Will a Defeated Russia Renew Itself? The Jury is Out

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Abstract:

This essay argues that Russia and its post-Putin leadership will likely exhibit a lack of accountability for the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The war crimes committed by Russian forces during the invasion have exposed a moral crisis within Russian society, reflecting a deep-seated cynicism and lack of morality. This crisis has significant implications for Russian foreign policy and global relations, and is unlikely to be resolved in the short term. The impact of this crisis warrants further analysis, regardless of whether Russia becomes more democratic or Western-oriented.

Key words: Russia, Ukraine, Russian society, Post-Putin leadership

'When will the alarm go off, and Russians finally realise that Vladimir Putin's regime is leading the country towards a catastrophe?' Ever since Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2022 professional Russia-watchers and the Western public at large have been asking this question again and again. The Russian assault on Kyiv failed. Tens of thousands of Russian soldiers were killed or imprisoned. Russian troops committed unspeakable atrocities in Ukraine's occupied territories. Massive international sanctions have been imposed on Russia in waves. Finally, the Kremlin announced the first round of mobilisation in autumn 2022. This sparked an unprecedented exodus of hundreds of thousands of military age men from Russia, streaming into Kazakhstan, Georgia, and even Mongolia. However, the answer to the question is still pending. Moreover, it may well be simply 'Never'.

Which means the war will continue in the foreseeable future simply because the tank called 'Putin's Russia' does not have a reverse gear. The aggression will come to an end in one of two ways: if the Kremlin realises it cannot win and considers negotiations, or if it is soundly defeated. In the first case, the Ukrainian leadership and the Ukrainian people will have to

decide whether to negotiate and on what conditions. At the time of writing, such a development seems increasingly unlikely. And even if it occurs, the negotiations will almost certainly fail. I can imagine that if the situation becomes too dire for him, Putin may withdraw from Eastern Ukraine. What he will not accept is ceding occupied Crimea. Furthermore, the Russian regime will reject any idea of reparations. And Putin, Shoigu, Patrushev, and others will not give themselves up to face an international war crimes tribunal. Any armistice or even peace accord without this will be a dangerous travesty, even if Ukraine joins NATO and the EU quickly.

Total defeat of Russia, including the loss of Crimea, will almost certainly mean the end of Putin's rule as well. Do not expect the crowds to storm the Kremlin, baying for the blood of the 'traitors'. The Russian people will grumble, but they will most probably accept the *fait accompli* (more about the state of the Russian society later). But Putin will not only lose whatever remains of his prestige. He will inevitably become a liability to the rest of the ruling clique. In such circumstances, a struggle for power will ensue. Its outcome is by no means predestined. Someone living in a fortress-like underground bunker with multiple layers of security will be difficult to dislodge. It will also be difficult to hatch a plot due to widespread surveillance.

Still, losing the war to Ukraine would provide the best opportunity to depose Putin. If successful, the new ruler or, more likely, rulers will be the second tier functionaries from the previous era. I believe they will be willing to accept the facts on the ground, forsake any territorial claims against Ukraine and talk peace – if only to get sanctions lifted.

They will try to turn everything into a topic for negotiations. How many war criminals are there, and who are they, exactly? Can we try them in Russia while international observers are present? I suspect that many of the suspects will suddenly die of heart attacks, commit suicide, or be killed in car accidents, as was the case with some of the Soviet Communist Party functionaries after the defeat of the hardliners' coup in August 1991.

We do not have the funds to make reparations. And even if we had them, we would not pay due to the economic hardships it would impose on the population. Do you want Russians to revolt and replace us with a new Putin?

Abkhazia and South Ossetia back to Georgia? We cannot leave Russian passport holders alone with vengeful Georgians; there will be a humanitarian disaster and a large number of refugees.

The new regime will attempt to portray itself as a bulwark against imminent chaos in Russia, as well as the only political actor capable of reform,

just as Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and even Vladimir Putin himself did previously. The safety of Russian nuclear power plants and the fate of its nuclear weapons will weigh heavily on the Western minds, as they did in the early 1990s. The West will be forced to choose between pursuing justice and focusing on the reconstruction of Ukraine and its NATO and EU accession processes, while simultaneously not letting Russia slip into total chaos, and possibly even gradually lifting sanctions.

So far, this appears to be the most plausible scenario. However, there will be an additional complication though. Contemporary Russia is not the former Soviet Union. The Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, to the best of its members' ability and understanding, defended the national interests of their Soviet Union – as they understood them. Unlike the Soviet regime, the main task of the Putin regime is survival, the preservation of power and property of the ruling clique. Brezhnev, Andropov, and their ilk ruled the Soviet Union but did not own it in the same way that the current Russian 'elite' does. That also means that the vast majority of the population directly or indirectly relies on Russia's rulers for a living. Will those who come after Putin be willing and able to act regardless of narrow personal considerations? Will self-preservation trump selfishness? There is a strong possibility that it will not.

If the struggle for power becomes prolonged the question of Russia's survival as one state may well become topical. According to the 2010 census, 81 percent of the population identified themselves as Russians (Demoscope Weekly 2022). Even massive migration from Central Asia did not change the figure dramatically since. At the same time, regional identities during the post-Soviet period became very pronounced. Moscow is universally disliked, as are most capitals in most countries. If regional elites decide that the power struggle in the Kremlin starts to spin out of control, creeping separation of at least some resource rich regions is not that difficult to imagine. It is more likely though that in such a situation competing factions in Moscow will try to secure support of the richest and most influential regions by promises of more money and autonomy. A looser federation, perhaps even a confederation, seems more likely than the emergence of a dozen states in place of today's Russia.

The Ukrainians and many of their supporters argue that Russia's neighbours will never feel safe and secure unless it is forcibly dismantled and denuclearised. The minority among Putin's critics and opposition activists,

the majority of whom are now living in exile, side with the Ukrainian view. The majority insists that a 'better Russia' is still possible.

The problem with the 'divide and disarm' strategy is that it requires a multinational expeditionary force of epic size and effectiveness, as well as an inordinate amount of political will to keep it going in such a vast country. It is not totally impossible but extremely difficult to imagine NATO and its allies, including Ukraine, proceeding with such an operation.

What is far more feasible and practical is for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia to join the EU and NATO as soon as possible, without regard for offending Moscow's sensibilities. With proper training, Western armaments and technology, and political backing, battle-hardened Ukrainian forces will be able to play the role of the indispensable security provider for the Black Sea region, serving as the main check against the potential new Russian expansionism. The United States and their allies may well request and receive permission from Kyiv to deploy missile defence systems and (if necessary) nuclear weapons on Ukrainian territory. If Moscow cannot be trusted, it can be deterred.

If one accepts that, on the one hand, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova will become full members of the EU and NATO, while Russia will remain weakened but whole – minus the Crimea – the question is how will the country evolve after the war is lost (or deemed totally unwinnable), and Putin is gone? Can Russia gradually adapt to and adopt the rule of law and – ultimately – democracy?

First and foremost, one must consider not so much the power struggle in the Kremlin or the state of the Russian economy. Nobody knows anything specific about the former. What is known about the latter is that commodity-based economies, such as Russia's, have a safety cushion that keeps them afloat for a long time. What is frequently lacking in many scenarios of Russia's future is a realistic assessment of the state of Russian society and the way it sees itself and the world. An important example from the not so distant past will help.

In summer 2020, Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was poisoned during a trip to Siberia and nearly died. At the time, the Levada Center, the only independent and trustworthy Russian pollster, conducted a poll. It showed that 30 percent of those surveyed considered the poisoning to be staged, 19 percent – a provocation by Western intelligence services, and another 7 percent – the result of a conflict within the Russian opposition. Only 15 percent saw what happened as an attempt by the authorities on the life of

a political opponent. If we add the first and second figures together, it turns out that half of those Russians who knew about the events around Navalny's poisoning (and this is the majority of the population) saw them as a gigantic theatre. In their view, the German chancellor, the president of France, the US secretary of state, doctors, biochemist experts, and Navalny himself and his family all willingly participated in a huge theatrical performance.

A significant portion of Russians lives in a fictional universe populated by shadowy operators and operetta villains who act contrary to logic and common sense. It is wrong to ascribe all this nonsense only to the hypnotic effect of television propaganda. Between 18–24 years old (who tended to consider the version of the assassination attempt the most likely one) and the 55-year olds (who are most inclined to believe state propaganda), there were – and still are – those who are 30-40-50 years of age. Many of these people understand how to go online and search for information.

We are talking about a conscious refusal on the part of not all, but a sizable proportion of Russians, to become acquainted with alternative points of view to the official one. Furthermore, in the eyes of the majority of Russians, Navalny committed an unforgivable offence: he "stuck his head out," while the rest of the citizens try to do the opposite and keep their heads down. It is easier to believe in gigantic international conspiracies than to admit that things are going wrong in the country and one's civic responsibility is to act to right the wrongs. In a way, it is comfortable to be a cynic, to squint suspiciously at everyone – Putin, Navalny or Ivan Petrovich from the next apartment – and imagine oneself to be wise and far-sighted.

For the majority of Vladimir Putin's 23-year reign, his regime consistently implemented three policies. All three, I believe, stem from Putin's personal assessment of the reasons for the Soviet Union's demise. All three are intended to keep the authoritarian regime afloat. The first policy is to ensure that the Russian consumer sector functions properly, so that stores are well-stocked with goods – to avoid people standing in lines to buy meat or shoes, as they did in the Soviet Union - and to chastise the government for the deficit. Consumption is something the Russians are not ready to sacrifice for anything. The second policy is to keep check-in counters open at Russian international airports. This attitude, which was so different from the Soviet practise of closing borders, ensured that a steady outflow of the dissatisfied left Russia over the years. It erupted into a monstrous outpouring in 2022. As a result, millions of people who could have acted as change agents for the country are now living elsewhere and have little influence in Russia.

The third policy is well-illustrated by the public opinion poll I cited above: relentless propaganda of cynicism, political passivity, and endless 'whataboutism.' Its main point is not only, or even primarily, the advantages of Russia's authoritarianism over all other countries, but rather a view of the world in which no participatory system or activity is worthwhile. 'Democracy is just a name for the manipulation of the public by the elites,' 'The West wants to destroy Russia because it wants its oil and gas,' 'America condemns the return of the Crimea but what about its own invasion of Iraq." In the last 7–8 years, the theme of Western decadence and depravity became a very prominent propaganda tool. The United States and the EU, the Russian propagandists claim, are destroying themselves with permissiveness, abortion, and the expansion of sexual minority rights. These and other propaganda narratives have a real feel to them because they are frequently based on real problems that Western societies are facing, such as debates about the democratic crisis, culture wars, and societal cohesion issues.

It also helps the Kremlin a lot that the Russians generally travel even less then the Americans (who usually serve as an example of an insular attitude) and only a very small minority ever visited Western countries. It is mostly those who live in Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

These policies, combined with selective and well-targeted repressions of the political opposition, independent, journalists and activists, were very effective in a society suffering from the post-imperial trauma of losing 'our great country,' the Soviet Union, and the system that guaranteed relative equality and a safety net. They created a country of non-citizens that go on repeating propaganda slogans even when they suspect that the reality is much more complex if not altogether different. They were made to feel powerless. Resorting to clichés borrowed from television is their method of keeping a mental balance.

Finally, Russia is a rapidly aging society (Interfax 2021), which is descending into a collapse of the demographic pyramid. There may be no way back from it. Combined with emigration, the demographics favour the regime as more and more people depend on the state for survival and less and less are young enough to adopt an active approach to life and politics. Russian society is at the same time fragmented, egoistic, and weak. With the possible exception of the tightly knit, extended family-based societies of the North Caucasus, Russians are nearly completely devoid of solidarity and prefer to stay away from other people's problems, especially if these problems can land them in trouble with the authorities.

The Russian opposition, from Boris Nemtsov to the radical nationalists, from Navalny to the 'new left,' failed in its attempts to shake the foundations of the Putin system. It misjudged the state of Russians' collective mind. Neither the calls for democracy, largely discredited by the painful post-Soviet transition of the 1990s, nor revelations of gigantic corruption that permeates all levels of the government and state-affiliated business, made the Russians abandon their passivity.

The massive moral crisis that Russia is experiencing became clear after Putin launched his February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The majority, or rather the largest segment of the Russian population, immediately retreated into the comfort zone of not so much believing the Kremlin line about the 'special military operation' as rather persuading itself to believe it. There is no anti-war movement to speak of. It is hard to imagine one emerging even if the already significant number of casualties increases further, as it will. Moreover, war crimes committed by Russian forces in Bucha, Irpen, Mariupol, and elsewhere in Ukraine revealed a complete lack of morality and human conscience among the (mostly) professional military. This is significant because the officers and men who committed these crimes represent a substantial segment of Russian society. They are predominantly the inhabitants of small towns and villages. There, habitual poverty, alcoholism, and drug use dehumanised existence to such an extent that pillaging, rape, and murdering harmless civilians, sometimes 'just for fun,' are seen as more or less normal.

It is difficult to imagine a society willingly renewing itself. As a result, I would not bet on its moral rebirth. It is possible, if not likely, that Russia will continue to exist in the shadow of its past, with no post-war German-style reckoning with it. In fact, several countries with recent dark spots exist in this manner, with Japan and Austria being prime examples.

What are Russia's transformation options if it does not disintegrate? In 2022, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a billionaire-turned-prisoner-turned-regime opponent, published a book titled 'How Do You Slay a Dragon?' (Khodorkovsky 2022). The title refers to a popular perestroika-era film, based in turn on a play by playwright Yevgeny Schwarz, which was banned by the Soviet authorities. It represents the end of the authoritarian and imperialistic trend that has dominated Russian history. The book is one of the few attempts to present a comprehensive vision of Russian reforms.

Khodorkovsky sees defeat in the war and restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity as a necessary condition for Russia's transformation. He

argues in favour of 're-founding' the Russian state as a renewed federation with extraordinarily broad powers for the constituent regions. He favours a parliamentary republic over the presidential system. He proposes a radical approach to giving the Russians a stake in the country's future and an incentive to participate in democratic processes. Khodorkovsky suggests that excess profits from oil and gas exports should be channelled towards personal social security and medical insurance accounts for all citizens, from birth until death. In his view, all of these reforms will be initiated by a Provisional Government of political kamikazes, who will then cede their place to politicians elected under the new constitution.

"How Do You Slay a Dragon?' is written for a future in which the Putin regime collapses completely and is replaced by a pro-democracy coalition of different political forces, so far non-existent or very weak. As I previously wrote, the emergence of a post-Putin government from within the regime is more likely, at least for the time being. I do not believe that the post-Putin rulers will impose a harsher form of dictatorship. In the wake of defeat in the war, partial or full, they will hardly have resources or desire to do this. Defeated dictatorships do not inspire followers. In fact, the new masters of the Kremlin may decide to free political prisoners, gradually liberalise the system and nudge it towards some form of quasi-democracy. They hope that by doing so, they will be able to facilitate the lifting of the sanctions and gain some sympathy from the West. This hope may not be entirely misplaced. Once the war is over and Ukraine wins, the phrase 'Let us not abandon Russia' will become a popular slogan in parts of – especially Western – Europe. The growing US-China conflict will fuel such thinking on the other side of the Atlantic. The Kremlin's new rulers will almost certainly try to play along. However, in Russia, the pace and depth of change will be slow, and the temptation to limit transformation will be strong.

Russia, much less relevant globally than before its assault on Ukraine, will most probably continue muddling through under the watchful gaze of NATO. Its evolution will be slow and take many decades. There will be no place for the 1991-style euphoria. And the transformation's eventual success is not guaranteed. British analyst James Sherr once told me, 'If after Putin we get to point when Russia is at peace with itself and with its neighbours, it will be a major security breakthrough for trans-Atlantic security.' This is a goal that seems realistic, if somewhat distant.

It is risky to apply historical comparisons from the 20th century to the events of the 21st. However, one such parallel sticks in my mind. A friend of

mine, an exile from Moscow, said in spring 2022, "We think modern Russia is akin to Weimar Germany, and Putin - to Hitler. But what if another comparison is true – Putin is a modern day Kaiser, and Russia is the German Empire. If so the Russian Hitler is still to come."

I try to perish the thought.

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