "personal chemistry" with and affinity for Russian leaders. Not long ago, most Western officials and analysts were excited about Medvedev's "modernization" campaign, seeing it as a genuine readiness to establish democracy and rule of law. They overlooked the reality that the Kremlin's top-down approach to modernization helped to legitimize a post-Soviet version of an anti-Western, anti-democratic system. When Putin announced his plan to return to the presidency, some Western businessmen even welcomed the news as a harbinger of benign predictability in Russia.

Even today, some Western officials and analysts stubbornly try to find new evidence for their optimism. Some see Putin as a known quantity with whom the world has learned how to deal. Others hope "Putin 2.0" will launch real modernization. Quite a few expect the reset to continue under Putin, despite recent hiccups over missile defense and criticism over the elections, because Putin supposedly understands Russia's need for Western technology and capital. They urge the Obama administration to stay focused on preserving the reset and staying above the fray, whatever that means. Some even cite Putin's decision to permit large protest rallies in December as a positive step

(as if he could have done otherwise without causing significant and very embarrassing bloodshed).

Russian reality is likely once again to teach those in the West a hard lesson. Putin and his team will be operating in a much tougher domestic environment than before, and he likely will return to the traditional model of survival: gradually closing off Russia from the West while simultaneously accusing it of posing a threat, increasing repression, and bullying neighbors. The Russian ruling elite will pursue the reset only if it helps the regime survive. The conclusion as far as Western policy goes ought to be clear: With what modest leverage the West has, it should not be helping the bad guys. There is nothing “pragmatic” about contributing to an enormity. The West has some options, and they all point in the direction of a more values-based policy.

## Challenging the Seven Myths

There are several things Western governments can and should do, starting with challenging a number of the myths used to argue against a values-based approach and for a “pragmatic,” one might even say “accommodating,” approach in dealing with Russia.

*Myth One: Criticism of Russia reflects Russophobia and/or a desire to return to the Cold War.* The West’s efforts to avoid antagonizing the Kremlin by downplaying human rights concerns during the 2000–08 period, when Russia’s political situation badly deteriorated, did not prevent a sharp cooling in its relations with Moscow, nor the lowest point in relations with the Russia-Georgian war of August 2008. The Kremlin sees the lack of critical reaction to Russia’s authoritarianism as acquiescence and a sign of weakness, even as a green light to engage in more such behavior.

*Myth Two: Engagement with Russia helps to integrate Russia into the European space.* Engagement can be worthwhile but is not an end in itself. What’s more, it must involve a range of actions that includes not just cooperation but also the principle of conditionality. The latter means that Russia’s integration in the European space should depend on how Russia’s leaders and the elite behave and whether they abide by liberal principles at home and commitments Russia has made as a member of the Council of Europe and the OSCE. Engagement practiced by both the Bush and Obama administrations and through the EU’s partnership with Russia has not so far prevented Russia from following a more authoritarian path.

*Myth Three: “Reset has brought normalization of the West’s relations with Russia.”* There is no denying that relations between Russia and the West are better now than they were at the end of 2008. But it should be stressed that the “reset” has become a means, unintentionally on the

side of the West, of giving the Russian corrupt system international legitimacy. Some Russian officials would like to define the reset as tacit agreement by the United States that Washington will not criticize Russia on its human rights violations. The Russian ruling elite also believe the reset enables them to integrate personally into Western society: they buy property in the West, send their children to study there, and so on. At the same time it pursues reset with the West, the Kremlin continues to use anti-Western sentiment to construct an image of outside threat to deflect attention from internal problems. While both sides praise the reset (the Kremlin grudgingly), they diverge on many issues: European security, missile defense, energy, the sovereignty of Russia's neighbors, the Arctic, tactical nuclear weapons, terrorism, and attitudes toward regimes that disregard human life (Libya under Qadaffi and Syria). Russia's military doctrine continues to view NATO enlargement as a threat and prepares Russia for future nuclear wars (one can easily guess with whom). Thus the gains of the reset are likely to be ephemeral in nature, a point reinforced by Russia's irrational threats to derail the reset if the Magnitsky legislation became a law. Just as lasting détente was never possible between Western democracies and the Soviet Union, a sustainable reset is virtually impossible between today's Russia and the West, given the still wildly different systems and sets of values both sides maintain.

Myth Four: *One should not meddle in Russia's internal affairs.* This argument contradicts the international conventions Russia has signed, in particular, the European Convention on Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris. Russia, by joining the Council of Europe and the OSCE, has committed itself to the principle that its domestic affairs are not of only domestic concern. Thus the West's renunciation of values-based assessments of Russia's internal development spites basic Western principles and abdicates its responsibilities to stand against abuses of human rights and freedom.

Myth Five: *Russia is no longer a threat to the West.* True, Russia has no plans to attack the West nor is it ready for a military confrontation. But it remains a threat to the West in other ways, as well as to its neighbors, especially those hoping to integrate themselves more closely with the Euro-Atlantic community (just ask the Georgians). Russia's political elite exports corruption to the West, pushes back against efforts to advance democracy in its neighbors, aids other authoritarian regimes around the world (Chávez, the Castros, Ortega, Assad) and lures the Western elite into cynical political trade-offs and economic buyouts. Moreover, it seeks to use its bountiful natural resources, especially energy, as weapons of influence against its neighbors.

Myth Six: *Russia is not authoritarian. People there have personal freedom.* True, the Russian system gives people personal freedom so long

as they stay out of politics, but even here, those freedoms are constricted by rampant, everyday corruption and the state's abuses of power. Those who actively oppose the authorities meet the repressive fist of the state, as Mikhail Khodorkovsky's case shows all too well. The problem is that Putinism could be an even bigger obstacle to democracy than outright dictatorship because it is less obviously repressive (so far) and lacks the stupidities of, say, Brezhnevism. In making use of cooperation with the West and packaging itself in liberal slogans, Russia's personalized power only demoralizes society further and discredits liberal democracy. But the more brittle the system becomes, the more likely the regime will try to defend itself through force.

Myth Seven: *Russia's people are not yet ready for liberal democracy.*

This is perhaps the most insulting of all the excuses for not pushing for Russia to live up to its international commitments. It is not clear why Russians are any less civilized than Bulgarians, Romanians, Mongolians or Kyrgyz, who have all chosen pluralistic systems. How is it that the millions of Russians living in the West seem to have no trouble abiding by democratic principles? The problem is not in the Russian genetic code or in Russian society's inability to live in a free environment, but in the Russian elite, which limits freedom in order to maintain its grip on power and the perks that come with it. Stereotypes about Russians' immaturity only help the elite keep its personalized power model in place. December's protests, if nothing else, should have destroyed this myth.

Beyond knocking down such myths and excuses not to take a more values-based approach in dealing with Russia, the West should work to restore the role it once played in the eyes of many Russians as an attractive alternative to Russia's personalized system of power (hard to do, one must admit, amid the European Union's economic crisis). Western leaders also must avoid the "personal chemistry" approach with Russia's leaders (this, anyway, is harder to do with Putin than with Medvedev) and broaden engagement with Russian civil society and other actors. Along these lines, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe would send a very strong signal and give renewed life to the protestors by rejecting membership for the new Russian Duma delegation since they would represent a parliament stemming from fraudulent elections.

By adopting conditionality in dealing with Russia, Western governments would demonstrate in the clearest terms to the Russian elite that its ability to prosper in the West depends on its behavior inside Russia itself. Members of Russia's elite treasure the ability to integrate personally into the West. The best way to influence Russian democracy from afar is to pursue the principle of conditionality with Russian officials: If you do not engage in human rights abuses, then you can enjoy the privilege of living, working, and banking in the West. Passing Magnitsky-like legislation, accordingly, is very important. Such legislation should even be broadened to include Russian officials who take part in rigging



elections and suppressing democratic freedoms. Finally, the West could make an indirect contribution to reforming Russia by supporting reforms in Russia's neighbors – above all in Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, and Moldova. A democratic belt around Russia would be a source of stability, contrary to what Putin may think.

Governments in the West need new thinking with respect to Russia, especially in light of December's protests and vote against the status quo. As the democratic community of nations comes to grips with the mistakes it made for decades toward authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, it should not keep making them toward Russia. Learning from those mistakes and understanding the challenges posed by an authoritarian Russia require a new approach and policy, based more firmly in democratic values and respect for human rights. Russia should no longer remain an exceptional case. While events in Russia are unfolding at a frenzied pace, those in the West, like those in Russia, must understand that the legitimacy of Russia's current authorities is crumbling. So, too, should the old ways of dealing with Russia and the myths that surround it.

# Putinism Under Siege; Implosion, Atrophy, or Revolution?

Lilia Shevtsova / *Journal of Democracy*, July 2012

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The wave of mass protest set off by Russia's December 2011 parliamentary and March 2012 presidential elections has put an end to the postcommunist status quo. The agony of Vladimir Putin's regime is apparent, but we do not yet know if the death knell has sounded for the "Russian system." This system, based on personal rule, the merger of political power with economic assets, and a statist-militarist model of self-perpetuating authority, might be finished. But it also may be the case that Russian society still has a long way to go before it can be said to have broken with this stubborn legacy of an authoritarian past. Moreover, what exactly will replace the system of personalized power? And will this replacement, whatever it is, appear on the scene *before* that system starts to unravel? No one can say. We can be certain, however, that Russia's transformation will come only when its citizens bring sufficient pressure to bear, and also that Russia's trajectory will have implications not only for the international order but for democratic prospects throughout the post-Soviet space. The normally placid surface of Russian political life erupted in turmoil on December 5, 2011, when outraged citizens took to the streets of large cities across the country to protest the previous day's balloting to fill the State Duma's 450 seats. Thus began three months of open rebellion against the authorities. The "December Movement" began as a spontaneous public response to election fraud that favored the Kremlin aligned United Russia party (which is less a party than a bureaucrats' union).<sup>1</sup> Even absent manipulation of the vote count, the parliamentary elections fell short of being free and fair: Some opposition parties were denied registration and barred from taking part. Others, such as Yabloko, were registered but then were denied the opportunity to run full fledged campaigns. Officially, United Russia won 49.3 percent of the vote and 238 seats while the Communists received 19.2 percent (92 seats), the Just Russia party took 13.2 percent (64 seats), and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) won 11.7 percent and 56 seats. But independent

<sup>1</sup> The tricks that Kremlin-run election commissions used in order to ensure United Russia's victory included ballot-stuffing, doctoring results, using "carousels" (people paid to go from one polling station to another and vote for United Russia), adding "dead souls" to the voter rolls, and using the police to drive independent election observers away from polling places.

experts have proved that, in reality, the Kremlin party's vote share could not possibly have been more than 35 percent.<sup>2</sup>

The outbreak of mass protests against vote fraud did not change the Kremlin's approach to elections. A system based on "uncertain rules but certain outcomes" cannot allow genuine competition. The March 2012 presidential election, which returned Putin to the top spot after a stint as prime minister, drove this point home. The Kremlin itself chose Putin's opponents and barred any potentially dangerous rivals from the race. Two of the handpicked contenders (Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov and Zhirinovskiy) have been constant Kremlin sparring partners since Yeltsin's days. Another, Sergei Mironov of the Just Russia party, has been a Putin ally for years. As for oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, he was hardly likely to have risked entering the race without the Kremlin's seal of approval – all the more so with imprisoned Mikhail Khodorkovskiy as an example of what happens to oligarchs who dare to show real independence.

These handpicked opponents were supposed to give Putin the appearance of engaging in a political struggle that would legitimize his "victory" and continued rule. Putin himself made use of his status as premier to exploit a panoply of state resources ranging from television time to financial carrots and repressive sticks with which to bribe or intimidate voters. Putin officially won 63.6 percent, though again there was widespread fraud. Independent sources calculate that he actually won around 46 percent overall, and as little as 40 percent in Moscow.<sup>3</sup> The mass discontent shocked the Kremlin, which at first stuck to its usual harsh tactics. Police broke up the December 5 demonstration and none too gently arrested hundreds of protesters. But instead of putting out the fire, the tough response only fueled it. Surprised observers, Russian and foreign alike, realized that educated urbanites were thoroughly alienated from their government. A system that had seemed stable and resilient now stood revealed as more fragile and brittle than many had thought.<sup>4</sup>

The dates of the largest protests were December 10 and 24, February 4, and March 5 and 10. The numbers did not reach the record levels of 1990–91, when up to half a million people took to the streets of Moscow, but getting 70,000 to 120,000 people at a rally was a real turnaround after two decades of somnolence. "Angry citizens" began branching out into picketing, staging automobile protests along major streets in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and (in a tactic borrowed from the Baltic-state independence activists of the 1980s) forming human chains. Their main call was "For Honest Elections!" – a slogan meant to unite

<sup>2</sup> See [www.novayagazeta.ru/topics/12.html](http://www.novayagazeta.ru/topics/12.html).

<sup>3</sup> See interviews of the independent experts Dmitri Oreshkin and Alexander Kynev under the title "In Reality Putin Did Not Win," at [www.svobodanews.ru](http://www.svobodanews.ru).

<sup>4</sup> Vladislav Inozemtsev, "Neo-Feudalism Explained," *American Interest* 6 (March–April 2011): 73. Russian opinion-survey agencies also failed to detect the rise of discontent – respondents do not always tell the truth when asked how they feel about the authorities. One expert found the Putin regime resilient and Russians unready for dissent because those most protest-prone had either left the country or become Web-addled. See Ivan Krastev, "Paradoxes of the New Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 22 (April 2011): 15–32.

people from various political currents, including nationalists. The demonstrations' leaders, chosen through online voting, listed five demands: 1) free all political prisoners; 2) dismiss Central Election Commission head Vladimir Churov and investigate all claims of vote fraud; 3) annul all results found to be fraudulent; 4) register opposition parties; and 5) hold new parliamentary elections. Subsequent rallies added new demands for "comprehensive political reform" and independent monitors for the presidential polling. Initially, these new Decembrists stopped short of bringing up the system's cornerstone – the executive monopoly on power cemented in the 1993 Constitution – and contented themselves with demanding honest rules of the game within the personalized-power framework. Things soon took a deeper turn, however, and protesters began denouncing Putin's regime itself. The growing demands for fundamental reform signaled that the movement was increasingly turning against the system, and that Russian society was coming to grasp the need for sweeping change at the level of first principles.

The mass anger overturned the image of an apathetic and demoralized Russian society. The Decembrist Movement's base is broad, and includes a wide range of discontented urban residents across various income levels, age groups, and political orientations. The protesters are not exclusively middle class, but they are well educated (70 percent are postsecondary graduates).<sup>5</sup> Putin's regime, it seems, has antagonized what might be called the most advanced or "modern" part of Russian society, thus ending its hopes for "top-down" modernization.

## Causes and Impetus

Was it election fraud alone that sparked the protests? There have been falsified elections before in post-Soviet Russia – under Boris Yeltsin, during Putin's first two terms as president, and under Dmitri Medvedev. Yet none led to mass opposition. We need to separate the protests' causes from their catalysts. Discontent with Putin's regime among educated urbanites has been building for some time as people have witnessed the cynicism, brazen corruption, official high-handedness, and general stasis on display in their government.

By the last part of Putin's second term (between 2006 and 2008), the foundations of his implicit deal with the country were starting to erode. The most active and dynamic sectors of society wanted more than the Kremlin's offer of stability based on looking to the past and staying within the narrow bounds of old myths about Russia and the world. People began to tire of the notion that they should be content so long as the authorities let them make a living in return for staying out of politics and recognizing the authorities as

<sup>5</sup> According to polls taken by the Levada Center, most of the protesters identified themselves as technical specialists, middle managers, journalists, or students. Interview with Lev Gudkov, "Dissatisfaction with Authorities Is Intensifying," *Izvestia*, 6 March 2012.

having the final say on questions of property ownership, making corruption an essential lubricant when frictions appeared. But there inevitably came a moment when Putin's formula for "social peace" no longer satisfied much of the populace. Too many had come to see that this pact could guarantee them neither opportunity nor prosperity nor even basic security. Moreover, Putin lacked any sense of the kinds of social improvements that might give young people a leg-up in life and a chance to better themselves. The financial and economic crisis of 2008 – and the way that Putin and his team reacted to it by guarding their own wealth and that of the oligarchs close to them – cast into especially high relief the flaws in Putin's model. For all the talk of modernization under Medvedev's presidency, corruption only strengthened its hold and the rot ate deeper into the system, further spreading public awareness that the country was at a dead end, its rulers unable to undertake genuine change. Medvedev's legacy looks much like that of Leonid Brezhnev, who ruled the USSR from 1964 till his death in 1982. In Brezhnev's day, the gap between the leader's declarations and real life became so huge that it caused people fed up with double standards and cognitive dissonance to reject the Soviet system root and branch.

Two other circumstances also played a part in fueling the mood of hostility to the regime that was taking hold beneath the surface calm. The first was the new prominence of a younger generation that had grown up under Putin and was free of Soviet complexes, nostalgia, and fear. The second was the rise of the Internet. I recall my disappointment with young Russians during Putin's first decade in power, when I was struck by their conformism and desire to find places within the system at any cost. Unexpectedly, many members of this generation have chosen to take a fresh look at their lives and prospects. They have made the once-popular Putin an object first of mockery and more recently of open scorn.

As for the Internet, it not only made organizing protests easier, but also helped to shape an alternative view of the world and an alternative political culture. Millions of Russians who got news and information online began to see the government as an antagonist. With new media and other independent communication tools, they could build communities of opinion "outside" the control of the Russian state. All this mattered, even though it soon became clear that online activism could never replace more traditional "real-world" forms of political participation. The initial impetus for turning a mood of disaffection into action came on September 24, 2011, when Putin and Medvedev announced that they had been planning all along to swap jobs so that Putin, his seat kept warm by his younger confederate, could once again become president. For millions of Russians, this revelation that their country's highest offices were being treated like someone's personal playthings came as a slap in the face and a blow to national dignity. People hitherto silent

decided that they could no longer hold their tongues. The fury that had been building up over time turned into readiness for open protest.

The authorities did not realize that the big cities had already grown weary of Putin and did not want to see him back in the Kremlin. The elections gave people the chance to take part in the authorized political process, and the accompanying fraud gave them grounds for openly and lawfully expressing their discontent. Worried about its legitimacy, the Kremlin could not simply break up the protests by force (though it would later do so when a new round of demonstrations broke out in May 2012). Like the “Arab Spring” protests that began a year earlier, the Russian protests since late 2011 have manifested a strong ethical component as people demand that the state respect their rights and dignity as citizens.

The Russian “drive for dignity” brought to the fore a new generation of civic leaders. These leaders have played an ambiguous role in the movement’s evolution. They have tried to keep the protests moderate-friendly by avoiding what they see as excessive politicization. (The first demonstrations’ ideological platform was so fuzzy that even a former cabinet minister and the head of a state-owned company took part.) The vague agenda may have helped to broaden the protests’ base, but at the cost of sapping their transformative potential. Moreover, open confrontation with the Kremlin will require a degree of courage and self-sacrifice for which civic leaders and many urban protesters do not seem ready. Then too there are doubts about how far the Russian middle class wants to go in changing the system. A model of democratization associated with the work of Samuel P. Huntington posits that middle-class citizens become a force for greater self-rule and political liberty in authoritarian settings as their economic agency and prosperity grow. Things may not be so simple in Russia, where a sizeable swath of the middle class lives off its role as a service provider to the state bureaucracy or big state-run corporations such as Gazprom. For these middle-class Russians, protest may be less about transforming the system than about getting a better deal within it.

The protest movement’s desire to preserve its civic roots flows from the view, widespread in Russia, that politics is a dirty game. In some measure, the movement has been the result of frustration on the part of an opposition that can accurately be said to be outside or even against the system. This “antisystem” opposition has failed to acquire a broad base of public support – not that building such a base would have been easy given Putin’s association with years of economic growth. Moreover, most of the antisystem opposition’s leaders are seen as relics from the unfondly remembered Yeltsin years, and their competing ambitions and inability to agree on a common program have kept them from becoming a powerful force. That said, these leaders and groups still deserve credit for keeping the embers of discontent burning through the difficult years

of Putin's clampdown. The Decembrist Movement's ability to put its mechanisms in place so quickly was due above all to the antisystem opposition's crucial involvement in the first rallies. After the March 4, 2012, presidential election, however, it became clear that the protest agenda was fizzling. The authorities failed to meet a single Decembrist demand. To continue taking to the streets with the same demands would have made no sense and would have only left the movement paralyzed when what it needed was to catch its breath.

## A Movement's Achievements – and Limits

We can draw several conclusions from the twenty-first century's first Russian rebellion. First, the Decembrist Movement never had a chance to actually bring about a change of system or regime in Russia. There was no unified leadership or clear program, and, as we have seen, the appetite for politicization was missing. Yet in just a few months, the protests did change Russia's political climate and marked the end of public indifference to politics. The mass dissent dealt a serious blow to the system of personalized power, shaking its foundations and speeding up its delegitimization. The protests saw old illusions and taboos begin to crumble, including the hope that the authorities grasped the need for change and were willing to pursue it. The protests showed that a new generation was taking the stage, a generation unwilling to live any longer in Putin's stuffy outhouse. During the protests, this generation brought forth a core group of new leaders. They no longer have the traditional fear of the authorities in their blood, and they have the potential to raise a renewed round of popular protests to the next level.

Long used to an apathetic society and unprepared for any serious discontent, the Kremlin initially chose the worst possible way to react – it cracked down. Shocked and apparently confused, Putin made matters worse by calling the demonstrators insulting names. The authorities soon regained their composure and began damage control. With one hand, they targeted repression more carefully. With the other, they offered various handouts, sought to coopt opinion leaders and popular public figures by inviting them to meet with Putin and Medvedev or join regime-sponsored panels, and tried to split the opposition while discrediting its leaders. These tactics were familiar, but the aggressiveness and desperation that were driving them were new. The authorities were frantically trying to save whatever was left of the system's rapidly waning legitimacy.

Putin's team decided to deemphasize force (which had been used more in the provinces anyway) in favor of a "soft-kill" approach that would wrap the Decembrist Movement in a suffocating official bear hug. Medvedev sent the Duma a package of cosmetic "liberalizing" bills with

no prospect of jeopardizing the ruling team's tight grip on power.<sup>6</sup> Authorities began parroting protest slogans, sending their own pro-Kremlin demonstrators – usually bussed-in state workers – into the streets to shout “For clean elections!” Every time the Decembrists put together an event, the Kremlin would immediately follow suit. If the opposition held an automobile protest, Putin's supporters would stage a pro-Kremlin version of the same thing. If the protesters filled a city square, they could be sure that the Kremlin would fill another square with an even greater number of its own supporters – most of whom were being paid for their participation.

Through it all, the Kremlin kept insisting that the Decembrists were foreign puppets and hirelings, paid by the West to foment another “color revolution,” and that the regime's fight against them was in fact a noble struggle to preserve Russian honor and independence. Here, too, the Kremlin could not come up with anything new. As always in Russia, when the authorities feel pressed, they repeat the old “besieged fortress” refrain and launch a search for enemies at home and abroad. The main enemy in the Kremlin's eyes has been the supposedly U.S.-financed liberal opposition. The lack of evidence to support such claims has never bothered the ruling team. Its spin doctors seem to think that if this kind of propaganda worked in the past, it will work now – and all the more so since anti-Americanism fits with Putin's own views.

Western observers taken aback by Putin's new aggressiveness hastened to add reassuring notes, suggesting that one could not take the Kremlin's rhetoric at face value. Instead, it was all just part of an election campaign and would not keep Moscow from hewing to its usual pragmatic ways. But the reality is not so simple. With Putin and his team now watching their hold on power irreversibly slipping away as their legitimacy is undermined, the “besieged fortress”

type of behavior becomes a key tool for trying to save not only the regime but the very system of personalized power. The authorities' serious worry came through clearly in the Kremlin's decision to take the risky step – borrowed from Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu and Ukraine's Viktor Yanukovich – of championing the provinces against the capital and using proregime provincials to intimidate dissenters. For Putin to rock the Russian boat himself like this is a sign of how limited the Kremlin's resources truly are. Trying to maintain the status quo by doing things that could undermine stability smacks of desperation and does not seem like a winning long-run approach. The Kremlin has fallen back on the statist-militarist paradigm that has kept Russia trapped for centuries under czars and commissars alike. Twenty years after the Soviet collapse, the Russian elite has not found a new means of governing. Instead, it is

<sup>6</sup> Medvedev proposed amending the political-parties law to make it easier for parties to register, yet the same package of proposed amendments also contained provisions designed to further fragment and cripple the opposition by multiplying the number of tiny “sofa parties,” by making it harder for parties to form coalitions, and by keeping tight state controls on party activities. He also suggested the idea of gubernatorial elections that would be direct yet tightly “filtered” so as to exclude independent candidates.



trying to prolong its hold on power by going back to battling imaginary enemies and fanning a climate of civil confrontation.

Yet the contradictions are striking. We are talking, after all, about a political elite that has integrated itself comfortably into a Western way of life while at the same time trying to keep its own country locked within a system that should have been junked long ago. The protest wave showed that this once seemingly effective means of simultaneously controlling society and projecting an image of belonging to Western civilization no longer works. The Kremlin has started to seek a new balance between anti-Western aggressiveness and its need to maintain the Western ties that make possible the comfortable lives of Russian elites. Whether the Kremlin succeeds in reaching a viable new equilibrium depends on how willing the West is to keep up its policy of tacit connivance with the Russian ruling team.

## Too Late for Reform

In March 2012, the tide of protest seemed to subside. In its aftermath, Russian society appeared disoriented and confused as the authorities began to regain (at least on the surface) their customary air of self-assurance. The opposition camp was split over both what it had accomplished up to that point and what it should do next. The atmosphere of calm was deceptive, however. On May 6, thousands of Muscovites joined by visitors from other cities poured into the capital's streets to protest Putin's inauguration. This time, the authorities dispersed them with brutality, rounding up and detaining hundreds. For the first time, protesters fought with the police and invented new forms of resistance aimed at occupying city squares. A new and more antagonistic stage in the confrontation between the Kremlin and society had begun. At first glance, one might get the impression that the system of personalized power can keep going. The commodities trade continues to pump money into state coffers. The elite reassures itself with the ideas that trouble is still a long way off and that protests can be met with crack-downs – and the elite's top members know that they can escape Russia in the event of a cataclysm. Squabbles and infighting threaten to consume the opposition. Nationalist antagonism toward non-Slavs (particularly internal migrants from the North Caucasus) seems as if it may provide a promising channel into which authorities can direct popular passions, even if the Kremlin worries that the political exploitation of nationalism has its limits and may get out of hand. Imperial nostalgia – still a force in some quarters – mitigates political discontent (Putin is a champion of Russia's claim to great-power status). So do Russian society's deep-seated atomization, demoralization, and degradation. All these are reflected in the loss of old cultural ties and the spread of social

ills – signaled by high rates of alcoholism, abortion, murder, suicide, family breakdown, and early male mortality – that plague Russia and hold broad segments of Russian society back from activism on behalf of civic dignity. And there is also the sheer inertial weight of the huge and change-averse state bureaucracy.

We should not underrate the role that fear plays in the personalized-power system. The most vulnerable segments of society cling to the state and feel terror at the prospect of any change. Elites and intellectuals worry about a blind revolt from below even as they do things that make it more likely. Liberals fear that any real liberalization will lead to state collapse, much as Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* policy did. "Russia," they warn, "is just a smaller USSR." One must admit that this fear is not groundless: Russia remains a "half-frozen empire" that includes incompatible segments (Chechnya, for example) whose membership in the Russian Republic will not survive its liberalization. And yet, does not the Chechen example show that Russia has already effectively begun to lose territory even without liberalization? Fearful, lacking new strategies, and unsure about the nature of political change and its implications, powerful entrenched interests in elite and intellectual circles are trying to convince themselves that the current regime might somehow become a force for change. Hence the argument is now being heard that "Putin 2.0" will find himself forced to carry out reform whether he wants to or not, and must therefore be supported. Yet if Putin is destined to become the transformer of Russian society, why did he not transform it earlier? Certainly, leaders can change course under pressure, but what Russia needs is the overturning of the entire personalized-power system, not just a course correction. So far, Russia's experience proves that reform "from the top" only makes the current autocracy more effective at holding transformation back. The Putin team's monopoly on power is the main source of the country's degradation. Only a transformative shift to fair and honest political competition can open the way to curing it. But will Putin step aside? And if he is ready for real change, why did he not start with a fair presidential election? As for the idea, favored by some liberals, that economic modernization will eventually bring political liberalization in its wake, the authorities have been working on modernizing the economy for years, but with what results? Any notion of "modernization" that is understood to mean a strengthening of state control and monopoly power over the economy cannot by definition mean liberalization. And how can even the most basic "economically rational" steps such as fighting corruption be taken when parliament has been turned into a circus and independent courts and media have been buried under thick layers of manipulation and intimidation? Sadly, however, "modernization from the top" remains popular among some deluded Russian liberals who seem fascinated by the idea of turning Russia into a colder version of Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore.

Another myth dear to those who think the Russian *Titanic* can keep steaming along as usual is the belief in “gradual” reform. Supporters of the “gradual path” claim that reform should begin in selected areas such as education, healthcare, and agriculture, and only then spread further. But how do you reform these sectors without doing away with monopolies and opening them to competition, and without the rule of law and independent courts? The authorities’ monopoly on power makes any real reform impossible, even in these limited sectors. The authorities’ tactical maneuvers and the myths spread by Kremlin propagandists can no longer stave off a crisis that has already begun. The alleged adaptability of the “Russian system” has been exposed as an illusion – cosmetic changes can no longer hide a more fundamental rigidity. The system guarantees Russians neither personal security, nor economic well-being, nor a sense of civic dignity. The system works only to satisfy entrenched interest groups at the expense of society at large; the “golden parachutes” that the elites maintain in the form of assets stored in the West prove that even they do not believe in the sustainability of the current political order. The paradox is that propping up the status quo is speeding up the system’s decline, but attempts to update this status quo without liquidating its basis (personalized power) threaten to cause system breakdown, not unlike what happened to communism in 1991. Yet a refusal to update – an embrace of stasis – will increase the threat of a sudden implosion. The Kremlin’s readiness to use violence could make this implosion bloody. Putin’s return to the Kremlin shows that his team wants to hold on to its monopoly forever. As Medvedev himself declared, the team’s main instrument for resolving Russia’s problems is the decision “not to give up power” for the next ten to fifteen years at least. For the ruling team, relinquishing political control could mean not only loss of assets but also loss of freedom or even life. Lights burned late in the Kremlin during the Arab Spring and conclusions were drawn: Lose your grip on power, and you end up like Hosni Mubarak or Muammar Qadhafi. Russia’s current rulers do not want to become another variation on the theme of “authoritarians come to a bad end,” although the more tightly they hang on to the Kremlin, the more they make a hard landing not only probable but probably nasty too.

Questions remain: Can Russia as a nation-state survive even as the “Russian system” degenerates and breaks down? What price will ordinary citizens be forced to pay? Will the state and the country fragment or somehow stay whole even as they are reborn? We may have answers to these questions sooner than we think.

<sup>7</sup> See [www.levada.ru/24-02-2012/vybory-prezidentadopolnenie-k-prezentatsii-chast-i-mitingi-protesta-i-v-podderzhku-vputi](http://www.levada.ru/24-02-2012/vybory-prezidentadopolnenie-k-prezentatsii-chast-i-mitingi-protesta-i-v-podderzhku-vputi).

<sup>8</sup> See [www.levada.ru/17-11-2011/o-pravakh-cheloveka-interesakh-vlasti-i-obshchestva-v-rossii](http://www.levada.ru/17-11-2011/o-pravakh-cheloveka-interesakh-vlasti-i-obshchestva-v-rossii). Around 44 percent of respondents supported the Moscow protests; 46 percent said that the main reason for the protests “was the fact that the state did not respect people’s rights”; and 54 percent agreed that the authorities have turned popular voting into a “procedure to perpetuate their power.” See Georgy Ilichev, “The December Folks,” *Novaya gazeta*, 11

## The End of the Russian Matrix?

Looking at Russia in the wake of the postelection protests, one could have come away with the impression that the “normal” state of drowsy oblivion was settling over the country once again. People have behaved as if they accept Putin’s continued rule, at least by default: In a February 2012 poll by the Levada Center, only 14 percent of respondents said that they felt Putin had the “best solutions for Russia,” but 35 percent said that they felt no one had solutions.<sup>7</sup> The May confrontations suggested that the silence could be the harbinger of a new and much more dangerous tsunami. Opinion is turning against Putin and the system of personalized rule. In a survey taken by the Levada Center in October 2011, around 68 percent of respondents were already saying that the interests of power holders and society at large did not coincide, while only 24 percent said that they did.<sup>8</sup> In a March 2012 survey, only 5 percent said that those in power “are concerned with the well-being of ordinary people.” Just 19 percent said that the authorities “are concerned with the interests of the country,” while 63 percent said that the authorities are concerned with their own interests, their desire to retain power, and the defense of major corporate interests. Only 23 percent had a positive view of the ruling team.<sup>9</sup> In a late-December 2011 survey, about 61 percent were sure that 2012 would not be a calm year, and reported feelings of foreboding. Nearly 21 percent thought that Russia would experience a coup d’etat, and 56 percent said that new turmoil was possible.<sup>10</sup> The regime has already lost the support of key social groups and may lose yet more support as economic and fiscal problems mount. “No change and no stability” is a precarious situation for any leadership. And yet the regime’s final act could take some time and will require more than several waves of protest. There are still powerful groups at both the elite and popular levels with an interest in preserving the system in general and the Putin team’s rule in particular. These include not only business interests but also “system liberals” (who may have their issues with the system but who serve it at the same time) as well as the traditional Soviet industrial populace that relies on the state for survival.

If Putin’s personal grip on power is no longer sustainable, his cohort may agree on his voluntary exit and a leadership reshuffle – or there may be a palace coup. The system of personalized power is deeper than just the current regime, and a change of faces at the top may allow things to drag on for a while longer. Even among the protesters and intellectuals, one can detect a longing for charismatic leadership and a new savior. The demise of the personal-

January 2012. See [www.levada.ru/19-12-2011/moskvichi-ob-oppozitsii-aktsiyakh-protesta-vystupleniyakh-v-podderzhku-edinoi-rossii](http://www.levada.ru/19-12-2011/moskvichi-ob-oppozitsii-aktsiyakh-protesta-vystupleniyakh-v-podderzhku-edinoi-rossii). In a survey taken in March 2012, only 15 percent of those polled said that they believed the presidential elections were fair. See also [www.levada.ru/04-04-2012/rossiyane-o-chestnosti-proshedshevik-vyborov-izvishchenii-liga-izbiratelei](http://www.levada.ru/04-04-2012/rossiyane-o-chestnosti-proshedshevik-vyborov-izvishchenii-liga-izbiratelei).

<sup>9</sup> See [www.levada.ru/03-04-2012/rossiyane-o-politicheskome-rezhime-i-lyudyakh-kotorym-prinadlezhit-vlast](http://www.levada.ru/03-04-2012/rossiyane-o-politicheskome-rezhime-i-lyudyakh-kotorym-prinadlezhit-vlast).

<sup>10</sup> See [www.levada.ru/29-12-2011/chego-ozhidayut-rossiyane-v-nastupayushchem-godu](http://www.levada.ru/29-12-2011/chego-ozhidayut-rossiyane-v-nastupayushchem-godu).

ized-power system that has been suffocating Russia for centuries could be an extended and dramatic process. That system's remaining pillars are three. The first is the neoimperial, Russia-as-superpower mentality that retains a hold on the political class and some segments of society. Putin and his team play on this by emphasizing Russia's global role, Moscow's perceived need to throw its weight around within the post-Soviet "near abroad," the creation of the Eurasian Union, the indivisibility of the Russian Federation, and the putative need to keep its "alien" regions (such as the North Caucasus) under Russian tutelage as de facto protectorates. The second pillar is a militaristic form of statism that points to the existence of real or (more often) imagined threats to Russia in order to legitimize the subjugation of society. Putin's goal of a "new industrialization" based on the military-industrial complex is this old model dressed up in a novel guise.

The third pillar is the apprehension of Western governments that prefer a stable if undemocratic Russia to a Russia in the throes of unpredictable change. The West's tacit approval, or at least acceptance, is a significant source of legitimacy for the Putin regime – all the more so as it watches its domestic legitimacy crumble. That Western governments facing their own malaise and dysfunctionality have no stomach for turbulence in Russia is unsurprising. Yet the West, by its silence and passivity, is indirectly (and in some cases, directly) helping the "Russian system" of personalized power to appear civilized, and thus is complicating Russia's path to liberal democracy.<sup>11</sup>

The only way to transform the Russian system into something more democratic is to eliminate the old triad of personalized power, the merger of that power with business interests, and neoimperial ambitions. Powerful pressure from society will be needed. The political and social actors ready to exert this kind of sustained, organized pressure have not yet emerged. Yet the stirrings we have witnessed from society in recent months offer grounds for hope that the agents of change may appear in the not-so-distant future. They could emerge from among the middle levels of the intelligentsia, the media, and business, particularly in sectors linked strongly to expertise and innovation, and from among younger people – those farthest from the Soviet past. Until recently, the Kremlin's constant clampdowns and discrediting campaigns prevented the opposition from gaining strength. Today, however, it is beginning to appear more likely that such regime efforts will backfire by arousing more and wider resistance in response, and by spurring society to pry open more autonomous space beyond the reach of state control. Yet even if change agents appear and gird themselves well for struggle, Russia will face another problem. At both the elite and popular levels, the country is replete with powerful rent-seeking

<sup>11</sup> Russian liberals are becoming openly critical of the main Western approach to the Russian regime: "Paris and Berlin are solid supporters of Putin. Obama's Russia policy is much more advantageous to Putin and his inner circle than [was] that of former U.S. President Bush;" Vladimir Ryzhkov, "Replace Jackson-Vannik with the Magnitsky Act," *Moscow Times*, March 20, 2012.

groups that benefit from the existing system and can be expected to fight for it.

Moreover, the postcommunist elites have built a system that deliberately lacks constitutional and political means for resolving conflicts and deadlocks. This raises the disturbing possibility that the “battle” over the system’s future may be not so much metaphorical and institutional as literal and waged in the streets. Then, too, there is the close-knit nature of the ruling team and its dependence on the security services. Hopes for the realization of a “pacted transition” between system pragmatists and the opposition appear dim in view of this circumstance.<sup>12</sup> Revolution might be the only answer to the question of how to displace rent-seeking stakeholders and restructure the system so that it is open to new interests. Frustrations born of fake liberalization and cosmetic efforts at trivial change could make that revolutionary process more intense and violent than it might otherwise be.

Russia is now in a race against time. Should a real alternative to the current regime fail to appear in the next five to ten years, the system may simply begin to fall apart. This would complicate attempts to set new rules based on liberal-democratic principles. The old system’s spontaneous collapse and public discontent could bring about a repeat of 1991 and see the personalized-power system regenerate itself in new packaging. However that may be, the Russian system’s demise is currently accelerating, and Russia’s political class and society do not have much time to find peaceful ways out of the current impasse before the system starts to unravel.

There is something new today under the Russian political sun – a sense, shared across broad layers of society, that the system of personalized rule has no future. Putinism as a leadership style and a type of regime with any hope for legitimacy is dead, but it is not yet gone. The problem is how to get it safely buried together with the institutional structure that it embodies.

<sup>12</sup> The process of potential dissent within Putin’s team may have already started. Former finance minister Alexei Kudrin has become a tough critic of the system. “We need political freedoms and political competition,” he declared. But at the same time, he stressed that “the process should be evolutionary.” See <http://akudrin.ru/news/bazovye-nashinedostatki-lechatsya.html>. This rhetoric shows that the “system liberals” are still not ready to leave the government ship; hence their role in future developments is unclear. Their hesitations may hinder the transformation process.

# Why Russia Doesn't Hold the Keys to Syria. The West may be using the Kremlin's intransigence as an excuse to do nothing

David J. Kramer & Lilia Shevtsova / *The American Interest*, July 11, 2012

It is difficult to decipher whether those who argue that Russia holds the keys to the solution of the Syrian crisis really believe it or are using Russia as an excuse to do nothing. The recent Syrian Action Group meeting in Geneva clearly showed that the Kremlin is not moving closer to the position of the United States and other powers. Tremendous time and energy have been wasted in trying to lure Russia closer to the view that Assad needs to go. Over and over again, Russian officials have made clear that they are not interested in helping find a real, as opposed to imitation, solution to the Syria problem. In a July 9 meeting with Russia's diplomatic corps, Vladimir Putin reconfirmed that he has not changed his position on Syria, reiterating his familiar mantra on the "political solution" and "dialogue," which barely masks his support for Bashir al-Assad. Continued Russian arms sales to the murderous Assad regime should be crystal clear evidence of which side Moscow favors in the conflict.

Before going any further, however, let's be clear what we mean when we say "Russia," vis-a-vis Syria or any other likeminded tyrant, for that matter. After all, it is Putin and his ilk who support and provide lifelines to such leaders around the world, whether it is Lukashenko in neighboring Belarus, Assad in Syria, or Chavez in Venezuela. Such support comes from the Kremlin, not Russia writ large, and certainly not from the Russian opposition or Russian civil society. It is critical to draw such a distinction.

With that clarified, let's look at why Putin and the Kremlin have staked the position they have on Syria. What are the Kremlin's motives for its obstinate defense of Assad?

Conventional wisdom offers several explanations. For starters, there are sales of Russian arms to Assad. About 75 percent of Syrian weapons come from Russia, and Syria is the fourth most lucrative market in the Russian arms trade, with \$700 million delivered to Damascus in 2011. Then there is Russia's small naval base at Tartus, the last Russian base in the Mediterranean. Syria is the last Soviet-era bastion and client state left in the Middle East, and the Kremlin does not want to lose it. Syria is also a gateway to Iran. Then there is Putin's suspicion of the West

and his knee-jerk reflex to resist American policy first and ask questions later. Putin also wants to remind the world that global problems can't be resolved without Moscow and his personal participation.

All this is true, but there is something else at work as well. To discover it, we must look to the systemic factors that explain why the Kremlin is trying to save Assad (or for that matter any other dictator, especially in Russia's so-called sphere of influence), even if he is a liability for Russia.

Here we must recognize that foreign policy is an instrument of Putin's domestic agenda. The domestic priority for the Kremlin is to preserve a status quo supported by three pillars: personalized power, its legitimation by superpower aspirations (or at least their imitation), and the attempts to consolidate society by seeking out an enemy and using that enemy to turn Russia into a besieged fortress. The more Putin's regime is confronted with problems at home (and since last December, it has been challenged more than at any other time after 1999), the more actively it looks for foreign policy means to support the Russian Matrix.

This translates in concrete terms to blocking the United States whenever and wherever possible. Thus, the Kremlin switches to vocal anti-Americanism and seeks to block the United States at the UN Security Council or in other fora. This switch has been most vividly on display in the endless harassment of U.S. Ambassador to Moscow Michael McFaul. Neither random nor a reflection of Putin's personal likes or dislikes or phobias, this behavior is simply how the Kremlin survival mechanism works. To reproduce personalized power with global aspirations, the Kremlin has to contain America and undermine the American order wherever possible – in Russia's own neighborhood or in other parts of the world. This is how Russian authoritarianism differs from other regimes of this type: In order to preserve and reproduce itself, the Russian personalized power system needs to demonstrate global reach. If the Russian ruling team can't force or persuade the world to endorse its stance, it tries to at least undermine the American and Western positions. Accordingly, the Kremlin's last client state in the Middle East became an arena of conflict geared toward bolstering the Kremlin's survival strategy, and toward demonstrating that Russia can still impose limits on the West. Sadly, in the process of doing these things, the Kremlin has shown utter indifference to the suffering of the Syrian people, for it is more focused on its own future than it is on the welfare of others.

The Kremlin's survival strategy revolves around the concept of total and "unbreakable" sovereignty, commitment to non-interference, and rejection of any intervention, including intervention for humanitarian reasons. In the context of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (a scenario that is still a nightmare for Putin) and the Arab Spring, the Kremlin's concept of sovereignty guarantees its future (a fact that is indirectly a nod to the fragility of the Russian system and Putin's



regime). Focused on sustaining itself, the Kremlin wants to avoid a scenario on Russian soil similar to those in Egypt or Libya, where, through Western interference, Mubarak and Qaddafi were brought down (even if such a scenario seems unthinkable). Ironically, in declaring its adherence to the concept of “spheres of interest,” the Kremlin does not recognize the true sovereignty of its neighbors. In short, this concept is in essence a warning to the West: “You have no right to dictate your rules to other states!”

Indeed, the concept of “total sovereignty” means that Moscow demands that the West forget about the principles of the Council of Europe and Chapter VII of the UN charter (expanded in 2005) – first of all the “responsibility to protect” in case of threat to civilian life.

Putin has openly confessed his major concern regarding Syria: “Russia will oppose attempts to use the concept of human rights as an instrument of political pressure and to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries.” Former Russian Prime Minister Yevgenii Primakov, at the St. Petersburg World Economic Forum last month, reaffirmed the Kremlin’s major headache: “Democracy can’t be transferred. This is where we differ with the U.S.” Thus, Syria, for Putin’s regime, is not about Syria in itself. Nor is it about the threat of an unraveling in the Middle East, or atrocities, or geopolitical goals. No, Syria is about Russia and the Kremlin’s control over the situation. To strengthen his rule, Putin must weaken the West’s influence. This is why Putin will not endorse a peaceful transfer of power from the leader to the opposition when he believes that power belongs only to the leader.

The West, however, clings to the hope that Moscow will help persuade Assad either to leave or to behave in a more civilized way. Alas, this is unlikely to work, for Assad is beyond redemption, and pushing him out would contradict the Kremlin’s attitude to power. A “managed transition” does not exist in the Russian political vocabulary. We liked Adam Garfinkle’s metaphor: To depend on Putin to save the situation is like depending on the services of Monica Lewinsky as a marriage consultant. Moreover, there are no signs that Moscow has sufficient leverage to force out Assad, even if it were to change its position.

The Kremlin’s call for a “solution through political dialogue” between Assad and the opposition has a specific meaning. In Russia, “political dialogue” means carefully selected people appointed to play the role of “opponents” – that is, “managed opposition.”

What is really puzzling is the belief of Western leaders that Putin has come around to their side. During the Los Cabos summit, UK Prime Minister David Cameron hurriedly announced that Putin had shifted his view of Assad during his talks with Obama and accepted the idea of a transition of power in Syria. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton after the Geneva talks also sounded hopeful. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius declared that the Geneva meeting was the beginning

of Assad's end. Russia "supports Annan's unity government plan," the global media announced.

Really? Why do they not listen to Putin's mantra that "nobody has the right to decide for other nations who should be brought to power or who should be removed from power?" Have they missed Lavrov's statements to the effect that some powers "misinterpret" the results of the Geneva talks, and that Moscow never said that Assad should go?

Western optimists either don't hear (or don't really want to hear) what the Kremlin is truly saying. Or perhaps they don't understand that Putin's acceptance of the Western plan for Syria would leave him without leverage and would not allow him to enjoy the role of a spoiler, which he plays with evident relish.

One can't avoid the impression that all sides in the "Syria Concert" are taking part in a game of "Let's Pretend!" Western leaders pretend that they are looking for a breakthrough, and pretend that Russia is on board. The Kremlin's obstinacy with respect to the Assad regime winds up being an excuse for doing nothing, as well as a demonstration of the West's noble inclinations. The Kremlin pretends that it has leverage over Damascus and is helping to find a solution. The Kremlin in this game has a much stronger position: It does not care about Syrians' lives or its own reputation. And it has learned how to drive two horses in opposite directions, pretending to agree and disagree at the same time.

Does this mean that the Kremlin will never betray Assad? No. Putin does not care about Assad personally; rather, they care about what Assad represents. Putin is no friend to the end; he is a friend only so long as it serves his own purposes inside Russia.

But Putin would perhaps agree to play along if doing so could help the Kremlin to strengthen the Russian Matrix. The list of possible enticements could be long, starting with demands like "don't meddle" in Russian and Eurasian affairs and ending with things like concessions over oil transit routes and a central role in the privatization of Syrian commodities. Sadly, the West might even agree to play such a trading game with Putin.

Of course, the "responsibility to protect" provision gives the West the right to proceed without arguing that "Russia has the keys to Damascus." If the Western powers continue to wait for such keys, they may in fact be looking for excuses to do nothing.

# Ukraine, Russia, and Two Horses

Lilia Shevtsova & David J. Kramer / *The American Interest*, August 21, 2012

Nearly twenty years ago, Zbigniew Brzezinski famously said, “Russia can be either an empire or a democracy, but it cannot be both... Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire.” Uninterested in becoming a democracy, today’s Kremlin has not given up the hope of regaining a facsimile of its old empire, with Ukraine at its core. To be sure, the Kremlin today is pragmatic enough to understand that it can’t revive the corpse of the USSR (though Georgians may beg to differ), but it would like to create the Eurasian Union – a new version of “satellites along its periphery.”

Russia’s leaders sure have a strange way of pursuing this agenda, as illustrated by the most recent meeting in July between the leaders of Russia and Ukraine. Vladimir Putin kept his host, Viktor Yanukovich, waiting three hours – not due to any dramatic circumstances but out of sheer rudeness. Putin left Moscow late, but then, to add insult to injury, after arriving in Crimea he stopped first to meet with a bunch of bikers. Only after that did he make time for an official visit. Such appalling lack of diplomatic etiquette was a direct slap in Yanukovich’s face, an intentional gesture of both impudence and intimidation (albeit one Putin has made to other foreign leaders and CEOs). Big Russia was teaching Yanukovich and Ukraine a lesson – or so the Russian leaders thought!

This incident demonstrated not only the personal animosity between the two leaders but also the mutual suspicion and distrust that plagues the relationship between the two states. Russia’s leaders never hesitate to remind Ukraine who the big boy on the block is – a strange way, to say the least, to win over friends and allies. Indeed, one should not underestimate Moscow’s ability to alienate potential partners through its arrogant, aggressive approach to foreign policy, especially when its immediate neighbors are involved.

Of all the states in Eurasia, Ukraine is *the* most important test of the Kremlin’s neo-imperialistic longings and of Russia’s readiness (or not) to be a modern state. It is also a test of the West’s interest in expanding its normative principles eastward, which can best be

advanced if Ukraine itself demonstrates a desire for deeper integration based on a democratic path.

For Russia, Ukraine is important in Moscow's desperate and ongoing search for a new identity. A significant part of the Russian elite and society at large resented having to recognize Ukrainian independence more than two decades ago; to many Russians, it was like losing a limb. Those feelings have not gone away, as many Russians look at Ukraine's trials and tribulations and hope that Kiev will come limping back into Moscow's fold, reuniting the "Slavic brothers" again. Even many Russian liberals stop being liberals when they think about Ukraine and the possible reconstitution of the "family." There is no other country in the region that creates in Russia such a longing to embrace without first asking the object of its attention if it wishes the same. They are linked by history, family ties, language, and many Russians see Kiev as the birthplace of their statehood.

While today's Kremlin does not demonstrate overt, military aggressiveness toward Ukraine, there is no doubt about Ukraine's importance for the Kremlin agenda. As his own grip on power starts to erode, Putin seeks to compensate for that erosion by turning to the international arena. The Eurasian Union is not a new Putin hobby. Strengthening Russia's role in the region is the Kremlin's instrument for finding legitimacy and leverage. But the Eurasian Union isn't a serious entity if only Kazakhstan and Belarus join Russia. It needs Ukraine as an anchor. As in 1991, when the Soviet Union could not survive without Kiev, today the new alliance can't be formed without Ukraine. That is why the Kremlin will pressure, cajole, and intimidate Kiev into "rejoining" its orbit. This goes beyond Ukrainian assets and the gas pipeline (in fact, after Nord Stream and the start of South Stream, Ukraine is less essential to Moscow for carrying gas to Europe). More important for the Kremlin is the search for new ways to energize the Russian political system, which can't reproduce itself without global aspirations and satellite states. Indeed, the Kremlin understands that if Ukraine – especially a democratic Ukraine – moves toward the West it would be a crushing blow for the Kremlin's authoritarianism and an invitation for Russians to do the same.

Ukraine has its own drama, with different leaderships (both the one in charge now and the one that was in charge during the Orange days and is now in the opposition) that have greatly disappointed the population. Ukraine's leaders have been preoccupied with pursuing their own interests at the expense of the country.

Yanukovich came to power after Ukrainians tired of their Orange leaders. But instead of pursuing a truly Ukrainian path, Yanukovich sought to turn Ukraine into another, smaller Russia – not in the sense of wanting to be absorbed by Moscow, but in the sense of pursuing Putinism on a Ukrainian scale. This has meant keeping Ukraine in a gray area: controlled from the top, rife with corruption, but pretending

to be a democracy and at the same time riding two horses on the international scene – one moving toward the West and another away from the West. To succeed at such a trick, Yanukovych needs to have a West that is truly interested in having Ukraine move toward Europe to counter the push-and-pull from Moscow. Instead, Europe's interests have turned inward because of the financial crisis and waning interest in integrating Ukraine, which is often viewed as a headache. So when Yanukovych started to clamp down on freedoms and his behavior began to resemble Putin's, the West responded by delaying free trade and association agreements but also, for the most part, just looking the other way.

Putin can get away with his behavior because of Russia's nuclear weapons, its permanent Security Council seat, its energy resources, and its overall size and importance. Yanukovych, however, doesn't get away with similar behavior. He instead gets ostracized by the West – and left to the vicissitudes of Russia's leadership.

On top of all this, Yanukovych has showed poor understanding of his Russian counterparts. The April 2010 Kharkiv deal signed with then-President Dmitri Medvedev – in which Ukraine granted Russia continued use of Sevastopol's port for the Black Sea Fleet for another 25 years, until 2042 – only whetted the Russian Bear's insatiable appetite. Putin viewed this deal as evidence of weakness on Yanukovych's part and wanted to extract more from his Ukrainian partner.

Yanukovych should take heed of Aleksander Lukashenko's fate in Belarus. By turning to dictatorship, Lukashenko lost his ability to balance his country between Europe and Russia and immediately became the Kremlin's hostage, in turn essentially giving up parts of Belarusian sovereignty and economic assets to Russia. Even if Putin loathes Lukashenko, the Kremlin has Belarus and Lukashenko exactly where it wants them: as the Kremlin's satellites and dependents.

Yanukovych's clampdown on democratic actors and institutions pushes him down the same road. Ukraine can be truly independent only if it is democratic, for only then will the West be interested in deeper relations – and be willing to help buttress Ukraine from Moscow's acquisitive instincts. Yanukovych either fails to understand this or just doesn't care. The policy of balancing is over, because neither Europe nor the Kremlin will allow Yanukovych to ride two horses.

In 2004, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians turned out in Maidan to insist on free elections and a brighter future. Close to eight years later, the population is tired and frustrated with political leaders of all stripes, but there is a stirring throughout Ukrainian civil society that suggests that tolerance for poor leadership is running out. For many Ukrainians, the answer to their country's problems lies not in Moscow but within their own borders.

Moreover, Ukraine is for Europe and the West the key to the Eurasian space, not simply in geopolitical terms but for civilizational devel-

opment. If a democratic Ukraine rises again, it will act as the most powerful stimulus for its neighbors' democratic hopes. Creating favorable external conditions for Ukraine's return to a democratic path by offering a concrete sense of belonging and, down the road, membership will also serve as a powerful test for Europe's ability to present itself once again as a normative power.

This makes Ukraine's parliamentary elections this October even more important. Yanukovich, following the Kremlin model, wants to determine their outcome ahead of time; such a plan would please Putin and the Kremlin, too. The West must stress the consequences of such an effort. If the Ukrainian elite wants to guarantee their country's independence and control of its assets, they need to return to the democratic path, and the Rada elections are the place to start. If Yanukovich tries to rig the elections, he may end up as the governor of another province under the Kremlin's thumb, for the West will become shut off to him and his country. Let's hope Ukrainian society recognizes what's at stake.

# Obama vs. Romney: Who Would Putin Pick?

Lilia Shevtsova & David J. Kramer / *The American Interest*, September 11, 2012

In his speech accepting the Republican nomination for president, Mitt Romney vowed to take a hard line in dealing with Russia. “Under my administration,” he said, “our friends will see more loyalty, and Mr. Putin will see a little less flexibility and more backbone.” Earlier in the campaign, Romney had cited Russia as “our number one geopolitical foe.” The party platform endorsed at the Republican convention calls for passage of legislation that would impose a visa ban and asset freeze against Russian officials involved in gross human rights abuses:

“Russia should be granted Permanent Normal Trade Relations, but not without sanctions on Russian officials who have used the government to violate human rights. We support enactment of the Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act as a condition of expanded trade relations with Russia.”

A week later, the Democratic Party platform criticized Romney’s comments on Russia and defended the Obama administration’s approach to dealing with Russia:

The Cold War mentality represented by Mitt Romney’s identification of Russia as “our number one geopolitical foe” ignores the very real common interest we share with Russia in reducing nuclear stockpiles, stopping additional proliferation by countries such as Iran and North Korea, and preventing nuclear materials from falling into the hands of terrorists. The President’s “reset” policy toward Russia has produced significant cooperation in these areas, as well as in Russian support for the Northern Distribution Network that supplies our troops in Afghanistan... At the same time, we are candid with the Russians when we disagree. The administration will not put aside our differences but will raise them directly with the Russian government. And we will continue to strongly criticize Russian actions that we oppose, such as their support for the Assad regime in Syria.

Russian President Vladimir Putin wasted little time weighing in with his reaction to the two candidates’ views. In a recent interview, Putin praised the Kremlin’s relations with the Obama administration, notwithstanding ongoing differences over missile defense:

“I believe that over the last four years Presidents Obama and Medvedev have made a lot of progress on the way to strengthening Russia-U.S. relations. We have signed the new START treaty. Backed by the U.S., Russia has become a full-fledged member of the World Trade Organization. There have been more reasons to be optimistic about our bilateral relations: our strengthened cooperation in combating terrorism and organized crime, in the nonproliferation of weapons of mass-destruction and others. In other words, we have accumulated quite a lot of positive experience.”

Putin also described Obama as “an honest person who really wants to change much for the better.” At the same time, Putin didn’t pass up a chance to blast Romney:

“As for Mr. Romney’s position, we understand that this is to a certain extent motivated by the election race and election rhetoric, but I also think that he was obviously wrong, because such behavior on the international arena is the same as using nationalism and segregation as tools of U.S. domestic policy. It has the same effect on the international arena when a politician, a person who aspires to lead a nation, especially a superpower like the U.S., proclaims someone to be an enemy.”

Does all this mean that Russia would prefer to see Obama reelected? Would the Kremlin go so far as to help his chances by not creating problems for him? Not necessarily.

The Kremlin has one criterion by which it assesses the U.S. presidential candidates: namely, which one will help it pursue its own domestic agenda. The Kremlin’s relations with the outside world are instrumental to achieving its domestic goals, and the key domestic goal for Putin’s team today is survival, even as evidence mounts that its position has started to crumble.

In his first term, President Obama proved to be a welcome partner for the Kremlin, especially after relations at the end of the George W. Bush administration plummeted following the Russian invasion of Georgia. Things between Putin and Bush got off to a good start in Ljubljana in the summer of 2001, when Bush looked into Putin’s eyes and “saw his soul” and Putin soon after supported Bush’s response to the 9/11 attacks, even against the advice of his close advisers. For Putin, partnering with Washington in the war on terrorism was to mark the beginning of a new era: the era of the U.S.-Russian world condominium with Bush and Putin at the helm of the global pyramid.

It didn’t take long for the bilateral relationship to sour, however. From the U.S. perspective, Putin’s crackdown at home – exemplified by the arrest in October 2003 of Mikhail Khodorkovsky – and his interference in his neighbors’ affairs were responsible for the steady decline.



From the Kremlin's perspective, the U.S. invasion of Iraq, support for the color revolutions in neighboring Ukraine and Georgia, expansion of NATO eastward, and missile defense were the sources of friction that Putin later skillfully used to his advantage in playing up the external threats to Russia (recall his post-Beslan remarks in 2004 and his February 2007 Munich speech – even his reference to the United States as the Third Reich in May 2007). The Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 sunk relations between Moscow and Washington to their lowest depth since the collapse of the USSR.

Largely unknown to the Kremlin, Obama initially was viewed suspiciously by the Russian leadership, which feared that the new American president would continue pushing values. Quickly those suspicions were dispelled, however, as Obama and his advisers made the “reset” one of his key foreign policy priorities but downplayed human rights.

Here is how Dmitry Suslov, a member of the pro-Kremlin Valdai Discussion Club, explains the positive attitude toward the Obama administration, a view likely shared among the Russian official establishment:

“The Obama administration is pursuing the most realistic and least ideology-driven foreign policy in U.S. history since the end of the Cold War... The success of the reset policy was largely due to the significant tempering by the U.S. of its criticism of Russia on issues of democracy and human rights... The U.S. response to the targeted measures recently taken by the Russian authorities against opposition leaders was unassuming. The isolated and openly low-key statements being made by administration officials on this matter are nothing more than a nod to the election campaign and are mainly designed not to give the Republicans another opportunity of accusing the White House of betrayal.”

Obama's unexpected rejection of the normative stance and his desire to build consensual, “win-win” relations with Russia wound up inadvertently handing the Kremlin a present as Russian leaders were seeking international legitimacy for their imitation democracy, as well as support for then-President Dmitri Medvedev's modernization rhetoric. The Kremlin quickly learned how to deal with the Obama administration – although, to be clear, the U.S. did accomplish goals of its own: Afghan transit, the New START Treaty, and a resolution on Iran (Russia's WTO accession is more ambiguous due to the fact that the Kremlin made sure that accession would not hamper its control over property).

By 2010, the reset policy with Russia was being touted by Obama administration officials as one of its top foreign policy successes. This, in turn, may have created an impression in Moscow that Obama needed to keep the reset going more than Putin did, though the then-Russian prime minister paradoxically gained domestically by returning to anti-

American slogans courting his traditionalist base. By this logic, a second Obama term would seem to be the Kremlin's preferred option – especially since, to Putin, Obama is by now almost a hostage to his own reset policy, part of which is a tendency to avoid upsetting the Kremlin. The reset, after all, has not prevented Putin from behaving badly without paying any price in the relationship because of the administration's rejection of linkage.

Yet the Russian reality is more complicated. The fact that Putin is experiencing growing problems and fading popularity at home has forced the Kremlin to turn to repressive mechanisms in order to survive. This, in turn, demands justification, which requires a search for an enemy. The threat for the Kremlin (real or imagined) can't come from inside or from a normal country or neighbor; that would be humiliating for an elite that tries so hard to look macho! To look convincing, the threat has to come from a great power that represents an alien civilization: America. This is a return to the Soviet tradition of the search for an enemy to perpetuate the system. In this situation, the Kremlin does not need the leader of the reset anymore. Instead, the Russian ruling team will be tempted to turn Russia into a "besieged fortress" that will pursue a different type of relationship with America – namely, a more assertive one. And Obama is less likely to offer justification for this type of relationship. With his criticism of Putin and the reset, Romney may actually fit better in the new Kremlin's domestic agenda.

Still, Kremlin pragmatists might assume that Romney, notwithstanding his tough rhetoric as a candidate, would be more moderate as a President and want to avoid the risk of confrontation with Russia. Thus the Kremlin might conclude that its new assertiveness will not provoke American retaliation under either President, enabling it to maintain bilateral ties while also cracking down at home without paying any price.

This leads us to conclude the Kremlin could be happy with either a second Obama term or a first Romney one: with Obama looking the other way while the Kremlin cracks down at home, or with Romney giving the Kremlin pretexts to hold up the U.S. as a threat. In both cases, the Kremlin believes that America needs Russia more than Russia needs America. As one of the leading Kremlin foreign policy experts and the Duma official Alexei Pushkov said, ". . . after admission to WTO, this country [Russia] does not need the support of the White House very much while Americans need Moscow's support on Iran, Afghanistan, North Korea and on nuclear nonproliferation."

At the end of the day, regardless of who wins the election, U.S.-Russian relations will be much cooler and figure less prominently in U.S. foreign policy calculations. Russian expert Fyodor Lukyanov offered this insight:

"Reset-2 with the same content is impossible. Not because we have Putin and not Medvedev in the Kremlin. The moment when the in-

terests of two sides coincided has passed... Contrary to anticipations, the second Obama presidency could become a serious test for both – Russia and America.”

Among the Russian opposition, there tends to be a critical view of Obama’s reset policy for its downplaying of human rights concerns and legitimization of Putin’s rule. For now, based on Romney’s early rhetoric, the opposition hopes that the Republican candidate, should he win, would adopt a tougher line toward Putin’s Kremlin. See the GOP platform again for evidence of this:

“[W]e urge the leaders of their government to reconsider the path they have been following: suppression of opposition parties, the press, and institutions of civil society; unprovoked invasion of the Republic of Georgia, alignment with tyrants in the Middle East; and bullying their neighbors while protecting the last Stalinist regime in Belarus. The Russian people deserve better, as we look to their full participation in the ranks of modern democracies.”

While heartened by the Republican endorsement of the Sergei Magnitsky Act, which the Obama administration has opposed, Russia’s opposition is mindful that campaign rhetoric doesn’t always translate into actual policy after the ballots have been cast and counted. Regardless of who wins the election, passage of the Magnitsky legislation would send a strong signal of support to Russian liberals that America does care about the values and principles it preaches.

You might well ask who cares whether Putin has a preferred candidate in America’s presidential elections! Robert Bridge, writing for the Kremlin-sponsored site [RussiaToday.com](http://RussiaToday.com), is hallucinating if he thinks “Russia is taking center stage in the United States presidential campaign.” Barring some unforeseen crisis, neither Russia nor Putin will have any influence on the election outcome in the United States. Nevertheless, as America’s leaders think about their mission in the world, Americans should care what the rest of the world is thinking about them. The Obama administration’s reluctance to take leading roles in the crises in Libya, Syria, and now Mali is evidence of a shift to a much more passive role. And with the ongoing euro crisis, it is not clear that the European powers are going to fill in this void anytime soon. What will world politics in this G-0 world look like?

# Goodbye, America!

Lilia Shevtsova / *The American Interest*,

October 9, 2012

My title, “Goodbye, America!” is taken from a song in the super popular Russian flick *Brother 2* (the 2000 sequel to the also popular post-Soviet crime film, *Brother*). The film’s protagonist, Danila, accompanies his brother to Chicago, where he tries to “do justice,” becoming involved in a series of encounters with different types of Americans, both good guys and bad ones. By film’s end, Danila’s brother has decided to stay in America, preferring to go to an American jail for murder rather than to return to Russia, but Danila himself leaves America with no regrets and returns home. The movie, a box office hit in Russia, symbolized the idea that Vladimir Putin’s Russia was “getting up from its knees” and putting an end to Boris Yeltsin’s “pathetic years,” in which it envied the West and attempted to imitate it. Danila returns to Russia convinced that he will surely find “truth and power” there. The ending was pure Putin. No wonder the Russian president later quoted a line from the movie: “Power is where the truth is.” So truth and power are in Russia and not in America.

The movie depicts a whole slew of feelings and emotions that Danila, a young, affable Russian street gangster, experiences toward the only superpower remaining after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Those feelings include: sarcasm; a sincere, almost childlike astonishment and bewilderment upon coming into contact with the confusing America; respect for America’s might and majesty; and the conviction that nevertheless Russia has something that America does not. In a word, the movie depicts a simpleton’s patriotism: “We still have it better than you guys.” There is no explanation of what exactly is better, but this undefined “something” provides the basis for feelings of self-confidence – the very same contradictory feelings residing deep in many Russians’ hearts today.

To be sure, American movies about Russia are no less simplistic: full of samovars, caviar, matryoshka dolls, Russian mafiosi, and bumbling spies. There is no shortage of stereotyping, for that matter, in any country’s popular media. But the fuller truth is that there is a multitude of Russian attitudes toward America, because there are now, in the post-Soviet period, many different Russias. There is the Kremlin Russia,

which speaks in the voice of its leader (Putin's voice, for now), as well as those of its propaganda officials. There is the Russia of the ruling political class, which breaks down into segments that display varying feelings toward Americans and their country. The Russia of the liberal, left, and nationalist oppositions speaks in many different voices as well. There is also an even vaster Russian public space, whose voice is seldom heard in official and political discourse.

Whatever the attitudes of Russia's political class or society toward America, we can observe a general phenomenon in the fact that, 21 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the bipolar international system, Russia continues to view America not only as one of the most important factors in its foreign policy but also as a factor in its domestic scene. Moreover, the American factor has systemic significance for Russia. This means that the stance toward and the policies related to America combine to form one of the means of preserving the traditional Russian system predicated on personalized power, which we can call the "Russian Matrix." Regardless of their willingness or readiness to do so, Americans play a significant role in the Russian drama. And there can be no doubt that what is now happening to Russia and its system is a civilizational and historical drama. How else could we characterize the dead end Russia finds itself trapped in – a plight that a substantial part of society recognizes but from which, so far, it sees no way out?

Please pay attention here: Despite there being a possibility of rapprochement, or even agreement, between the official and unofficial Russian interests of the moment, on the one hand, and American interests, on the other, nevertheless Russia and America represent two completely different, spiritually alien civilizations. What is the reason for this alienation? Some will say it is culture, political mentality, and tradition; in part, they are right, but such differences between, say, America and India do not interfere with their ability to cooperate and trust one another in areas of mutual concern. Others point to differences in value systems. That much is obvious; Russia and America developed around different principles. However, this should not automatically translate into hostility. Yes, Russia has an authoritarian regime, but the United States has rather friendly relations with many autocracies.

There are deep-seated reasons for the impossibility of close relations between the United States and present-day Russia. The problem lies in the distinctive set of principles along which the Russian state is developing – principles that testify to the existence of a distinctive Russian civilization.

This Russian "distinctiveness" or "uniqueness" is based on the following principles that create the conditions for the existence and endurance of the Russian Matrix: claims of Russia's world role as a great power (*derzhavnost'*); expansionism; spheres of influence and satel-

lite states; missionary outreach; and the constant search for a foreign enemy. The principle of missionary impulse exhausted itself with the fall of communism; the Kremlin has run out of ideas that can be brought into the world. But all the other principles still apply and, as of yet, there is no basis for concluding that Russian authoritarianism can survive without them. They are intertwined in a reciprocal relationship. Thus, the personalized power in the Kremlin sustains itself by virtue of its world claims; the Kremlin's world claims, in turn, justify the preservation of the authoritarianism. This specific characteristic – the way in which internal and external politics are tied together – makes the Russian Matrix different from other authoritarian systems like, for instance, the Chinese one, which does not require overtly aggressive and expansionist props to support it.

In this context, keeping up one's great-power appearances and maintaining existing spheres of influence requires one constantly to compare oneself with a similar world power, to contain that power, to distance oneself from it, and to compete with it for world influence. If one isn't even playing in the same league as the other power, the competition can be imitated. The United States is the only country in the world that affords the Russian Matrix an opportunity for self-affirmation of this kind.

Relations with the United States allow the Kremlin to maintain the myth of Russia as a superpower and to appear to be one of the key global players. Conversations with Washington give Russian leaders an opportunity to hold onto the feeling that their country still belongs to the world's top-tier powers and also provides foundations for their *derzhavnost'* claim. Managed anti-Americanism – that is to say, emotions that can be played up by the Kremlin today but played down tomorrow – is one of the most effective instruments for consolidating Russian society. Trade and economic cooperation are secondary and cannot neutralize the other motives that dominate in the Kremlin with respect to the United States.

Playing off the United States to attain systemic goals was the established policy of the Soviet Union even before World War II. However, this policy was most actively practiced after the war, as Josef Stalin perfected the art of turning America into a factor for sustaining the Matrix. Having America as a rival helped him to formulate the hierarchy of Russia's goals in militarist terms, as well as world expansion and the creation of an internal enemy. Stalin's heirs assigned the United States the same functional role. "Overtake America!" was one of the slogans that consolidated Soviet society in the post-Stalin era. The nuclear containment of the United States was a justification for the militarism that remains the principal distinctive characteristic of personalized power.

Little has changed since then. The Kremlin has become more flexible in switching between dialogue with and rejection of the United

States, as dictated by its needs of the moment. Moscow was forced to reject its policies of military confrontation with the United States due to a lack of resources, as well as the Russian elite's quest for personal integration into the West, but the essence of the Matrix has remained unchanged. And no degree of U.S.-Russian cooperation on tactical issues can change it, nor can such cooperation change the personalized regime's stance toward America.

## How the Enemy Is Chosen

One may disagree with this analysis by saying that external politics is not simply an instrument of internal politics, that it has its own objectives and instruments. I am not arguing with that. (By the way, there was far greater room for maneuvering on foreign policy issues at the time of the Soviet Union, but even then foreign policy priorities – the security risks, the nuclear standoff, the drive for the communist expansion and the preservation of the world socialist system, the “Third World” policies – served as direct or indirect means of attaining the objectives of the Matrix in its Soviet incarnation.)

Today when Russian civilization based on traditional personalized power is in terminal decline, the country's foreign policy has a much more limited scope and is fixated mainly on preserving the status quo. In fact, as internal instability and the diminishing public support for Putin's regime become more pronounced, the Kremlin will exploit foreign policy issues to a far greater extent simply to survive. The time has come when Russia cannot afford to engage in geopolitics just for the sake of geopolitical ambitions; now the Kremlin's geopolitics is about survival.

The preservation of the status quo is also being helped by the greater traditionalism in Russia's foreign policy compared to other spheres of life, as well as by the conservatism of those who work in this field. Of course, foreign service institutions are conservative everywhere; liberal democracies are no exception. However, in Russia, the foreign service bureaucracy and experts (excluding a very narrow group of independent analysts) function collectively as the guardians of archaic state values. In comparison to the regime officials working in the economic and internal policy spheres, the foreign service bureaucracy looks like a relic of the 19th century, if not the 16th century. Neither liberal nor even competing interpretations are allowed in the bureaucracy, inasmuch as external policies have always been primarily a means of protecting statehood and internal order rather than a means of modernizing them.

America plays a key role in the Kremlin policies of maintaining the status quo, primarily because it is the driving force of the international liberal community that represents the alternative to and pri-

mary challenger of the Matrix. One cannot help but note the following paradox, however: One would have thought Russia would perceive an emerging China, which shares borders with the weakening Russia, as the major threat. This would have been consistent with the logic of *realpolitik*. But no! Despite having growing suspicions of Beijing, the Kremlin prefers to see the West as the major threat. Thus, America, not China, is the main object for deterrence and counteraction. America, not China, is the reason for giving Russian society the impression that it lives inside a “besieged fortress.” This paradox goes to show that civilizational – that is, value-driven – challenges are more important by far to Russia’s ruling team than geopolitical ones.

The more the Kremlin senses its internal vulnerabilities and the more it loses its position in society, the more intensive will be its search for an external enemy. This has been the Kremlin’s long-standing preservation model. You may ask: who can be the enemy of the Matrix? Of course, one can hiss at petty enemies like Georgia. It is also possible to single out Poland again, or pick on the Baltic states. But to maintain the *derzhavnost’* spirit and greatness, or its imitation, there has to exist a really powerful enemy, a large state, but one that, crucially, will not allow itself to be provoked by the Kremlin’s aggressiveness. China cannot be such an enemy, essentially because it may use force in response to provocation. Moscow understands that China will not throw soft balls (there has already been one post-war boundary conflict between the Soviet Union and China, in 1969). But the crucial reason why China does not embody a systemic threat for the Kremlin lies elsewhere. China operates under an authoritarian paradigm and can work alongside Russia to contain the West, which is viewed as a hostile civilization by the Kremlin. True, authoritarian states can also be embroiled in fierce disputes (as in the case of Russia and Belarus), but they unite when threatened by the alien liberal civilization.

Thus, America perfectly fits the profile of systemic enemy of the Russian personalized regime. To a degree, one can see a continuation of the Soviet tradition in preserving such an image of America in the Russian political mentality. And, of course, such a stance toward America is also an expression of nostalgia for the late Soviet Union and its “enemy number one.”

Having the right powerful external enemy is extremely important for the sustainability of the Russian Matrix. It allows the Kremlin to search for internal enemies that are the projections of the external one. The Russian regime cannot acknowledge that internal enemies and rivals appear on their own, as this would mean that there are internal reasons for their appearance. Believing that the internal enemies are generated (and financed) externally is more expedient, though it may well be that the Kremlin bosses sincerely believe this. The Kremlin recently declared Western-sponsored NGOs “foreign agents,” thus



confirming the axiom I am describing. The most dangerous “agents” are naturally those financed by the United States!

However, the policies of containing and transforming America into an enemy can no longer be the only approach. The Kremlin does not want to turn Russia into North Korea. The regime is trying to strike a balance between containment and dialogue on the issues of interest to it. The latter helps with personal integration of the Russian elite into the West. It would be naïve to think, however, that this integration into the West is going to prevent the escalation of anti-Americanism by the Kremlin and will stop its slide toward confrontation with the United States. The personal integration of Muammar Qaddafi’s clan into Europe did not dampen his commitment to waging war against the West when it came to preserving his power. We do not yet know where the boundaries of Kremlin’s recklessness lie. In fact, neither do its occupants.

Provided that the containment of the West and, primarily, the United States (the Kremlin looks upon Europe as a limp and pathetic political formation) is a systemic factor, there are no grounds for hopes that partnership and cooperation with liberal democracies will soften the regime and force it to reject the old dogmas. Engagement may help work out specific problems in Russia’s relations with the West at particular points in time, but it cannot alter the Matrix. The impetus for transforming the system is not external; it is inside Russia. Not realizing it and relying on engagement only may lead to missing the point at which the Kremlin starts taking advantage of the West for its own survival. That is what happened with the U.S. “reset” policy.

I would like to note here that my constant criticism of the West’s acquiescent treatment of the Kremlin does not imply that I hope a different approach could bring about the internal evolution of Russia. This would be possible only if Russia joined the EU and accepted the principle of political conditionality, according to which membership depends on the degree of domestic transformation. This is impossible for a number of reasons. The Western liberal democracies can, however, do at least one thing: They can try to pursue a policy that would cease to legitimize the Matrix and would deprive the corrupt Russian elite of favorable conditions for integrating into Western society. This is not to say that the West should “make” Russia follow Western principles, but that the West should follow these principles inside its own domain.

## What the Pro-Regime Political Class Thinks of America

I have already described the Kremlin’s stance toward the United States as a continuation of Soviet policies, albeit in a modified form.

The Russian political class is wider than the Kremlin circles, however. How do its different parts feel about America?

Let's discuss systemic liberals – that is, the liberals who stand for the free market but who also support authoritarianism. The vast majority of them view America favorably and wish to cooperate with it. But systemic liberals lack the former enthusiasm and hopes that characterized them during the 1990s. They are always at the ready with suspicions of America (if the Kremlin wills it), so they are unlikely to soften the anti-Americanism of the ruling team, even if they disagree with it at heart.

The power elites that took over the Russian regime look at America unambiguously. Read Putin's statements and you will understand their psyche. They are suspicious about everything they cannot influence; they mistrust everything that expresses views alien to theirs; and, most importantly, they dislike everything that is far more powerful than they are. Putin's 2007 Munich speech, in which he lashed out at the United States, summed up his Praetorian Guard's doctrine. The only difference between them and Putin, however, is that they are much more straightforward than their master, who can see the limit of his rhetoric and puts pragmatism before his feelings.

As for the systemic left and right – that is, forces that are part of the system, such as the Communist Party, the Kremlin's perennial ally; the Just Russia party, a moderately left Kremlin satellite; and nationalists like Dmitri Ragozin, long-time mouthpiece for the Kremlin's nationalism and imperialism – they have always been consistent conductors of anti-Americanism, quite often of an even more aggressive kind than that of the Kremlin.

## What the Opposition Thinks

The position taken by anti-systemic forces is of greater interest. Let's start on the left. Sergei Udaltsov, the "Left Front" leader, can be considered one of the Left's popular radical representatives. He actively participated in anti-American rallies and is proud of the fact that he expressed displeasure with the United States right by its embassy. The radical Left's anti-capitalist orientation is unlikely to allow them to revise their hostile stance toward the bastion of capitalism.

The nationalists, for their part, have their own reasons for being suspicious of the United States. In contrast to the Russian imperialists, they seem to have fewer issues with America's global expansion. However, the nationalists are convinced that America opposes and fears Russia's revival as a nation-state and thus is its enemy. While the nationalism of the former Russian satellites in Eastern Europe was pro-Western and pro-American, Russian nationalism remains generally hostile to Ameri-

ca. This is understandable: Russian nationalism, despite the fact that its moderate supporters accept liberal rules of the game, retains a fair share of Soviet-type suspicions when it comes to the outside world. I cannot rule out the idea, however, that nationalists of liberal and democratic stripes (yes, they do exist) may evolve in their view of America.

The evolution of the liberal opposition's views is the most interesting. Those who consider America a symbol of liberal democracy represent a tiny minority and have no effect on the general mood in the opposition's liberal camp. Some liberals support the European model of democracy, which explains their critical posture toward the United States. However, those who are dissatisfied with Washington's policies with respect to the Kremlin and Russia comprise the majority of the liberal opposition.

One can actually trace the changes in their expectations of Washington. In the early 1990s, Russian liberals and democrats expected the United States to actively support reforms in Russia and put pressure on Yeltsin to follow through with them. They were unhappy when this support seemed inadequate, or when it was directed at sustaining Yeltsin's absolute power. In the Bush-Putin years the anti-systemic liberals found themselves confused in their perception of the United States. They approved of the Kremlin's support of the American war on terror, but they grew increasingly frustrated by Washington's attempts not to notice Putin's tightening of screws.

With Barack Obama entering the White House, the opposition liberals, or at least most of them, gained new hope. His election in and of itself was viewed as a global breakthrough. A world superpower elected a black person as its leader! No wonder the Russian liberal "ghetto" expected Obama to find a new formula for American and, in general, Western relations with Russia. This formula was to create external constraints for the growing Kremlin's authoritarianism. Obama attracted Russian liberals, and not only the liberal opposition, by his willingness to reject the simplistic idealism of "regime change" rhetoric. He also won their admiration by his attempts (at least rhetorically) to find new ways to promote freedom. "The standards and principles . . . should be the heart of our policies," he wrote in "The Audacity of Hope." These words struck a chord in the Russian liberal community, in which quite a few believed that Obama would definitely represent a new type of policy combining interests and values.

For the Kremlin, Obama's election understandably came as a shock and a harbinger of difficult times. The unknown always causes fear, especially among the forces that are incapable of innovation. However, Obama's "reset" policy soon alleviated the Kremlin's fears. It turned out Obama decided to pursue the course of tactical compromise, avoiding anything that might unnerve or irritate the Kremlin. Russia's ruling team could not help but support Obama's approach to dealing with Rus-

sia, since it was based on a rejection of “ideology,” as well as on ignoring “linkage” between foreign policy and domestic developments. That is exactly what Putin’s regime wanted: In its dealings with the West it has always strived to eliminate the discussion of values and domestic developments.

The reset has resulted in certain tactical gains for both sides, but it could not eradicate the deep-seated reasons that make Russian and American systems alien to each other. Sooner or later, cooling and mutual grievances between diverse Russian political groups and America were inevitable. It soon became evident that very different political forces inside Russia, even opposing ones, were disappointed by the reset. They could not agree on other issues but were unanimous in their criticism of the reset. Putin, who has never been its advocate and never missed a chance to make his tepid views of America known, could abandon the reset route at any time – his hands were free. It is no coincidence that he let Dmitri Medvedev assume the role of the Russian architect of the reset policy.

The cooling of U.S.-Russian relations, which became unmistakable by the end of 2011, signaled the failure of one of Obama’s key foreign policy initiatives. As seen from the Russian perspective, Obama essentially became a hostage of his “reset.” The Kremlin grasped this quite fast and gleefully demonstrated its lack of commitment to the reset paradigm with Washington. The Kremlin’s harassment of Michael McFaul, the new U.S. ambassador to Moscow, was an intentional gesture that told Obama: “We could care less about you. You depend on us, and not the other way around!” A paradoxical situation developed: Washington had to pretend that everything was going all right and that Russian roughness and assertiveness were merely a ruse directed at Russian society that could be disregarded. Meanwhile, Moscow enjoyed complete freedom of action, which it took full advantage of, thus trying America’s patience.

At the end of 2011, Putin basically returned to anti-Americanism, perfectly understanding that he was putting Obama on the spot as the U.S. presidential election approached. The Kremlin essentially started playing into the hands of the Republicans despite the fact that Obama is a more acceptable candidate for them than the alternative. Although Putin’s behavior can be partly explained by his personality and his attitude toward America, it was still dictated by the logic of the Matrix, the survival of which necessitates searching for an enemy to distract Russian society and the world from Russia’s internal problems. Even if Putin were Obama’s good friend, he would still have to heed the Kremlin code.

The reset saga, which will go down in history as another Western strategic failure, exposed the trap that all Western leaders have ended up in as far as relations with Russia are concerned. These leaders could

either turn a blind eye to Moscow's trampling on the very limited freedoms that still exist in Russia and, by doing so, ensure Moscow's cooperation on the issues that are important to them (security, energy, trade); or they could condemn Moscow and be faced with an unpredictable and unmanageable partner. The first approach would inevitably cause public discontent in Western societies and provide ammunition to their political oppositions. The second would create a foreign policy issue that the West, already in the throes of the world economic crisis, was not ready for. Moreover, even cautious support of democracy in Russia could backfire, not only embittering the Kremlin but also turning the opposition into the target of growing public anti-Americanism.

When, by the end of 2011, the Kremlin started escalating authoritarianism and returned to anti-Americanism, Washington stayed on its course of tactical realism with respect to Russia (albeit lacking its containment element), still trying not to aggravate Putin and his team with democracy and human rights rhetoric. The Kremlin interpreted this as weakness in Washington, as well as a sign that Moscow could afford to play a macho game.

The Russian opposition and the segments of society that were disaffected with the regime began to view the West, and primarily America, as symbols of hypocrisy and indifference. But I will hazard a guess that this spell of disenchantment benefited the opposition by finally convincing it that waiting for help from the West was futile, and that it could only rely on its own strength. The naïve ones that harbored such hopes finally understood that the West has limited abilities and is not ready to undertake the project of Russia's transformation.

Today the Russian opposition, including its liberal segment, senses the public mood and understands that reliance on the West, and America in particular, will not provide it with mass support. It was high time for the opposition to part with the old illusions and remake its public image. The past two years have marked a turning point for non-systemic liberals as they began to do what they could not have imagined doing in previous years: They openly criticized America's and Europe's policies of connivance with the Kremlin (some of them criticized these policies earlier, but they were just a few).

At times, liberals criticize the West, and the United States as its leader, for the very same things that the nationalists and the Left criticized them for in the past. The criticism is sharp. Leading liberal politicians and opposition writers openly accuse the West of collaborating in the creation of a mafia state in Russia, not only by virtue of its acquiescence but also through direct participation in the Kremlin's corrupt projects. For instance, the West is blamed for creating mechanisms for laundering dirty Russian money and lobbying for the Kremlin's interests in the West. One must admit that these accusations are not without some grounding. Such leading Western politicians and former

leaders as Gerhard Schroeder, Silvio Berlusconi, Paavo Lipponen, and Lord Robertson were or still are directly involved in the activities of totally nontransparent Russian state or semi-state corporations that are viewed in Russia as corrupt or even personally controlled by Russian leaders. Western companies participate in business deals that involved Russian government officials. Western governments create favorable conditions for integrating the Russian ruling elite into the West. Western experts and writers work for the Russian regime, for instance, by trying to improve its image. These are all instances of Western collaboration in sustaining the Matrix. Mikhail Khodorkovsky was entitled to draw the conclusion that Russia exports not only its raw materials to the West but its corruption as well.

Let's listen to Russia's leading politicians and writers and their take on American policies toward Russia.

Garry Kasparov, one of the leaders of the Solidarity political movement says:

"I do not believe Obama has a Russia policy at all today. His 'reset' was based on a fallacy, that Medvedev was anything more than Putin's shadow. Now the White House is hoping Russia just goes away, but that is not going to happen, as shown by Putin's support for Assad. To be relevant, any Obama policy must confront the reality of the Putin dictatorship and also recognize that Putin does not represent the Russian people."

According to Vladimir Ryzhkov, one of the leaders of the Republican Party-Party of People's Freedom:

"Obama's policy vis-à-vis Russia is very weak and ineffective. Obama has removed from his agenda all the positive points present in the American policies of the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush years. At least, Clinton tried to help Russia with its reforms. Bush tried to raise the questions of democracy and human rights. Obama opted for the policy of pragmatism. And what could he accomplish aside from a few tactical compromises? The disagreements on Iran, Syria and missile defense still remain. The Kremlin's policies became blatantly anti-American. And what does Obama do? His administration tries to obstruct Congress' Magnitsky Act, which would voice America's concerns with the human rights situation in Russia. We can only interpret all of this as a policy of double standards and hypocrisy."

For Andrei Illarionov, an independent economist, in bilateral [U.S.-Russian] relations, the American side is *constantly retreating* on all issues.

"The KGB guys could barely contain their joy and satisfaction at the offer to 'reset' the Russian-American relations and 'start from a clean slate.' [...] The behavior of the American administration

cannot even be called a retreat. It is not even a policy of appeasement. It is a capitulation. It is a complete and unconditional surrender of Russian democrats' hopes and efforts to the modern Russia's regime of KGB officers, mobsters and bandits. It is also a surrender of hopes and efforts of the peoples in the post-Soviet states, who have been dreaming of setting themselves free from the system that has controlled and terrorized them for almost the whole century. But that's not all. This behavior makes it extremely clear for the democratic and liberal forces in Russia and the Former Soviet Union that from now on the US refuses to offer them even moral support in their struggle against the forces of the past and thus joins the ranks of their mortal enemies. As a result, the Russian KGB regime receives a *carte blanche* to engage in the new shady adventures in the post-Soviet states and beyond. [...] Today the collaboration between the two governments is only possible under conditions set by the Russian regime and can only be consistent with its goals."

The president of Levada Center, Lev Gudkov, who is an independent sociologist, says:

"I think that both the opposition and the public at large (there is practically no difference here) perceive the 'reset' policy as a purely cynical act of trade off between Putin and the new American administration. The agreement is based on a few assumptions. Among them are America's promises to refrain from criticizing Putin's authoritarian regime and accept – at least superficially – Putin's claims to the status of a major statesman who restored Russia to its historical superpower position. This status makes Putin a tentatively acceptable partner to the West in a situation that calls for a quick solution of such problems as the war in Afghanistan and a silent acceptance of the aftermath of the Iraqi war, etc. In exchange, the Kremlin pledged its cooperation or at least its non-opposition in the sphere of American interests. Putin badly needed such an American stance to maintain legitimacy within the country (in contrast to his economic and social policies, his foreign policy is approved and considered unquestionably successful by the vast majority of Russians across the political spectrum). Few in Russia had doubts that these naked promises of two unprincipled governments can be breached at any moment should the interests of maintaining power require it. Essentially, the overwhelming majority of Russians believed that for the sake of increasing the Russian regime's world prestige and protecting its geopolitical interests, it is not only lawful but appropriate to treat the Americans as 'useful idiots' (to resort to the phrase attributed to Lenin). They believed that to this end any means are justifiable, including deception, blackmail, etc."

For Andrei Piontkowski, an independent publicist:  
“This ‘reset’ once all the lofty peel is removed is reduced to a simple bargain: the American military cargo transit to Afghanistan in exchange for safe havens in the West for the assets the Russian ruling elite has illegally accumulated. [...] Those who come to Bolotnaya Square and Sakharov Prospect understand that America is acting as an accomplice of Putin’s kleptocracy that is destroying Russia. America also guarantees safety of the elite’s foreign holdings and is their beneficiary [...] By covering up Russian criminals, the governments of the US and other Western countries become accessory to the pillaging of Russia.”

Finally, George Satarov, another independent publicist, argues:  
“The last ten years have been characterized by the declined importance of values in world politics. Quite naturally, America as the world leader was setting the pace in this area as well. But morality is quite aptly called long-term rationality. Having replaced it with the expediency of the moment, the US starts suffering strategic losses even in the mid-term perspective. While conveniently allowing Putin’s regime to bury the US Cold War democratic victories in exchange for dubious concessions, the US didn’t notice the trap. In fact, by obliterating democracy in Russia and by pilfering it, Putin’s regime is repeating the breakup trajectory of the Soviet Union, changing its palette from tragedy to farce. However, when the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia assumed control over the nuclear weapons. What will happen to these nuclear weapons in case of Russia’s breakup is not the question that occurs to the State Department and White House pragmatists.”

The above statements are pretty blunt. You may think they are excessively emotional and unsubstantiated. In this case, we can discuss and debate the merits of the statements by the Russian opposition thinkers and see where they are mistaken and what they exaggerate.

“You are wrong,” claims my American colleague. “We are not out to legitimize the Kremlin and your system!” Of course not! Even America’s sharpest critics do not think that the United States is deliberately playing the Kremlin’s game. This is not how it happens. In reality, the Russian elite, long-practiced in the game of survival, is skillfully using American policy to achieve its goals. Washington is using the Kremlin to achieve tactical goals, while the Kremlin is taking advantage of Washington to survive. If one of America’s strategic goals can be said to be the expansion of democratic values, then this goal is being shortchanged for the benefit of U.S. tactical goals. The question, then, becomes “who is winning?” For the time being, not America.



Another important development is that today a broad section of the liberal camp in Russia criticizes the American administration while only a handful of liberals on the right and left were critical of Washington in the past. This indicates that the United States and the West have lost the trust of the most progressive and advanced segments of Russian society. This is a problem that needs to be discussed.

Thus far one thing is clear: Russia's opposition has changed its outlook on the role the West plays in the country's development. A lot of oppositionists now believe the role that Western governments, at least, play in Russia's development is likelier than not to be negative. At the same time, the opposition respects Western public opinion and those Western parliamentarians who are critical of trends in Russia and of the evolution of the Kremlin regime. The very fact that Western public opinion is concerned with issues of democracy and values offers hope for a possible dialogue between Western civil society and the emerging alternative Russia.

One may note another direction in which the Russian opposition's views of America and the West are evolving. While it was previously believed that the West should aid democratic development inside Russia, the opposition now believes that the best option would be a policy of containing the elite's ambitions and interests in the West. Hence the opposition's active and full support of the Magnitsky Act. By the way, the very fact that this bill has even been drafted has softened the anti-Americanism of both the opposition and other segments of Russian society that follow international events. If Western observers would take a look at some of the Russian websites where the Magnitsky Act has been discussed, they would discover views more or less like this: "Of course, nothing good is to be expected of the U.S. president and the State Department. But at least, the U.S. Congress has decided not to support our crooks. So Americans are starting to understand what is happening here." Such views are among the first, and thus far rare, expressions of public approval of U.S. policies in recent years.

The discussion over the Magnitsky Act has ushered in a new phase in Western policies toward Russia. There can be no doubt that trying to curb the exportation of corruption from "contaminated" countries – Russia, in particular – is both an effective instrument for containing authoritarian regimes and a morale booster for Western society. Of course, a lot depends on how quickly the Magnitsky Act is passed, and how it will work. Some Russian opposition members do not rule out that the legal mechanism will be developed in a way that will avoid irritating the Kremlin. It is disappointing that, as of October 2012, the law still has not been passed. The American administration did not want to get involved with Putin, the Russian opposition gathered. If it turns out that the administration is deliberately dragging its feet on the passage of this law, it will become yet another reason for

the opposition to step up its criticism of the United States. It will also give the Kremlin another reason to believe that the United States is no obstacle to stiffening its repressive mechanisms, nor is it an obstacle to Russia's aggressive posture in the global arena.

And now I will say a few words on how Russian intellectuals feel about America. Intellectuals ceased to exist as a unified group upon the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and today they express very contradictory sentiments. The prevailing sentiments, perhaps, mirror the Soviet attitude toward America: on one hand, suspicion, and on the other, a wish for Russia to somehow resemble America – admiration and hostility, mockery and arrogance, all mixed in with inferiority complexes.

Back in the day, the great Russian opera singer Feodor Shaliapin grumbled after arriving in America, “Disgusting...Difficult country.” Having visited America, the poet Sergei Yesenin uttered, “We have soul, America has squat.” A similar mood hovers over the Russian intellectual and creative class to this day. The Russian rock star Boris Grebenshchikov ironically remarks, “Russia and America can be friends... We have to be gracious and feed them like a guinea pig (!).”

In these circles, there are generally two issues with America. The first can be summed up as “they have no soul,” and the second as “they don't want us to be strong.” The question of “soul” and how to define it always arises when Russian civilization is discussed. Russians love to discuss the “soul,” which is probably an unconscious attempt on their part to ignore the cruelty and soullessness of the system that they live in. The “soul” discussion also serves an abstract compensation for the lack of a normal and dignified life in a state that denies human beings dignity and rights. As for the second issue, you may argue till you are blue in the face that America is more likely to fear a weak Russia, but you will not get the Russian audience to come around. This argument would destroy a stereotype that is one of the elements of the political mentality that appeared in the post-Soviet era and that people are not ready to discard.

## And What Does Society Think?

How does Russian society at large relate to America? Much like the political class, it looks at America through a deformed lens. The vast majority of the public is an object of constant manipulation by the regime and as a result is susceptible to the myth that America is “enemy number one,” or at the very least a country that does not wish Russia any good. In short, society is still captivated by the Soviet mythology and stereotypes that help the Matrix to survive.

In fact, the Russian mass consciousness does not usually distinguish between Western countries and cannot appreciate the peculiarities of a given Western democracy. Nevertheless, there is a distinction

between Europe and America, thanks more to propaganda than to actual knowledge. Generally, Europe and the European Union are viewed positively: 63 to 78 percent said they view the European Union positively in a recent poll. In contrast, the attitude toward the United States is more critical and constantly fluctuates in reaction to the Kremlin's political course: respondents saying they viewed America positively have comprised anywhere from 40 percent to 56 percent in recent years. As a matter of fact, the good feelings toward the European Union are often based on a belief that Europe resists American hegemony.

Any positive attitude toward America is abstract, since it is not accompanied by a desire to draw closer and get to know it. According to polling by the Levada Center, rapprochement between the two countries rarely gets the support of more than 13 percent of respondents. Meanwhile, up to 31 percent advocate closer relations with countries that resist U.S. influence. In recent years, about 40 percent of those polled said they considered the United States to be the enemy of Russia, second only to Chechen fighters.

About 73 percent of Russians said that the United States seeks to control all countries in the world. At the same time, almost 47 percent of those surveyed described Russian-American relations as normal or good. The contradiction is obvious, but it has an underlying logic. America is an enemy, and enemies are not to be trusted. But it has always been thus; besides, Russia can always stand up to America. The fact that we are not at war and are dealing with each other means that our relations are "normal." Whatever exists is our "normalcy," and this is not subject to change.

There can be no illusions as to this last characterization. Since America is alien to us in any case, it can become a threat at any moment. Therefore, positive attitudes toward America can be reversed at any time. When it comes to America, the public mood changing to satisfy the Kremlin's demands is a permanent characteristic of life in Russia.

As for the evolution of perceptions by Russian society, let me refer to Lev Gudkov, who said exclusively for this essay:

"As the situation in the world changed, all the 'reset' rhetoric went away and is now virtually forgotten. According to the data compiled by the Levada Center in May 2012, 78 percent of Russians do not know what the reset policy is all about; nine percent believe that it promotes Russia's national interests; seven percent say it does not, and six percent think that the reset policy and the national interests are not related. Only seven percent of respondents expressed interest in this issue, mostly those who support Putin's system, vote for him and belong to the regime's bureaucracy. Even back in 2009, only one percent of respondents were interested in the reset, seven percent were ready to pay some attention to it, and the rest disregarded it completely."

While discussing this data, I would like to stress that those supporting the reset policies support something they understand little to nothing about. There is some cognitive dissonance here: People support the reset policy while at the time supporting closer relations with the states that are viewed as an alternative to the United States. In any case, the reset did not lead Russians to perceive that relations with the United States had improved. For instance, in October 2011, about 58 percent of respondents said they approved of the reset. But at the same time 33 percent characterized relations as cool, 12 percent called them tense, 7 percent described them as friendly, and 6 percent as neighborly.

There is a clear reason that suspicions toward the United States have grown: the Kremlin returned to the “besieged fortress” strategy. The American threat was in demand again, and Russian television coverage returned to an all-too-familiar program of America-bashing.

In 2012, the escalation of suspicion and caution with regard to the United States has continued. The Kremlin’s turn to a harsh authoritarianism that needs to be justified, and thus will result in more frequent scapegoating, is accompanied by the spike in negative feelings toward America among the Russian public. According to Levada Center polls, at the end of 2011, 56 percent of respondents had a positive opinion of the United States, while 29 percent had a negative view. In early 2012, 44 percent expressed “mostly positive” views and 40 percent “mostly negative” ones. In the summer of 2012, according to one of the Russian survey center’s FOM data, only one-eighth of Russians said they saw the United States in a positive light, and only 15 percent said that relations “will be improving.”

The Levada Center polls also indicate that Russians believe that their country should increase its cooperation with China and India. Thus, in 2012, 35 percent of those polled said so, while only 18 percent talked about the need to work on building closer relations with the United States. This evolution of public views was a natural result of the Kremlin’s rhetoric and the evolution of the Russian regime.

## How Will the Kremlin Act?

Considering that the Kremlin has to constantly alternate between accelerating its anti-Americanism and putting on the brakes to prevent anti-American feelings from increasing too much, thus jeopardizing its pragmatic agenda with the United States, one might expect further fluctuations in the public take on America – weakening anti-Americanism followed by growing anti-Americanism, and vice versa. Yet the major trend will still be the steady growth of suspicion toward America. Why? Simply because, as it switches to a more repressive mode, the regime will accentuate the image of America as “enemy number one,” as

the country that plays dirty tricks on Russia. Such is the Matrix's logic of self-preservation.

Let me reiterate: the Kremlin is staffed with pragmatists who are interested in keeping anti-Americanism under control. They do not seek to provoke conflict with the leading superpower, since that could not only harm their corporate interests outside of Russia but also undermine the status quo domestically. But the fact is that the scapegoating survival mechanism is taking on a life of its own. At some point, the regime may lose control over these tools. Putin is already constantly forced to resolve contradictions between his anti-Americanism and the need to maintain a working relationship with Washington. The Kremlin is having an increasingly hard time answering certain questions: If America is an enemy, how can Russia even talk about NATO's creating a supply hub in Ulyanovsk? Why does Moscow continue its economic cooperation with America, allowing Americans invest in Russia?

So far, the Kremlin has been able to contain the anti-American machine. However, one may envision a situation when the need to consolidate the traditionalist base would require the Kremlin to engage in an open confrontation or even a limited conflict with the United States. Actually, Moscow has already engaged in such a conflict once: in Georgia in August 2008. This was a bona fide proxy war with the United States, with Georgia getting the beating. It was supposed to demonstrate that Moscow is ready to act decisively to protect its spheres of influence. But at this stage of the game, I have a hard time imagining a situation emerging that would push the Kremlin into direct confrontation with the United States. Kremlin officials do not look like they're ready for a bout of recklessness.

But let's ask ourselves another question: How will the regime behave at the point of its collapse? At the breakup of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev decided to voluntarily hand over his powers to the democratically elected government of the new Russia. For the first time in Russian history, a leader who still held the reins of the army and the power structures decided not to resort to bloodshed to hold on to them. In contrast, when it became clear that Yeltsin could not keep grasping the reins, he and his family handed them over to the *siloviki*, the representatives of the old KGB apparatus, who guaranteed his immunity from persecution and were also ready to use force. This was Yeltsin's method of self-preservation.

How will Putin's *siloviki* react when the Kremlin starts losing power? It is hard to say. The Russian system has had no precedent for representatives of the security forces holding power; their function had always been guarding the personalized power regime. But the Praetorian Guard is starting to lose power gradually. Will they agree to give it up when they understand that they can no longer maintain it? Or will they cling to power and resort to mass violence? If the second scenario is followed,

conflict with the West, particularly with the United States, cannot be ruled out.

## If the Russian Matrix Falls

The departure of Putin's regime from the Kremlin, and even the fall of the Matrix, while they probably won't occur in the foreseeable future, are not likely to result in the formation of another regime that will view the United States as a desirable partner. A new regime would probably not seek close friendship with America as did the first Russian democrats of the early 1990s. Even in the best-case scenario, one in which society accepts democratic rules of the game, there will likely remain reasons for treating America cautiously, even with a grain of suspicion. As of now, I can foresee a few such reasons:

- retention of *derzhavnost'* relics, memories of Russia's former historical role, and jealousy toward the world's only global power, which are hard even for liberals to forget;
- suspicion of America's agenda and refusal to accept its leadership – similar to French sentiments toward America, a form of Russian Gaullism;
- the inevitable rise of anti-Americanism if Russia turns to the left and toward a nation-state with a nationalistic bent;
- lack of broad economic interests that would propel Russia toward partnership with America.

At the same time, there are some seeds that may bear fruit in more trustful relations between the United States and Russia, should the Russian paradigm change:

- the threat of a rising China with aggressive geopolitical ambitions and a desire to take over Russia's Far East – or otherwise the threat of instability in China spilling over into Russia;
- the drive of the Russian political class for partnership with America to achieve a modernization breakthrough;
- gravitating toward incorporating the American political experience into building a political system in Russia.

As you can see, I operate under the assumption that the logic of Russia's internal political development will be the decisive factor in informing the attitude of Russia's society and political class toward America. U.S. policy may also have certain influence on this attitude, but it is hard for me to imagine a situation that would make it a key factor in formulating Russia's stance toward America.

The experience of the last few years demonstrates that Russia's internal logic influences the Russian attitude toward America. In 2010–11, there were no significant shifts in U.S. policy toward Russia. There were no drastic geopolitical changes that might have influenced the vec-

tor of Russia's policies. Nevertheless, Kremlin politics with respect to the United States grew more suspicious and the anti-Americanism of the ruling class intensified. These changes were a corollary of the Russian regime's logic of self-preservation.

## Russia Is Off the Radar

American observers often ask: who would Russians like to see in power in the United States, Republicans or Democrats? According to the 2008 polls, 39 percent of Russians said that it was easier to deal with Democrats, while 11 percent said Republicans. The same poll revealed that 28 percent of Russians said that Russian-American relations were at their best under Clinton; 11 percent said the same about George H. W. Bush, while 10 percent chose Russian-American relations under Ronald Reagan. Almost a third of Russians (27 percent) wanted Obama to become President in 2008, while 15 percent wanted John McCain to win. These poll results were directly influenced by the Kremlin's official propaganda.

Whom do Russians want to see in the White House today, Obama or Mitt Romney? The respondents would probably choose Obama, given the fact that he stresses the "reset" policy, as well as Romney's widely publicized and certainly ill-conceived statement that Russia is America's "number one geopolitical foe." However, the Russian opposition, whose skepticism toward White House policies on Russia is growing, may end up preferring Romney if he treats the Kremlin more critically.

Admittedly, Russian elite or public attitude toward America is no longer a factor in American foreign policy. Nor is it of particular interest to the American political community. That is understandable. Similarly, Russian society is hardly interested in what, say, Pakistan or Austria thinks about it.

The very fact that America has lost interest in Russia while Russian society is still interested in America generates the latter's painful reaction and reinforces its inferiority complex. The growing American indifference toward Russia generates a desire, whether unconscious or not, to draw attention to oneself, to get even – in other words, the feelings of a rejected lover. These feelings manifested themselves in the *schadenfreude* of some segments of the Russian public in the aftermath of the September 11 tragedy. The number of these gloaters has decreased in recent years, however. In 2001, 50 percent of those polled said that "Americans got what they deserved, and now they know what the people of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Iraq, and Yugoslavia felt." But in 2011, only 27 percent said so. This indicates that part of society is recovering from an unhealthy attitude toward America, although not that it is turning to a friendly attitude.

If there is a factor that still engenders contradictory feelings toward America, it is America's drive to maintain its global leadership role. On the one hand, there is an understanding that the weakening of American hegemony and the world's drift to multipolarity will inevitably result in global instability. On the other hand, disillusionment with American-style capitalism and, to a greater extent, with Washington's policies toward Russia causes resentment of America's leadership role. At the same time, the EU as a normative model is also a source of growing disenchantment. Hopefully, both of these disenchantments are transient and will pass, at least within the liberal community, as the West emerges from the latest crisis. However, at the present time these feelings are only growing stronger.

There may be one more cause of concern: the loss of expertise on America and its political processes in the Russian political community. The loss of such an expert base may lead to inadequate understanding of America and clumsy policies toward it under any regime.

## Moving without Direction

Upon reading these cheerless reflections, an American observer might say, "So what! Russia is not a serious global player, and Washington's policies toward Russia are instrumental in nature. It is important for us to neutralize Russia as a spoiler when it comes to Iran, nuclear safety, and other global issues. And we are neutralizing it successfully." I would add the following: Putin's regime is maintaining stability in Russia (so far) and is not interested in confrontation with the West at this time. Thus one could get the impression that Western democracies can stay on their moderate *realpolitik* course with respect to Russia.

The West could continue to play the imitation game, pretending that it is taking the Kremlin's global power claims seriously and patiently listening to the litany of demands that it must meet to pay for Russia's geopolitical concessions. Everyone understands everything. The West understands it is playing the imitation game; the Kremlin understands that the West understands. And everyone is happy.

It seems that this game of "Let's Pretend!" can drag on for quite a while before the Matrix starts imploding. The Russian system's safety margin is pretty substantial. It is far more substantial than that of Putin's regime, which is not likely to last beyond 2018. As a matter of fact, the Russian ruling elite has learned to prolong the Matrix's life by changing leaders and regimes. It cannot be ruled out that the Russian ruling class (or at least some of its segments, for sure) will once again consent to the reproduction of the Matrix, albeit within a more limited geographic realm, accepting the fragmentation of the Russian Federation.



But let's contemplate the consequences of a game that increasingly resembles Russian roulette. If America, the only global power that conceives of itself as a world leader and views value promotion as part of its mission, continues to participate in an imitation process, not only will America's real intentions be cast into doubt; it will also undermine the normative system that it promotes.

It is understandable for America to be reluctant – or to feel that it lacks the time or energy – to assess the future of the Russian Matrix and the consequences of its decline. America does have a fair share of its own problems. Besides, with a presidential election fast approaching, who could be thinking of some distant future strategy? In this period, all the strategy stops at November 2012. Then, creating an agenda for the new presidency begins and will again be limited by a four-year horizon. But when it comes to Russia and the post-Soviet space, one has to operate on a time continuum stretching well beyond the span of a single presidential term. Moreover, one has to contemplate the consolidated agenda of Western society as a whole. And this takes time that no one has, and resources that are limited.

It comes as no surprise that the Western hiatus gives some room to maneuver to the Kremlin, which is desperately trying to breathe new life in the weakened Matrix. Today, the Russian ruling elite is able to exploit the civil war in Syria to force the West (albeit temporarily) not to intervene in the conflict, thus protecting the right of autocrats to remain in power at the expense of destroying their own people. In fact, it is the Kremlin (with China hiding behind it) that allowed the UN Security Council to refrain from action, thus legitimating this "Autocrat's Law." The West had to put up with the Kremlin's concept of absolute sovereignty, which denies fundamental international treaties and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Autocrat's Law and the concept of absolute sovereignty will be the means that the Russian personalized power regime will later use in its struggle for survival. After all, it is clear that, as it focuses on saving Bashar al-Assad, Moscow is thinking ultimately about saving itself. Even if the West finds the strength to stop Assad's destruction of his own people, liberal democracy has already suffered enormous moral and political damage.

Syria became a litmus test for the abilities of Western regimes – and primarily America – to react to violence that is intended to preserve autocracy. As a result, the Kremlin realized that it has a decent chance of enjoying a favorable external climate. Even more so, the Kremlin understands that now the West owes Russia for Moscow's stubborn support of Assad. After all, it was this support that allowed the West not to lose face and justify its inaction when it was not ready to get engaged.

There was a time when America presented an example of transformational strategy to the world, even though it was tied to the promotion

of American economic interests. I'm referring, of course, to the Marshall Plan. There is no need to repeat the history of America's aid-oriented strategy today. The world will now expect a different American strategy, one that revives values-oriented foreign policy but without its less attractive neoconservative characteristics. It appears that in its efforts to avoid being accused of returning to Bush policies, the Obama administration keeps pressing on the pedal of Niebuhrian realism. The Russian Matrix has learned to use any form of realism in its own favor. That is what it did with the "reset" policy, which became for it an instrument of international self-affirmation.

Here I should confess that, when we follow America's foreign policy from Russia, we have doubts as to whether it can be values-oriented at all, especially in a period of decline. In any event, we do not expect America to assist us in our democratic transformation (it couldn't do so anyway, even if it tried!); rather, we want it not to obstruct, not be a stumbling block, in our quest for this transformation by creating a favorable international climate for the Kremlin. Who would have thought ten years ago that Russia's opposition and independent observers would be saying to the world's leading liberal democracy, "Do not hinder us!"

We are by no means trying to persuade America to return to isolationism. We understand that America remains the only global power capable of prodding the West toward a new strategy (hopefully including a normative dimension) and a new vision of global development. One of the elements of this vision should be a realization that the Russian Matrix will inevitably decline, and that the geopolitical fallout of this decline could be dramatic. After all, we are talking about a nuclear-weapon state here; a state that still controls enormous territory; a state that has been able to corrupt multiple segments of Western society; and a state that borders a rising China, which in its own turn may prove to be a colossus with feet of clay.

The collapse of the Soviet Union turned out to be a surprisingly peaceful process – perhaps because it was simply the Matrix shedding its old skin. Only now is the Matrix truly beginning to approach the end of its lifecycle. No one knows how this civilization will depart and how painful its agony will be.

America has a choice. It can continue to help the Russian Matrix, prolonging it in its decay. It can help the Matrix by merely believing in its stability. Or it could choose another path: It could help Russian society cope with the most dramatic challenge in Russian history by at least understanding this challenge and recognizing the transience of the regime it's dealing with.

# After the Elections, All Eyes on Georgia

David J. Kramer & Lilia Shevtsova / *The American Interest*, October 17, 2012

For a small country located in a very tough neighborhood, Georgia has not received lots of attention since 2008, when Russia invaded the country and declared South Ossetia and Abkhazia independent. And with the world's attention focused elsewhere (elections in the United States, the humanitarian disaster in Syria, the challenge of Iran), many might have missed an extremely important development within the past two weeks – namely, Georgia's parliamentary elections, in which President Mikhail Saakashvili's party not only suffered defeat but readily accepted the results.

The implications of this election cannot be underestimated. Through this election and pending peaceful transfer of power, Georgia has made several great strides toward establishing democracy and the rule of law in the most precarious of situations inside what the Kremlin still sees as its "sphere of interest." Indeed, what happened in Georgia stands to become a role model for Eurasia.

Both Russia and the West deem Georgia important, albeit sometimes for different reasons. It serves as an energy transit corridor for Azerbaijani oil and gas, an interest Russia and the West share. But on the issue of integration with the West, Moscow and the West differ sharply. Under Saakashvili, Georgia has aggressively pursued closer ties to, and eventual membership in, NATO. The 2008 war with Russia brought Russia's relations with the West to their most trying point since the break-up of the USSR. And the color revolutions, which began with the Rose version in Georgia in 2003, heightened the Kremlin's paranoia that a similar uprising was being planned for Russia, too. That's a lot of high-profile attention for a country of less than four million people.

Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) party not only lost the elections to the Georgia Dream party; it got clobbered, losing by some 15 percent. A constitutional realignment of power in Georgia that shifts greater power to the prime minister and parliament had fed speculation that Saakashvili would switch jobs and "do a Putin" (that is, move to the strengthened premiership after the elections). The election results made that impossible, however, and instead billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvi-

li will become the new prime minister of the country. This peaceful transfer of power and Saakashvili's almost immediate acceptance of the results confounded polls and expectations.

In the Eurasia region, only Ukraine, in early 2010, has had a similarly peaceful transfer of power, but local elections in October of that year, and the ones for parliament on October 28, have raised serious concerns that Ukraine's streak of decent elections is a thing of the past. That makes what happened in Georgia even more impressive.

Georgia offers both proof of certain *axioms* as well as *unpredictability*. Let's start with the former. The defeat of Saakashvili and the other victors of the 2003 Rose Revolution confirms the axioms established by previous transitions: Liberal technocrats are doomed to leave power after they finish painful structural reforms that trigger frustration and unhappiness among their societies. This has been the destiny of almost all East and Central European (post-communist) reformist governments. Technocrats usually don't pay much attention to institutions. They are absorbed by building a liberal economy and afraid of democracy and populism, even relying on an authoritarian leader. No wonder they provoke resentment among two different segments of society: those who want political freedom and democracy, on the one hand, and those who want justice, on the other.

Georgia's election proves another axiom, too: the more radical technocrats are, the bigger the pain of transformation, but the shorter its duration. The longer and more indecisive are reforms, the more drawn out is the pain and the lower the chances of success, as with Yegor Gaidar's reforms in Russia.

Just as the Orange Revolution is a distant memory in Ukraine, the Rose Revolution in Georgia is now over. In both countries, we see the rise of oligarchs; in Georgia, it is Ivanishvili's rise to power. This begs a question: Why do poor societies with a strong ethos of justice and equality elect oligarchs to positions of power? How will such individuals govern, and what will their moral and political principles be? In Ukraine, the oligarchs have proven that personal enrichment and preservation top any notion of national interests. Will Ivanishvili be any different?

For Saakashvili, following Putin's or Lukashenko's path by ignoring the results or rigging the election was not an option. Instead, he pursued a rational mode of behavior that leaves open the possibility of his return some day, should society sour on the new team. "He [Saakashvili] will cling to power," Putin predicted before the election, projecting his own determination to stay in the Kremlin onto his Georgian nemesis. Indeed, for Putin the notion of surrendering power voluntarily after an election is so alien as to be incomprehensible, if not suicidal.

Saakashvili's acceptance of defeat could become his greatest achievement. And yet in Moscow, quite a few Russian liberals blamed the Geor-

gian president for abiding by the voters' democratic verdict. "Georgia proved that people without property can't be allowed to vote!" lamented the Russian adherents of the liberal Pinochetism. Yet history proves that it is better to go through such a defeat than to achieve "victory" through a crackdown.

In retrospect, Saakashvili was both lucky and unlucky. He was lucky to have secured support for Georgia from the West, especially the United States. Yet he was unlucky in that, for several years after coming to power, he faced no real, constructive opposition, nor did he fully appreciate the benefits of such an opposition. This demonstrated yet another axiom: Without a real opposition, the regime was prone to overplaying its hand and making mistakes.

Now for the *unpredictability*. The new Georgian prime minister is relatively unknown and inexperienced politically. Will Ivanishvili move in an authoritarian or populist direction? Witness his early call for Saakashvili to resign as President, followed by a quick retraction of said call. Whereas Saakashvili is all charm and charisma, Ivanishvili is an enigma: We don't know how to score his real goals, agenda, or ability to govern. Is he beholden to Russia and the Kremlin, or his own agent? This uncertainty feeds suspicions: The name of his movement, Georgian Dream, sounds awfully Soviet and Marxist. It was communist tradition to consolidate people on the basis of a dream. Moreover, dreams risk turning into disappointment, even nightmares. Besides, this movement is a temporary mix of various groups with conflicting and incompatible interests, united largely by their antipathy toward the current regime. What was it about Saakashvili's rule that spawned the emergence of such a strange opposition? How unhappy or irritated were Georgians to vote for a party with a vague dream but no clear agenda? (These are bitter questions for Saakashvili and his technocrats to ponder.)

Another area of unpredictability looms. The two sides will have one year of the French model of government – that is, cohabitation of the powerful parliament with the less powerful presidency, until presidential elections a year from now. As election winners seek to build their rule and define their policies, the losers will remain in the presidency while getting accustomed to becoming the new opposition. All bets are off during this cohabitation period, including a tug of war between the competing sides or attempts by the new leaders to monopolize power – or possibly just gridlock. Nonetheless, the way Georgians behaved during the elections holds promise that the country will move peacefully toward a parliamentary system. Some countries (Slovakia under Vladimir Meciar, Viktor Orban's Hungary) have shown that the prime minister in such systems can act on authoritarian inclinations. But in the Eurasia region, in a departure from Soviet and post-Soviet tradition, Georgia will be one of the first (after Moldova and more uneasily

Kyrgyzstan) to begin this experiment. Georgia's neighbors will be taking note of what happens.

Of course, Georgia begins its experiment in a complicated and unfriendly international atmosphere. Europe is dealing with its own crisis, and the United States has reduced its previous interest in Tbilisi while focusing more on Russia. The Kremlin, meanwhile, is becoming more assertive as it seeks to justify its increasingly repressive domestic trends, following the Russian tradition: When the authorities fear their power weakening, they look for external threats and objects for bullying. Georgia is the perfect target for macho posturing.

The last area of unpredictability involves the balancing act for the new Georgian leader in preserving Georgia's pro-Western trajectory while improving ties with Moscow. But here is the trap: For the Kremlin, any dialogue means concessions, as we have seen with Russia's pressure on Ukraine. Putin's Kremlin will want Georgia to return to Russia's embrace. Will Ivanishvili be able to resist such pressure? Yanukovich has not succeeded and has even antagonized the West. Increasingly, he is left at the mercy of Putin's whims. With interest in Georgia flagging in the West, this balance will be even harder to strike for Ivanishvili.

These unpredictable areas notwithstanding, Georgia has opened a new chapter, but its new leaders and soon-to-be new opposition must prove that they know that democracy entails working for the greater good. Given their location and size, they can afford nothing short of coming together as a nation. Everyone in the region will be watching, some hoping for failure while others pray for success. Georgia will need patience, understanding, and assistance from the West, because its largest neighbor to the north will be working to undermine it.

# The Next Russian Revolution

Lilia Shevtsova / *Current History*, October 2012

“With an elite that seeks only to protect its own interests, and without any alternative force in society, crisis is the only thing capable of stirring the swamp.”<sup>1</sup>

Recent developments in Russia demonstrate that the society is awakening, and that the country sooner or later will face a moment of truth, as it did twice in the past century when it had to solve a dilemma: whether to de-hermetize or to reproduce its system of personalized power that can only push the nation toward disaster. In 1917 the Russian Revolution produced a new incarnation of the country’s traditional matrix of personalized power, statism, and imperialism in the form of communism, which succeeded in becoming a global alternative to liberal democracy. In 1991 the country’s elite instituted a different model of the Russian Matrix by dumping the Soviet Union and communist ideology. Personalized power in the communist disguise existed for 74 years. The new-old Russian system consolidated during the presidencies of Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin, and Dmitri Medvedev has started to show cracks after 21 years. The challenge the nation faces today is existential: Either the society succeeds in transforming the system of personalized rule that suffocates it, or Russia will lose its energy and end in rot or implosion. There is only one way out of this civilizational trap, and that is through pressure from below. But will the new Russian revolution be a transformational “velvet” one, or will it again create a more predatory form of rule?

## To the Bitter End

Russia has always been a land of paradoxes. Is it not a paradox, after all, when democrats bring an autocrat to power and then protect him from competition, as Russia’s democrats did in 1989–91 in supporting Yeltsin? And was it not a paradox when, in the 1990s, the West assisted Russia in its reforms only to discover later that in reality it

<sup>1</sup> Lilia Shevtsova, “Russia XXI: The Logic of Suicide and Rebirth” (Carnegie Moscow Center, 2013, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/RussiaXXI\\_web\\_Shevtsova.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/RussiaXXI_web_Shevtsova.pdf)).

had helped to remodel personalized rule as an oligarchic and corrupt capitalism still hostile to the West? Now there is yet another paradox as the middle class, tied as it is to the state, takes up the defense of the status quo, thus disproving political scientist Samuel Huntington's association of democratization with the emergence of a middle class. (The participation of some segments of this class in the protests of 2011–12 does not undermine this trend.)

The country continues to amaze with its paradoxes and to destroy models convenient to many in both Russia and the West. A good number of Russian liberals, just like the Western political establishment, would have preferred to see Medvedev stay in power, for he at least employed liberal rhetoric. But whether Medvedev or some other figure held the presidency, it would have only prolonged illusory hopes that the authoritarian system could modernize itself. Putin's return to the presidency this year leaves no doubts as to where Russia is going: It proves that Putin himself will never voluntarily give up his monopoly on power, and his team is not going to carry out either political or economic reform.

Indeed, Putin's return to the Kremlin means that Russia is starting to repeat the logic of the final Soviet years, characterized by the political system's degradation and a growing gap between the authorities and society. There are no guarantees that the country will manage to avoid fragmentation. So far, the difference between the Soviets' decline and that of Putin's Russia is that, unlike the Soviet ruling elite, which had grown too old and flabby to survive, today's authorities are ready to fight for their power until the bitter end.

It is still too early to bury the regime of Putin and his team, or the personalized power system with all of its institutions, informal rules of the game, entrenched interests, mentality, and habits. For all the mounting frustration in Russian cities and the refusal by much of the educated urban population to recognize the leadership's legitimacy, the regime still has resources to prolong its survival. It enjoys the support of a large part of the political class and of segments of society wary of any change. It can count, too, on the ruling team's (so far) monolithic nature. Still, in the event of increasing public discontent, it cannot be ruled out that the Putin regime would give way to another one with a new leader in a bid by the ruling elite to preserve the system, only without Putin. The Russian ruling elite has learned how to continue the system through a process of regime change.

Despite this year's and previous changes of wrapping, Russia's system retains its key features: personal power, a merger between power and economic assets, neo-imperial ambitions, militarism, and reliance on a commodity economy and patron-client relations. The Kremlin's neo-imperial ambitions, albeit in milder form than in the past, are pursued through efforts to preserve a sphere of interest in the post-Soviet region. These, together with its militaristic features, reflected in assertive



rhetoric and in the defense-heavy federal budget, are what distinguish Russia's government from other authoritarian regimes and make its democratization more complicated. Russia's civilizational model might be obsolete in the twenty-first century, but its leaders have learned to keep it alive by reaching out to different groups of the population while manipulating a combination of incompatible components. Russia is a nuclear petro-state that is still a great power, yet plays the role of a commodity-supplying appendage for more developed countries. The Russian political elite has integrated personally into the West, yet it views the West as an enemy. Liberals in the government help to prolong the life of a regime for which liberalism is alien.

## Survival Tactics

Several other factors also help to reproduce the Russian Matrix. Among them are the lack of formidable liberal opposition, the demoralization of society, the state's ability to bribe the population, the fear that any change will bring Russia's collapse, and finally the lack of serious threats from either the outside or the inside. I would emphasize two obstacles on the path to transformation.

The first is the role and mentality of the intellectual class, which in all societies has always been the engine of change. In Russia, the demoralized state of the intelligentsia has become one of the main causes of the country's failure to embark on a new path since 1991. The emergence of a new form of autocratic power during the Yeltsin presidency has left intellectuals disoriented. Most have been unwilling to take a stand in opposition to a new personalized power system disguising itself as a democracy. Some have become propagandists and experts in the service of personalized rule. Together, they are the gravediggers of the intelligentsia in its traditional role of bearer of moral criteria.

One of the most important factions of the intellectual class, the liberals, by their willingness to serve the system delivered the most crushing blow to the chances of liberal democratic change in Russia. These "systemic liberals" operate within the system and serve the government in different capacities while at the same time trying to monopolize the right to speak on behalf of liberalism and democracy. They not only reproduce a "grey zone" devoid of clear principles and direction, but also discredit liberal-democratic norms in the eyes of Russians.

A second obstacle to transformation is the role of the West, which often helps the traditional Russia to keep going. For starters, in the eyes of a significant part of the Russian population Western civilization has lost the role of alternative to the personalized system. Partly, this is a result of the current political "malaise" in the West. However, more important has been the policy of Western governments with respect to the

Kremlin, which the most advanced parts of Russian society regard as one of connivance or even appeasement of the regime. For many liberal-minded Russians, the latest turns of the Western course toward Russia – America’s “reset” and the European Union’s “Partnership for Modernization” – provide legitimation of the country’s personalized rule.

The role of Western politicians, pundits, and journalists in the Kremlin’s staged “operas,” such as the Valdai Club and the Yaroslavl Global Policy Forum, which have become instruments of their co-optation by the regime, is another form of legitimation that the West provides for the Russian system (hopefully unintentionally). In the eyes of Russian society, the West has turned into a laundry machine for a corrupted elite and has offered a powerful “service class” that includes politicians, bankers, and public relations agencies that help the personal integration of the Russian political class into Western society. Western acquiescence and attempts to ignore the Russian elite’s brazen behavior, lack of accountability, and even criminalization give Russian society grounds to believe that no international laws could constrain the elite, and that the West will always be ready to accommodate it. No wonder that even Russian liberals have started to be openly critical of Western policy toward the regime.

The Kremlin continues its old tactic of co-opting members of the political community and the intellectual elite, intimidating those unwilling to submit, and tossing favors to the populist-oriented groups that depend on the state. Rather than forcing Putin into experimenting with liberalism, as some hoped, growing public discontent creates pretexts for the regime to turn to repression and use force (in particular by returning to the search for “enemies” and fomenting confrontation between different groups in society). Essentially, the authorities are returning to the tactic tested in the past by Stalin and Mao, who maintained society in a state of constant tension and used the “besieged fortress” idea to justify violence. The Kremlin’s adoption of the Stalinist- Maoist approach, albeit without the same level of violence, indicates that the regime has run out of milder methods for sustaining its position.

The regime’s very nature determines its drift toward repression. It is a praetorian regime run by people from the secret services – indeed, from these services’ most archaic provincial level – and is thus predisposed toward violence. Violence has always served as a tool for perpetuating Russia’s autocracy, but before the Putin period control of the institutions of repression was in civilian hands. Now, for the first time in Russian history, people from these institutions have taken power into their own hands. In this situation, the degradation of the system and the emergence of threats to entrenched interests make it only more likely that the regime will resort to force in order to protect itself.

Putin is aware that stepping up the repression would take Russia toward the status of a North Korea and into isolation, which would contradict the political class’s desire for personal integration with the West.

The Kremlin thus has to find the limits beyond which it cannot go if it is to avoid Western rejection of the Russian elite. The Magnitsky Bill, a measure in the U.S. Congress named after Sergei Magnitsky, a Russian attorney who died in police custody, would impose sanctions on Russian officials suspected of human rights violations. If it were enacted, it could show the Kremlin the limits of Western countries' willingness to tolerate the situation in Russia. The problem is that, even if faced with a critical reaction from the West, Putin and his team have no way back. They cannot begin a liberalization process that would risk costing them their power. This leaves pressuring society as their only survival tactic.

## Maximizing Profits

Meanwhile, the ruling team is trying to make use of the time still at its disposal to gain maximum profit and guarantee its assets' future protection. The Kremlin has been looking for projects that will bring huge dividends for the clans at the top. Among the ideas discussed has been a bizarre suggestion to establish a state corporation to manage Siberia and the Far East (a corporation that would answer directly to Putin and guarantee his personal control over the main commodity flows from those regions), as well as new privatizations carried out by groups close to the authorities. The Kremlin is quite unabashedly allowing particular clans to grab hold of state assets and take over private assets in exchange for personal loyalty to Putin.

Putin has also raised another idea for self-preservation – a new wave of industrialization centered around the military-industrial complex. As he sees it, this should spur economic growth while at the same time reinforcing the state's militaristic base. This is yet another borrowing from Stalin's policy arsenal. Stalin in his time carried out forced industrialization from above, a model that can be repeated only under dictatorship. Today any such attempt is doomed to fail, and not just because forcible reindustrialization under outright dictatorship would require shedding much blood, a task for which the country's corrupt law enforcement and security services are unlikely to be prepared.

The fact is that Russia's defense industry is a closed and bureaucratic structure stuck in the 1960s and devoid of any incentive to innovate. Huge sums injected into it will only end up lining the pockets of the ruling clans. The one thing that is still not clear is whether the Kremlin actually believes in the possibility of such a Stalin-style industrialization, or whether the idea has been dreamed up just to consolidate traditionalists' support while providing the ruling team with a new source of enrichment.

Whatever the case, what is emerging in Russia today is a weird hybrid of a petro-state with nuclear weapons and neo-imperialist

and militarist ambitions. True, these ambitions are only imitative: The Kremlin is not prepared either to expand national borders or to go to war with the West. Still, this hybrid regime with its eyes searching the past for ways to prolong its life is stopping Russia from becoming a modern country.

How long can these tactics prolong the current team's survival? Time is running out for Putin. Judging by the public mood he is unlikely to last longer than his current presidential term, which ends in 2018. The big issue for Russia today is to build a systemic alternative in the form of a political force capable of winning public support and of putting together a plan for transforming the system of government. If such an alternative does not emerge, the Putin regime's fall could open the way to a new authoritarian regime or even dictatorship, or Russia will enter a stage of severe degradation.

## The Protesters' Problems

Until now, political dissent and socioeconomic protest have followed parallel paths. The country's future will depend greatly on whether these two roads intersect at some point, when this might take place, and what will happen if these two flows do indeed merge as one. If the political opposition can convince provincial Russia that the roots of its problems are political and that not only does Putin have to go, but the whole system has to be restructured, this would mark a turning point in Russian history, with the public realizing the need for political transformation and not just a change of leadership. But this has not happened yet.

Two circumstances open the way for the system to reproduce itself yet again. One is the authorities' attempts to tighten the screws on society, reflected in repressive legislation adopted in the summer of 2012, continued persecution of the opposition, and political trials such as the one this summer that ended in convictions for members of the Pussy Riot punk rock band. The other circumstance is moderates' attempts to engage the authorities in dialogue and convince them to behave decently. At the same time, the impatient minority within the opposition is growing more radical and is ready for revolt. It is worth remembering in this context that the radicalization of protest movements in Russia has always followed hopes for liberalization and their subsequent disappointment. Discontent with the limited nature of the czarist government's reforms led to the emergence of terrorism in Russia in the late nineteenth century, and in 1917 unfulfilled hopes for liberalization set off what would become one of the twentieth century's bloodiest revolutions.

Today, Medvedev's fake modernization has played a part in bringing protest to the surface. It is absolutely clear now that the ruling

group will never voluntarily renounce its monopoly on power so long as the personal power system is still in place. This means that only social protest can bring about change, but some preconditions are needed for the protest movement to usher in a process of peaceful transformation. The main preconditions are: consolidation and consensus among all groups opposed to the regime and the system on the need to change the rules of the game through free and fair elections; revision of the constitution so as to do away with excessive presidential power; and agreement by the main political forces to renounce the leader-based model of political life.

## Leftists and Liberals

Recent events show that leftist and left-wing populist sentiments are on the increase within the protest movement. The more the discontent spreads to the provinces, the more the Kremlin will try to suppress it through force, and the stronger this trend will become. This new leftist mood rejects the old Communist Party, which has become the authorities' partner. The leftist wave worries not just the ruling team but also the liberals and technocrats working for the Kremlin. Such fears have always been typical for liberals and for the intelligentsia in general, forcing them to take the side of the personalized system, afraid as they are of popular uprisings. Today, these fears serve to justify support for the authorities by a significant section of intellectuals, who have integrated into the system and feel comfortable within it.

For the time being the desire to avoid upheaval pervades Russian society. People have been patiently hoping that the ruling class will initiate change. For all their populist slogans and even anti-Western outlook, the new left-wing movement's leaders are ready at this stage to listen to others, even to the liberals' point of view, and to work with them. So far, liberals dominate the protest movement's leadership, but they will have to make concessions to the leftists if they want to give the movement genuinely broad support.

If and when a future protest wave takes place, it will most likely be dominated by left-wing and perhaps left-liberal values. Consensus based on classical liberalism had its window of opportunity in Russia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but Yeltsin and his team wasted this chance when they carried out so-called "liberal reforms" that laid the foundations for a new authoritarianism. Liberals during Putin's time have failed to get in tune with mass public feeling and remain the voice of an urban minority. Ironically, the longer that liberals serve Putin's regime, the more the general public will be suspicious of the liberal agenda. Liberals who oppose the regime will find it increasingly difficult to resist this process. As during the Yeltsin period, liberal-minded

intellectuals and politicians could once again find themselves facing the dilemma of choosing between a corrupt regime that is damaging for the country, and leftwing forces that would inevitably raise the issue of re-nationalizing privatized assets and reviewing the property rights that have emerged.

During Yeltsin's time, many democratically minded people, fearing a communist return to power, supported the corrupt ruling team and closed their eyes to election fraud that secured a second victory for a sick Yeltsin, thus paving the way for today's authoritarian regime. The time is coming when the liberal minority could face a similar choice between supporting the regime, out of fear that illiberal forces might gain power, and endorsing the democratic process, that is, free and fair elections. If the liberal minority once again takes the authorities' side, this would sound the death knell for liberalism in contemporary Russia and make its re-emergence in the near future almost impossible.

What is it about Russian nationalism that the country's liberals and the West fear? Recent events show that nationalism is not the dominant force in the country. At least, not yet. Russian nationalism has undergone an evolution from an imperial version, based on the notion of the empire-state and personalized rule, to one that openly opposes the Putin regime and the system in general with its neo-imperial ambitions. Russian nationalists were among the first to raise the question of transforming Russia into a nation-state and renouncing the Caucasus.

Moderate nationalists have begun discussing the need for constitutional reform to transform Russia into a parliamentary republic at a time when constitutional reform is not yet a priority on the liberals' agenda. In short, Russian nationalism is turning into a force opposing the regime, but it is not yet clear how influential it might become, and whether the moderate or aggressive elements will end up dominating. Polish, Baltic, and Ukrainian nationalism had a pro-Western and European dimension during post-communist transformation, while Russian nationalism is still anti-Western. At the same time, however, moderates among Russian nationalists support the rule of law and competition.

The future development of Russian nationalism is thus likely to be full of contradictions. One thing is clear: It will work at undermining the Putin regime, but its radical currents will complicate efforts to build a liberal democratic system and continue Russia's integration into Europe.

## Crisis or Decay

If the current trends continue, Russia will inevitably head into economic, social, and geopolitical decline. A country cannot renew itself, after all, if the authorities are intent on maintaining the status quo

indefinitely and stamping out dissent. But exactly how this decline will take place is still uncertain. Will it be a lengthy process of decay that goes beyond any time frame we can adequately measure today? Or will it be interrupted by social and political explosion, and if so, when and with what consequences? Would this explosion lead to the continuation of the authoritarian system under a new guise, or would it transform Russia into a liberal democracy?

Socioeconomic and political crisis is the key factor that will determine whether Russia takes the road of endless stagnation or whether the society attempts to stop this process and finds the strength to look for new forms of political life. With an elite that seeks only to protect its own interests, and without any alternative force in society, crisis is the only thing capable of stirring the swamp. So far, crisis is producing ripples that rock the Russian boat but it seems there are not yet waves sufficiently large to threaten the status quo.

What could set off a full-scale crisis, and what would this mean for the country? Russia could head into such a crisis if, for example, oil prices fall to \$70 a barrel, public sector workers dependent on the state see their living standards take a steep downturn, the urban population becomes increasingly politicized and the gap between it and the authorities widens, local conflicts build up, signs of splits emerge within the political class, and executive power ends up paralyzed. Setting all of these exacerbating factors into motion and making them converge in time would require a tipping point, perhaps a stupid act on the authorities' part, such as back in 2005, when a decision to replace social benefits with cash payments brought pensioners into the streets.

Other tipping points could be the unjustified use of violence against the population and clashes in the streets, electricity blackouts in Moscow that would paralyze the capital, corruption scandals in government, growing student activism, and so on. In a full-scale crisis we could see executive power become immobilized, underscoring the authorities' inability to keep the situation under control. The mass protest movement could swell and law enforcement agencies could refuse to use force against citizens. Crisis could cause dissension within the political class and erode the authorities' support base.

The mood in Moscow is of crucial importance for Russia's future. But if an explosion does take place, a set of conditions is needed to channel it in a peaceful direction and ensure that liberal transformation begins. Anti-regime and anti-system forces would need to consolidate. Pragmatists among the authorities would need to ally themselves with the non-systemic opposition. New laws would have to ensure free and fair elections, which would need to be immediately organized. And either the parliament or a constitutional conference would have to enact constitutional amendments curtailing excessive presidential power.

All this would inevitably be followed by a new stage during which the anti-system coalition would fall apart and a new round of drawing up the political boundaries would begin, only this time it would take place under new rules of the game. This is the optimistic scenario. It would require not just the convergence of several trends but also consistent effort by the opposition forces to prepare for transformation on the basis of political competition.

Just as important is a favorable international environment for Russia's transformation. This is not about outdated Western assistance and democracy promotion policies. Rather, at some point, the old system's collapse might require the West to help in other ways, for example by warning the failing regime not to resort to violence, or by helping to smooth the way for its representatives to leave Russia for abroad.

## Dangerous Direction

Unfortunately, Russia is moving in a dangerous direction. The authorities still have enough resources at their disposal to keep the country in a state of indefinite "controlled decline." What is more, the ruling class has deliberately chosen to deepen demoralization in society, hoping in this way to prevent the emergence of an alternative that would threaten its survival. This atmosphere of continued decay, in which moral principles and taboos that act as restraints are eroded, and total mistrust and cynicism spread through society, could push the country down a path of slow collapse. In this situation, popular protests could end up turning into ruthless and destructive mutiny.

No matter what form Russia's trajectory takes – crisis, implosion, or transformation – its territorial integrity will be a serious problem. It will be very difficult to maintain within a single country regions that belong to different civilizations. One only needs to look at the North Caucasus, for example. The future of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan is also unclear, though their lack of external borders would make it harder for these regions to secede from Russia. In any case, we need to be prepared for a new spiral in the collapse of the still partially intact old empire. The most likely scenarios I have outlined for Russia over the coming five to ten years would see the country become a zone of turbulence whose ripples could jeopardize stability across Eurasia and Europe. The country's future will say a lot, too, about the role of a Western civilization that so far has failed to answer Russia's challenge.



# How Will Russia React to Obama, Round Two? It depends on which “Russia” we’re talking about

Lilia Shevtsova / *The American Interest*,

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The question posed by my title doesn’t quite hit the mark. Just as one cannot really speak of a single “America,” there is no one “Russia” anymore but rather several Russias. But while each different Russia has its own interests, attitudes and moods, there is something that unites them all with respect to America: The United States is on all of their radars. All of the various Russias hope to use the United States and its policy to serve their own domestic agendas. (In contrast to this, Russia largely fell off America’s radar after the fall of the Soviet Union.)

How, then, will the various Russias react to the renewed Obama presidency? Let’s start with the official Russia – that is, Vladimir Putin’s Kremlin. Along with David Kramer, I have already discussed what the Russian establishment and Putin’s regime could have expected from either possible election result on November 6. I will only add here a couple of brushstrokes to that landscape now that we know the results of the election. Moscow’s official rhetoric and actions over the past year – that is, after Putin officially returned to the Kremlin – allow us to conclude that the Kremlin’s position on the United States would have been based on the following premises no matter who America hired as boss in the White House:

- *America is weak.* It is teetering on a “fragile foundation” and will continue to decline. The United States today can no longer continue as a world leader, and its ongoing fall from grace will give Russia more room to maneuver on the global scene.
- *America needs Russia more than Russia needs America.* The United States needs Russian help on Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Central Asia, nuclear issues, and counterbalancing China. All of these issues put the Kremlin in a stronger bargaining position with respect to Washington.
- *America’s decline and European stagnation demonstrate that liberal democracy is in crisis.* This fact justifies the Kremlin’s decision to return to the idea that Russia represents a “unique civilizational model.”
- *America is bogged down by domestic problems.* It is turning its focus inward, thus making it less prepared to react

to the Kremlin's turn toward repression. Moscow can dismiss Washington's criticism; its bark is worse than its bite.

- *The Obama administration will fear the rise of Russian nationalism and populism more than it will fear Putin's machismo.* That means that Washington will continue its policy of acquiescence and will try not to irritate the Kremlin.
- *The Kremlin should use this period of American decline to establish a more assertive policy toward the West.* Moscow has to dictate the rules of the game to Washington. The Kremlin's newfound assertiveness will be reflected in the updated version of Russia's foreign policy doctrine. Moreover, Moscow is ready to use revenge policy, too, as a means of appeasing the hardliners.
- *Russia need not worry that America will ignore it,* say the Kremlin's foreign policy architects. A nuclear-armed Russia is much too important for global security to be ignored.

The Kremlin may view a second Obama term as a boon in its project to update its foreign policy stance. That new stance would help consolidate the idea of Russia as an independent civilization that desires to be integrated into the globalization project on its own terms. There are signs that the Kremlin architects of this update and pro-Kremlin experts believe that President Obama can hardly be expected to take a more assertive position with respect to Russia, which will mean undermining his "reset" past. Even if Obama wanted to rethink the "reset," these experts believe, he could afford neither to ignore Russia nor to confront it. That is why they expect the Obama administration to continue to play its current hand in its poker game with Putin's Kremlin.

However, the above-mentioned key premises hold independently of how President Obama plays his cards. To be sure, Moscow will take a softer approach with Obama than it would have with Romney, but we are only talking about a rhetorical difference here, not a substantive one. At any rate, the question of how Moscow would have treated a President Romney is now academic.

For Russia, foreign policy has always been a means of solving domestic problems. The Kremlin's attitude toward the United States, today more than ever, is formed by the logic of the Putin regime's survival. This logic dictates that the Kremlin must turn to repression, and must return to old Soviet practices that inevitably lead to a more aggressive stance in the global arena. The Kremlin's struggle with its domestic enemies, which is an essential element of this survival strategy, also necessitates that it struggle with external enemies too. Putin's team, like its Soviet predecessors, can't afford to acknowledge that its domestic enemies have popped into existence of their own accord; rather, these enemies have to have been bought and paid for by the hostile "abroad." And neither Poland nor Georgia will suffice

as an external enemy; indeed the very idea would be humiliating for Russia. The external enemy, rather, must be a foe worthy of a Russia that has been “raised from her knees.” Only America (even a weakened America) is a worthy adversary. Thus, the logic of the Putin regime’s survival dictates that America must be public enemy number one, irrespective of who its leader is. True, in order to fit into this role the American president has to wield a harsh rhetoric even as he cooperates pragmatically in areas of mutual concern. But is this what Obama will do as he rethinks the reset?

In September 2012 Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergei Lavrov bluntly declared that “the reset is over.” Putin had already shown himself to be done with the reset months ago. And they were both right, of course: The reset, as a policy of tactical trades and an imitation of a warm embrace, really is over and done with. Even many “reset-chiks” now accept this as conventional wisdom.

However, the Obama administration failed to notice this, and it has thus been forced to react clumsily to the Kremlin’s turning its back – a fact that has strengthened the Kremlin’s conviction that it is Washington that needs Russia more than the other way around. The reset formally ended last year, when America became a tool for inciting the “search for an enemy” during the Kremlin’s election campaign. Many had assumed that this was merely a temporary injection of hostility, and that, as before, the Kremlin would return to a more accommodating mood once the elections were over.

This was the wrong assumption. From now on, the Kremlin’s mantra will be to “reset the reset.” The question is: What will this mean in practice? At the moment it is not clear. Putin’s Kremlin has been clearer about what it rejects than it has about what it supports. There will definitely be some ground for cooperation. Lavrov has stated that Moscow is interested in broadening its economic ties.

But how can one expect American capital, technology, and know-how to flock to Russia when a corrupt and predatory bureaucracy is already driving domestic investors out of the country? How can one expect American businesses to feel welcome if the United States is named as Russia’s key external enemy? There is perhaps one way to solve this puzzle: if U.S. investors agree to operate according to the Kremlin’s rules – if, as some of them are doing now, they seek shelter under the personal “umbrella” of Putin.

But what could the United States expect in return? One could hazard a few guesses... Khodorkovsky comes to mind. He said that Russia exports two kinds of things: commodities and corrupt. Is America ready to become a partner in this process? There are other ways, perhaps, that a new “reset” could be implemented: in a European joint missile defense or in an arena far from an important area (like, say, the Arctic). But I nevertheless wonder how these suggestions can be combined with

the Kremlin's search for an enemy, or its determination to make America its key threat?

Having watched the Kremlin's actions and rhetoric, one can rest assured that its updated strategy with respect to America will be built around two principles: containment and the "don't meddle and don't preach" rule. The first principle entails that Moscow attempt to deter America where possible, or to play a spoiler role (just as Moscow is doing in the Security Council). The second principle means that the Kremlin will try to force Washington (and the West in general) to endorse the principle of total sovereignty, which would mean forcing it to reject quite a few human rights norms that legitimize external influence in the internal affairs of non-democratic states (among them the Helsinki "basket," the "responsibility to protect" principle, and the principles of the Council of Europe).

Indeed, I see in all of this a Kremlin attempt to return to the Soviet past, circa the *detente* period, when economic, cultural, and security cooperation between the Soviet Union and the West was developing quite well despite the nature of the Soviet regime. But today the Kremlin wants the West to tolerate its reproduction of anti-Western hostility within Russia. That means, in effect, that the Kremlin wants to continue cooperating with the West when it comes to integrating Russia into global economic structures (the OECD is the current goal), even at the same time as it closes off the country to Western influence. We did it with the Soviet Union, the Kremlin leaders are saying, so why can't we do it now?

I have a hunch that the Kremlin ruling team actually believes that the chances for the survival of the personalized power system is even more favorable today. They believe this, first, because America and Europe are in crisis; second, because the Russian elite has been personally integrated into the West; third, because the Western establishment has demonstrated its readiness to accept the Kremlin's rules of the game, and even to work for the Kremlin.

In this context, there is no need for Moscow to play the imitation game that until recently dominated relations between Russia, on one hand, and America and the West, on the other. The new philosophy ("yes, we are different, but we can cooperate") doesn't require warm embraces, and it allows for a colder, more reticent relationship, devoid of the previous optimism and illusions. The "don't meddle and don't preach" policy pushes both sides toward another type of behavior. Both Washington and Moscow can silently agree not to take each other's criticism seriously, instead considering it as mere empty ritual that doesn't affect cooperation on tactical issues. Let the State Department blast the Kremlin's repressive machine. Let the Kremlin blast the Obama administration for its "imperialism" and "hegemony." This mutual scolding, short of real action, could become part of the new game. Moscow

will continue to ignore U.S. criticism of its worsening human rights and democracy record. The ability to ignore these Western laments will form a basis for consolidating the fundamentalists, Russia's own "Tea Party" faction, which today views Putin as too liberal and soft.

Tactical cooperation based on "don't meddle and don't preach" diplomacy will prevent the relationship from freezing solid. But at the same time it will have other effects. It will water down the "values" dimension of politics, thus undermining America's normative reputation and producing a "non-ideological" area of politics, which others will take as proof of American cynicism. It will make the Russian opposition (and democratic forces in other countries) more suspicious of America and its goals. It will undermine America's ability to think strategically. It will strengthen the Kremlin's attempts to use the West to legitimize itself.

If the U.S. Congress passes the Magnitsky Act and begins to ramp up criticism of Russian domestic developments, one can be certain that the Kremlin will retaliate. Lately, the Kremlin has deployed preemptive tactics (for instance, kicking USAID out of Russia and discontinuing the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program). What, then, would its retaliatory tactics be? For starters, they would include well-worn gimmicks, such as the new Russian treason laws prohibiting opposition groups from dealing with U.S. organizations, or the harassment of U.S. diplomats and journalists. Would U.S. businesses also be made to suffer? Not necessarily. And in any case, the U.S. business community has learned how to survive in the Russian aquarium. Thus the limited basis of U.S.-Russian relations also limits the Kremlin's retaliatory options.

But besides this, the Russian ruling elite would hardly try to raise tensions up to the point of serious confrontation. The rentier class, which depends on the West for its survival, is not ready for that. But at the same time it can't control the logic of mutual mistrust, which, once it gains momentum, can become difficult or impossible to stop.

The most likely probability is that we will face a long period of mutual suspicion, or for at least as long as the Russian Matrix (that is, the personalized power system, which relies on the "search for an enemy") remains in place. There is one way the open tension could be eased: if Washington were to prove itself ready to abide by the "don't meddle and don't preach" rule. If in the coming years we witness a warming relationship between the current Russian regime and the Obama administration, we should ask ourselves what price Washington is paying for that?

We mustn't forget about the Other Russia: the Russia of the opposition, which includes a variety of groups with different ideologies. This Russia is frustrated by the reset with the Putin regime, and it is mistrustful of Washington no matter who occupies the White House (Obama is definitely no hero to the Russian opposition). It is very strange, not

to mention rare, for the Russian opposition to line up in any position with the official Kremlin. To be sure, the opposition's suspicion of America has different roots; it is triggered by a belief that America wants to preserve the Russian status quo of top-down rule out of a fear of change and uncertainty. Will the new Obama presidency change these moods? Possibly, but only in one case: if America shows that it will at least try to contain the corrupt Russian elite that operates in and through the West. The opposition hardly wants U.S. interference in domestic Russian affairs; it, too, would rather do without American meddling and preaching!

Will Washington under President Obama be ready to pursue a new strategy on Russia? The Magnitsky bill and its mechanism (if it is passed into law) will be a litmus test for whether the administration is at least willing and able to think anew. But so far, the writing on the wall says that America is turning its gaze inward and is not ready for any breakthroughs abroad. Really: why bother about Russia? The Kremlin is smart enough to cooperate. As for the future Russian turmoil, who knows when it will come? And if it does, it certainly won't come before the next presidential election.

And so here we are: On the Russian side, hardly anyone views the future of U.S.-Russian relations with any optimism. Here again both Russias, official and oppositional, are in agreement. The growing crisis of the Russian system means that each Russia's relations with the outside world are held hostage to domestic developments. True, this does not preclude the possibility of cooperation, but will this cooperation help Russia's transformation, or will it prolong the life of an obsolete system?

The only hope is that U.S. engagement with a decaying Russian system, and with a regime that has entered the agony of its terminal phase, will not totally undermine relations between America and the new Russia that will emerge sooner or later. This demands from the second Obama administration not a willingness to make tactical trade-offs but a capacity to Think Big, and to push its conceptual horizons well beyond the end of its final term.

# Germany and Russia: The End of Ostpolitik?

Lilia Shevtsova & David J. Kramer / *The American Interest*, November 13, 2012

Germany's role in the ongoing euro crisis is a reminder of its economic superpower status in Europe. But Germany plays another leading role: defining European policy toward Russia. Brussels and other European capitals often follow Germany's lead when it comes to dealing with Russia. And with the United States distracted with its recent election and other priorities, and with the reset not what it used to be, Germany's role in defining the "Eastern strategy" – and specifically the agenda toward Russia – is likely to increase (even if Berlin tries to keep a low profile).

Until recently, the German-Russian relationship was viewed as the model of a happy, albeit weird, marriage of incompatible bedfellows. No longer: German public opinion has grown increasingly critical of Vladimir Putin's regime and its clampdown on human rights and the political opposition. While this shift in public attitude has not had a major impact on the official Berlin line, it has reinforced the push by some Bundestag deputies, especially the German Greens, the only party that has consistently raised the issue of human rights in Russia.

But things have started to change in Berlin. This summer the German special envoy for Russia on behalf of the ruling coalition, Andreas Schockenhoff, prepared a critical motion on Russia ("The Civil Society and Rule of Law in Russia"), which sought to clarify Germany's position before the high level Russian-German government consultations and annual meeting of the St. Petersburg dialogue in November. According to *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, however, the German Foreign Affairs Ministry, headed by the Christian Democrats' partner Free Democrats and its leader, Guido Westerwelle, substantially edited the motion. In fact, the ministry rewrote the key points, significantly altering the main message of the motion. See for yourself. Schockenhoff's motion started with the following:

"The German Bundestag seriously worries that Russia will be facing stagnation instead of progress on its path toward building an open and modern society due to the deficit of rule of law, investments and innovation."

The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs changed that to say that Russia is “the key and essential partner of Germany and Europe . . . the largest state in the world that stretches through two continents . . . and is the crucial energy supplier in Europe.” One might almost think this was rewritten by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, not the German one. But there’s more: German diplomats added a line stating that global problems could be solved only with Russia’s participation. The Foreign Ministry also took out the seemingly innocuous phrase that Germany and Russia are “interested in a politically and economically modernized and democratic Russia.” Apparently, the ministry did not like the Parliament’s mention of civic activism in Russia. They also took out the phrase, “After years of managed democracy and apathy a lot of Russians are ready for greater activism in their country,” and erased another assertion that the Russian “authorities view politically active citizens not as partners, but enemies,” broadening the gap between the authorities and the society. While tweaking a Parliamentary motion is not unheard of in German legislative history, in this case the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs turned the intent of the motion completely upside-down. This provoked a mini-scandal in a country where the political elite tries to avoid scandals at any price.

This conflict between Bundestag circles that are critical of the current Russian regime and the part of the German government that wants to maintain the status quo between Moscow and Berlin got even more complicated when the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stuck its nose into the matter, indignantly accusing Schockenhoff of making “slandorous accusations.” The Russian ministry was especially offended by Schockenhoff’s assertion that Russia was losing influence in the Arab world and declared that it was not going to deal with Schockenhoff anymore! This turned out to be too much even for those who were trying to be accommodating toward Moscow. The Russian ministry’s clumsy and heavy-handed interference escalated emotions in Berlin and simultaneously bolstered those who have been more critical of the Kremlin.

Consequently, it was not only the German Greens who were calling for a much tougher line with respect to the Kremlin; members of the ruling coalition started to distance themselves from their previous softness toward Moscow, a position that the Russian opposition has viewed as “appeasement.” Even the German Social Democrats, known for their more than accommodating attitude toward Putin personally, have started to feel uneasy and are distancing themselves from the views of their leading Russia expert, Gernot Erler, who has spoken about Russia’s being on a path of “Europeanization.”

The position of German President Joachim Gauck is worth keeping an eye on. A highly respected freedom fighter in the GDR, Gauck appears to have no illusions about what is happening in Russia. As a former Stasi “hunter” and tireless pro-democracy advocate who exposed



the crimes of the former communist secret police, Gauck and Putin, the former KGB agent based in the GDR, have nothing in common. That may be why Gauck appears to be in no hurry to meet with Putin on a regular basis, after their only meeting so far ended on a chilly note.

What we are seeing unfold in Germany is without precedent. There is a new mood emerging in the country and among the German political class reflecting changing views toward Putin's Russia. Before, only the political minority and a handful of marginal politicians had the courage to stand up against the "general course" for partnership with the Kremlin. Now those calling for a more critical line are seeing their ranks expand and become part of the mainstream.

Until recently, Berlin pursued a policy toward Russia that we would define as "close partnership based on common interests and total rejection of the normative approach." This policy during Gerhard Schroeder's time acquired the name "Schroederization," which meant avoiding anything that would annoy the Kremlin; we must be close friends. Angela Merkel's rise to power had many hoping that Schroederization would end; on her first visit to Russia as chancellor, she made a big, positive impression when she met with civil society and opposition figures, drawing a stark contrast to her predecessor. But to a large extent, Schroederization turned into "Merkelization," reflecting more continuity than change.

Why has German policy over the years stubbornly clung to the pursuit of close relations with the Kremlin even as German public opinion has become increasingly critical of developments inside Russia? Is it motivated by commercial and economic interests? Other countries with commercial interests in Russia have escaped the love affair with Putin's Kremlin, and they don't call the Russian autocrat in the Kremlin an "impeccable democrat," as Schroeder did.

The complicated history between Germany and Russia and German feelings of guilt for the Second World War and invasion of the Soviet Union have something to do with it. But these don't explain why German leaders would side with authoritarian rule in Russia. Perhaps German idealism (or is it romanticism?) that emerged during the early Putin era endures in the hope that Putin could be persuaded to follow a normal European path? Recall that in September 2001, Putin's speech in the Bundestag provoked a standing ovation as he represented the embodiment of the new and democratic Russia – or so members hoped. But all hopes in the end are delayed disappointments. This is as true in Russia as anywhere else.

Gerd Koenen, in his book, "Der Russland-Komplex," published at the beginning of the Merkel period, wrote about German delusions regarding Russia. He described Berlin's goal as doing everything it could to avoid antagonizing Russia, "even at the expense of raising false expectations." He admitted that in this way Germany became the object

of Russia's "world ambitions." Koenen's thesis begs the question of why such a great European country would conduct itself in such a manner. No less important is the question of why the German ruling elite can't differentiate between Russia writ large and the Kremlin.

Perhaps the answers to these questions are not so difficult to find. Influential members of the German political and business establishment have been co-opted into the Kremlin's expanding network. Former Chancellor Schroeder is an obvious example, but several representatives of the German punditry and elite have become loudspeakers for the Kremlin and members of Putin's business circle, such as Alexander Rahr, who happily compares Putin to Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer, and former Stasi like Matthias Warnig, executive director of the North European Gas Pipeline Company, the operator of Gazprom. Indeed, the fact that Putin speaks fluent German and lived for several years in the GDR helped him build his network of German friends. It is doubtful he could have developed such relations elsewhere. Putin knew how to play to Germany's ego, saying that "Germany will be the key European distributor of gas" and "Germany will be a motor for investments."

But even this isn't sufficient to explain the situation. Indeed, one must go back in history to "Ostpolitik," formulated by Willy Brandt and his close adviser Egon Bahr on the basis of Bahr's doctrine of "Change through Rapprochement" in the late 1960s/early 1970s, which was largely continued by Helmut Schmidt in the early 1980s. Its main goal was normalization of the relationship between the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR. "The policy of all or nothing must be ruled out," Bahr explained in 1963, justifying a new approach of gradual change involving "many steps" through rapprochement. The same strategy was soon applied by West Germany to the Soviet Union.

While easing tensions between global competitors was a positive development, Brandt's Ostpolitik was based on an idealistic premise: the possibility of provoking positive change inside the communist system through geopolitical rapprochement, which also included a hope that both systems would converge. One of Bahr and Brandt's ideas was the creation of a body that would coordinate between NATO and the Warsaw pact. This model of transformation was doomed from the very beginning; the communist system proved to be unreformable. In retrospect, judging by the outcomes of this policy, one can say that it helped prolong the life of the socialist "Commonwealth" through its dialogue with the West (and especially West Germany). The global communist system and the Soviet Union did not change gradually under external influence; they eventually collapsed!

Schroederization emerged from Brandt-Bahr's Ostpolitik. Recall that one of the key elements of Brandt's policy toward Russia was a "gas for pipelines" deal suggested by Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs

Andrei Gromyko during his visit to Hanover in 1969. Leonid Brezhnev energetically supported the idea and even ordered the buildup of a special secret channel of communication between Moscow and West Berlin that allowed the two sides to talk despite the global tensions of those times. Gradually, the Federal Republic of Germany became a trusted partner of the Soviet Union and often lobbied Moscow's interests within the NATO alliance.

"Gas diplomacy" and the crucial role of Gazprom and Ruhrgas (with financial support from Deutsche Bank) became the foundation of German-Russian relations that survived the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of its successor, Russia. The philosophy of "change through rapprochement" has been repeated with German leaders beginning with Helmut Kohl.

Leading Social Democrat Frank-Walter Steinmeier (currently head of the Social Democrat faction in the Bundestag) developed the concept of "growing closer by interweaving" and initiated Germany's "Partnership for Modernization" that became part of the EU's agenda for Russia. These are a logical follow-on from the same Ostpolitik. During Willy Brandt's time, Ostpolitik had a "triad" of outcomes (not necessarily acknowledged by its architects): easing tensions, solving the energy problem for Germany, and helping the Soviet system to survive. Its new reincarnation has dual meaning: it helps to solve the German economic agenda (mainly its energy priorities), while at the same supporting the Russian system of personalized power. "The current German Chancellor," wrote *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* with bitter irony, "has to, clenching her teeth, give Putin her two cheeks, in order not to damage the energy security of Germany."

From Brandt's Ostpolitik emerged in Germany a solid lobbying group that included not only the foreign policy bureaucracy but the commercial and industrial lobby (centered around the Ost-Ausschuss, the East Committee). This group shudders at the prospect of even the slightest chill in relations with the Kremlin and formed the basis for "Schroederization-Merkelization."

"The Social Democratic Party has a long tradition of promoting a policy toward Russia that is driven by a deep inclination to understand and accept quickly Russia's deviation from Western models of democracy, human rights and civil society," wrote German expert Joerg Himmelreich. Such a policy may not be limited to one party, however.

"Regardless of who is chancellor, Social Democrat or Christian Democrat, Germany has to have a good relationship with the Russian leader," explained Gernot Erler in 2005. "It has got to do with our geography, our history, the wars, the rivalries, the sensitiveness. It's about Germany wanting Russia to be part of Europe."

The counter to such a view is that Germany should have a good relationship not with the totalitarian or authoritarian Kremlin but

with Russian society – and the two are very different. As long as “good relations” are defined as good relations with Russia’s system of personalized power, Russia will never become “part of Europe,” because the very existence of personalized power in Russia means a rejection of European rules and norms. And the effects are not limited to inside Russia’s borders. For example, while Germany has succeeded in becoming the key distributor of gas in Europe, it has paid a steep price in corruption scandals.

Klaus Manhold, chairman of the East Committee, which has been actively promoting business in Russia, likes to say again and again that bringing Russia closer to Europe “has been our long term aim.” In reality, the German efforts have helped in bringing Putin’s Russia closer to Europe by incorporating the corrupted Russian elite into Europe and turning Europe into a laundry machine for Russian money. None of this has helped Russia become more European.

Meanwhile, Germany has become the butt of jokes (at least in Russia) due to certain Germans’ excessive love for Putin. In 2011, the German organization Werkstatt Deutschland decorated Putin with a special prize, “Quadriga.” According to the organizers of the prize, Putin deserved a special chapter in the book of history because, like Peter the Great, he built a path toward the future(!). Among previous winners of the “Quadriga” have been Helmut Kohl, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Vaclav Havel. The chairman of the selection committee was Lothar de Maizière, a former East German who was a cabinet minister in Kohl’s government but had to resign after coming under suspicion of having connections with the Stasi. At the time of the award announcement, he served as co-chair of the steering commission of the symposium alongside Viktor Zubkov, chairman of Gazprom and a confidant of Putin. Enough said.

Fortunately, the award provoked an outcry in German society, in Russia, and beyond. Several German members of the board of Werkstatt Deutschland, among them one of the leaders of the Green Party, Cem Ozdemir, as well as a prominent history professor from Heidelberg University, Edgar Wolfrum, stepped down from the award’s board of trustees. Havel soon followed them and announced he was returning his prize. Embarrassed, the German group had to cancel the award “in light of the growing and unbearable pressure and the danger of further escalation.” After this, the Kremlin never forgave Havel and did not even express official condolences when he died.

To help us understand the changing moods in Germany toward Russia, we turned to one of the country’s most thoughtful political analysts, Heinrich Vogel. Here is what he said:

“No, it’s no love-affair between Berlin and Moscow, it never has been... The vast majority of Germans always were skeptical about instant success of ‘market-democracy,’ the alleged destiny of man-

kind in the nineties. They knew first-hand having to integrate the former GDR.

The Christian Democrats in Berlin are caught in a true dilemma. Over the last twenty years, the Russian market with its undeniable potential attracted sizeable real investments from German big and even middle sized businesses who are key to winning the next elections to the Bundestag in 2013. This group is worrying about corruption in Russia and lack of predictability when they turn to Russian courts. They want a clear perspective for their engagement but so far Putin<sup>2</sup> blew it. It's not a happy partnership. But these people are also worried about what they call 'politicization' of economic relations, i.e. German politicians annoying the Kremlin by speaking out against the obvious course of Russian politics, forward towards the past. Obviously politicians in Germany on whatever side of the aisle will not stop Mr. Putin from driving his country against the next wall by yelling at him. Asking questions, however, when and how he intends to make Russia a leading industrial state again (as he has promised) will cause additional heat on those in charge as the Russian people will continue calling for answers. Modernization only comes in a package with rule of the law, responsibility and a spirit of freedom."

As Vogel's astute analysis reveals, Germans have started to ask questions. On November 9, representatives of all key parties in the German Bundestag (with the exception of the representative of the Left Party, Wolfgang Gehrcke) voiced sharp criticism of political developments in Russia. During the debate, Andreas Schockenhoff did not mince words, saying when "democratic freedoms are limited, when the principles of the rule of law are undermined, when the repressive tendencies are deepening, this . . . creates our deepest concern." He blasted the Kremlin notion of "modernization," repeating that "all modernization projects in Russia could be implemented only with the support of the population." Instead, we see capital flight and "the creative class leaving Russia."

During the debate, the most critical were the Greens. Their representative, Marieluise Beck, received applause when she pointed out that German companies were paying bribes for getting juicy contracts from the Kremlin, mentioning Siemens and Daimler in particular. Those who are behaving in such a way in Russia, she said, "can't raise their voice in defense of the foundations of the rule of law state."

Even usually accommodating Social Democrats were forced to change their tone. Their representative, Gernot Erler, admitted that the Russian leader had "disappointed many who had hopes" and "scared the opposition on all levels of the Russian society." But at the same time, in a sign that old habits die hard, representatives of the Social Demo-

crats urged Germany “not to teach” Russia and continue the “equal exchange of views.”

On November 9, the Bundestag resolution mentioned in detail Kremlin actions that constitute a crackdown on human rights and concluded:

“The Bundestag notes with particular concern that since President Vladimir Putin’s return to office, legislative and judicial measures have been taken which collectively exert increased control over politically active citizens, increasingly criminalize critical engagement and set the government on a confrontational course with its critics.”

The Bundestag, in other words, unequivocally concluded that Putin’s abuses may limit the possibilities of the bilateral relationship.

In the end, the resolution that emerged was the result of compromise, and the most critical German deputies were not satisfied. Nonetheless, the very fact that the debate took place at all is of great significance and marks a shift in Germany’s Russia policy. No votes against the resolution were cast, meaning that the German political establishment across the political spectrum is increasingly worried about the direction in which Putin is taking Russia. This marks the first serious attempt to free Germany from the suffocating relationship with the Kremlin and may restore respect for the German government and leadership not only among its own civil society, but among Russian civil society and opposition, too. As Marieluise Beck noted, “The guys from the former KGB sitting in the Kremlin . . . have to be sensitive to our criticism.”

In mid-November, delegations from Germany and Russia will meet again for discussion of their cooperation. Will Berlin be ready to formulate a new policy based not only on interests but values, too? Is the German elite ready to go beyond thinking about a short-term tactical agenda? Time will tell, but one thing is apparent: the leadership can’t ignore German society’s growing frustration with its policy toward Putin’s Russia. Indeed, this rising frustration is not limited to Germany; elsewhere in Europe there is a sense that connivance with Putin’s regime must end, as reflected in recent resolutions of the Parliamentary Assembly of Europe criticizing the Kremlin’s actions, growing support for sanctions legislation, and sharp criticism by the European media of the cozy relationship between many European leaders and Putin. All this will have an impact on Germany. Indeed, a new policy toward Russia could not only become a test of Germany’s ability to adopt a normative dimension but also a new model of German leadership.

# What the Magnitsky Act Means

David J. Kramer & Lilia Shevtsova / *The American Interest*, December 18, 2012

Sergei Magnitsky was a 37-year-old lawyer who was beaten, deprived of vital medical attention, and left to die in a Russian prison nearly a year after uncovering a massive fraud allegedly committed by Russian officials to the tune of \$230 million. The very people whom Magnitsky implicated in the fraud arrested him in 2008; a year after his murder, several of these officials were promoted and awarded, adding insult to the fatal injury inflicted on Magnitsky.

Magnitsky's client, Hermitage Capital head Bill Browder, launched a full-court press to seek justice for his lawyer in the West in the absence of any possibility for justice inside Russia. Browder recounted Magnitsky's riveting story to members of the U.S. Congress and anyone else who would listen. Fortunately, two Congressmen, Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) and Representative Jim McGovern (D-MA), did listen, and they followed up by leading the campaign to adopt the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act, which was approved by the House in a 365-43 vote November 16, and by the Senate with an equally bipartisan landslide (92-4) on December 6. The Act will deny visas to and freeze the assets of those in the Russian ruling elite implicated in Magnitsky's murder and other human rights violations and corruption. Various polls in Russia show support for the legislation by a ratio of more than two-to-one among those familiar with it. In targeting sanctions against corrupt and abusive Russian officials as opposed to the whole country, the Act resonates with the many Russians who are fed up with these kinds of problems in their country. The next critical step is to get European countries to adopt similar measures, which would have an even greater impact on those Russians who like to travel and do business in Europe.

There will likely be international ramifications to the approval of the Magnitsky Act – especially if it gets applied to other abusive officials elsewhere around the world; Senator Cardin strongly supports such an extension of the law's reach. The Act is also bound to influence the Russian-American relationship – if not today, then in the future. If not implemented aggressively, the legislation risks ending up as yet another piece in the “Let's Pretend” game that the West has long been playing with Russia and other authoritarian states. (Indeed some

hope for this outcome.) This would expose the deep crisis affecting the Western world and signal a victory for the forces of authoritarian corruption seeking to demoralize Western society. The U.S. Congress must see to it that the Obama administration implements the legislation in a serious manner.

To understand the significance of the Act, we have to see the “Magnitsky factor” in a broader historical and political context. During the Helsinki process of the early-to-mid-1970s, the West created a new foreign policy model of linkage between interests and values. While the West pursued this linkage inconsistently and often only rhetorically, it was recognized as the key principle of Western foreign policy doctrine. This recognition was reflected in the almost universal acceptance of the Helsinki Principles, according to which human rights are not merely the internal matter of a country. This principle is a key part of the OSCE and the European Council’s legal framework. It was translated into the philosophy of democracy promotion with the Western states and civic organizations that supported the building of democratic institutions (elections, parties, rule of law) in transition societies.

Regrettably, the Obama administration announced early on in its reset policy with Russia that it was abandoning the notion of linkage between interests and values. This mistake essentially gave Putin a green light to engage in human rights abuses, secure in the knowledge that such actions would not affect the broader relationship. In passing the Magnitsky Act, Congress has fixed that mistake. Long before the Helsinki Accords, and consistent with them, the U.S. Congress approved the Jackson-Vanik amendment in 1974 to deprive countries of most favored nation trade status if they limited their citizens’ right to emigrate. The Magnitsky Act takes the premise behind Jackson-Vanik and updates it to apply it to today’s Russia.

## The Old Ways of Dealing with Russia

Since the collapse of the USSR, Western policy toward Russia has gone through many zigs and zags. The West adopted the “Transformation through Integration” approach (promoting Russia’s transformation by moving it toward the West), which implied the West’s active cooperation in building Russian democratic institutions. As it became more evident that the Russian regime had little in common with liberal democracy, a modified model appeared, known as “Integration through Transformation” (integrating Russia with the West, but contingent on its transformation). But the essence of the model had not changed: The West still hoped that Russia would democratize, and it would participate in Russia’s democratization and integration into Europe.



These hopes were grounded in the erroneous assumption that Russia had started moving toward democracy in the 1990s. In fact, Russia was reviving the system of personalized power under the guise of liberal slogans. By describing the period of the 1990s as a time of democracy in Russia, when to most Russians it was a terrible and dislocating decade, and by openly supporting the new Kremlin one-man rule, Westerners wound up discrediting the notion of democracy in the eyes of many Russians. “If this is democracy,” they thought, “then we don’t want any!” The West was thus reduced to participation in the imitation of reforms in Russia. Many Russians began to view the West as cynically interested in Russia’s demoralization and degradation. Moreover, once the “collective” West embarked on this path, it couldn’t veer from it. No Western politician was willing to admit that the belief in Yeltsin and Putin (early in his rule) as democratic reformers was a mistake. Nor did anyone want to risk undermining the advantageous partnership with Russia on issues of economics and security.

The West’s imitation of a normative approach to Russia has had two consequences. First, it has tarnished the West’s reputation as a normative society both on the Russian stage and on the global one. Second, it has facilitated the exportation of corruption to the West (especially to European countries) from Russia and other post-Soviet states. Thus, a segment of Western society began to serve the interests of corrupt elements from authoritarian or “imitation democracy” states and, in so doing, impacted the Western countries’ foreign policies. Undermining the West from within through the exportation of corruption has been far more effective than the policies of confrontation and containment practiced by the Soviet Union.

## Magnitsky as a Turning Point

The “Magnitsky factor” marks a turning point, since it allows for the possibility of solving the following problems:

- restoring the primary role of a normative aspect in Western society by confronting the issue of normative imitation, external corruption, and the demoralization of political elites in both Russia and the West;
- undermining the sustainability of corrupt authoritarian regimes by limiting their external resources and hindering their elites’ personal integration into the West;
- bringing back liberal democracy as an attractive alternative to the authoritarian model;
- overcoming anti-Americanism and anti-Western sentiments in Russian and other societies that are now suspicious of the West and its agenda by standing up for principle.

The Magnitsky Act signifies an entirely different format of Western influence. It does not intend to influence the societies that live under authoritarian regimes (in most cases, these societies no longer need lectures on building democracy); it is aimed instead at the elites who use Western countries to secure their interests and their authoritarian regimes.

To be clear, Congress likely would not have passed the Magnitsky Act had it not been linked to the repeal of the Jackson-Vanik amendment and the granting of permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) with Russia. The American business community, motivated by the prospect of losing equal access to Russia's markets once Russia became a member of the WTO, deserves credit for pushing on that front. Dropping opposition to Magnitsky was the only way for the American business lobbies to get PNTR, since a number of key members of Congress made it clear that they would not support PNTR without Magnitsky. Still, after the Senate vote, the business community focused its comments on the granting of PNTR status, which is understandable, in that most businesses are generally not interested in promoting democracy or human rights or imposing sanctions. Klaus Kleinfeld, chairman and CEO of Alcoa and the chairman of the U.S. Russia Business Council, had this to say: "We welcome today's historic Senate action which provides the U.S. business community with the certainty and predictability it needs to compete in Russia's growing market. Passage of Russia PNTR offers an important boost to U.S. businesses across sectors."

For the Russian government, however, the repeal of the Jackson-Vanik amendment has long been a non-issue. In fact, it provided the Kremlin with a familiar and convenient excuse for its constant anti-Western harangues. It was the Magnitsky Act accompanying PNTR that came as an unwanted surprise for the Kremlin. Thus, even with PNTR, American companies may find rough sailing in Russia in the near term, as the Kremlin and its lackeys in the Duma vent their frustration over the Magnitsky legislation. Nonetheless, by linking economic interests to universal values, Congress turned a new page in the foreign policy textbook – albeit a page turned against the wishes of the Executive Branch. This indeed marks a new approach, both for the United States and the West as a whole.

As noted above, Russian society, and especially its most progressive segments, have overwhelmingly supported the Magnitsky Act. It also supported the lifting of Jackson-Vanik but was much more interested in seeing it replaced with Magnitsky. Russian internet users, who are usually quite suspicious of the United States, reacted to the passage of the bill on the popular Echo Moskv website as follows:

"Of course, I doubt that the American politicians sincerely care about Russia . . . but I can say one thing with certainty: the act WORKS. If we notice all the Kremlin's hype around the law, it means

THERE MUST BE A REASON. Then, these efforts are not IN VAIN, after all. Whatever names we are calling Americans and regardless of how we are treating them . . . this time they did a great job!”

Here is one more posting on the same website:

“Thank you, the U.S. Senate, for trying to deprive Putin’s gang of the reason to exist.”

According to a recent Levada Center poll, 39 percent of Russians support the Magnitsky Act, an incredibly high level of support among the Russian public, who are usually reserved and even hostile toward the United States. Around 95.5 percent of listeners of Echo Moskvyy (which, granted, has a largely liberal listenership) supported the Magnitsky Act, with only 4.5 percent against. Given the Kremlin’s relentless and negative propaganda campaign against the Act, these levels of support in Russia are nothing short of amazing.

However, for the “Magnitsky factor” to work, its practical application must be developed further. First and foremost, it has to be adopted in Europe as well, since Europe is the main recipient of Russia’s corrupt exports. Therefore, a Schengen Zone member of the EU should pass a similar law so that in effect all countries of the Schengen Agreement must abide by it. Passage in the UK, Norway, and Canada would also send an important signal, but approval in the Schengen Zone would have the greatest impact.

At the same time, it is quite clear that “corruption donors” in Russia and other countries will take all necessary steps to block the new law and render it merely symbolic. “Baloney. It will change nothing,” as one Russian official put it, perhaps hoping that the White House, which has constantly voiced its disagreement with the law, will be able to thwart it. But, just in case, the Kremlin has already started to prepare “symmetric” and “asymmetric” measures to combat American human rights violations. The Russian Foreign Ministry had this to say right after the bill was approved:

“The decision of the United States Senate following the House of Representatives of the United States approved the legislation, which under the false pretenses introduces the visa and financial sanctions against some Russian citizens, is the performance in the theater of the absurd...”

It looks like that behind ridiculously biased approach taken in the U.S. Congress there is only the vindictive desire to get even for principled, consistent line of Russia in world affairs in favor of strict adherence to international law. We have to reiterate hyperactive opponents of normal development of Russian-American relations: their efforts look pathetic. However, the Russian side will have to respond.”

This statement is quintessentially Soviet, for the Soviet Union was great at accusing its opponents of the same things it was accused of. Perhaps, the statement's authors failed to see its absurdity: They identify themselves with those responsible for a person's death and show their readiness to protect Russian human rights violators at any cost.

On December 13, President Vladimir Putin blasted the Magnitsky Act as a "purely political, unfriendly act." The Russian leader was apparently sincere when he said, "Frankly speaking, I don't understand. This is most likely a domestic political intrigue. But I don't understand why Russian-U.S. relations should be sacrificed for some domestic political gain." The Russian leader definitely does not believe that Americans can include a normative dimension into their policy; he evidently thinks that Washington works within the same policy formula that he pursues, and the rest is simply "intrigue." Apparently, thus far he has found no evidence to the contrary.

A natural question amidst all this froth arises: Why did the Kremlin allow the situation surrounding Magnitsky's death to escalate to the point that the West felt it had to adopt sanctions against members of the Russian ruling elite? The Kremlin's political shortsightedness is not the only culprit here. There is a more serious problem. The logic of personalized power does not allow the regime to display weakness. The regime cannot punish one of its own members; otherwise the principles of mutual loyalty and permissive connivance that consolidate Putin's regime will begin to crumble.

Right after the Act's adoption, Moscow warned about restrictions on certain meat products from the United States. This constituted its first retaliatory step after the law was passed. The Russian Duma is endorsing its own version of the anti-Magnitsky law, carrying its own retaliatory measures: For example, it calls for American parents who adopt Russian children and abuse them to be banned from entering Russia, along with American officials guilty of abusing the human rights of Russian citizens, such as the notorious arms dealer Viktor Bout.

The reaction of the Kremlin and the ruling class to the Magnitsky Act is quite understandable. After all, some fear it will endanger their financial positions and their ability to remain connected to the West. Others, like the communists, support retaliation against America to express their outrage at the very fact that the United States tries to exert pressure on the Russian elite. The irony of this is outstanding: The communists and other elite groups known for their anti-American stances are in fact defending the right of the corrupt Russian elite to keep their assets in dollars and in U.S. banks!

The Magnitsky Act has its detractors in the West, as well as among those who fear that the adoption of a new normative approach to foreign policy will complicate partnership with Russia on issues like Iran, Af-

ghanistan, Syria, energy policy, and so on. Staunch supporters of Kissingerian-style realpolitik will dismiss the normative approach as romantic dreaming. They believe that Western foreign policy should be a bargaining process or a “transactional relationship,” and that the internal politics of a country one is negotiating with should be put on the back burner. There are also those who are directly implicated in catering to Russia’s corrupt exports – banks, businesses, legal and political consultants, and companies engaged in PR for the Kremlin – who will work to make the Magnitsky Act irrelevant.

Incorporating the Magnitsky approach into the West’s foreign policy does make it more complex. The West will have to abandon its traditional methods and stereotypes and move on to a multi-step diplomacy that may not yield immediate results. But this is no loss: current Western diplomacy no longer involves strategic thinking. The West may boast of its tactical successes, but these come at the expense of strategic failures. The question is whether Western diplomacy will be able to move on to normative politics. The jury is still out on that, including among those in Russia who support passage of the Magnitsky Act.

Nonetheless, the overwhelming support for the Magnitsky Act in the U.S. Congress, the unanimous backing for similar legislation in the European Parliament this fall and in the Dutch Parliament last July, and a recent resolution in the German Bundestag speaking out for civil society and human rights in Russia suggest that the West is adjusting its approach and reviving a more normative role in dealings with the Kremlin.

As the last decade’s experience bears out, the realist approach to Russia has discredited the West in many Russians’ minds. The West lost its overall vision and foresight of political developments amid Russia’s turn toward authoritarianism and the spike in anti-American and anti-Western sentiments.

The coming year will be key to determining how systemic the change in approach by the West toward Russia will actually be. The “Magnitsky factor” offers some hope that the West will overcome its current malaise. And credit for that should go to people like Sergei Magnitsky and those who seek justice for his death.

# The Crisis in the West... and How It Affects Those Who Have Not Become the West

Lilia Shevtsova & David J. Kramer / *The American Interest*, January 18, 2013

A year ago, the world was abuzz with talk of the euro crisis and the feared disintegration of the European Union. By the end of 2012, the discussion has shifted to the crisis of the liberal democracy model itself. The debate is no longer “Keynes vs. Hayek” or expansionary vs. austerity fiscal measures. At the heart of today’s debate are the systemic problems affecting Western civilization.

The current political process, which has been a cause for ever-increasing concern, can be called the “Crisis Triad.” On the one hand, we are witnessing a conflict between a dynamic, ever more aggressive global capitalism and the system of liberal democracy that took shape in the aftermath of World War II, which was somewhat revamped in the 1970s. On the other hand, we can point to a conflict between political and economic mechanisms on one side and post-industrial social structure and social aspirations on the other. The existing liberal democratic political institutions can neither halt the growth of social inequality nor guarantee social justice and legitimize the technocratic decision-making of the ruling elite, which is becoming increasingly distant from society at large. While American society is at least accustomed to social inequality at some level, Europeans have proven to be totally unprepared for the decline of the welfare state. The European crisis also turned out to be especially severe, insofar as the European community, which claims to be the only “normative power” in the world, has shown itself incapable of using normative values to preserve social stability or solve the social problems of the past decade (such as demographic decline, an aging population, migration, the failure of multiculturalism, and others).

In the 1970s, the West, and the European countries in its midst, were able to overcome economic crisis with the help of neoliberal instruments and by limiting the role of the state, thus unleashing free market forces. But it is precisely the neoliberal cure that is under attack today. All attempts to resolve the crisis through economic or technocratic means delegitimize the process of governance, since they are not supported by many voters. European society is losing faith in democratic institutions because they are failing to secure social

stability and are offering no vision of the future. Thus, parties, parliaments, and governments are losing their credibility. The support for the Unified Europe project is declining. Where we once discussed the transition to democracy, we have now begun deliberating on the “transition from democracy.” People are turning to nationalism and extremism, and see their salvation in a strongman. Hungary provides a stark illustration of this general trend. Even in communist times, that country was at the forefront of the democratic reform movement, but in recent years it has seen serious backsliding.

In addition, EU power structures have become alienated from European society, merely a bureaucratic appendage. European politicians have resorted in some cases to limiting democracy in the hope that this would help them overcome the fiscal crisis and prevent the disintegration of the European Union; however, the people, unable to have any impact on EU economic decisions, end up trusting their governments even less.

An ostensibly improved situation in the United States does not alleviate these concerns. As everyone surely remembers, American complacency and faith in self-regulating market forces were a major cause of the 2008 financial crisis. The failure of the Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism and lack of faith in the current administration's ability to redefine it are not the only causes for concern today. Francis Fukuyama presents a cogent argument on “political deadlock” in the United States. There is an international angle to the crisis too: the current American leadership is also growing less committed to and capable of maintaining its hegemonic role in the world; meanwhile, the world is not ready for multipolarity.

Under these conditions, we are seeing a resurgence of support for authoritarian capitalism. The supporters of this model, who had been quiet for many years, are again chanting their mantras. Quite often, they seek to negate liberal democracy by heaping praise on authoritarian regimes. Their ideal is China, though talk of the “China Model” is not quite what it was even a year ago, given the country's problems with corruption, social and ethnic unrest, and heavy-handedness by the authorities. Putin's Russia occasionally is also cited admiringly, though there, too, Putin's support inside Russia is declining. Still, the resurgence of support for authoritarian capitalism reveals the crisis of Western political thought, which has so far been unable to find ways to recast the liberal democratic model.

The current crisis of liberalism as model and ideology appears to be much harder to overcome than the previous ones. Leadership emerges as the central issue. Can the leaders who were not prepared for the crisis, and who are now attempting to deal with it pragmatically through minor adjustments, rise up to the new challenges? We are here primarily talking about President Obama and Chancellor Merkel, the respective leaders of the only global and European superpowers. Neither

of them was ready for the current crisis or for the need to assume global and pan-European responsibilities. Neither wished for it, and both are clearly trying to avoid it, instead pursuing a policy of retreat and pragmatism – which is merely another form of avoiding strategic responsibility. We will see very soon whether Merkel and Obama are capable of demonstrating “transformational leadership,” which calls for special personal characteristics such as resolve. Their ultimate success will rest on their ability to realize the need for normative and systemic change, as well as on their readiness to set the West’s collective agenda and demonstrate the will to implement it. True, we still argue over some questions: whether the change in the Western political system will come from the leaderships’ efforts, as it has in the past, or whether change will only come by reducing or eliminating the role leaders play in the search for new decision-making mechanisms. If it is the latter case, then who is going to be the “transformational” force in the Western community? We should not forget that overcoming crisis through change contradicts the Western elite’s current efforts to maintain the status quo.

All this prompts another question: How does the crisis of liberalism affect authoritarian and totalitarian societies? Preoccupied with its own “malaise” (the term bestowed upon President Carter’s dour assessment of the economic crisis of the 1970s), the West seems to lack the strength and stamina to assess the impacts of its illness on the world around it. But sooner or later, the West will be forced to do this. No doubt these global impacts will be negative ones that will reflect back on the West itself.

It is already evident that the crisis of liberal democracy and its inability to provide both economic stability and social justice in the post-post-industrial society are leading to disillusionment with the West as a model across many segments of illiberal societies. Of course, whether these societies will overcome their current conditions depends on internal processes and their readiness to accept the new rules of the game. But the discrediting of the West’s model will hardly facilitate their exit from authoritarianism. Some in the West may dismiss these concerns by saying, “So what? How will this affect us?” We would reply that the deceleration of transformational processes in illiberal and undemocratic societies will have a negative impact on Western civilization’s external environment. Not all authoritarian regimes will be as friendly to the West as was Mubarak’s Egypt. This deteriorating external situation will strain the budgets of Western countries, since they will have to increase their defense spending. Thus if Western civilization loses its appeal, its very existence will be threatened, and, moreover, illiberal societies will face a far more painful transition to freedom.

The new historical situation undermines the Western model of influencing the world, specifically its democracy promotion policy. Can democracy promotion be on the agenda when the democracy promoters themselves cannot solve their own problems? The answer should be



yes, but Western philanthropists already face increasing complications working in illiberal societies.

There is a certain correlation between the rise of liberal democracies and the democratic awakening of illiberal societies. This could be seen in the 1970s and 1980s, when the progress in the West coincided with the post-communist “velvet” revolutions. The picture is less clear today. For instance, the Arab revolutions occurred as the West was entering its crisis stage. Actually, due both to internal factors and to the opposition’s disillusionment with Western policies, these revolutions could yield a decidedly undesirable result for the West, though that is far from certain. Anti-Western Islamic democracy or Islamic authoritarianism could pose a serious challenge to replace the challenge of traditional authoritarianism, especially if the latter enjoyed Western support.

High hopes for “color” revolutions in the post-Soviet states – Ukraine, Georgia, and (less so) Kyrgyzstan – were also dashed, although these countries have remained within the framework of political pluralism. But lest we forget, political pluralism – of the oligarchic type – did not prevent Russia from sliding back into the authoritarian abyss. The movements in Eurasia seemed so promising that they were even dubbed “the fourth wave” of democratization; today we refer to the region in terms of a “democratic recession,” as demonstrated by Freedom House’s latest *Freedom in the World* report, which reveals a seventh consecutive year in which losses of freedom outweigh gains.

The irony is that the crisis of the West arrived in sequence with the gradual awakening of Russian society. However, further scenarios involving such an awakening could be dramatic. First, the Russian personalistic regime still possesses a lot of resources and can reproduce itself in a more repressive form. Second, the crisis of the liberal democracies will not allow them to create external stimuli to press Russia’s transformation forward.

Nevertheless, a new unexpected factor is emerging alongside this rather bleak assessment of the Russian future: Western elites are looking for a new mechanism to deal with Russia. The *Magnitsky Act* is an example of this new experiment. Provided the will and determination are there, the Magnitsky Act may create a new mechanism to influence the corrupt authoritarian elites while at the same time cleansing Western societies of their own sources of corruption.

The West’s reputational decline brings up another concrete goal: the need to reformat Western foreign policy. The internal crisis in the West must lead to changes in the way liberal democracies engage the outside world – to a new foreign policy paradigm. This paradigm should be based on the “New Balance” of interests and norms – in other words, a return of the normative dimension to foreign policy, which has substantially weakened after the breakup of the Soviet Union and been distorted by the American invasion of Iraq.

Some seasoned analysts of political evolution are cautiously optimistic about the future. Francis Fukuyama, in “The Origins of Political Order,” says that “a society successful at one historical moment will not necessarily always remain successful given the phenomenon of political decay” (p.482). But having offered this warning about historical uncertainty, he also expresses hope for the West, concluding that “there is, however, an important reason to think that societies with political accountability will prevail over ones without it.” Philippe C. Schmitter is moderately optimistic too: “European democracy will survive both these crises [the euro crisis and the crisis of the European Union], but in doing so it will have to become even more different that it already is from the brand of democracy that Social Democrats and Christian Democrats built in the years following World War II” (“Europe’s Disintegration,” *Journal of Democracy*, October 2012, p. 45). Schmitter believes that European democracy has to devise a “new social contract” and a more regulated economy, not to mention the novel channels of democratic participation and mechanisms of accountability to citizens. At the moment, however, developments are going in the opposite direction.

Let us hope that Fukuyama is right, that Western civilization has better chances than do other civilizations for prolonging its lifecycle. Perhaps the crisis of the current model has to intensify in order to prod liberal democracies toward this renaissance. Only an obvious crisis will force the political elites in liberal democracies to undertake possibly painful but meaningful reform. While pondering possible exits from communist systems for the countries of Eastern Europe, Ralf Dahrendorf said that these societies will have to go through the “valley of tears” – that is, they will have to make tough choices in order to reject the old rules of the game. Apparently, the same fate awaits Western civilization: It will have to walk through its own valley of the shadow of death before it adopts a system that will allow it to successfully resolve its “Crisis Triad.”

# Russia and China: Is the World Ready for Their Decline?

Lilia Shevtsova / *The American Interest*,

February 11, 2013

When Russia and China come up as subjects in the media and in political and academic discourse (as they frequently do), they are discussed in terms of bilateral relations, as a segue into a discussion of regional and global politics, as authoritarian threats to the West, or as examples of attempts at authoritarian modernization. Ever since Bobo Lo and I endeavored to compare Russia's and China's roads to modernization (see "A 21st Century Myth: Authoritarian Modernization in Russia and China"), I cannot help feeling that a comparison of these two civilizations and their centralized states, as they both look for an appropriate response to the Western democracies, would reveal not only the dramas of undemocratic societies and an understanding of the limitations of modernization efforts by top-down governments, but also the challenges that the West faces – challenges that it is, to date, incapable of assessing correctly.

Observing the authoritarian experiments of these two serious global actors (although one of them has been weakened), as well as their search for an appropriate international role, has made for interesting viewing, revealing several paradoxes: first, the paradox of stability covering up a deeper instability and impending upheavals; second, the paradox of economic growth that is most likely only a brief respite before a precipitous fall; third, the paradox of outward displays of force that conceal inner weakness and disorientation. These paradoxes illustrate that there is a conflict between perceptions and reality in these two authoritarian states. The only question is to what extent they are the results of conscious distortions of reality as opposed to naïveté or unwillingness to accept inconvenient truths.

Were Arnold Toynbee alive today, a comparison of Russia and China would provide him with ample material for his theories on the rise and fall of civilizations. Perhaps, Samuel Huntington would have revised some of his conclusions on reform from the top and the role of the middle class in modernization. I hope, too, that Francis Fukuyama will have a chance to compare the modern evolutions of Russia and China, and their systems' struggles for survival, in the upcoming second volume of "The Origins of Political Order."

The West should be particularly concerned about the future of these two models of the centralized state. The impact that Russia and China have on global security and the world economy is not the only cause for concern. More importantly, both authoritarian systems have found a way to exploit liberal democracy, and both have been quite successful at doing this. Since the fall of communism, Russia's personalized regime has been able to use the West as an important guarantor of its stability. It has also been sponging off liberal democracies, in the form of its elite's personal integration into Western society. This integration has led to the creation of powerful pro-Kremlin lobbying structures that are undermining the normative foundation of liberal democracy (in fact, the Western politicians often don't even recognize that this is what is happening). It is unclear how the Putin regime will survive, now that it has embarked on the path of consolidating itself by rejecting the West and treating it as an enemy.

Through the force of economic might, China earned the West's admiration and is now treated as a future global superpower, forcing the United States to struggle with the question of how to adapt its policy to this perception. Moreover, it has made the United States, still the world's only superpower, its debtor.

Regional and global stability, as well our assessments of the prospects for liberal democracy to formulate foreign policy equal to these challenges, are contingent on Russia's and China's successful exit from the centralized state model, in which the state survives by limiting society's freedom.

Thus far I have been interested in differences between the Russian and Chinese authoritarian models. While both regimes are repressive, they differ in their approach to governance, ideology, and adaptability to changing external circumstances. Both countries come from long traditions of despotism, but differing ones. Thanks to Confucian influences, China has certain moral checks on authoritarian leadership. The principle of meritocracy has made for an efficient bureaucracy that is the envy of other countries (at least in Asia). As for the Russian tradition of governance, it has always been based on absolute power, unrestrained by moral taboos. Russia's all-powerful predatory bureaucracy has turned into a Leviathan that has for centuries been bent on destroying any reform impulses arising from the elite or from society as a whole.

The Russian personalized power matrix cannot reproduce itself without resorting to a great power agenda (*derzhavnichestvo*), militarism, and neo-imperialism. These assume the need for spheres of influence to justify the existence of a powerful centralized state with geopolitical aims. Historically, Russia's militarism is a very special case. There were perhaps two similar cases of militarism: those of Sparta and the Aztec Empire. These involved a militarization of everyday life that turned the population into an army at the ruler's disposal. Relics

of such militarism still exist in today's Russia, and Putin is now trying to revive them.

As far as I can tell, China conducts a much more cautious foreign policy and does not openly aim at constructing the same kinds of spheres of influence as does Russia. Chinese militarism (if indeed the term can be applied to China's efforts to strengthen its military might) does not involve mobilizing the population in its everyday life and turning the issue of military might (as opposed to economic might) into a crucial factor for consolidating society.

Russian authoritarianism is characterized by the dominance of a personalized authority that acts on behalf of the state. However, especially given weakened individual authority, bureaucracy is a powerful force that can take a leader hostage – a fate that may yet befall Putin. Nevertheless, collective leadership was a model that was relegated to the ash heap of history with the demise of the Soviet Union. The communist ideology that legitimated the Soviet Union is also a thing of the past. Nowadays the Kremlin's ideology is a weird concoction of pragmatism and great-state aspirations, coupled with claims to a unique Russian civilization ("Russia's special path").

As for China, so far the collective leadership remains in power, and there are no signs of the return of personalized rule. The collective leadership arrangement better reflects the balance of power among elites and the nomenklatura. But more importantly, the Chinese system has established term limits for its leaders: They must step down after two terms to be succeeded by a new symbol of power and a new moderator of clan interests. While China still officially retains communist ideology, its role has been reduced to that of symbolic rhetoric, reminiscent of the role that it played in the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

Bobo Lo has drawn attention to the difference in degree of political and economic freedom in Russia and China. Until recently, Russia had offered greater prospects for political pluralism, although those prospects did not extend to the monopoly on power. In China, political pluralism and freedom of expressions are far less developed, but the country offers greater economic freedom, which jump-started its economic growth.

Finally, the Russian state and political system are in a state of decline. Herein, I believe, lies the main difference between the two countries. Unless Russia's decline is reversed in the next ten to fifteen years, it will have a hard time preserving its state and geographic integrity. Several factors may bring about the crisis of the Russian state: the absence of a systemic alternative to absolute power; gradual depletion of the resources that fueled the personalized power system; demographic problems and labor shortages preventing economic growth; or an inability to create a high-tech economy under the personalized-power framework.

Moreover, the events of the past twenty years have conclusively demonstrated that the Russian system cannot be reformed or transformed from above. It requires a jolt from below – pressure from society itself. However, it remains to be seen whether the new Russian revolution will result in a new dictatorship or will create the foundations for a rule-of-law state.

China is in a different stage of development. The Chinese are confronted with the challenges that Russia had to confront in the 1930s during Stalin’s industrialization. Back then, Russia was transformed from an agrarian to an industrial society. China has yet to complete its transition to an industrial society – a transformation that can take place under an authoritarian framework. Thus, in many respects, China owes its economic success to the fact that it has not yet exhausted its extensive potential for growth. But sooner or later, perhaps very soon indeed, China will be forced to look for a way out of the conundrum that Gorbachev faced in the late 1980s, when he was confronted with the conflict between an antiquated system ill-suited for the challenges of post-industrial society. The Chinese conflict may prove more explosive than the confrontation at the last stages of the Soviet Union, especially considering that the new generation of China’s youth and its middle class are not as amenable to living under the archaic system as the population of the Soviet Union was. It cannot be ruled out that China’s clan system of collective leadership will be unable to ensure its own survival, resulting in a reversion to one-man rule. In point of fact, the Russian elite chose to rely on the personalized regime after the old matrix began to fail.

In any case, my readings on China suggest that we Russian liberal analysts are speaking the same language and discussing the same scenarios as the China experts. The articles by Francis Fukuyama, Minxin Pei, Bobo Lo, Andrew Nathan, Andrew Scobell, Yu Liu, Dingding Chen, and finally the discussion published in the January 2013 issue of the *Journal of Democracy* and the *Washington Quarterly* (2012) all testify to the similarities between the two countries. Let me quote a couple of those essays. “The consensus is stronger than any time since the 1989 Tiananmen crisis that the resilience of the authoritarian regime in China is approaching its limits,” writes Andrew Nathan. In Russia, we are a step ahead, believing that the Putin regime has already reached its limits. But the system of personalized power, as an aggregate of institutions and habits, still has not reached the end of its life cycle, thanks to the support of the elite (even some liberals!) and of the populist segments of society. “The regime likes to talk about making itself more democratic,” says Nathan about China. It should be noted that the Kremlin was saying precisely the same thing a year ago but has since stopped playing its “Let’s Pretend!” game and has clearly opted for coercion. Perhaps China is also approaching the limits of its “democra-

cy” imitation talk. As Fukuyama warns, “China’s apparent good record today contains many time bombs that will go off in the future.” In Russia, we constantly dwell on our own time bombs, wondering when they will explode.

“No one is able to say for sure whether, when, and how change will come,” say both Bobo Lo and Andrew Nathan. The same is true for Russians. We don’t know exactly when everything will collapse. But we do know that the system has irreparable cracks, and that change is coming. The question is only about when, and what will be the trigger.

The Center for European Reforms’ Charles Grant, analyzing the mounting problems of both states, writes, “The West must hope that Russian and Chinese leaders are bold enough to take on vested interests and push through serious reforms.” No hope for that: The authoritarian experiments in both states have proven that the Russian and Chinese authorities are not kamikazes who will set in motion reforms that will undermine their power. (But am I perhaps wrong about the Chinese leadership?)

The *Journal of Democracy*’s recent discussion on China could just as well be a discussion on Russia. Tiancheng Wang says that “gradualism” is a non-starter in China, and that China should shun gradualism to opt instead for a quick transition. That is exactly what the Russian opposition keeps saying. Cheng Li deliberates on possible triggers for an uprising in China; in Russia, we are discussing the same question.

Minxin Pei, Andrew Nathan, Cheng Li, Yu Liu, and Dingding Chen discuss deep changes in China that run counter to the West’s view of it as a case of “authoritarian resilience” and its future as a contest between the fear of revolution and the hope for political reform. This sounds a lot like Russian political discourse! The surprising simultaneity with which we, the Russian liberal experts, and our counterparts analyzing China started asking the same questions and coming to the same conclusions makes one wonder where it will all lead. Naturally, this situation begets the question of why these centralized states are experiencing similar problems despite their apparent differences in development and political models. Perhaps globalization and open borders, along with the modern means of socialization and communication, are bringing trends into alignment even as they accelerate development.

Incidentally, it might have seemed until recently that China has thirty to fifty more years of calm before it is saddled with similar levels of discontent as Russia. However, China may soon surpass Russia in terms of public protest and yearning for freedom. In Guangzhou, China’s third largest city, numbering about 14 million people, the entire staff of the local *Southern Weekly* newspaper took to the streets to protest government restrictions on freedom of speech. As of yet, no one has dared to do something similar in Russia...

There is a cause for serious concern in this context. Here is how Minxin Pei highlights the problem: “China’s declining fortunes have not registered with the U.S. elites,” and U.S. policy toward China still “is premised on the continuing rise of China.” The belief in the continuing rise of China is not unique to the United States; it is characteristic of the West as a whole. The disconnect between reality and perception has become a worrisome trend in Western political and intellectual discourse. For instance, the West believed in the integrity of the Soviet Union even as it had already started collapsing. The anti-communist revolutions in Eastern Europe and the fall of communism were likewise a total surprise to the West. Nor were the liberal democracies ready for the Arab Spring. Not only did the Western establishment believe in the success of Yeltsin’s reforms and Russia’s democratic progress, but it also supported Dmitri Medvedev’s modernization program. Western policies found their reflection in the U.S. “reset” policy and the EU “Partnership for Modernization” with respect to Russia, and even today they are built around these assumptions. Now, after Putin’s turn to repression, the West has no idea how to break with its former illusions without completely losing all analytical respectability. And even as Western politicians have begun to realize that the trajectory of Russia’s development is different from what they expected it to be, their attitude toward China is still predicated upon the belief that it is inexorably becoming a successful global superpower, as evidenced by the so-called U.S. “pivot to Asia.”

There is one more issue that causes concern. As domestic policy experts in both Russia and China talk of the end of resilience, tipping points of social upheaval, and inevitable decline and collapse, Western foreign policy analysts and Western business interests seem fixated on mantras in praise of Russia’s stability, its revival as a new “center,” and the rise of China. It is as if we were discussing completely different countries! What price will the West pay for suffering yet another disappointment?

“The Coming Collapse: Authoritarians in China and Russia Face Endgame,” reads the headline of a 2012 *Washington Post* column by Jackson Diehl. Many treated the prediction embodied in this title as the musing of an idealist. However, recent events have unfolded so quickly that the “endgame” indeed appears close at hand. Those who recently worried about the rise of the authoritarian “duo” should start to worry about the consequences of its decline.

Of course, I feel some measure of sympathy for all the authors who expended so much effort to describe Russian and Chinese might in their articles and books, trying to prove that these two countries are examples to be followed and alternatives to the Western path – an “Authoritarian International” of sorts. But what can one do: mystifications, even not so subtle ones, always create illusions that can feel pretty comfortable, especially if they reflect traditional stereotypes.



Even Henry Kissinger, the guru of international political analysis, can be wrong in this regard. Not long after the election of Dmitri Medvedev as Russian president, Kissinger praised Russia's evolution: "The last Russian election marks a transition from a phase of consolidation to a period of modernization." As we know, Russia has been moving in the opposite direction. What if he is also too optimistic in describing China's might, and in calling for a Sino-American "co-evolution," in which the United States silently agrees to a global condominium with China? Evidently, it is not enough to listen to leadership rhetoric and observe diplomatic rituals to form a balanced view of what is happening in a given country.

If the impending crisis of the Russian Matrix could deal a blow to the world order on its own, what can be said of the crisis of *two* centralized civilizations? Both states are nuclear powers; one of them doesn't even try to conceal its innate assertiveness, while the other has gradually revealed it. One more note of warning: The processes of rapid decline in the case of Russia (and probably a slower one in the case of China) coincided with the crisis in the West. And it is hard to expect successful transformations over such vast civilizational spaces, given the unfavorable external circumstances.

The current global political order may be dismantled, and the West is not ready for what might turn out to be the most crucial challenge of the 21st century. We can hardly fathom today what the consequences of a decline and crisis would entail for these two global powers. Let us imagine the simplest scenario.

Imagine that the Russian state fails to reform itself. In its agony, it loses control over the vast territory of Siberia and the Far East (this control is already quite tenuous). Let us assume that the Russian drama terrifies China and that it decides not to intervene. Even in this case, Russia's fall will change the entire regional architecture. But what if Beijing also begins its fall from grace? Won't the Chinese regime be tempted to prolong its life through a foreign incursion? Common sense no longer applies when the ruling class loses its monopoly on power. As a matter of fact, both countries have a history of provoking nationalist sentiments and searching for external enemies in order to distract attention from their failures. If the federal center loses control, local elites might act recklessly in border areas. It is hard to imagine how the world would react to these developments, when a crisis that affects even one Security Council member would render current international institutions dysfunctional.

However, it is also hard to imagine that in a crisis Moscow would suddenly decide to take on China (notwithstanding the fact that the Soviet Union and China did have a military confrontation over a territorial dispute in 1969). The elite in Moscow is busy provoking anti-Western sentiment, but it will stop short of doing the same with respect to China

for fear of retaliation. Today it seems equally improbable that the Beijing leadership would lose its mind. But even if common sense prevails in both capitals, other actors may stoke the fire – the Central Asian countries, Pakistan, Afghanistan, or North Korea. How would they react to a systemic crisis in either or both nuclear powers? Could they become the indirect cause of the clash of the falling giants? In any event, the failure of the two nuclear superpowers that consolidated the vast Eurasian space may trigger the disintegration of that space. The world order that came about as a result of World War II and that is still maintained by the UN Security Council will also begin to fragment.

The West needs to start contemplating these future scenarios today, in order to try to find mechanisms that would soften the blow of these potential upheavals. As with California earthquakes, it is better to get ready for the Big One in advance, because it may come when we least expect it, and it could be even bigger than we think.

# Here We Go Again: Falling for the Russian Trap

David J. Kramer & Lilia Shevtsova / *The American Interest*, February 21, 2013

Nearing the end of his second term, George W. Bush sought to salvage Russian-American relations with a visit to Sochi in April 2008, but then a few months later, Russia's invasion of Georgia brought the bilateral relationship to its lowest point in twenty years. President Obama came to office intent on repairing the relationship and working together with Moscow on a range of global issues. At the start of his second term, however, despite four years of the reset policy, Obama, too, faces a very strained relationship with Russia.

True, the United States has made its mistakes. But the current state of Russian-American relations stems mostly from the Kremlin's creation of imitation democracy and its attempts to exploit the West and anti-Americanism for political survival. The Kremlin's imitation game has complicated American and Western policies toward Russia and forced the West to pretend, just as the Russian elite does. The "Let's Pretend" game allowed both sides to ignore core differences and to find tactical compromises on a host of issues ranging from the war on terror to nuclear safety. This concerted imitation has also had strategic consequences, however. It has facilitated the survival of Russia's personalized-power system and discredited liberal ideals in the eyes of Russian society. It has also created a powerful pro-Russia Western lobby that is facilitating the export of Russia's corruption to developed countries.

Despite numerous U.S. attempts to avoid irritating the Kremlin, relations between Moscow and Washington always seem to end up either in mutual suspicion or in full-blown crisis. That is what happened under the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, and that is what happened after Barack Obama's first term in office. Each period of disappointment and rupture in relations, which has always been preceded by a period of optimism, has been followed by another campaign by both Moscow and Washington to revive relations. Who is behind these campaigns? For a quarter of a century, it has been the same consolidated cohort of experts in both capitals, most of whom have serious and established reputations and vast stores of experience. (There are a few new additions to the cohort, but they walk in lockstep with the old hands.) After every new crisis, these experts implore politicians on both

sides to “think big.” Each time, “big thinking” on the Western side includes encouragement to avoid issues that would antagonize the Kremlin. Thus U.S. administrations looked the other way as the Kremlin created a corrupt, authoritarian regime.

Like the movie *Groundhog Day*, this is happening all over again. We are falling for the same Kremlin trap. The demise of the reset policy has begotten another campaign to forge yet another new era in Russian-American relations, this time under the banner of “strategic cooperation.” Those advocating this approach present nothing new but simply repeat the same old warnings against ignoring Russia and downgrading relations. Proponents of this approach address only Washington and Western policymakers; for some reason, they never seem to prod Putin and his circle, even though Putin’s actions and behavior have made the development of relations and cooperation increasingly difficult. None of these “strategists” maintain that Russia deserves to be treated differently because it could become an engine of social and economic progress; rather, they believe Russia cannot be ignored because it could act as a spoiler, causing massive problems for the West.

Strategists who look for explanations for previous failures in relations attribute them to Washington’s meddling in Russia’s internal affairs; the U.S. missile defense program, which frightens the Kremlin; or the push to enlarge NATO. But these explanations overlook the Kremlin’s contribution to the breakdown, ostensibly believing that their criticism of the Kremlin will undermine efforts to introduce a strategic approach.

Among the strategists are those who claim that the George W. Bush administration took a “finger-wagging, lecturing, patronizing” approach toward Russia on issues such as democracy and policy toward its neighbors. We wish that were true – and one of us (Kramer) worked in the U.S. government during that time. The reality is that the Bush administration did not in either of its two terms push back anywhere near hard enough on Putin’s crackdowns on the North Caucasus, the media, the opposition, or civil society. That failure to push back hard enough has continued under Obama, only worse.

In rejecting the notion of “linkage” at the beginning of its term, the Obama team decided to completely separate Russia’s domestic and foreign policies, ignoring in the process the worst deterioration in Russia’s internal situation since the collapse of the USSR. Thus, Washington sought to avoid upsetting the Kremlin and chose not to react when the Kremlin kicked out the U.S. Agency for International Development and American non-governmental organizations from Russia. It looked the other way as the American ambassador was harassed in Moscow. It stayed silent when Moscow started opting out of agreements it had signed with Washington. And its response to the ban on adoptions of Russian orphans by Americans was pathetic. (See Freedom House’s special report on Russia for a summary of Putin’s malevolent actions.)

President Obama himself has said absolutely nothing about these developments, though he has shown interest, including in his latest State of the Union speech, in reaching another arms control agreement with Putin. This signals to Putin that he can continue to get away with his crackdown at home as long as he pretends to be interested in cooperating with Obama to reduce the number of nuclear weapons.

In short, Moscow seemed to do everything in its power to provoke the United States, while Washington did everything it could not to get offended. When the Kremlin's slaps in the face became too obvious to ignore, Washington correctly, albeit belatedly, withdrew from the U.S.-Russia Civil Society Working Group, which, it should be noted, was a failure from the day it was created.

We have to find an answer to the question of why there is a new crisis in Russian-American relations; otherwise, working on new strategies is pointless.

Why don't the strategists tell us under what conditions the Kremlin will agree to better relations? In a February 15 op-ed in the *Washington Post*, Stephen Cohen at least laid out Russian leaders' list of grievances. These grievances come in the form of weekly ultimatums to Washington by everyone in the Kremlin from the president and the prime minister down to the minister of foreign affairs and members of parliament. Washington is urged to accept the concept of total sovereignty and not meddle in internal affairs, to stay out of Russia's neighborhood, to abandon its "threatening" missile defense system, to expand trade, and to guarantee "mutual" investments. That is how the pro-Kremlin experts and politicians define how the United States should behave. Most importantly, the U.S. should not be part of the Russian internal political process; values should not be a prerequisite for cooperation in the 21st century.

Some strategists do make mention of the Russian take on strategic dialogue with Washington, but they characterize it in mild terms: "Russians will take care of business themselves, and meddling in Russian affairs will backfire." Thus one is meant to understand that they agree with the Kremlin that the West should abandon the principles outlined by the Council of Europe and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that state that repression and human rights abuses are not merely a country's internal affairs.

What do our colleagues propose as subjects for the "strategic dialogue" between the United States and Russia? To us, the term "strategic" in relation to politics implies the promotion of a state's fundamental long-term interests. In fact, any strategic foreign policy interest is derived from an interest that guarantees the state's internal functioning. Our colleagues, however, seem to focus on assisting in Russia's ascension to the OECD, agreement on missile defense, expansion of trade, joint projects in the energy area (like Rosneft, Exxon Mobil, and BP),

a joint pivot to the Asia-Pacific region, and helping Russia develop Siberia and the Pacific provinces. In other words, these proposals for the most part do not introduce new ideas. The rest also repeat subjects that have been mentioned many times before. There is a legitimate debate about whether these are indeed the proper spheres of strategic partnership for either country.

But let's be clear that none of these areas involve cooperation between U.S. and Russian societies; rather they are about working with the Putin system, which, after all these years, has not found its civilizational vector and is thus attempting to survive by returning to an archaic personalized-power system. This system's strategic interest is to survive at any cost, primarily by resorting to repressive methods. Moreover, the values and principles embraced by the system (and consequently by the state that represents it to the outside world) are hostile to the values that the United States promotes. Thus, the system survives by constraining the United States and the West from promoting universal values and interests. Every time our colleagues start talking about strategic dialogue, they should ask themselves a question: Would this dialogue contribute to the survival of Russia's personalized, corrupt, anti-Western regime, or possibly even suffocate the country's needed transformation?

Given that Russia's political system is hostile to the United States, pursuit of strategic dialogue begs another question: What is there to talk about? What's the purpose, for example, of Russia's joining the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)? Having already become a member of the WTO, Russia is already indicating that it is picking and choosing which rules it will abide by. Unless other WTO members hold Russia to account, WTO membership will not advance the cause of rule of law in Russia – just as it has failed to do in China for more than a decade now. Russia's joining the OECD will yield the same results and will only help the Kremlin's survival, not the country's modernization. Modernization should start from within. It will never begin by means of introducing principles that are alien to the system – the Kremlin will never allow it.

What about missile defense? According to Russian independent experts, the missile defense project does not compromise Russia's security, and its purpose is expressly to defend against an Iranian or terrorist threats – not threats on the scale of Russia's nuclear forces. The constant allusions to the threat that missile defense poses to Russia is more of the Kremlin's attempt to force Washington to give in on this issue. In this context, compromise on missile defense is not even a matter of the Kremlin's strategic survival, let alone a question of Russia's survival. Missile defense is not among the Kremlin's strategic interests, since it does not believe war with the West is possible. Rather, it is a matter of the Kremlin's foreign policy tactics, which are an extension

of its domestic politics. Holding up the West, and specifically missile defense, as a threat passing into the Kremlin's hands.

In terms of trade, the United States is not a serious partner for Russia, given the paltry level of trade between the two countries. The issue of trade matters only to a select group of Russian and American companies that either have decided to penetrate the American market (like Severstal and Lukoil) or are ready to work under the Kremlin's patronage (like Exxon). In this case, calls for expanding trade between the two countries serve the interests of select companies and the Kremlin. Until rule of law takes root – and that won't happen under Putin – investment in Russia will always be more difficult than it should be.

As for the popular ideas of a joint pivot to the Asia-Pacific and Arctic cooperation, these are more of a passing fad. Russia has already "turned" to the Pacific by hosting the APEC summit in Vladivostok, which ended up costing \$22 billion. The summit demonstrated Russia's ability to construct Potemkin villages (a performance it will repeat for next February's Winter Olympics in Sochi, the cost of which has already reached \$50 billion). This turn to the Pacific benefited those who pocketed the money that was appropriated for running the summit, while the consequences of the turn to Asia remain unclear. What can Russia offer to the region aside from raw materials and weapons exports? Is Russia ready to become a raw materials appendage to Asia? This is what the turn to Asia might bring them. Does that make the turn strategic? And is it strategic for the state, or for society?

Provided Russia's corrupt state is preserved, the Arctic is another opportunity for the Kremlin elite to funnel money out of the country – or, plainly speaking, steal it. How can the West help Russia develop its Siberia and Pacific provinces when the country's elite cares only about providing for corrupt interests? Russia has to transform itself first, and this is Russian society's main goal. Only then can we talk to the United States and Europe about assistance in developing Siberia and the Far East.

It is hard to imagine how all these ideas would be of "strategic interest" to the United States. America, after all, remains focused on dealing with threats from Iran, North Korea, terrorism, and proliferation. On the first two of those, Russia has probably provided all the cooperation it can; on terrorism and proliferation, more can be done but that is because they are top Russian priorities as well. Even so, however, there are limits to what can be accomplished with a regime like Putin's.

Pursuit of such "strategic cooperation" will never lead to "strategic partnership." This cooperation may be the best the West and the United States can do, at least until the end of Obama's second term, after which a new administration will come to office thinking *it* knows the right way to work with Russia. But one has to take this approach for what it is and not for what it is not. One has to understand that such an approach dis-

tracts from the real problems in Russian-American relations and the actual situation in Russia.

Besides the influential cohort of strategists in the West, there is another group that is especially influential in Moscow. This group says there can be no strategic dialogue, let alone strategic partnership, between Russia and the United States. However, their reasoning is quite different from the argument we describe above. They believe America will try to meddle in Russian affairs anyway, so they will not allow it to do so. At first glance, these two groups have different views, but they actually represent two subtypes of the same species. Both the strategists and the “pessimists” oppose the normative approach to foreign policy. But the former think that the normative approach can be avoided, while the latter are sorry to acknowledge that values must be reckoned with, so it is better to have no dialogue altogether.

Does our criticism mean that the United States should have no dialogue with Russia while Putin remains in office? No, of course not. Russia and the United States cooperated on issues even through the most difficult moments of the Cold War. But this is not a strategic approach, let alone partnership; instead, it represents tactical compromises amid the incompatibility of the two countries’ strategic vectors. It should not be presented differently, for doing so will merely produce illusions and end in disappointment.

If Washington is ready to pursue an overarching strategic objective, it should be grounded in values and principles, which are the very staples of such objectives. When Russian society is ready, it will be able to determine its strategic interest toward the United States. No other force will be able to replace this strategic interest with its own corporate or personal interest and pass it off as a “strategy.”

Why can’t the strategists acknowledge the incompatibility of the two countries’ strategic vectors and limit themselves to a modest agenda, doing what they can without prolonging the life of the Russian Matrix? They should realize that their dialogue plays into the hands of the Kremlin and allows it to legitimize and perpetuate its Potemkin village projects. We await more convincing arguments in favor of a strategic approach that does not ignore the normative dimension.



# A Realist's Response to an Idealist

Lilia Shevtsova / *The American Interest*,  
March, 2013

I am pleased that David Kramer and I have managed to attract our opponents to discussing Russia and U.S. policies with respect to it. I am even more pleased that Thomas Graham, whom I consider one of the most subtle and thoughtful Western analysts of Russia, responded to our article. Paradoxically, Graham's response, entitled "In Defense of a Strategic Approach to Russia" (<http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=1394>), as well as his other thoughts on Russia, provide additional arguments in support of our position. We can only thank Graham for helping us to justify our views.

Essentially, Graham's essay is a manifesto for a foreign policy school of thought that we will call, using his term, the "American strategists." The "strategists" determined Washington's policy toward Russia during President Obama's first term and will most likely continue to do into his second term. It is important to enumerate the ideas held by this school, since they reflect the way a large segment of the American political establishment looks at foreign policy.

First, Graham's main argument: that U.S. Russia policy should demonstrate "hard-nosed, consistent commitment to American interests". One cannot agree more with this. Indeed Russia's policy toward the United States should also be based on commitment to Russian interests. I will not argue with Graham's definition of American interests. It is not a topic for a Russian citizen to opine on. But Graham somehow forgot to define American interests with respect to the outside world, apparently believing that these interests are clear enough on their own. Well, not to me. I would like to know to what extent the United States is committed to the preservation of the current world order and its post-WWII institutional architecture. I would like to know to what extent the United States is willing to support its reform. I would like to know whether Graham believes that continued support of the current model of liberal democracy is in America's interests. Or, perhaps, he, like several authors of *The American Interest* and other critics of this model, thinks it should be revised. Graham does not discuss these issues. Having promised to clarify "America's long-term national interests," he immediately proceeds to define the mechanism of Russian-American

relations: “the strategists’ ultimate goal is not cooperation for the sake of cooperation, but the creation of the balance of cooperation, competition and indifference that best advances American interests.” But what these interests are remains unclear. What if they contradict Russian interests so much that any sustainable cooperation between the two countries is impossible?

Actually, later in his essay Graham discusses the challenges the United States faces on the global stage: “Maintaining strategic stability; preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction; combating international terrorism;” and so forth. But he says nothing of the need to rethink the fundamental principles of global politics. Thus, we can conclude that the author believes that preserving the global status quo and the current model of liberal democracy should be America’s main goals. But if indeed this is the case, then the United States cannot claim to be a world leader. After all, being a leader means supporting progress and renewal, not fighting a rearguard action to preserve an antiquated status quo. If this is indeed what he means, then let us reconcile ourselves with this conclusion and stop expecting the United States to offer us something it cannot offer.

Graham’s next argument elaborates on his pragmatic approach to the American agenda. The author mentions “linkage,” which is “an inescapable component of U.S.-Russian relations.” He assures us that by this word he does not mean a crude *quid pro quo* – for instance, “sacrificing Georgia to Russia in exchange for its support on Iran.” But if not that, then what is “linkage” supposed to mean? It turns out it means “creating the atmosphere and shaping expectations to persuade Russia to act in ways that advance our goals.” In other words, Graham tells us that the United States does not necessarily have to sacrifice Georgia to Russia; it can simply pretend that it is doing so, and if Russia believes this (or plays along) it will in turn support the United States on Iran. Well, this is politics, I suppose, and unfortunately politics and Machiavellian tactics go hand in hand. However, what’s good for the goose is also good for the gander; Moscow will also seek to “shape expectations.” And the Kremlin is a much smoother operator when it comes to shaping expectations and disorienting its partners. This skill was on full display during the “reset” period, and during Medvedev’s presidency, both of which periods frustrated quite a few expectations in Washington.

A reader might retort here that a strategic agenda cannot consist of hot air and games of “let’s pretend.” There has to be some “there” there – namely, at least a partial convergence of interests. What does Graham think about this convergence of interests? In his 2009 report for The Century Foundation, “Resurgent Russia and U.S. Purposes,” Graham wrote that U.S.-Russian cooperation “will have to be built on shared interests and shared threats.” He subscribes to a different opinion today:

“The strategist . . . treats talk of shared interests as the basis for cooperation with skepticism. A close examination of any alleged shared interest reveals significant differences in assessments of the problem and saliencies for national interests that create obstacles for effective cooperation.”

Graham then goes on to cite specific examples proving how much Washington’s and Moscow’s interests truly differ in what are considered their traditional spheres of “shared interests.”

Given that Graham acknowledges differences in the “supposedly shared interests” of the two parties, how does he envision his strategic framework? Does he still advocate continuing President Obama’s transactional approach and the “mutual give-and-take” policy he called for in his 2009 report?

Not that long ago, Graham might have still believed that the transactional approach was possible. In early 2012, in interviews with ITAR-TASS, *Business Gazeta*, and Voice of America, he talked about “a very positive evolution” of the Russian political system and “the dialogue between the government and the opposition.” He stressed that “the system will evolve toward greater openness, pluralism and effectiveness.” Using this definition of evolution, Graham claimed that “there are no insurmountable obstacles to reaching a common strategic understanding and a common goal.” However, by the time of his March-April 2012 article in *The American Interest* (“Putin, the Sequel”), he was forced to acknowledge that “Putin’s return will steadily lay bare the limits of the transactional approach to U.S.-Russia relations. . . . The problem is that the easy trade-offs have already been made. . . . Compromise will thus grow elusive, particularly in the absence of trust, and Putin’s return will strain whatever trust has been restored over the past few years.” I will quote Graham’s conclusion (which I completely agree with): “Putin’s return exacerbates the situation, for he symbolizes the stark differences in values, interests and outlook that still divide Russia and the United States...”

How is it, then, that the “strategists” hope for a successful strategic partnership with the Kremlin when they (as represented by Graham, at least) acknowledge that they have “to treat talk of shared interests . . . with skepticism” and admit that there are limited opportunities for tradeoffs? Can they really be relying only on America’s capacity for “shaping expectations”?

I understand why Graham and other “strategists” may feel apprehensive about another approach – namely, incorporating the normative dimension into U.S. foreign policy. Their fears stem from the belief that, as Graham admits, it is hard to understand Russia, and that one cannot help to reform a system that one does not understand well. The strategists also “remember” the West’s failure to promote democracy in Russia

in the 1990s. But let me correct that particular recollection: The United States and the West did not actually promote democracy in Russia in the 1990s; they supported a Yeltsin regime that had nothing in common with democracy. It is as if, in an attempt to justify their rejection of a normative dimension for foreign policy, the strategists are attempting to rewrite history.

Graham is fond of quoting George Kennan. This time he quotes Kennan's Spring 1951 *Foreign Affairs* essay: "The ways by which people advance toward dignity and enlightenment in government are things that constitute the deepest and most intimate processes of national life. *There is nothing less understandable to foreigners, nothing in which foreign interference can do less good.*" Even today these words remain as shrewd and thoughtful as they were more than a half-century ago. A lot of Kennan's conclusions from that era could be still applied to contemporary Russia. However, it is perplexing that all these decades after Kennan uttered these words, American political analysts still admit that they cannot understand Russia even as they attempt to engage in "strategic dialogue" with it. I would have thought that understanding would precede "strategic dialogue," not the other way around.

However, as for Kennan's advice "not to interfere," I am on the same page with Graham. I believe that the old "democracy promotion" formula has long since exhausted itself and become counterproductive. The normative dimension that I advocate entails merely that the West should practice the norms that it preaches. It is of course desirable that the West create a foreign policy context that will facilitate Russia's transition to freedom. If the West is not ready for this challenge, there is at least one thing that we Russian liberals expect from it: Don't stand in the way of our struggle, and don't legitimize the corrupt Russian regime!

The strategists want the West to return to the old ways of exerting influence: exchange programs, business contacts, and other "people-to-people" initiatives. No one objects to these exchanges. Of course, we should foster them. But at the same time, it must be pointed out that these types of initiatives smack of the U.S.-Soviet dialogue from the 1970s and 1980s. Allow me to quote Kennan this time. Reflecting on "cultural collaboration" between the two states, Kennan warned, "Actual manifestations of Soviet policy in this respect will be restricted to arid channels of closely shepherded official visits and functions, with superabundance of vodka and speeches and dearth of permanent effects." By trying to isolate Russian civil society from its ties to the outside world and, most of all, from America, the Kremlin is returning to precisely the formula of exchange Kennan was describing in the "Long Telegram." We need to understand why this type of dialogue did not stem the growing tide of anti-Americanism in Russian society – and why President Obama's policies, which included all of the strategists' recommendations, resulted in a sharp deterioration of Russian-American

relations. How could this have happened if the administration followed the strategists' and Kennan's advice to a tee?

A few other remarks by Graham are worth addressing since one often hears Western analysts repeat them. He advises the strategists to avoid supporting "marginal" Russian opposition figures. I would answer that the Russian opposition needs no help from the strategists, who at any rate are busy playing the Kremlin's games.

Graham is also concerned that more and more Russians "are wary of being branded American agents or linked to marginal forces and failed leaders." Here the situation is more complex. On the one hand, Graham is right; there are many such people in today's Russia. On the other hand, he should also be concerned about an even faster-growing segment of Russian society. These people are unhappy with the current regime, and they are critical of the West (primarily the United States), believing that the West has become just another cog in the Kremlin's corruption machine. Graham should be worried that the Western-oriented segment of Russian society has shifted to criticizing the United States.

As for the Magnitsky Act, Graham's opposition to it is in line with the arguments put forward by the Kremlin's propagandists. The Act does not in any way "send Russians the wrong message about rule of law." Quite the contrary; the Russians who are familiar with it believe that the United States has finally demonstrated that it cares about the rule of law. As for the argument that "Russians will be tempted to use this Act as a way of gaining a competitive advantage over their commercial rivals," here in Russia we are more preoccupied with how Russian and American companies exploit their proximity to the Kremlin to advance their interests. We are outraged by the fact that the deal between Rosneft and Exxon Mobil (brokered by some influential intermediaries) effectively legitimized Rosneft's theft of Mikhail Khodorkovsky's assets. But Thomas Graham knows all of this better than I do.

On the whole, the Magnitsky Act will help rehabilitate American society by creating barriers to the Kremlin's export of corruption. America needs this Act more than Russia does!

In conclusion, Graham calls for "high level strategic dialogue to determine whether there are solid grounds for long-term cooperation." But should I spend more breath restating the obvious? This dialogue is doomed to end the same way all the prior ones did. Who needs a "strategic dialogue" that is based on imitation strategy? Perhaps it's needed for the experts and politicians in both countries who cannot function in the new paradigm and rely on such Potemkin village dialogues for financial assistance and job security.

David Kramer and I do not urge Washington to stop cooperating with Moscow. We are merely trying to prove that tactical dialogue should not be called "strategic."

We understand that introducing the normative dimension into the U.S. relationship with the Kremlin will complicate things. But things were always going to be complicated anyway. By returning the normative dimension, on the other hand, the United States would regain the trust and respect of Russia's pro-Western constituency. It would be foolish, moreover, to believe that Russia is suicidal, that it would return to the Cold War as soon as the West stops cajoling it. The Kremlin elite thinks pragmatically. It doesn't want to turn Russia into another North Korea. After all, they now have their beachfront condos in Miami to worry about!

Graham concludes that strategic dialogue may fail. However, he comforts his American audience by saying that "that outcome would not be a tragedy – as long as it advanced American interests." We should thank Graham for his candor; this is definitely better than illusion or misdirection. But I will be blunt: The Kremlin will hardly settle for being an instrument for advancing American interests. And Russia's pro-Western segment will surely oppose Russia's assuming this role. Indeed one expects they will do everything in their power to avoid it.

A final thought: Why is it still impossible for American analysts to envision a foreign policy that takes into account American interests but that is also respectful, understanding, and sensitive to Russian society, which is undergoing a painstaking search for a way out of its present conundrum? Americans should always remember that the Russia that they want to have strategic dialogue with is not Russia as a whole, but the Kremlin's Russia.

# The Agony

Lilia Shevtsova / *Yezhednevny Journal*,

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One should not belabor the obvious: that Putin's regime has exhausted itself. It would be far more productive to discuss whether the regime's agony will bring an end to the autocratic system as a whole, and whether it will provoke a split within the ruling elite.

## Putin as a Gravedigger for Autocracy

Recent history of democratic revolutions reveals three ways in which authoritarian leaders and dictators have attempted to maintain their hold on power once it started slipping away. Some tried to imitate democratization; this was taken as a sign of weakness and only intensified popular demand for change. Others cautiously introduced some change, hoping to re-legitimize their rule by holding elections and allowing some degree of political pluralism; none of these authoritarian leaders have been able to convince the people of that their sudden urge for liberalization was genuine, and once the changes were underway, the regimes usually collapsed. The rest wasted no time on charades, immediately turning to repression; these authoritarian and dictatorial regimes had a chance to prolong their lives under certain conditions.

One of the conditions was a change of leader. This lent some air of legitimacy to authoritarianism. Another was external conflict or even all-out war, which consolidated society (albeit only for a while). Leadership changes and cadre reshuffling helped to preserve the Chinese regime in 1989 when it resorted to violence. The Greek and Argentine regimes also used military force – the former in Cyprus in 1974 and the latter on the Falklands in 1982 – thus drawing out their political deaths, but not for long. Incidentally, neither Putin's regime nor the Russian autocratic system needed the August 2008 conflict in Georgia, but if that conflict had occurred today, they would have been able to make use of it.

We are undoubtedly witnessing the death throes of Putin's regime. Russia is exhibiting textbook symptoms of regime decline: the Kremlin is unable to maintain the status quo but it is also powerless to initiate change; it turns to repression to preserve its power; it is unable to relate

to modern challenges and responds to them by digging up the past (militarism, Russian Orthodox fundamentalism, the search for an enemy, and a return to the concept of Russia's uniqueness); it also attempts to hand over power and property as inheritances. Those who harbor any doubts that the final countdown for the Putin regime has already begun are advised to read Toynbee, Huntington, or Fukuyama, who wrote extensively on the decline and demise of authoritarian regimes. Can Putin maintain power by swapping imitation democracy for repression? The historical record suggests that only military conflict with the outside world will allow such a regime to survive.

If Putin is not ready to take these measures, his tenure in the Kremlin will clash head-on with the interests of the autocratic system itself. This system is the aggregate of mechanisms, traditions, and interests of those invested in the personalized power regime, including both elites and members of the society at large. Indeed, the system's political and social base is much broader than Putin's personal base, which is rapidly shrinking. Today the reproduction of the system calls for an end to Putin's rule. People associate failures with this leader and his team, which makes it harder for a new status quo to emerge. Putin cannot guarantee the corporate interests of the power structure bureaucracy (with the special services playing a dominant role), since he is not tough enough. He cannot satisfy the "system liberals" and bourgeoisie, who are to be vanquished by the power structure bureaucracy if the new rules of the game are to be put in place. Putin has long been rejected by the dynamic urban majority, but the archaic segments of society are not particularly fond of him either. Theoretically, Putin may try to cheat his demise by appealing to society directly, bypassing the bureaucracy and the Praetorian Guard. But to be legitimated as the absolute leader, he has to be ready not only to spill blood but also to banish the leading and most trusted members of the ruling class. From what we have seen of him, Putin is not likely to become a new Stalin or Mao. This was demonstrated by the affair involving former Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov. It was never clear whether the regime was accusing the main character in this story of corruption or was defending him against those charges. But the population that Putin appeals to will only support him as a result of an anti-bureaucratic and anti-oligarchic revolution from the top modeled along Maoist-Stalinist lines. A leader who has lost his charisma and his sacred aura can hardly become a Supreme Ruler, even if he turns to bloodletting to achieve it.

So far, the Kremlin has not decided how far it is willing to go with repressive measures. It also isn't clear how far the power structures are willing to go to defend the regime when the crunch time comes. (The Kremlin itself apparently has no answer to this question.) This situation, in which a regime leader is not sure whether or to what extent he can resort to violence, cannot last long. These uncertainties, as well



as the fear of what violence may bring, undermine the regime's foundations and the system itself. Moreover, while society as a whole fears uncertainty, some segments of it are emboldened by it and energized by the chance to confront the authorities.

Putin's role is thus a contradictory one. On the one hand, he founded post-Putinism and initiated the transition to rule by force. He also launched the repressive mechanisms that the Duma, the Investigative Committee, and the courts now energetically promote. On the other hand, the Putin presidency is beginning to undermine the system. The ruling class certainly understands this. The price to keep Putin in the Kremlin is already higher than the price the ruling class will have to pay when he departs. Thus those close to Putin and those in his inner circle – at least the perceptive ones – surely must now be concerned with how to organize his departure.

This possibility presents us with a paradox. Putin has to leave the Kremlin before the genuine transformation of the country can take place. But if he leaves before an alternative system arises, a new "iron fist" could come to power and help to preserve autocratic rule in Russia. One presumes we will soon see forces inside Russia trying to privatize the "Down with Putin" slogan in order to clear a path to the Kremlin throne for a new czar. This slogan can actually be a net benefit for Russian society only when accompanied by the "Down with autocracy!" appeals calling for abandoning the constitutionally granted monopoly on power.

## Should We Hope for a Split Within The Elite?

A number of successful global transformations resulted from splits in old ruling classes. In many cases, a few pragmatists left the ruling class to ally with the anti-system opposition. In other cases, members of the old regime would initiate democratic transformation (hence the famous slogan from the last wave of democratization: "non-democrats can become democrats"). The democratic revolutions of the past 50 years (primarily in Latin America, Spain, and South Africa) gave rise to the conviction that a "pact" between the pragmatists and the opposition is the most successful scenario for democratic transformation. This conviction has had some impact on the Russian liberal opposition, which has invested its hopes in a split within the elite, believing it would pave the way for Russia's own "pact" or "roundtable."

Certain facts indicate that the unanimity of Russia's ruling corporation has indeed become a thing of the past. Its members argue over what is to be done with the economy (the conflict between the statist and the system liberals has once again been reignited). Some ministers were surprisingly critical of the ban on American adoptions, dubbed "Herod's

Law.” (The critics quieted down rather quickly, however.) In addition, different clans are engaged in a fierce fight for resources. Finally, it is evident that repressive authoritarianism is unpopular with the oligarchs and system liberals, who have long been unhappy with aggressive elevation of the power bureaucracy. The regime’s drift to repression is bound to eventually close the country to the outside world, which means that the non-power segment of the regime will not only lose a chance to serve the Kremlin while projecting a liberal image but will also lose its international clout; it will no longer be needed as an intermediary between the Kremlin and the West.

Does all of this foreshadow the impending split in the Russian ruling class? Agitation, grumbling, discontent, and even participation in the protests by members of the ruling class do not necessarily indicate a durable commitment to oppose the Kremlin and the rest of the elite. Compiling reports calling for change and issuing strongly worded warnings still fall within the framework allowed by the regime – even when these things are accompanied by public criticism of Putin from, for instance, circles close to former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin or oligarch Mikhail Prochorov. Divisions within the ruling class of authoritarian states have previously induced discontented groups to appeal to the public with their reform programs. It is important to note that splits within the ruling class have always been accompanied by or resulted from public discontent, the onset of power paralysis, and the appearance of radical opposition outside the framework of the regime. All of the reformers who came from within the old regime emerged as a result of increased public activism.

How do we apply these observations to Russia today? There are no figures like Spain’s Adolfo Suárez or South Africa’s F.W. de Klerk in Putin’s team. So far, there is also no outside pressure that could facilitate the emergence of such figures. And even if there were, it is hard to imagine anyone inside the Kremlin harboring rebellious thoughts.

Let us imagine, however, that a social crisis sets in, people take to the streets, the Russian ruling class actually splits, its fragments define their separate agendas, and political struggle ensues. This split could trigger change, provided that at least two preconditions are met. First, the pragmatists would have to be ready to support the creation of a rule of law state – a position that would cut against their own interests, since they would lose power under this scenario. (Who in the Kremlin ruling team would agree to that?) Second, structured opposition would have to exist outside of the system.

If at least one of these conditions is not met, the split within the Russian elite will inevitably lead to a coup at the top. Part of the ruling elite is likely to cling to power through a transition to an isolationist military dictatorship. This scenario seems more probable because Russia has a mobilized traditionalist base and is already moving toward repressive

policies. Also, soft authoritarianism can no longer guarantee that the ruling elite will stay in power. This scenario would add the final touch to the structure that Putin set in motion, and this structure will persist even if he is forced to leave the Kremlin.

How likely is it that the system liberal royalists will stage a coup? Their track record does not offer much hope that they would suddenly decide to fight for the rule of law state in the event of a social and political crisis. In both actions and rhetoric, even those system liberals who have been critical of the Putin regime are hardly prepared to oppose the system. Why would they, if they can find their place in an autocratic regime under a new leader, as they have done in the past? On the other hand, the consequences of opposing the system are unpredictable for their future and well-being.

It should be remembered that bourgeoisie and liberal technocrats both in Russia and in other transition societies have always sought the leader's protection. Therefore a coup staged by system liberals could be expected to generate another Yeltsin-like regime. But sooner or later the "Yeltsin 2" regime would have to be defended (first of all from the public), and that is when this regime would start looking for a new Putin. Then it would be back to square one: another squad of the Praetorian Guard once again triumphing over the joint team of oligarchs and technocrats, neither of which groups has been known for exceptional courage. Chubais's spectacular victory over the Korzhakov-Soskovets (Yeltsin's *siloviki*) team in 1996 has long been buried in the annals of history and is not likely to be repeated: Chubais has lost his former drive, while the Praetorians have become more aggressive. Actually, it is difficult to enter the same river twice, especially if the river has changed its course. Putin's current term clearly illustrates this phenomenon. Ostensibly, we have the same leader, an unchanged Kremlin, and the President's job approval ratings are still through the roof. However, Putin did not come back to savor his triumph but rather to attend his political funeral.

Paradoxically, the system liberal coup scenario is even worse for Russia than the Praetorian dictatorship. The royalist coup staged by the system liberals would discredit freedom and a rule of law state even further. At any rate, we alluded to this scenario out of pure academic interest. We also sought to demonstrate that any type of imitation complicates social transformation to a much greater extent than does a clearly defined trend.

All told, one should not bet on a near-future split within the Russian elite or hope that Russia will have an easier exit from autocracy if a split does occur. The unjustified expectations of a split at the top only distract Russian society from focusing on creating an anti-system alternative. In fact, only the creation of and popular support for such an alternative can change the facts on the ground enough so that

certain members of the ruling class begin to look for lifeboats to leave the Kremlin's *Titanic*. Some in the ruling class (not the top brass, however) can participate in the democratic roundtable – but only on the opposition's terms. They cannot do it as mere nonconformist members of the ruling class. Most likely, this difference will distinguish the Russian transformation from other democratic revolutions.



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# Crisis: Russia and the West in the Time of Troubles

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