



**RUSSIA**

**XXI:**

*by*

**LILIA**

**SHEVTSOVA**

**THE LOGIC**

**OF SUICIDE**

**AND REBIRTH**

# CARNEGIE MOSCOW CENTER

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CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE



C A R N E G I E M O S C O W C E N T E R

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Russia has finally reached the point when its very form of existence through the personalized power system and its attempts to justify itself by ideological and territorial expansion – the Russian Matrix – is under question.

The author deliberates on the following issues: can Russia find a peaceful way out of its civilizational dead end, or should it go through chaos and implosion before it opens a new chapter? What could be the transformational agenda, and are the elites and society ready to pursue it?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# SUMMARY

The Russian system is beginning to decay. It cannot sustain the crumbling status quo, nor can it be certain of finding a new incarnation for itself. The only real questions are what stage of decay the system is in, whether the agony of its final demise has already started, and, if so, how long it will last. To be sure, the system still has some resources, if not to revive itself, then to draw out its death, and that survival instinct could take a nasty, even bloody, form.

## THE FUTURE OF THE RUSSIAN MATRIX

- The system can still reproduce itself through regime change and the emergence of a new Leader, who will personify authoritarian rule.
- It can't be excluded that the forces who present themselves as "liberal," declaring the need to "influence" the system from within and supporting "partial" changes, will try to highjack the protest movement and reestablish personalized power under liberal slogans.
- Most certainly, any new attempt to breathe life into the rotting Matrix will necessarily involve coercion in order to preserve its power.

## PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE

- For the first time in its long history, Russian society is ready to free itself from the stifling embrace of the Russian system and of the political regime that is its engine, and to accept new rules of the game.
- It is true that only a minority is ready to publicly stand up for a state based on the rule of law. It is more important, however, that the idea of the new order is not rejected by the vast majority of Russians, and they are ready to accept it, if it is offered to them.
- At this point, however, the demoralized and corrupt Russian ruling elite is not ready for any change that will endanger its monopoly and its corporate and personal interests.
- For its part, the Russian opposition, still weak and fragmented, has so far failed to present society with a viable agenda for an exit solution.

However, there is no doubt that Russia's moment of truth is fast approaching. The question is whether the confluence of several specific factors will occur in the same time frame and in the not too distant future. These factors include:

- public pressure on the regime;
- the consolidation of the non-system opposition;
- the split of the ruling elite, with its pragmatic part joining the opposition;
- the power structures' reluctance to defend the old order; and
- the creation by the opposition of a "road map" for the transition to the new rules of the game that will include Constitutional reform and a new state structure.

Failure to reach these goals will deepen the rot and/or implosion of the system and the state.

There are several objectives in the upcoming political season. One key goal is for the opposition to emerge ready to formulate an agenda that is responsive to the challenges posed by a more repressive regime.

The fast-paced events of the day and the degradation of the system may call for some ad hoc changes to the agenda, but one objective remains paramount under any circumstances: the pledge by all participants in the political process to renounce personalized power and to step down from positions of power in case of electoral defeat. This has never happened in Russian history. If Russia finally manages to do it, it will have reached its "end of history" and the beginning of a new one.

**MODERN RUSSIA DEMONSTRATES THE AGONY WITH WHICH OUTDATED SYSTEMS DEPART FROM** the political scene when they are no longer able to meet new challenges. The painful departure is exacerbated by the fact that the ruling elite in such systems loses the opportunity to provide for its corporate and personal interests when the old regime is gone. Because both its security and well-being are threatened by change, the old elite is neither ready to lose its monopoly on power nor to accept the new rules of the game. Nor is the elite's resistance to change the only complicating factor: society itself, accustomed to living under the old regime and fearing an unpredictable future, can draw out the excruciating process of change even further.

The Russian system, that is, the existing institutions, informal rules of the game, entrenched interests, political traditions, and mentality and habits of the elite (and society as well), has demonstrated an exceptional ability to survive and to absorb body blows. It has proved that it can survive a change of the political regime, while retaining the mechanism of personal rule embodied in a leader who stands above the fray. The Russian system has even survived through two different structural, economic, and ideological incarnations: first by exchanging tsarism for communism in 1917, and later by discarding communism for imitation democracy in 1991. Throughout all of these periods of change, the essential elements of the Russian system have remained unchanged: a personalized-power regime whose fusion with property necessitates tight control of the economy; a ruling class that hungers for external spheres of interest; a claim to Russia's global status; and militarism as the means of securing and justifying the regime's domestic and foreign policy agenda.

The signs are now plain for all to see, however, that the Russian system is beginning to decay. It cannot sustain the crumbling status quo, nor can it be certain of finding a new incarnation for itself. The only real questions are what stage of decay the system is in, whether the agony of its demise has already started, and, if so, how long it will last. To be sure, the system still has some resources, if not to revive itself, then to draw out its death, and that survival instinct could take a nasty, even bloody, form.

Society is trying to free itself from the stifling embrace of the Russian system and of the political regime that is its engine. What obstacles society encounters in this quest for real not imitative democracy – and indeed whether a democratic transformation in Russia is possible at all – these are the questions we will ponder here.

# WHAT IS HAPPENING WITH THE "HUMAN MATERIAL OF POLITICS"?

A number of obstacles stand in the way of Russia's path to an open society: its past, its traditions, the mindset of its elite, common stereotypes about its nature, and peculiarities of the personalized-power structure. However, as the history of other transformations over the past fifty-seventy years demonstrates, when certain preconditions for democracy are absent, the political elite (primarily its intellectual segment) can compensate for that absence with its own vision and with a readiness to offer society a consolidating strategy. This, of course, requires that the elite reject its selfish, old-regime interests. However, in the final analysis, even non-democrats can begin to build democracy, as Juan Linz and Giuseppe Di Palma have shown: "The non-democrats of yesterday can become democrats, even convinced democrats."

In fact, it is the voices of Russia's intellectuals that may turn out to be decisive. These voices should awaken society from its slumber, formulating and expressing society's own interest in renewal. Societies are destined to stagnate when intellectuals prefer to remain part of the old regime. As Ralf Dahrendorf once correctly pointed out, "Intellectuals are accountable to society. Society is doomed if they remain silent." Max Weber, Albert Camus, Jürgen Habermas, and Karl Popper have all related change and the path to freedom to the role of and actions taken by intellectuals. Successful transformations throughout history highlight the enormous role intellectuals play in establishing moral imperatives, determining a strategic vector, and building national and public consensus around the concept of freedom. East European intellectuals who entered politics, such as Václav Havel, Jacek Kuron, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and Adam Michnik played a decisive role in the initial stages of transformation.

Unfortunately, the "thinking minority" in Russia was not able to become the engine of change after the fall of communism. Demoralized by years under the Soviet system and accustomed to their comfortable role serving the ruling class, the Russian intelligentsia was not able to become the force for a breakthrough, even despite the existence of a courageous dissident movement. This failure is one of the key reasons for Russia's first abortive attempt to change itself after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. At the time, Russia could not field a strong and influential team of intellectuals that could

simultaneously act as architects of transition, moral compasses for the elite and for society, and a bulwark against attempts to return to old ways.

It almost seemed as if the Russian intelligentsia gave up its role as an opponent of autocracy when the communist state collapsed. The emergence of a new form of autocratic power, Boris Yeltsin's super-presidency, left the intellectuals lost and disoriented. Since then, most have been unwilling to risk taking a stand against the new democratically disguised personalized-power system. Some have become propagandists, strategists, and experts in the service of personalized rule. The demise of regime-independent intellectuals as a class has deprived Russia of a crucial source of renewal for authoritarian societies.

One of the most important factions of the intellectual class are liberals. More than any other class of intellectuals, liberals ought to be most invested in establishing freedom and the rule of law, but the sad irony is that it was liberals who delivered the most crushing blow to the chances of liberal democratic change in Russia. I called them "system" liberals (Andrei Illarionov later coined the shorter "syslibs"). Operating within the system and serving the government in different capacities even as they tried to monopolize the mantle of liberalism, these syslibs were instrumental in restoring one-man rule in Russia. Bright and popular personalities in the service of the new Russian autocracy, they have done much to discredit liberal values and to create an atmosphere in which cynicism and double standards thrive.

Whether they did this consciously or not (does it really matter which it is?), the system liberals have seriously impeded Russia's capacity to part with its past. They have essentially become one of the pillars of the new post-communist autocracy, creating myths and illusions that helped establish and strengthen the new authoritarianism. It is the presence of liberals in authoritarian power circles that has led others the world over to incorrectly assess Russia's post-communist development.

In the early 1990s, many individuals, both in Russia and in the West, began to believe in Russia's democracy and wrote books lauding Yeltsin as a reformist architect of a democratic Russia. Today, these laudatory tomes read like monuments to analytical and political naïveté, but even now many of their authors have not been able to muster the courage to rethink their optimistic assessments of the Yeltsin era. They prefer not to answer certain questions: How did Russia end up with an authoritarian constitution? How did the oligarchy begin? Who brought Vladimir Putin to the Kremlin? Who stood watch while democracy and liberalism were discredited?

While many were singing paeans to Russia's democratic reforms, Yeltsin and the new generation of the Russian ruling elite were busy restoring

the old model of the personalized-power regime and disguising it to make it look more appealing. It was Yeltsin who created the framework for the new authoritarianism by shelling and dissolving the opposition-dominated parliament and then adopting a new constitution that gave the president more rights than the Russian tsar without holding him responsible for his policies.

The appearance of Yeltsin's hand-picked successor, Putin, initially rekindled hopes in the liberal camp, although the very fact that he was hand-picked should have been a cause for concern. Russian liberals and their Western colleagues flocked to the new leader, hoping he would carry out the reforms that Yeltsin had failed to pursue. Quite a few of the opposition figures and liberal experts who criticize Putin today were originally his supporters, and some of them worked for his regime in the period from 1999 to 2003. Even though there were no particular grounds for considering Putin a reformer, many nevertheless wanted to believe in his liberal credentials.

The disappointment of Russia's liberals and intellectuals, as well as their counterparts in the West, did not last long. As soon as Putin's pocket appointee, Dmitri Medvedev, appeared in the Kremlin, their hopes were rekindled. Liberals argued that surely Medvedev would be the one to carry out long-abandoned reforms. Medvedev, meanwhile, plodded resolutely down Putin's path, putting legal restraints on civil society, expanding the powers of the security services, extending the presidential term limit, and supporting the war with Georgia and threats against Ukraine. Undaunted, the liberals persisted in believing that these were just Medvedev's tricks; that at heart he was still a liberal, a democrat, and, of course, pro-Western; that his true reformist beliefs would come to light one day soon.

Russian liberals weren't the only believers in Medvedev's reformist potential; the West showed just as much credulity. The American "reset" policy and the European "Partnership for Modernization" would not have appeared, were it not for Medvedev. These policies were based on the hope that Medvedev was a reformer, or at least that he was interested in repudiating Putin's aggressive stance toward the West.

As it turned out, liberals in Russia and the West were wrong again. Liberal rhetoric and a softer touch in the Kremlin couldn't conceal the fact that Medvedev continued to operate under the paradigm of Russia's personalized-power regime – a regime based in part on the need to treat the West as a hostile civilization.

Some intellectuals, however, are incorrigible. When Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012, quite a few began to look for reasons to harbor new hopes



that he would somehow turn a new leaf and become a reformer, thus undoing everything he had done over the past twelve years of his reign!

“Putin could still become a reformer,” say these incurable optimists. “He is a deft and flexible ruler, capable of adjusting quickly in difficult circumstances.” But the optimists have no answer to this question: if Putin is destined to become a transformational ruler, why didn’t he do it earlier? Certainly, leaders can abruptly change course under pressure, but Russia needs to reject autocracy, not reform it to make it more effective. For transformation to succeed, Putin’s team would have to renounce its monopoly on power, which is the main cause of Russia’s degradation, and open itself to fair and honest competition. They would, in other words, have to perform political suicide, and there are no signs that they are contemplating such a step!

Besides, if Putin really is ready for change, why didn’t he start by instituting free and fair presidential elections in 2012? And why, when he returned to the Kremlin, was his first move to clamp down on the most dynamic and educated part of society, which is the only basis for Russia’s transformation?

Feeling that it would be difficult to pretend that Putin is a prophet of democracy, his liberal fans have resumed their chant of “economic modernization.” But one could say that the Russian authorities have been following a policy of economic modernization for the past twenty years, with little to show for it. After all, how can one carry out economic liberalization while one strengthens the state’s monopoly over the economy? How does one fight corruption if one turns parliament into a circus and buries independent courts and the media? Sadly, the “modernization from the top” idea is still popular among some Russian liberals, who are fascinated by the “Lee Kuan Yew thesis.” Tellingly, so far not a single Russian leader has shown any inclination to follow Lee’s path, but the optimists persist in their belief that sooner or later the Russian Lee will come from on high to modernize Russia!

There is a variation of the modernization from the top belief: the belief in “gradual” reform. Supporters of the “gradual path” assert that reform should begin first with, say, education, healthcare, or agriculture, and only then spread further. But how does one reform these sectors without first demonopolizing them and opening them to competition? And how does one do this without first establishing the rule of law and independent courts?

The gradual path thesis raises further questions. Who decides which forces get to enjoy competition and the rule of law first? And how can these things be introduced? First in specially designated regions or zones, and only then in the rest of the economy? Does anyone believe that this kind of gradual and “sectoral” approach can actually work? Recently the adherents of the gradual

path have begun to use the term “evolution.” This word choice has one goal: to forestall the “revolution” that the establishment is so afraid of. The essence of the gradual path approach remains the same: partial reforms from the top within the same monopoly on power and state control.

However, these arguments have no effect on those in Russia and abroad who try to persuade the world and themselves that Putin will, at some vague point in the future, somehow be forced to introduce the rule of law and competition. One may feel tempted at this point to throw one’s hands up in despair: how is it possible to maintain the hope that a Russian tsar will suddenly decide to give up his monopoly on power, especially one who has proven himself to be incapable of any change, one who hates and fears any sign of real competition and political struggle? In Russia, even leaving the door open a crack, that is, allowing limited liberalization, will inevitably let in a howling wind that will throw the door open and blow down the house of cards that is the Russian system. How can one expect Putin and his team to give up all the resources they control, especially when the Arab revolutions have demonstrated what a loss of power means for an authoritarian leader? But no! I am continually amazed at certain people’s capacity to believe in miracles, and I find it even more amazing that precisely those individuals who consider themselves liberals are the most ardent proponents of reform from the top and the most stubborn believers in the myth of the Leader-Modernizer. It is the majority of those on the Left, as well as a number of moderate nationalists, that is trying to find a solution by establishing new rules of societal organization and tending to gravitate toward political pluralism and free competition.

One can see it as a paradox: system liberals are the faction least interested in freedom! The irony could be expanded: some liberals (and not just system ones), along with certain well-known intellectuals, have openly started to argue for the need for a new dictatorship in Russia. This new dictatorship will supposedly eliminate corruption and get rid of the current rotten political regime, after which it will install freedoms! Is this naïveté? Is it fear of popular rebellion (which has always been cruel in Russia)? Is it a lack of vision? Or is it due to a fear of being left on the margins? Whatever the motivation behind these arguments, they demonstrate the totalitarian way of thinking of a rather significant and influential segment of those who call themselves “liberals.”

Let’s ask a question: What accounts for the indestructible optimism of the system liberal camp and its reliance on the Leader-Modernizer? And why does the West (not entirely, but for the most part) continue to hope for an authoritarian Kremlin leader who will trust the West and reject the traditional Kremlin hostility and suspicion toward the outside world?

I think it is easier for me to tackle the first question. It is not that the system liberals are naïve and lack understanding of Russia's political realities. I would argue that the main reason for their indestructible faith in the leader and his commitment to change is fear. It is the fear of becoming a minority or, worse, a marginal force in an environment of real freedom and political competition. Quite a few Russian system liberals do not believe in Russian society or its ability to thrive in an atmosphere of freedom. They also think that Russia is still a very left-leaning country, and perhaps one where nationalism is on the rise. In this case, they think, only a leader who can rise above society can make Russia civilized. They believe that this leader should have access to all the instruments of power for suppressing the populist and nationalist elements. System liberals can enjoy some measure of power and protection by taking refuge underneath such a leader's umbrella.

The only problem with this stratagem, of course, is that, time and again, the Kremlin's authoritarian leader claims the country is not yet ready for reforms. He is ready to become a Pinochet, but without the Chilean dictator's economic modernization. The outcomes of such "Pinochetism" are apparent: every time the leader tries to control everything and crack down on his opponents, Russia goes further and further downhill, and liberals in the circles of power become mere stage props justifying a corrupt and anti-populist regime. However, many of these liberals continue to assure the public that without them the regime would have been even worse, and they warn that without an authoritarian leader, Russia would slide into chaos and bloodshed. Being afraid of the people, the system liberals prefer to rely upon an authoritarian leader. Perennial fear of society has been a characteristic of the Russian elite and Russian intellectuals for centuries. Today, with the Kremlin beginning to resort to repressive methods, fear of the Left or of nationalism, regardless of whether these fears are real or imaginary, is the most popular political justification for the resurgence of faith in the authoritarian Kremlin. The elite, including the syslibs, who are used to living comfortably, is ready neither to fight for its freedom nor to lose its status.

In short, the system liberals continue to reproduce the myth of the reforming leader and incessantly blab about Russia's modernization from the top. They have been doing this for years, with only minor changes of the objects of their attachment from Yeltsin to Putin, then from Putin to Medvedev, and now back to Putin. They comprise the bulk of the experts who work for the regime in various councils, thus forming its analytical base. It is a sad irony that those who would call themselves liberals have become an essential component for the reproduction of an autocratic system.

What is perhaps more disturbing these days, however, is the vigor with which some liberals defend the system. When the regime's repressive drift

became undeniable in the summer of 2012, the leading system liberals began to voice their concerns about democracy and a free society openly and shamelessly. Reemerging on the political scene, German Gref, liberal guru of Putin's era, declared with astonishing bluntness that the regime's ability to manage the country depends on its capacity to "manipulate" the public, and that freedom would make Russia unmanageable. As Anatoly Chubais said: "The Duma will be chosen by fair elections. It won't be worse. It will be left. And it will definitely block the absolutely essential economic reforms which were not completed in the last ten years. It will lead to an economic stupor as a result of the democratic victory." Consequently, democracy should be avoided. Clear as day.

Who could have suspected in the late 1980s and early 1990s that liberalism would be used to support the survival of an archaic, decaying Russian system? However, that is exactly what has happened. Economic liberalism (the system liberals try to avoid mentioning political freedoms) has served as Viagra for Russian authoritarianism.

Of course, not all liberals should be listed as "system" guardians. Russia also has "non-system" or "anti-system" liberals. However, they have been outnumbered so far, and their voice has not been heard because they have practically no access to the mainstream media, which the system liberals dominate.

So why are the ideas of the system liberals so popular with the intellectual and political community in the West? Why does the belief in Russian reforms from the top endure there? Why does every new leader's arrival in the Kremlin revive faith in his modernizing aspirations and his readiness to finally build friendly relations with the West? One would think the West would be wary of all authoritarian leaders, since its societies place their trust in solid institutional foundations rather than in a leader!

I will attempt to offer a few explanations of this seeming peculiarity. Of course, one may suppose that illusions about the Kremlin's modernizing aspirations on the part of some Western observers are a function of their failure to grasp Russian realities, and of their excessive and unjustified faith in the assessments of Russia's system liberals. As is widely known, in the 1990s Western policies with respect to Yeltsin were to a large extent built on the trust that members of Western political circles harbored for the Kremlin liberals, specifically Yegor Gaidar and Anatolii Chubais. Later on, the system liberals continued to influence the Western elite's views on the Kremlin and on Russia, thanks to their close relations with the Kremlin, their friendship with leading Western experts and politicians, and their direct access to the Western media.

But why did the majority of Western politicians believe the system liberals for so long over the real liberals or other opposition factions? Perhaps because, just like the Russian system liberals, some Western politicians do not believe in Russian society's democratic potential and fear its populist and nationalist aspirations. Many in Western political circles do not believe that a free Russia would behave decently. They believe that under authoritarian leadership Russia is more predictable and relatively docile. Order and stability, even at the expense of freedom, is what many Western leaders prefer to see in Russia. This goes a long way toward explaining the Western policy of acquiescence toward Russian autocracy. In this respect, the West's logic is no different than that of the Kremlin liberals.

Of course, there are also more prosaic and pragmatic reasons for this acquiescence, among them economic interests and security issues. Naturally, outsiders dealing with these issues are interested in maintaining the status quo in Russia. After all, the nature and behavior of a free and democratic Russia is unclear. And who can even guarantee that a post-authoritarian Russia would be democratic, rather than a chaotic entity moving toward disaster?

There is quite a bit of sad irony in this. It so happens that the longer the current regime in Russia endures, the deeper the public's suspicion of liberalism (which is being discredited by the Kremlin's liberals) and of the West (which, in trying to establish a partnership with the corrupt system, is creating the impression that it is interested in preserving Russia as a decaying relic). Further, the deeper Russian society's suspicion of liberals, the more it will gravitate to other ideological streams, including the leftists and nationalists that Russian liberals (system and non-system) are so afraid of.

What are the non-system liberals doing today? We can report that their numbers are growing. This group includes a lot of those who worked for the regime under Yeltsin and at the beginning of Putin's reign. Disappointed by reform from the top, they came to the conclusion that only democratization can guarantee modernization. However, there is no unity in the non-system liberals' assessments of the Russian system and of exit solutions. There is also a conflicting situation here. Non-system liberals may retain varying degrees of systemic thinking – remnants of hopes for the old rules of the game. There are those among them who harshly criticize Putin's regime but still look up to Yeltsin's constitution, meaning they are ready to play by the old rules.

There are regime critics among the non-system liberals who believe in raising electoral barriers in order to prevent the "masses" from putting people in power who would reverse the outcomes of the unpopular privatizations of the 1990s. Such limitations on democracy are the tip of the authoritarian iceberg. There are also non-system liberals who say: "Street protests

are dangerous; the regime should be pressured only through elections.” But how can it be pressured through elections when the regime controls the election results?

The discussion continues. Meanwhile, anti-system liberals are expanding their social and political base by means of new social networking and information technologies. However, the movement faces a hard road ahead, not only because liberalism is being discredited by those working for the Kremlin, but also because today the Kremlin views anti-system liberals as its main adversaries.

But let us return to the Russian intellectual and political elite as a whole. There is a direct and immediate connection between the demoralization of intellectuals and their transformation into the Kremlin’s servants. If the most dynamic and educated part of the thinking community is conformist and has turned to sponging off a decaying system, how can one hope that the political elite will suddenly start worrying about the public interest?

The twenty years that have passed since the collapse of communism have revealed the dramatic extent of the degradation of Russia’s political elite. This degradation affects the widely varying groups subscribing to different ideologies and located in different sections of the political system.

Analyzing the components of the political elite (that is, the people who take part in broader political life), Joseph A. Schumpeter called them the “human material of politics.” This “material” should be of sufficiently high quality, he wrote. Among several measures of this quality, Juan Linz mentions “the commitment to... values or goals relevant for collectivity, without, however, pursuing them irrespectively of consequences.” The Russian “political class,” by and large, is precisely the antithesis of what both Schumpeter and Linz describe. The reasons for this remain to be analyzed. Is it the lingering legacy of communism? If so, why have the new elites and political classes in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states shown themselves to be of sufficiently high quality? Is it the legacy of the 1990s, when the new version of Russian personalized rule reemerged under the guise of liberal slogans with the willing help of the intellectuals? Or is it the fact that after the collapse of the Soviet Union and communism the intellectuals ceased to be a social group and lost its critiquing function with respect to the state?

One could mention that, for instance, top authorities in communist China have shown a desire to moderate the acquisitive instincts of the political class and to practice “good governance” and professionalism (as a result, apparently, of the influence of Confucianism). These qualities have been absent in the Russian political class and its apparatus, which has no equivalent



meritocratic traditions to speak of. However, here one could also mention one of many Russian paradoxes: the lack of positive qualities in the elites and their inability to moderate their entrenched interests can have a positive effect by shortening the life of authoritarianism. However, they could make it nastier too!

I will come back to the subject of the Russian political elite later, when I discuss the public protest movement, but for the time being, I will just mention a new trend that adds a bit of optimism to this otherwise sad story.

The public revitalization that began in Russia in 2011 not only energized a part of the “thinking class” that is not involved in the Russian system; it also formed the new thinking stratum that is ready to seek freedom. Moreover, the protest mobilization that occurred at the turn of 2011-12 has created a new reality: serving the regime has now become shameful, and being a system intellectual is no longer as comfortable as it once was. Although the protest movement grew weaker in the middle of 2012, it has created, for the first time in years, the possibility of a real choice for members of the thinking community.

The fate of the opposition movement is largely contingent on the extent to which the thinking stratum will be able to retain this new frame of mind, consolidate itself, and get through to the public. Ultimately, the fate of yet another attempt by Russia to break free from its historical trap also depends on it.

# WHAT HELPS THE RUSSIAN SYSTEM SURVIVE?

Of course, we should refrain from excessive euphoria. Both the Russian system and the political regime that serves as its embodiment still hold significant resources for survival. Russia's move toward freedom and an open society is being hampered by the persistent disorientation and passivity of the overwhelming majority of intellectuals and of the political class as a whole. However, there are also other factors impeding this move.

When the first protests began at the end of 2011, it might have seemed that Putin's regime, at least, if not the Russian system as a whole, was beginning to crack. Actually, the events between December 2011 and February 2012 left the Kremlin shocked and staggering. But let's soberly assess both the state of the Russian system and the readiness of the opposition and public for change. During Russia's first awakening from 1989 to 1991, there were many unrealistic hopes that led to disappointment. We need to avoid creating any new illusions this time.

When I look at today's Russia, the following metaphor comes to mind. The patient may have awoken from his catatonia, but he cannot yet leave the hospital where he has been kept for years, drugged and bed-ridden. His keepers have rushed in to silence him. If cajoling doesn't work, they are ready to shackle him. However, 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 first impressions can be deceptive. The patient can break loose at any moment and run out of the hospital. The question is whether he will know what to do when he gets out the front door.

At any rate, it is still too early to bury the regime of Putin and his team, or the personalized-power system, with all its institutions, informal rules of the game, entrenched interests, mentalities, and habits. One could easily imagine a situation in which Putin's regime goes down, only to give the system new life with a new version of personalized power.



For all the mounting dissatisfaction in Russia's big cities and among the most restive parts of society, the leadership crisis, and the educated urban population's refusal to recognize the regime's legitimacy, Putin and company are still able to prolong their survival. The regime has the support of a large part of the political class and of segments of society that are either wary of any change or not ready to take up an active role in the struggle for change. It can also count on the ruling team's monolithic nature (so far). True, the resources and the basis of the regime have started to dwindle. One would hesitate to bet that Putin will survive through to the end of his current term in 2018. One would guess that his lieutenants might not welcome him to stay for one more term if he does not guarantee that he will be the best defender of their interests.

There are signs that the ruling class is not sure any more that Putin will secure their entrenched interests in the long run. Putin has lost the aura of invincibility. In the event of increasing public discontent and growing social and political crises, the Putin regime may give way to another regime under a new leader (either through a coup or through the ruling team's consent) in a bid by the ruling elite to preserve its interests. I've mentioned earlier and would like to stress again that the Russian establishment has learned how to continue the system and preserve its place within it through a process of regime change. The system itself still has a much broader basis than Putin's regime. Even some opponents of the Putin regime would seek to prolong the life of the system, if they were to take over the Kremlin.

Russia's civilizational model might be obsolete in the 21st century, but it has learned to keep itself alive by manipulating a combination of incompatible components that enable it to imitate contradictory vectors and reach out to different parts of the population. Thus, Russia is a nuclear petro-state that is still a great power, while at the same time it plays the role of commodity appendage for more developed countries. The Russian political elite has integrated personally into the West, but at the same time it views the West as an enemy. Liberals in the government help to reenergize a regime for which liberalism is alien, and which engages in anti-Western rhetoric. Ironically, these incompatibilities until recently have helped the Russian system to survive, chameleon-like, by changing its rhetoric and policy as suits its interests of the moment.

There are quite a few factors that could keep the system limping on. The key political and economic conditions for maintaining the status quo are well known: the deep-seated demoralization of society that the Kremlin tries to foster; the populist expectations of the people, who still look 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.

The petro-state still has the resources to guarantee the support of the paternalistically oriented social base, which depends on government handouts. Usually regimes that depend on natural-resource rents tend to be more durable and resilient. They can keep their supporters loyal through patronage while also maintaining a strong repressive apparatus. However, the Arab Spring demonstrated that these regimes can crumble even before the well of patronage runs dry if new destabilizing factors come into play.

I would highlight several other circumstances that impede the de-hermitization of Russia. The most powerful hindrance is the remnants of a neo-imperial mentality residing in the ruling elite and in broad sections of the population, coupled with institutional remnants of the former empire that exist in the current Russian state: the unitary character of the Russian “Federation,” the stubborn attempts to talk about “areas of interest,” the laments about NATO expansion and the attempts to force the world to accede to the Finlandization of the former Soviet space, and the efforts to build the Eurasian Union as a new embodiment of the Russian galaxy orbited by satellites. The fact that the Kremlin is not ready to, and would not in any case be able to, pursue the idea of Soviet restoration does not mean that the Russian elite has erased all imperialist longing from its mind. There is a substantial reason for this: the personalized-power system cannot reproduce itself without indulging in the desire to preserve Russia’s great-power status and areas of influence (with the latter being the blood vessels to the former’s heart). I would even argue that, if the domestic appeal of the regime starts to wane, it will desire all the more to compensate for its internal weakness through a more assertive statist and neo-imperialist policy abroad. At least, this has always been the logic of the Russian matrix as it fights for survival.

Even yesterday, one would have argued that the era of Russian neo-imperialism was over and the Russian elite had rejected the ambition to influence other states. Today, however, even Russian liberals set aside their liberalism when they start to talk about Ukraine, the Russian-Ukrainian “brotherhood” and the “one nation.”

Militarism continues to be an instrument of survival for the Russian system. Until recently, this was mostly confined to rhetoric and imitation. (The system seemed unprepared either to expand by force or to go to war with the West.) Today neo-imperialist and militaristic rhetoric is beginning to wend its way into doctrine, and some establishment forces may try to implement it in practice.

At any rate, the new vocabulary of the Kremlin team shows that it is undergoing a serious evolution, or rather devolution, that was hardly expected even in the most alarmist scenarios. See for yourself. Dmitri Ragozin,

the deputy prime minister, wrote in September 2012 that Russia will again become a true industrial-world powerhouse, while at the same time transforming its military into an “iron fist” to deter the West. Russia will not pursue “global military expeditionary plans,” promised Ragozin, but it will use its newfound might closer to its home territory.

Ruslan Pukhov, the director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, a think tank closely associated with the defense ministry, wrote about the “national consensus” that has emerged in Russia around defense and foreign policy. According to independent observers (for instance, Alexander Goltz), this consensus has begun to replace the formal military and national security doctrines, which today are used mostly for propaganda and window dressing. According to this “consensus,” Russia has to reestablish absolute dominance in its “natural sphere of influence – in the former Soviet republics.” Moreover, Russia must “dislodge,” using soft power or direct military effort, all neighboring anti-Russian regimes and limit Western influence. Russia has to become a “revisionist power,” Pukhov declares, and he is not shy about the possibility that Russia will have to destabilize the world order to achieve its national ambitions.

As if to confirm the new “consensus,” the Russian defense ministry enacted the “Kavkaz-2012” strategic war game in the fall of 2012 in the North Caucasus, as well as in the Black Sea and Caspian Sea. A simultaneous exercise involving the Russian military, “Vzaimodeistvie-2012,” was held in Armenia under the mantle of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). As the chief of the general staff of the army at that moment, General Nikolai Makarov, remarked, the Kavkaz-2012 exercise “involved resolving two distinct very important strategic tasks: to use troops to resolve an internal conflict, while at the same time repulsing an external conflict.” It’s not difficult to understand that he considers one of those “conflicts” to be a threat to the Kremlin’s monopoly on power.

How seriously should we take these statements and actions? It is unthinkable that the Kremlin, even if its power were threatened domestically, could risk a military confrontation with the West or with any major power. However, one must keep in mind two possible outcomes of the escalation of militarist rhetoric: first, rhetoric creates a certain kind of thinking that impacts behavior; second, rhetoric that intends to create an imaginary reality results in bad policy, and the outcome of that policy can be threatening indeed.

Another factor helping to prolong the life of Russian authoritarianism is the widespread fear among various sectors 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 mini-regimes on the basis of their own rules is a sign that the process of state atrophy is underway. In fact, the Kremlin pact with Chechnya is an imitation: with the Kremlin’s blessing, the Chechen dictator Ramzan Kadyrov pacifies the republic with utmost cruelty. The Kremlin thus gives the impression (or chooses to believe) that Chechnya is still part of the Russian Federation. 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, even global, leader; such a construction surely contains the seeds of self-destruction. The return of the Russian army to the North Caucasus (as of October 2012) has demonstrated that the construction has started to fall apart.

There is always a risk that a state constructed from incompatible civilizational pieces can fall apart, whether that state’s regime liberalizes or strengthens its hold on power. The problem of the fragility of the current Russian state has already become an issue of active debate. One thing that is clear today is that Russia cannot transform itself as long as the North Caucasus problem remains unresolved. With the North Caucasus as it is (and Tatarstan and Bashkortostan may follow suit), Russia cannot get itself in any kind of order or become a modern state.

The Kremlin is powerless to generate new mechanisms for adapting to a changing reality, but it is still able to use its old tactic of co-opting members of the political community and the intellectual elite, intimidating those who are unwilling to submit, and tossing favors to the populist-oriented groups that depend on the state. Rather than pushing Putin into experimenting with real liberalism, as some hoped, growing public discontent has created pretexts for the regime to use force and coercion (in particular by returning to the search for an “enemy” and by fomenting confrontation between different groups in society). The emphasis is on the “external enemy,” which allegedly “seduces” some forces inside Russia, turning them into the “internal enemy.” According to the Kremlin’s logic, internal opponents cannot emerge independently; they can be born only as a result of hostile outside influence!

Essentially, the Russian authorities are returning to a tactic used by Stalin and Mao. Those autocrats maintained society in a state of constant tension and used the idea that the country was a “besieged fortress” as a means of justifying the use of force. The Kremlin’s adoption of a Stalinist-Maoist pol-

icy, albeit in a much softer form, indicates that the regime is running out of imitation policies for consolidating its position, which might have allowed for some pluralism and limited freedoms.

But why didn't Putin and his team turn to another tactic of Stalin and Mao: the *kadry* purges? The Kremlin had an opportunity to use the protest to cleanse the ruling elite of its most corrupt elements and introduce new faces into the government, including those from the opposition camp. In a situation where Putin was losing popularity, it would have been a smart move that could have given his regime new strength and attracted new supporters for it.

Alas, this was never really an option. Putin decided instead to continue relying on the old and totally degenerated bureaucracy. He could hardly turn to the elite purges that helped past communist leaders keep the political class and a restive populace under control, because he lacks the elements that would make such a technique successful. First, Putin definitely doesn't want to take any new risks. Second, an elite purge requires of the leader who uses it certain leadership characteristics, strong and reliable repressive instruments, an idea that will mobilize society (the search for an enemy is losing relevance), and a readiness to close the country. The current regime lacks all of these things.

Putin's firing of one of his loyalists, Defence Minister Anatolii Serdyukov, in November 2012 and the investigation of corruption in his ministry should not be seen as a sign of an elite purge. Serdyukov was kicked out as a result of a struggle of the clans surrounding Putin, as well as Serdyukov's open disrespect, even contempt, for the army, which Putin could no longer tolerate without its impacting his own position. The new defence minister, Sergei Shojgu, is a veteran of both Yeltsin's and Putin's cabinets, and his appointment shows that the current Russian president is reaching out to the tried-and-true old guards rather than looking for new *kadry*.

Even without a Stalinist touch, the regime's very nature determines its gradual drift toward increased coercion. It is a praetorian regime run by people from the secret services – indeed from their most outdated provincial level. It is thus predisposed by background and mentality toward violence. Repression has always served as a tool for perpetuating Russia's personalized-power system, but before the Putin period, control of the organs of coercion was in civilian hands (even during the communist years). For the first time, people from these state agencies 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 all the more likely that the praetorian regime will resort to force to protect itself.

The events of 2012 have proven that the authorities are moving in this direction, which reflects not only their lack of confidence but also the cracks opening up in the very foundations of the system. Look at the short list of desperate Kremlin actions from the summer-fall of 2012:

- constant harassment of opposition figures and raids on their homes;
- legislation that would force nongovernmental organizations to call themselves “foreign agents” if they receive funding from outside of Russia;
- recriminalization of libel and slander, which could be applied to all those who criticize the authorities;
- efforts to control the Internet, which until recently has remained surprisingly free of government censorship;
- a massive increase in penalties for participating in “illegal” protests and complicated procedures for obtaining permission to organize public meetings of any kind;
- a new law that broadens the definition of state treason and makes it intentionally vague (the definition of extremism had been similarly broadened earlier);
- the introduction of a bill that would mandate a prison sentence for “insulting the religious feelings of others;”
- the cleansing of opposition deputies from the Duma;
- political trials intended to scare not only the opposition but also the dissident part of society (for example, the Pussy Riot trial and the trials of the participants in the May 2012 rally);
- state invasion of citizens’ private lives and attempts to control their moral and ethical views;
- the alliance between the conservative part of the Orthodox hierarchy, Orthodox militants, and the state;
- booting USAID out of Russia and attempting to limit the activity of other Western foundations in Russia;
- the imposition of state control over volunteer movements that might threaten the state monopoly over society;

The Kremlin has been trying to legitimize the use of force and to clamp down on social unrest by adopting openly repressive legislation. The batch of repressive laws passed in the summer and fall of 2012 is just the beginning. Note that we should not understand these laws to mean that the regime feels that it cannot act without judicial support, nor do they prove that there are some limits to the regime’s capacity for violence. Until recently, the nature of Putin’s regime has been to use all possible trappings to make itself look civilized, meaning that it did not want to look like an open dictatorship. The laws endorsed by Putin’s Kremlin have been intentionally vague and murky, which allows for their selective and arbitrary use.



Today, however, the Kremlin has thrown away all past pretense and imitation gimmicks. It has begun to adopt laws that recreate the atmosphere of wartime and emergency rule. Actually, the way these laws are being implemented and interpreted by the executive branch makes them not necessary at all! The executive branch could have just gone ahead and proceeded without any justification. State punishment, whether justified by the repressive laws or not, becomes all but certain for those who disagree with the regime or are even suspected of disagreeing; the state bureaucracy interprets the laws entirely as it pleases.

The use of the legislature and courts to legitimize violence has another consequence. The judicial system is turning into an element of coercion, thus discrediting the rule of law. It will take a great deal of effort to rebuild trust in these institutions in the future. Not only the legislature and courts, but other political institutions (elections, parties, and so forth) as well, have been intentionally discredited in an effort by the Kremlin to streamline the vertical mechanism of coercion. This will push people who have no other channels to articulate their interests in the street.

Putin is aware that stepping up repression would isolate Russia, pushing it toward international pariah status, like North Korea. This in turn would work against the desire of the political class for personal integration with the West. The Kremlin thus has to find out exactly how hard it can push while still avoiding Western rejection of the Russian elite. For the Kremlin, to be accepted by the West means two very important and mutually connected things: international legitimacy (which can compensate for dwindling internal legitimacy), and a guarantee of personal well-being for the Russian elite within Western society. Following recent developments in Russia, however, the need for coercion has begun to outweigh the Kremlin's desire to look civilized.

True, the West can show the Kremlin the limits of its tolerance. For example, the U.S. Congress passage of a legislative package including the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act, which would impose sanctions on Russian officials suspected of human rights violations, would demonstrate these limits. The problem is that even if the West ups its level of criticism, Putin and his team have no way to walk the repression back, and they may even realize this. They cannot begin a liberalization process for which they are not ready and that could cost them not only power but also their personal security. This leaves pressuring society as their only remaining survival tactic.

However, are the power structures ready to violently defend the regime until the bitter end? When will repression provoke a response by society (indeed,

if it will at all)? The jury is out on these questions at the moment, but there is growing certainty about the answer to the first question: corrupted law enforcement agencies will hardly be ready to stay on the ruling regime's ship until it sinks. Their rank-and-file members are too closely integrated with the population to engage in bloodshed.

In any case, the logic of survival sooner or later will push the Kremlin to broaden its coercive efforts (even if some of its members will loathe and regret it) and even to partially isolate the country. The discussion of the Kremlin's idea to repatriate officials' assets from abroad and their legalization in Russia may have two purposes at the moment: to increase the elite's loyalty (and fear) and to send a message to the population that the Kremlin is ready to fight corruption and criminal elements. However, these plans could have other purposes, as well; they could be intended to prepare the country for isolation. If the regime faces a choice between losing power or closing the country and cracking down on the dissent and rebellion, it will without doubt choose the latter option. The "repatriation model" could provoke a split within the establishment, angering the comprador segment to the point that it would try to change the regime, although at the moment this scenario hardly looks feasible.

Another brick in the defensive wall being built around the system is the new marriage between the state and the Orthodox Church. The interests of both sides are clear. The regime needs the Church's support to compensate for its crumbling legitimacy and to return to the old Russian idea of sacralized power. (The very idea sounds absurd, to be sure, as the Kremlin has seemingly done everything in its power to de-sacralize itself.) The Orthodox Church, for its part, has felt the renewal of its old ambitions to increase its impact on society through the use of government instruments. Two recent steps demonstrate how the partners in this "marriage" are trying to consummate their union. The Church has adopted a measure allowing its clerics not only to take part in politics and be elected to the legislature but also to take jobs in the executive branch in case "some political force is trying to diminish the influence of the church." It's no secret what force might be doing this: the political opposition. As a further part of this marriage, the state undertakes to step in where necessary in order to defend the Church with new legislation, for example, against "blasphemy" and "insulting religious feelings." The newly emerged Orthodox militancy groups are already demanding action against everything from Darwinism to short skirts. As some observers have warned, this tendency could take Russia another step closer to becoming a theocracy like Iran or other Muslim states, where "insulting Islam" is punishable by severe prison sentences. In Russia, the marriage between the state and the Orthodox Church will provoke not only the Orthodox fundamentalism supported



by the state, but also the Islamic revival and its attempts to impose its own fundamentalism.

The “marriage” of the authorities and Orthodoxy will hardly help the latter to reenergize itself. On the contrary, it could produce a split in the Church’s base, and who knows what force or doctrine will replace traditional Orthodoxy when it begins to lose its impact.

Meanwhile, the ruling team is trying to make use of the time still at its disposal to gain maximum profit and guarantee that its assets are protected well into the future. The Kremlin is, quite unabashedly, allowing particular clans to grab state assets and take over private assets in exchange for personal loyalty to Putin. Indeed, this has become one of the main means of keeping the regime going.

The idea of a new industrialization centered on the military-industrial complex is another Kremlin project. As it sees it, this will spur economic growth while at the same time reinforcing the state’s militaristic base. This represents yet another weapon borrowed from Stalin’s policy arsenal. Stalin carried out forced industrialization from the top down, and dictatorship is the only way this can be done. Any attempt to take this road today would be doomed to fail, however, and not just because dictatorship in Russia would require shedding rivers of blood, a task for which the country’s corrupt law enforcement and security services are unlikely to be prepared. Russia’s defense industry is a closed and bureaucratic structure stuck in the 1960s and devoid of any incentive to innovate. The huge sums injected into it will only end up lining the pockets of the ruling clans. True, it is still not clear whether the Kremlin actually believes in the possibility of a new Stalin-style industrialization, or whether this whole project has been dreamed up just to give the ruling team a new source of enrichment. It will end, without doubt, as a new imitation project that will line the pockets of the loyal bureaucracy.

Ideas borrowed from the past, like a new “industrialization,” along with reliance on state monopolies and calls for nationalization, randomly pop out alongside seemingly liberal suggestions: a new round of privatization, construction of new high-tech hubs, creation of a new global financial center, and demands for the state to get out of crucial areas in order to allow Kremlin liberals and technocrats to save their reputations. Thus, in the fall of 2012, meeting with foreign investors at a conference entitled “Russia Calls” (!), Putin returned to his “liberal” litany, declaring that the country has exhausted its supply of “simple solutions” (and who, pray tell, was supplying them?) Further growth, promised Putin, is possible by means of the development of “human assets,” and he promised to take steps in this direc-

tion. How he would “develop” these “human assets” even as he was brutally clamping down on them, Putin did not explain.

This mix of contradictory projects, which creates cacophony and disorients observers, is the signature of the Putin era. However, the attentive listener will definitely hear a single dominant melody: the uniqueness of the Russian path. This old, familiar song, cooked up by the statist of the past, is now being sung by a new generation of statist, who are trying to find a new variation on the traditional melody: steps in the direction of a theocratic state, the Eurasian Union as the new form of areas of influence, and a “pivot” to the Pacific as a means of geopolitical confirmation of Russia’s distancing from Europe.

There is a final phenomenon requiring a serious analysis that neither Russian liberals nor Western observers are ready to start, for reasons not difficult to guess. (Those who have tried to raise this issue are dismissed as “radicals” or “idealists” by the expert and political community.) That phenomenon is the West’s role in helping the Russian system survive. Several issues should be taken into account here. For starters, Western civilization, in the eyes of a significant part of the Russian population, has lost its role as the alternative to the personalized-power system. This is partly the result of the current Western “malaise.” Western intellectual and political gurus have been candid in acknowledging the state of the Western model. Francis Fukuyama today writes of “dysfunctional America,” Zbigniew Brzezinski warns of Western decay, and Walter Laqueur has announced “the slow death of Europe.” Naturally, this Western crisis is inspiring neither liberal hopes within Russian society nor attempts to follow the Western model, at least for the time being.

However, it is less the recent Western crisis that has delivered a blow to pro-Western sentiment in Russia than it is the policies of Western governments with respect to the Kremlin. These policies are viewed in Russia as connivance with and appeasement of the regime. The latest edition of Western policy toward Russia, the U.S. reset and EU policy toward the Kremlin, are considered by many democracy-minded Russians as legitimizations of the personalized-power system that give it additional strength to survive. For the first time, one can hear harsh criticism of Western policy toward the Kremlin coming from pro-Western circles in Russia.

For example, one of the leading figures of the Russian democratic opposition, Vladimir Ryzhkov, says: “Paris and Berlin are solid supporters of Putin. Obama’s Russia policy is much more advantageous to Putin and his inner circle than that of former U.S. President Bush.” This view could be supported by broader circles of the Russian anti-system liberals.

The U.S. administration's policy toward the Kremlin and Russia receives the most emotional and sharp criticism from among the pro-Western and liberal-oriented audience in Russia. 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.*

From Andrei Illarionov, an independent economist,

*In bilateral [US-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 Russian 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 carte blanche to engage in 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 the 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.

From 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 the case of Russia's breakup is not the question that occurs to the State Department and White House pragmatists.*

These 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.

At this point, I would expect my Western colleagues to say: "Come on! This is rubbish! What do you expect the West and the United States to do? Isolate Russia? End trade? Stop negotiating nuclear weapons cuts?" Of course not. I am not so irresponsible or naïve. The 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, nothing is forcing Western governments to play the game "Let's Pretend" with regard to the path the Kremlin has taken. Western politicians are free to refuse the brotherly embraces of Kremlin leaders. After Putin turned down a repressive road, German Chancellor Angela Merkel hugged him when he visited Berlin in June 2012. Did she really have to go that far? One has the impression that, in talks with Putin, neither the German chancellor nor her Western colleagues ever mentioned any concerns about the tightening of screws in Russia. Or perhaps they are not concerned?

In November 2012, during her visit to Moscow to attend the annual German-Russian high level meeting, the German chancellor changed her tone, deciding to openly express her concerns regarding the latest political trends in Russia. She chose to tell Putin during their joint press conference that her country was worried that civil rights in Russia have been undermined due to "some laws" adopted by the authorities. The Bundestag resolution endorsed just before her visit, which had been critical of Putin's policy, did not leave her a chance to remain silent. She said, "Our position is not destructive. We ask, 'Is it good for Russia?'" Putin's icy responses to her proved that their dialogue this time was not as friendly as before. But the German reaction to the Kremlin clampdown came too late: the Kremlin can't change its course and can't stop its bullying. It is now locked into the law of repression.

The participation of Western politicians, pundits, and journalists in Kremlin-staged "operas," such as the Valdai Club and Yaroslavl Forum, is another form of legitimacy that the West provides to the Russian system (hopefully unintentionally). Western pundits, journalists, and former politicians did not refuse to attend the Valdai meeting hosted by the Kremlin in the fall of

2012, at a time when there could be no more illusions about the Kremlin's authoritarian clampdown. In the eyes of Russian society, the West has turned into a laundry machine for Russia's corrupt elite. This laundry machine now comes with its own powerful "service class" of politicians, bankers, and PR agencies that helps the corrupt Russian political elite integrate personally into Western society. This only increases the elite's brazen behavior and lack of accountability at home.

Fortunately, public opinion in the West shows a genuine interest in Russia's democratic development. The attempts in certain, mostly parliamentary, Western circles to voice concerns about the evolution of the Russian regime (for example, by supporting the Magnitsky Bill) allow Russian society to understand that the West is not monolithic and contains factions interested in building a new Russia. Unfortunately, Western policies are currently formulated by governments that prefer to be nice to the Kremlin.

In this context, it would be interesting to compare the viability of the Russian and Chinese regimes. Now, I fully understand that we are talking about authoritarian regimes in different stages of development. Nevertheless, the comparison is useful, since it indicates how much closer the Russian regime, and the Russian system along with it, has come to a period of terminal decline. For instance, regarding the longevity and durability of the Chinese regime, Minxin Pei, one of the more astute observers of China, finds that Beijing has bolstered its survivability by thoroughly researching the causes of the Tiananmen Square events of 1989 as well as the circumstances surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union. To avoid repeating the Tiananmen crisis or the more dramatic turn of events that befell the Soviet Union, the Chinese Communist Party developed a new survival strategy and undertook reforms, including opening more space for small- and middle-sized businesses, intended to reduce public demands for democratization. We would look in vain to see any signs of similar learning in the Kremlin; on the contrary, the Russian elite is actively following in the footsteps of its Soviet predecessors and in this way accelerating the system's decline.

How long can the Kremlin's survival tactics and the favorable external environment prolong the current team's political life? Can they help to keep the personalized-power system in place? Time is running out for Putin and his regime. The big issue for Russia today is building a systemic alternative: a political force capable of putting together a plan for transforming the system of government and winning the public's support for that plan. If such an alternative does not emerge, the Putin regime's fall could pave the way for a new authoritarian regime, or even a dictatorship. Either that, or Russia will enter a state of permanent rot.



# SUICIDAL STATECRAFT

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. By attempting to deal with new challenges using old methods, the system is undermining itself. Even the people who are most deeply incorporated into the regime and system admit this. Anatolii Chubais, in one of his rare interviews, said in the spring of 2012, “The stability epoch is over.”

The Kremlin’s blatant manipulation of democratic institutions, such as its actions during the 2011-12 elections, erodes the legitimacy of a regime that has no other mechanisms, whether inheritance-based or ideological, to justify its continuation. The concept of legitimacy is extremely important for a regime that is neither closed nor dictatorial and is highly dependent on the West. Until recently, the Kremlin tried to solve its legitimacy problems through imitation or “virtual” politics – manipulating elections, creating sham institutions and “system opposition” – thus giving the opposing minority narrow breathing room without allowing it to influence society. In fact, elections were an extremely important means of guaranteeing legitimacy. Thanks to strict control and uneven access to resources, they ensured victory for the Kremlin candidates while creating a veneer of freedom and competition. These were elections that guaranteed a certain result. For a while, this was sufficient for Russian society to recognize the regime as legitimate.

But in 2011-12, imitation politics stopped working. In fact, it began to work against the regime, delegitimizing it rather than legitimizing it. The old regime had been one of “competing” or “electoral” authoritarianism, which allowed for some liberties, mostly in the area of private life. The new one cast away imitation and turned instead to a more traditional authoritarianism, and the screws are being tightened every day. Traditional authoritarianism cannot bring legitimacy to the Kremlin, so from now on it will be forced to resort to harsher means of preserving power. It is doubtful, however, that the Kremlin has enough repressive tools up its sleeve. This puts the Kremlin in a quandary. Refraining from applying broad, harsh coercive measures after they have been made legal would be taken as a sign of weakness, but

applying such measures would mean playing the Kremlin's last trump card without any assurance that it will work, and without any trumps in reserve.

Imitation stopped providing legitimacy for a number of reasons. The most important ones are:

- the Russian people no longer have to concentrate on basic physical survival, and their memories of the 1990s have begun to fade;
- a new generation of Russians is demanding a higher standard of living;
- increased prosperity has allowed city residents to begin to pay attention to issues of freedom and dignity;
- Medvedev's presidency created a gap between the imitation of liberalization and the reality that proved irritating to many;
- the sharp degradation and corruption of the regime became evident;
- new social means of communications appeared;
- the regime's methods began to backfire in the 2011-12 elections, as the regime's efforts to intimidate and discredit the opposition led to increased support for it (as well as its radicalization) and further alienation of the regime from the people.

Other factors that had only recently worked in the regime's favor no longer did, thus producing a boomerang effect.

The economy's dependence on commodities accelerates the system's decay. Russia has fallen into 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 example, Saudi Arabia) have demonstrated resilience is only the exception that proves the rule. The Arab revolutions of 2011 have proved how fragile "petro-stability" can be.

The elite's loyalty to the leader (yet another factor cementing the regime) may also evaporate before the means at his disposal are exhausted. As Lucan Way and Steve Levitsky correctly point out, "Material stimuli do not ensure sufficient consolidation at the time of crises." The elite may come to the conclusion that Russia's regime will not stand for long, and that it will gain more than it will lose if it abandons ship and joins the opposition. Today the Kremlin cannot rely on the same stimuli Stalin relied on to guarantee loyalty: ideology and fear of repression. This regime also does not enjoy the factors that have ensured elite loyalty to authoritarian and dictatorial leaders elsewhere: ethnicity, or a common heritage of revolutionary struggle (although, as the developments after the 1917 Russian Revolution suggest, struggling together in a revolutionary cause is no guarantee of unity). There-



fore the Russian elite's loyalty to the Kremlin and to Putin may sooner or later prove to be a passing phenomenon.

Tame, obedient institutions ensure an external calm, but the lack of channels through which the population can express its various interests leaves it with no choice but to take to the streets, thus further undermining stability.

There is a growing feeling in Russian society, or at least in rather broad segments of it, that only activism can help the people solve its problems. Until recently, observers correctly regarded Russian society as a sort of "sand heap" of atomized individuals. Indeed, despite the Soviet slogans of "collectivism," real community feelings were destroyed a long time ago, mostly under communism. A society that is being built around the state power "vertical," lacking the traditional understanding of individual rights and a moral code that exists, for instance, in Confucian societies, moves toward democracy much more painfully. Francis Fukuyama argued in a famous article ("The Primacy of Culture," *Journal of Democracy*, January 1995) that societies with a Confucian and semi-Confucian culture can be "compatible with democratic institutions." The hierarchical system can be "jettisoned relatively easily and replaced with a variety of political-institutional forms without causing the society to lose its coherence." Democracy can be built "around a deeply engrained moral code that is the basis for strong social structures and community life." In Russia, however, this "code" has been erased by decades of communist rule.

However, over the past two years we have witnessed for the first time in Russian history a new phenomenon on a massive scale: an attempt by society to self-organize and even take over the functions of the state. It started in 2010 during the massive summer fires, against which state authorities showed themselves to be completely helpless. In 2012, thousands of volunteers organized to help the population affected by the floods in southern Russia, demonstrating a rather high level of organization. Mass volunteerism by the younger generation has provided an amazing example of the gradual process of the formation of a new system of values in a country ruined by years of personalized-power regimes. These developments have strengthened among the people a sense of sacrifice, a readiness for community service, and a revival of moral values.

Russian society showed that it can rebuild principles and feelings long forgotten. These attempts to self-organize and replace the state have become a more serious threat to the Kremlin than open political opposition. A rising civil society that is overcoming its atomization and consolidating across previous divisions is a much more substantial threat to the regime.

Putin's return to the Kremlin means the inevitable growth of anger and the rejection of the regime, even by social groups that had previously been

submissive but were not ready to see Russia return to a Brezhnev-type degradation. Those who still trust the state and see Putin as an embodiment of stability have gradually begun to lose hope in his leadership.

We should not forget one fact mentioned above: Putin's regime not only relies on the security and law enforcement agencies but also is primarily made up of people who have come from the special services or are close to them. They are not able to think in terms of innovation and change. This regime has nothing in common with "praetorian realism," which defines a scenario for "imposing order in modernizing lands" (something that Fukuyama described when analyzing political order in Egypt). Russia's security service officers-turned-bureaucrats serve only one purpose: to pursue their corporatist interests and the status quo at any cost. Such regimes are not only doomed but will also pull the state they incarnate into the abyss.

The authorities' obsession with personal enrichment, especially among people from the security agencies, is another factor speeding up the regime's decline. It makes the regime more repressive as it defends its rights to the assets it has gathered. However, at the same time, this "commercialization" of the state's repressive machinery undermines the system, as corrupt security agencies lose their ability to effectively protect it. By the way, the historical examples are illustrative: Sparta and the Ottoman Empire fell when the Spartans and Janissaries, respectively, began to get involved in commerce and trade. (The success of the samurai during Japan's Meiji restoration could have been an argument in favor of that country's uniqueness, but for one fact: the Japanese ability to adapt to Western rules of the political game while preserving traditional social and ethical rules.)

The collapse of Soviet technical infrastructure is another sign of the looming crisis. It is ironic that Russia today continues to survive thanks to this legacy, but the dams, 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. This is all of a piece with a regime that has lost the support of the most advanced constituencies in society and now seeks support from society's throwbacks; such a backward-looking regime will reject true innovation out of hand.

The state's failure to prepare the population for natural disasters or to help those affected by them has begun to provoke anger even amongst the most passive and obedient segments of the population. The latest natural disaster, the floods in southern Russia in 2012, has clearly demonstrated the pathetic inability of the corrupt authorities to help the population.

Another confirmation of the degradation of the state and system is the intertwining of crime, business, and security and law enforcement agencies. Why can't the authorities clear their stables? Why do they protect the rank-and-file perpetrators clearly fingered in the Magnitsky case, even at tremendous cost to the regime's 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 housecleaning would undermine the power vertical the Kremlin has built and would violate the regime's fundamental principle that those who serve it are guaranteed impunity in return for loyalty. This mutual back-scratching between the regime and the agencies at its service is pushing the system into the final stage of decay. For the time being, the law enforcement agencies that have been given full rights to enrich themselves have saved the system from society's anger, but the rank-and-file representatives of the power structures are much more closely connected to society, and at some point they will certainly side with the population. There have already been several cases in which riot police have refused to use coercion against the people. This is a sign that the regime and the system can't fully rely on its "defense mechanism."

The authorities' passion for costly mega-projects, from the 2012 APEC summit and the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014 to the World Cup in 2018, is also a sign that the system has come to 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 that will soon be revealed as fake. But as the growing anger among Sochi's population shows (the site of the Olympics project has become a source of corruption unusual even by Russian standards), such projects will only evoke the fury of a people whose standard of living is in decline.

The use of Western technology to help ensure the regime's continuity (the usual Kremlin way of modernization) has also exhausted its potential. Spreading the use of new 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. In addition, Skolkovo itself looks like it has little chance of success now that the hollow role played by its "godfather," Medvedev, has been laid bare for all to see.

Meanwhile, the Russian ruling team is attempting to maintain stability by creating phantom challenges and imitating responses to them. The Russian elite is, to wit, battling NATO, preparing to counter a nuclear strike or even fight a nuclear war (see Russia's Military Doctrine), attempting to control Russia's neighbors, clearing the stage at home of any potential

opposition in preparation for fighting the “Orange Revolution” and defending the Motherland from a “fifth column” and “foreign agents.” The system, seen until recently as highly successful in finding ways to resolve internal and external conflicts, is becoming rigid. It risks losing the ability to respond to all but imaginary threats and becoming a threat to its own population. The Russian matrix still can survive, but it has lost its old resilience.

Some pundits continue to expect that the Russian political class will soon fragment, pushing Russia down the path to Robert Dahl’s prescription for a stable polyarchy. These pundits hope that the rise of political competition among the elites would then diffuse to a larger population, which will gradually be incorporated into electoral politics. But thus far, Dahl’s model is little more than a dream for Russia. Instead of elite fragmentation and “elite pluralism,” we are seeing clan struggles, which only strengthens the role of the national leader as arbitrator and discredits the idea of competitiveness. Real political pluralism is emerging outside the system, not inside it. However, if the sense of crisis deepens, the groups that are positioning themselves close to the emergency exits, as moderates and system liberals, will be the first to rush out. Then the Kremlin garrison will defect, leaving only Putin’s “brigade,” as the ruling team is nicknamed. Putin definitely understands human nature, and that is why the Kremlin today is pursuing two projects. First, the leader tries to bind the ruling class into taking responsibility for the tougher course that the state is taking; to that end, all Kremlin loyalists are required to support the new repressive laws and to vote for them in the State Duma. Second, he works to prevent the emergence of a new leader who could become a rival to the current “alpha dog.” However, when a new protest wave rises, all such preemptive measures usually become useless.

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

Some observers believe that the new Putin regime will not be too harsh because its members are personally integrated into Western society, with Western bank accounts and families who regularly travel, study, and live abroad. These connections will supposedly keep the regime from crossing certain lim-

its in pursuing coercive measures. I would ask these observers, though, whether personal integration of the members of Muammar Qaddafi's clan prevented him from starting a bloody, no-holds-barred fight to stay in power?

Others think that the Kremlin is introducing repressive mechanisms just for show, to intimidate opponents, and that in reality it is not prepared to use them, either because it fears retaliation or because the power structures are not reliable. I would argue that the state will hardly turn to mass violence à la Stalin, simply because it has no strength and cannot return to totalitarianism; it cannot be sure that the power structures will obey orders. Nonetheless, every attempt to suffocate society will result in the ruining of individual lives (Russia already has political prisoners) and the pushing of Russia deeper into degradation. Besides, even a limited degree of coercion could be a disaster for the people who would become its objects. Thus far, we see that the escalation of coercion can gain an unstoppable momentum.

At any rate, the Kremlin has made its choice. Instead of dialogue with its opponents, it has opted to clamp down on those who disagree with the system. This means that the last chapter in Putin's narrative has begun, but it is too early to say whether this will only be the end of the regime or that of the entire personalized-power system.

American analyst Leon Aron has written that "Putin is already dead," and he is right. The Russian political regime has lost its moral justification in the eyes of a significant part of society. However, Russia still has to find a political exit solution for a regime that is becoming one of, to use Guillermo O'Donnell's phrase, "impotent omnipotence." How to bury both a regime and a system that have lived past their time – this is the most formidable challenge in Russia today.

# THE DIFFICULT SEARCH FOR AN ALTERNATIVE

Russia's awakening at the end of 2011 came as a shock, not only for the Kremlin, but for the major part of the pundit community. The pundits had felt the growing popular frustration, but they had not expected it to arrive so soon in the most prosperous and most conformist communities in Russia. Their surprise indicates a lack of reliable instruments for measuring and understanding what is going on in Russian society. Astute and respected Russian analysts like Vladislav Inozemtsev argued just before the unrest that the Russian system is "fundamentally solid and durable," that "it will not collapse, and it will not radically evolve," that "no serious threat to the regime seems likely," and that the system "suits Russian citizens well enough." Most such conclusions were based on the assumption that Russians prefer to solve their problems individually rather "than to challenge national institutions collectively." Other experts argued that the elite and the population have agreed to play along with the rules of the game out of a hope to be incorporated into the system, or that they silently agreed to give the regime their unconditional loyalty in exchange for paternalistic guarantees. The authors of such "rational" (or "realistic") analyses, however, failed to understand the fact that numerous social groups are not ready to make what others deem a "rational choice" for them.

The most reliable social surveys also apparently failed to detect the change in the public's mood. According to a November 2011 Levada Center survey, the Kremlin's United Russia party would get 50.8 percent of the vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections; in reality, it didn't get more than 35-40 percent (the rest of its "vote" was the result of stuffed ballot boxes). This says that Russians are more down on the regime than they are ready to admit openly, and that there is much more frustration within society than one would have thought earlier.

Neither the opposition nor the pundits were ready for the sudden explosion of public anger. The opposition had to rush to catch up to the protest tide, composing an agenda in a hurry. In fact, discontent with the political regime, especially among the educated urban population, had been brewing for a long time, and there had been many signs that tensions had been rising. The 2011-12 election fraud was just the spark that set off the explosion.



At first, the protest movement took the form of a rebellion by the younger generation, mainly in the big cities, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In those cities, young people took to the streets to protest the rigged elections to the Duma. This rebellion of the young in turn awoke other segments of the urban population. This time, prominent intellectuals joined the protests, which helped broaden the movement to include people who were previously politically passive. Leading intellectuals (above all writers, television celebrities, artists, and musicians) helped to bring a moral and ethical dimension to the protest movement. The emergence of new civil leaders was a sign that the usually conformist intellectual and expert community has started to split, with part openly voicing disagreement with the Kremlin. It was the first time this had happened since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

One has to admit that the majority of the intellectuals who joined the protest movement believed that it had to have one goal: persuading Russia's leaders to embrace democracy and listen to society. "We'll need to influence the authorities!" was the slogan of the civil leaders. In trying to appeal to the Kremlin, they showed that they still believed in the potential of personalized power. They were not ready to admit that the system cannot be changed by the Kremlin and is not reformable. Thus, on the one hand, the intellectuals played a positive role by helping to expand the base of the protest movement, but on the other, they reproduced the old illusions and eventually became an obstacle to expanding the protest movement politically. At least some of the civil leaders soon proved that they were not ready to become political personalities, and they avoided taking part in the more radical rallies and marches that followed. The intellectual leaders' behavior during the first wave of protest in 2011-12 has demonstrated that the majority of them was not ready, for now, for oppositional political activity, nor is it ready, for now, to openly admit that the system is unsustainable.

However, despite the unreadiness of the intellectuals, the protest movement has rapidly moved from a moral-ethical drive for dignity to political slogans: first, "For Fair Elections!" and then, for a "Russia without Putin." The urban rebellion defied the observers' forecasts that Russia's diverse opposition forces would never manage to come together. The different protest groups (liberals, left-wing groups, moderate nationalists, and a variety of civil society groupings) have reached agreements, learned to organize themselves and showed their ability to make use of new forms of protest, from flash mobs to protest walks to occupations of public squares. Russia's protests have become the latest stage in the development of the movements that began in Serbia and Ukraine.

At the same time, however, the protest movement has manifested several obvious problems. For a start, there are tactical weaknesses due to the lack

of close coordination between old and new opposition movements, between political and civil initiatives, and between Moscow and the regions. There is also too little attention given to formulating a strategy with clear goals and a transitional road map supported by a majority, and too much focus on short-term slogans. An even greater problem, however, is the difficult process of reaching an understanding between the revolution-minded part of the protest movement and the moderates (which include civil leaders and civil activists), who hope to influence the system from within and want to avoid confrontation with the authorities. “The authorities have not fulfilled any of our demands,” the revolutionaries say, “and so we need to take to the streets to demand free elections and Putin’s departure.” The moderates, for their part, say: “We must not radicalize the situation but should seek dialogue with the authorities and refrain from making demands they are not prepared to accept.” The problem is that the authorities are willing to imitate dialogue (if there is enough pressure from society), but they are not willing to reconsider the rules of the game or renounce their monopoly on power. In this situation the moderates (indirectly and unconsciously, of course) could turn out to be a hindrance for the future of the protest movement. But the radicals have neither a clear vision of transformation nor the broad support of society.

Another development is the gradual increase in social and economic discontent in Russia’s provinces. Until now, political protest and socio-economic discontent have followed parallel paths, and Russia’s future will depend greatly on whether the two intersect at some point, when this might take place, and what will happen if they merge. 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 transformed, then it would have forced a real turning point in Russian history, with the whole public realizing the need for genuine political transformation and not just a change of leadership. However, the first political protest tide has gradually subsided, while provincial Russia remains mostly silent and drowsy (at least as of the fall of 2012).

The political mobilization from December 2011 to September 2012 eventually died down to a lull. The Kremlin managed to mobilize itself and develop counter-tactics, cracking down on the opposition and on civil society. But another irony has become apparent: the way that the regime and the Russian system defend themselves will only accelerate their demise. They have limited repressive resources and cannot use all of them out of fear of provoking both a Western response and a domestic counteroffensive. There is another problem of which the Kremlin has become aware: even if it starts to use coercion on a mass scale, thus risking bloodshed, it cannot be sure (as I’ve mentioned before) that the repressive machine will



obey orders. It cannot use selective repression for very long, because this will ignite a new explosion: the most dynamic part of society cannot be cowed. At the same time, it does not have enough money to bribe the entire population for an extended period of time, as economic stagnation is constantly shrinking the budget pie.

Meanwhile, the opposition continues to reinvent itself and to seek new forms of coordination, and its impact will gradually expand outside of Moscow, feeding on the growing social and economic discontent. The demand for alternatives to the regime and system remains, and it will provoke a new process of both deliberation and activity. For the time being, the protest movement that emerged in December 2012 (the Decembrists) has to learn the lessons of the recent past and prepare for future challenges.

Two factors hinder the new protest wave: the authorities' attempts to tighten the screws on society and scare the hesitant moderates, and the moderates' willingness to convince themselves and society that the Kremlin can still be persuaded to behave decently, or even to reform itself. At the same time, the impatient minority is growing more radical, more restless, and more politicized. It is worth remembering that the radicalization of protest movements in Russian history has always followed periods of disappointed hopes for liberalization. Discontent with the limited nature of tsarist reforms led to the emergence of terrorism in Russia in the late 19th century, and in 1917 unfulfilled hopes for change set off what would become one of the 20th century's bloodiest revolutions. Today, the modernization rhetoric of the Medvedev presidency, supported and disseminated by numerous optimists, has ended in a backlash. Disappointment with this outcome has also played a part in bringing discontent to the surface.

By clamping down on the most advanced part of society (the parts that could be the basis for modernization), and by openly appealing to the instincts of society's traditionalist segments, the Russian ruling group has proved that it is not ready to risk any reform. The continuing presence of system liberals in Putin's court and the emergence of various new Potemkin village councils of experts and even human rights defenders do not change the nature of the Kremlin's rule.

The Kremlin's return to a harsh authoritarianism means that only social and political protest can bring about change. The understanding of this truth has become more apparent within the opposition and civil society. Thus the Kremlin's logic of survival is pushing Russia toward a new revolution.

The question is: what ideology will dominate the next waves of protest? Developments in the fall of 2012 have shown that leftist and populist senti-

ments are on the rise in the protest movement. This new leftist mood rejects the old Communist Party, which has become the authorities' loyal partner. This new mood worries not just the ruling team but also the liberals and technocrats who work for the Kremlin. Such fears have always been typical for liberals and for the intelligentsia in general. Even in tsarist times, these individuals would take the side of the personalized-power system out of fear over popular uprisings. Today, these same fears serve to justify support for the authorities by a significant section of the political and intellectual class. These figures have integrated into the system and feel comfortable within it, preferring known evils to unknown ones.

Russian society, meanwhile, has undergone considerable change, and for now at least moderation and the desire to avoid upheaval and national disaster dominate among all major political groupings and the population at large. This goes a long way toward explaining why people have been patient for so long, hoping that the ruling class will initiate change from the top and guarantee them a decent and dignified life. For all their populist slogans and even anti-Western outlook, the leaders and ideologues of the new left-wing movements have shown that they are ready to listen to others, even to the liberals, and to work with them.

So far, the leading representatives of the anti-system Left are proclaiming very reasonable things. For example, Ilya Ponomarev, one of the "Left Front" leaders, said that "the protest should not transform into a rebellion, but rather into a regime change, a restructuring of the very foundation of the Russian public and political system... We need 'a velvet revolution' like in Poland or Czechoslovakia." As we can see, the moderate Left does not want any repetition of the October Revolution.

Liberals still dominate the protest movement's leadership, and they have a strong voice in the media and on the Internet, but they will be forced to make concessions to the left-wing groups if they want the movement to gain 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 sentiments. A consensus based on classic 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 the so-called "liberal reforms" that laid the foundations for a new authoritarian and oligarchic government. Liberals during Putin's time have failed to get in tune with the feelings of the public. They remain the voice of the urban minority. As I mentioned earlier, the longer the liberals remain in the government, attempting to create economic stimuli for Putin's regime, the more the general public will be suspicious of the liberal agenda and new liberal political movements.

The minority of liberals that opposes the regime and the system may find it increasingly difficult to resist Russia's turn to the left. As was the case 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 hurting the country and left-wing forces that would inevitably raise the issue of renationalizing privatized assets. During Yeltsin's time, many democracy-minded people, fearing the communists' return to power, supported the corrupt ruling team and closed their eyes to election fraud, 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 a fear that non-liberal forces might gain power and supporting the democratic process, that is, free and fair elections, no matter what the outcome of doing so. If the liberal minority once again takes the authorities' side, this would sound the death knell for liberalism in Russia and make its reemergence next to impossible in the near future.

What about the Russian political nationalism feared by liberals and the West? Recent events show that nationalism is not the dominant force in the country. The fears that nationalists and the far Right will dominate the streets appear to be overblown, at least for the time being.

One should take into account the fact that Russian nationalism has undergone a visible evolution from its imperial version, based on the traditional empire-state and personalized power, to one that openly opposes the Putin regime and the system in general with its neo-imperial ambitions. Russian moderate nationalists were among the first to raise the question of transforming Russia into a nation-state and renouncing claims to 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, or whether its moderate or aggressive, xenophobic elements will end up dominating it. Baltic, Polish, and Ukrainian nationalism had a pro-Western and European dimension during the transformation period, born out of opposition to Russian imperial ambitions, but Russian nationalism is still strongly anti-Western in nature. At the same time, however, moderates among Russian nationalists support liberal principles for building the state and government system (rule of law and competition). But will the moderates dominate in the future if the Right consolidates? This is still unclear. The future evolution of Russian nationalism is likely to be full of contradictions. One thing is clear, though: it will undermine the Putin regime, but at the same time its radical currents could complicate efforts to build a liberal democratic system.

At this stage, any radicalism, be it left or right, is the direct outcome of the Kremlin's attempted intimidation of society. The Russian observer Kiril Rogov was right when he wrote: "The increasing illegitimate regime violence against the street protest fortifies the radical leaders of these protests."

# LONG LIVE THE CRISIS!

If the current trends continue in Russia, its economic, social, and political decay will continue, which will bring inevitable geopolitical decline. A country cannot renew itself or strengthen its role on the international scene, after all, if the authorities are intent only on maintaining the status quo indefinitely, relying on the segments of society that are totally dependent on budget largesse, and stamping out dissent. The ability of the Russian system to adapt to the new internal and external circumstances continues to decrease. The authorities try to respond to new challenges mainly through coercion. The regime cannot change the political and social rules of the game, because that would mean new and unpredictable outcomes, and the Kremlin fears these more than it fears the results of the current rot.

Francis Fukuyama has identified two key forms of political decay: first, the failure of the ruling elites, not just to change outmoded institutions, but also “to perceive that a failure has taken place.” In Russia the situation is even more hopeless: The majority of the elite understands the suicidal path the country is on but is unable to change it. The second form of political decay is “repatrimonialization,” when the ruling elite tries to pass on its positions to its children or friends.

“The two types of political decay – institutional rigidity and repatrimonialization – oftentimes come together, as patrimonial officials with a large personal stake in the existing system seek to defend it against reform,” concludes Fukuyama in “The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution.” This process is taking place in Russia: politics and business have turned into a family affair for the influential clans that came to power under Yeltsin and Putin. Neo-patrimonialism helps to secure vested interests but also increases the dysfunctional nature of the system from the standpoint of society as a whole.

Exactly how this political decay will develop and what forms it will take are still very unclear. Will it be a lengthy process of stagnation and decline that goes beyond any timeframe we can adequately measure today? Or will it be

interrupted by social and political explosions, and, if so, when and with what consequences? Would these explosions (or explosion) just lead to the continuation of the authoritarian system under a new guise, or would it transform Russia into a liberal democracy?

I would argue that gradual stagnation, even with “spots” of activism and signs of potential and even real growth in some economic areas (though this growth will hardly be of an innovative nature), is the less inspiring scenario for Russia – and even a threatening one. It will gradually exhaust society’s drive and longing for real change. The most dynamic representatives of society will leave Russia, and the country will continue to plod ahead toward an incurable depression that will last for a very long time.

A socio-economic and political crisis could be a blessing. It would be the key factor that determines whether Russia takes the road of pathetic hopelessness or whether its society finds the energy and strength to look for new forms of political life. With an elite that seeks only to protect its own interests, and without any strong alternative force in society, crisis is the only thing capable of stirring the swamp and snapping people out of their lethargy. When could we be sure that Russia is entering a real, full-blown crisis? Several conditions must be present: sharp economic decline, a massive rise of social anger, inability of the authorities to respond to said anger, and paralysis of the state structures. “It is too early to conclude that Russia is going through a full-scale crisis of Russian authoritarianism and even more – it’s too early to say that we are witnessing its approaching collapse,” says the Russian pundit Vladimir Gelman. “However, the challenges this authoritarianism has been confronted with have a systemic and permanent nature.”

Even if some experts hesitate to describe the current situation as a crisis, they believe that Russia is moving in this direction and forecast more severe challenges on the horizon that the current system is not equipped to handle. In short, we see signs of a crisis producing ripples that are rocking the Russian boat, but not yet waves large enough to capsize the system. This could change at any moment, however. Just imagine the following picture: popular rallies similar to those of the Orange Revolution roil the streets of Moscow, and the police refuse to use violence to disperse them. This could trigger the implosion of the system. In order for this to happen, however, other factors of instability need to be in place.

What could set off a full-scale crisis in Russia, and what would this mean for the country? Russia could head into full-scale crisis if, for example: oil prices fell to \$70 a barrel; public-sector workers saw their living standards take a steep downturn; the urban population became increasingly politicized and the gap between them and the authorities widened; local social and

economic conflicts built up; terrorists struck major urban centers; the civil war in the North Caucasus spilled beyond its boundaries; Orthodox and Islamic militancy rose; signs of splits emerged within the political class; or executive power started to unravel. Setting all of these exacerbating factors into motion and making them converge on a moment in time would require some kind of tipping point, perhaps some idiotic act on the authorities' part, as occurred, for example, when the Kremlin decided to replace social benefits with cash payments, bringing pensioners into the streets in 2005. Other tipping points could include the unjustified use of violence against the population and clashes in the streets, electricity blackouts that bring Moscow to a halt, corruption scandals in government, growing student activism, and so on. In a full-scale crisis we could see executive power become paralyzed, underscoring the authorities' inability to keep the situation under control. The mass protest movement could swell, and the law-enforcement agencies could refuse to use force against the public. A crisis could cause dissension within the political class and erode the authorities' support base.

The mood in Moscow is of crucial importance for the Russian authorities' future. However, if a social and political explosion does take place, several conditions would be necessary to channel that unrest in a peaceful direction and ensure the beginning of a transformation. These conditions are: the consolidation of anti-regime and anti-system forces; the readiness on the part of pragmatists among the authorities to enter into an alliance with the non-system opposition; the adoption of new laws on free and fair elections and their immediate organization; and the endorsement by the old parliament, under pressure from society, of constitutional amendments that would curtail presidential power (or the convocation of a constitutional conference to adopt such amendments). This would inevitably be followed by a period during which the anti-system coalition would fall apart and a new round of efforts to draw new political boundaries would begin, only this time taking 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 and moderates within the system to prepare for transformation on the basis of demonopolizing power and guaranteeing political competition.

Just as important for Russia's transformation is a favorable international environment. This is not about Western assistance and its democracy-promotion policies, which can do more harm than good. 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 and repression, or by helping to smooth the way for its representatives to leave Russia.

Unfortunately, Russia is moving in a dangerous direction at the moment. The authorities still have enough resources at their disposal to keep the country in an indefinite state of “controlled decline.” What is more, the ruling class has deliberately chosen to deepen the degradation and demoralization of society, trying to keep people numbed in the hopes that this will prevent the emergence of an alternative that would threaten its survival. This atmosphere of continued decay, in which moral principles are eroded and total mistrust and cynicism spread through society, could push the country down the path of slow rot. In this situation, popular protests could end up turning into a ruthless and destructive mutiny, unless constructive forces within society consolidate to prevent this outcome.

No matter what form Russia’s continued degradation takes, whether the country runs into worsening crisis or implosion, the trend that has undermined its territorial integrity will inevitably continue even if transformation begins. It will be very difficult to maintain regions belonging to different cultures and even civilizations within a single country, especially one built on a unitary construction. I have already mentioned the problem of the North Caucasus. The future of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan is also unclear, although these regions’ lack of external borders would make it harder for them to secede from Russia. In any case, we need to be prepared for a new spiral toward the collapse of what is still an only partially intact old empire.



## IN SEARCH OF A NEW PARADIGM

Now let us look at the process of understanding the basic political realities in Russia and the search for exit strategies from the Russian system. The search transpires outside of the Kremlin's purview, that is, in society itself, and among independent political and expert groups. The very fact that the Russian public and political thought has started moving beyond the simple analysis of current events is a positive development. Today the Russian thinking community is contemplating broader, long-term strategic issues and has already proceeded to developing projects, that is, creating "road maps" for transforming authoritarianism. (At an earlier stage, alternative exit strategies were offered by quite a few experts and politicians, including Andrei Illarionov, Garry Kasparov, Vladimir Ryzhkov, and Boris Nemtsov.)

Much criticism can be directed at Russian intellectuals and opposition politicians. There was a lot that they failed to foresee. They constantly fall behind with their assessments of current events and get distracted by minutiae, thus losing strategic perspective. Some of them concentrate solely on the problems of Russia and do not express any interest in world developments, which explains their inability or lack of desire to understand Russia's position in the outside world and the outside world's influence on Russia.

The bitter truth is that the Russian opposition and non-system intellectuals were not able to offer an action plan after the first wave of public protests that began in 2011. There was an understanding that this wave was coming, since the limits of the regime's survivability have long been evident, but the non-system community did not have time to devise an action plan, nor did it formulate an agenda that could receive support across the public spectrum. The non-system community also turned out to be incapable of forming mechanisms for dealing with a more repressive regime.

However, Russian independent political discourse is gradually developing. There are some visible signs of progress. Let us determine in which direction non-system political thought is being developed, and on which issues there already exists public or expert consensus among independent analysts and politicians.

In the independent community that includes all major ideological streams, there has long been recognition that the political crisis in Russia is deepening. Non-system liberals, the Left, and the nationalists can agree on that. This understanding also exists in the political and expert circles close to the regime. However, it was not yet clear at the end of 2011 to what extent the crisis of the regime influenced the crisis of the system as a whole. In most cases, experts did not distinguish between the “regime” and the “system,” but soon they will have to gain an understanding of the differences between them.

The public’s thinking is already moving in this direction. I will quote Mikhail Remizov, who belongs to moderate nationalist circles but who thinks along the line popular among opposition liberals. In the summer of 2012, he wrote:

*This anti-crisis technology [the Putin regime] has worked surprisingly long and well. However, it cannot work endlessly, and the current protest boom is but one symptom of the fact that this technology is nearing the end of its lifecycle... It has to be understood that... we are not bidding farewell to the “odious past” but are rather returning to it. The personalized political regime is left one-on-one with institutional atrophy, afflicted by “congestive political failure,” which it has contained for a certain time and perhaps will continue to contain for some time.*

Here he is discussing Russia’s return to its systemic problems, unsolved since 1991, and here, as well, “The personalized regime is decaying; it has stopped compensating for the genetic defects of the system.”

The anti-system circles are changing their attitudes toward the crisis process itself. It is no longer perceived as a semi-mythical apocalyptic vision but rather as an objective and inevitable process that may (or rather, must) trigger change, and without which change is impossible. In short, societal development is no longer viewed idealistically as containing some static world operating smoothly, without fits and starts.

Opposition social and political groups are coming to agreement on another issue: that change is possible only if pressure from below is applied, that is, by way of revolution. Some talk about it cautiously or anxiously, while others are optimistic, but the very fact that many are overcoming their fear of the concept of “revolution” is notable. Vladimir Pastukhov was one of the first among Russian political writers to calmly state: “The society has entered the phase of preparing for the revolution... We have already fallen into this revolutionary rut, where everyone plays his historical role.” Perhaps there is too much fatalism in this statement, but it is justified, at least with regard to Putin and his team; they really will not be able to change their role

as guardians and will only increase the tensions in society. Political commentator Evgeni Ikhlov also ponders the “revolutionary dialectic” and “not allowing the revolution to become merely a regime face lift.”

Further, here is what political philosopher Andrei Pelipenko writes:

*The regime has tried to besmirch this word (“revolution”), take it out of commission, and firmly link it to everything dreadful, and thus under no circumstances acceptable. “Just no revolution,” the intelligentsia is hysterically squealing, missing the point that by doing so, they are framing an ideological statement of the regime. However, revolution is a normal and logical form of historical dynamics regardless of whether you like it or not.*

This message can also be heard from the moderate Right: The New Russia project cannot be implemented by the regime. “Now it is the regime opponents’ move,” says Mikhail Remizov.

Fear of the word “revolution” is understandable among those who follow events in Russia. The Bolshevik takeover ushered in a dictatorship that turned out to be harsher than the tsarist regime. Other great revolutions of the past, including the French Revolution, do not engender much optimism about this method of change. However, it is hard to miss the fact that the more the Kremlin fears revolution and does everything to avoid change, the likelier it makes revolution. Moreover, the policy of thwarting protest from below by clamping down on society not only makes its advent more likely; it also increases the threat that, when it comes, it will come as an act of extremely violent confrontation bringing on a new dictatorship.

On the other hand, there is the history of the peaceful “velvet” revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe. These resulted from compromises (pacts) between system pragmatists and the anti-system opposition. The future of the Russian transformations depends on the ability of the Russian moderates and anti-system opposition to make such a pact. However, this can happen only in the case of a crisis that will provoke a split within the ruling class, demonstrating to the moderates that they will lose more (or everything) by staying inside the system.

There is a lot here that is unclear, however. “The transformation should take place constitutionally,” claims the majority of leading oppositionists who think about how to avoid violence in the impending political struggle. In this light, a question arises: to what extent is constitutional transformation possible in Russia if the constitution contains barriers to such a transformation, in the form of “organization of power,” that must be eliminated?

The history of the velvet revolutions in Eastern Europe demonstrates that there are peaceful methods for overcoming these barriers, so a repeat of bloody revolution is not necessarily inevitable in Russia – at least for now! The questions remain: Will there be a chance for a peaceful way out, and will the moderates and the opposition take that chance?

Here we will be addressing another issue in Russian discourse: constitutional change. Should the Yeltsin constitution be changed or retained? In 2011 this question was barely raised. In opposition circles, the question itself was met with surprise and rejection. There was a prevalent opinion that the constitution should simply be followed, and that changing it would endanger the integrity of the state and unleash chaos. The liberal political commentator Valeriya Novodvorskaya warned: “To change the constitution is to open Pandora’s Box. Just start and nothing will remain there... It is madness, amok. The constitution is the only element of law, the only Yeltsin gift that we have left. If you knock it from under our feet, we will all be dangling in the noose.”

However, by mid-2012, constitutional change had become one of the most frequently discussed issues, and it has become one of the protest movement’s demands, as stated in the Political Manifesto approved in May 2012. The opposition movement has started to realize that the provision of fair elections, which was once the main opposition demand, cannot change the personalized-power system when power is legally monopolized. Indeed, genuinely free elections are impossible under a power monopoly. This power monopoly was legitimized by the Yeltsin constitution, which sets the president above all other branches of government, and above society as well. The guarantee of power monopoly included in the constitution allows the president, the source of this monopoly, to blot out any and all other rights and freedoms in the constitution at his pleasure.

Here is what Igor Klyamkin, Mikhail Krasnov, and I wrote on this issue in 2012:

*The position of those who see the exit from the political dead end within the boundaries of the current constitution looks extremely naïve. They say it is enough to follow its spirit and letter well in order to ensure political competition and regime change in accordance with the people’s will. This competition is absolutely impossible under our Basic Law! Tangible political representation of different social groups is also impossible. If the president determines the main policy vectors, then the party electoral competition, albeit fair, can only be construed as the struggle for Duma seats and privileges but not for the chance to implement some independent programs. There may be the struggle for Duma status but not for political influence.*

My colleagues and I have made a considerable effort to prove that the Russian constitution did not prevent the gradual expansion of authoritarianism and the concentration of power in the hands of the president; nor did it prevent direct constitutional violations by the president himself. According to Krasnov's calculations, since the constitution was adopted in 1993, three Russian presidents have received 502 new powers. Yeltsin received 165, Putin 226, and Medvedev 111. Among them are many constitutionally questionable ones, along with some flat-out unconstitutional ones. There were 41 unconstitutional powers during Yeltsin's term in office, 108 during Putin's, and 51 during Medvedev's. Naturally, the presidents expanded their own powers and created new ones. The new Russian monarchs used the constitutional articles on the power structure to violate articles on rights and liberties, all within the constitutional framework. In brief, authoritarianism was expanded by constitutional methods.

The monopolized power set forth in the Basic Law constantly moves to expand itself, and there is nothing and no one to contain it. Since his return to the Kremlin in May 2012, Putin has unabashedly begun to undermine the constitution, casting away enshrined rights and liberties by taking advantage of his constitutional monopoly on power.

In the course of 2012, the opposition community had reached no consensus about eliminating the super-presidency. There has been an ongoing discussion on whether the super-presidency should be replaced by a parliamentary or mixed regime. I, along with Klyamkin and Krasnov, believe that Russia should be moving toward a mixed parliamentary-presidential or premier-presidential regime, since a transition toward a parliamentary regime, given a weak party system, may lead either to chaos or to a new monopoly, only this time it would be an authoritarian premier-ship monopoly. At the time of writing, there was still discussion underway on changes to the constitution and the role that this issue should play in the opposition agenda.

Meanwhile, there has been progress in Russian political discourse on another issue: that of changing the old concepts of leadership. The constant search for a charismatic leader is an old Russian tradition. Such a leader had to consolidate society and become the primary agent of change. This concept of charismatic leadership was also characteristic of liberals, reflected in their faith in all three Russian presidents. (This is still characteristic of many liberals and is primarily supported by the system liberals.) Gradually, however, the public has begun to grasp the failure of the "Leader-Reformer and the Leader-Savior" model. Lately the opposition has started searching for a new "multi-subject" model, that is, one that will feature collaboration among leaders or collective leadership. (An example of this form of leader-

ship is the Republican Party-People's Freedom Party, which is headed by Mikhail Kasyanov, Boris Nemtsov, and Vladimir Ryzhkov.) There are quite a few difficulties associated with this model, not the least of which is the fact that it is difficult at times for the leaders to agree on a common course. This model is also not yet understood by the general public, which continues to seek leadership in a single person. Nevertheless, the search for a new leadership model signifies a new stage in the development of Russian political consciousness, with at least part of society and the elite turning away from popular political stereotypes.

Among other issues facing the opposition is undoubtedly the important, yet unsettled, issue of the type of democratic coalition. The convergence of attitudes of different political forces (liberals, the Left, and moderate nationalists) toward the regime allows for the creation of an all-inclusive democratic movement to struggle with the authoritarian regime. It should be acknowledged, however, that there are substantial differences between these forces with respect to the building of the new political and economic system. These differences make disagreements and even confrontation between the elements of the democratic movement inevitable, once the authoritarian regime is no more.

However, up to this point, despite some cooperation, the process of creating an inclusive democratic movement has been difficult and painful. Besides the radical Left's gravitation toward the use of force and populist slogans, and the nationalists' extremism and xenophobia, there has been an issue with sectarianism in the liberal community, with some of its members showing unwillingness to enter into a coalition with other political groups. Some leaders of the liberal camp consider political distancing from the Left and from moderate nationalists to be more important than the struggle with the authoritarian regime.

It is still unclear when or even whether the opposition forces will be able to find common ground. The future of the protest movement depends in large measure on the answer to this question. The experiment in the fall of 2012 with the creation of the opposition Coordinating Committee, a body that includes representatives of key ideological and political groups, could, despite many organizational problems, be viewed as a positive sign that the opposition is moving toward new forms of consolidation on the basis of a broad democratic movement. How effective the Coordinating Committee will be in forming the new democratic consensus remains to be seen.

One more question discussed in anti-system circles relates to the coordination of civil and political protest. Some intellectuals and public figures believe that the development of civil society in all its diversity should be stressed, and



that public participation should not be politicized. They claim that diverse organizations and non-political advocacy groups (from ones focused on ecology to consumer protection) should be developed. This is said to be the way to create a mature civil society that can become an active opponent of the regime in the future, forcing it to delegate some responsibilities to civil society. Incidentally, it is clear that this idea of civil society is welcomed by the regime. No need for politics, says the Kremlin; let society deal with personal interests, although under the control of the regime or the institutions it created. In reality, emphasis on the non-political thrust of civil society creates the danger that it will fall under the control of the regime and becoming an element of the system. Concentrating on personal and group non-political interests and “baby steps” within the framework of the system built around “the presidential vertical” makes these interests dependent on the vertical.

At the same time, the need for a new stage of political consolidation does not preclude the development of new forms of civic awareness and the growth of public self-reliance. In the past two years, Russian society has made huge progress in establishing or reviving the long-forgotten values of collectivism, cooperation, and community spirit, irrespective of political and ideological orientation. Essentially, society has started solving problems that the state, which turned to serving the ruling class exclusively, was not able to solve. Understandably, this trend was very frightening to the Kremlin, since it realized that societal autonomy will inevitably be accompanied by opposition to the state, hence the desperate drive to control the volunteer movement and to deprive society of any opportunity for free initiative.

The conversation continues on whether civil society and the opposition should engage in a dialogue and collaboration with the regime. Many in civil society and intellectual circles still believe in such collaboration. Their representatives belong to the public councils and other institutions created by the regime (for example, the Public Chamber, the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, “Big Government,” and so forth), which are supposed to serve as the arenas for collaboration between society and the regime. Yet in reality the central and local public “councils” created by the regime are simply simulations, intended to replace civil society and channel public life within boundaries drawn by the regime. Interestingly, the less democratic the country becomes, the more simulations are created by the regime.

After Putin’s return to the Kremlin, quite a few representatives of the intelligentsia and civil society left the Presidential Council for Human Rights in a show that they were unwilling to further support the Kremlin’s imitation. However, generally speaking, there has not been a mass distancing of intellectuals and experts from the regime, even when the regime has revert-

ed to overt authoritarianism. A substantial part of the thinking minority has chosen to remain friendly to the regime and in the regime's "orbit" despite the damage to its reputation.

Obviously, there is a part of civil society that has to engage in dialogue with the Kremlin on specific issues of protecting people's rights. The participation of civil rights advocates in the regime's councils is understandable and justifiable. However, the other representatives of civil society and the intellectuals participating in these councils are displaying a conformism that is hardly of any benefit to society.

There was also some controversy about the "roundtable" discussion between the opposition and the regime. The idea originated with the opposition even before the first protests of 2011 and was translated into "The December 12 Roundtable." Its creators planned to develop this idea in order to use it at some point in the future when the regime had started to lose ground. Then the roundtable would become a medium for discussing issues relating to the transfer of power to the opposition.

At the time of the first December 2011 protests, the idea of a roundtable suddenly became relevant. Both the opposition and some moderates from the ruling team hoped that the Kremlin would agree to a dialogue. They were mistaken. The Kremlin had no interest in dialogue, and the reason it did not is clear: Why would the regime agree to a roundtable with the opposition and listen to its demands when it poses no threat to the regime?

One could not help getting the impression (Andrei Piontkowski was the first to notice this) that certain groups close to the Kremlin, primarily the system liberals, have tried to use the idea of dialogue at the height of the protest movement as leverage for getting the regime to elevate their status. "You can see that the crisis is intensifying," they said to the Kremlin, "but we know how to solve the problem. We are ready to take responsibility for getting Russia out of this crisis." Even after the protests began to wane, those close to the system liberals continued to talk about including reformers in the government. But what for? The regime wasn't about to start any reforms! The representatives of other parties (for instance, Dmitri Gudkov from the opposition faction of the A Just Russia party) also continued to say that "the Kremlin is morally ready for negotiations with the opposition." This was clearly wishful thinking on their part. Putin's team ignored these efforts, which was to be expected.

At the time of writing, the time for a roundtable discussion has not yet come, but the idea itself can prove helpful as the political process intensifies. That is why the opposition will probably contemplate the formation of a round-



table. However, at this stage, while the protest movement is still weak, hopes for a roundtable discussion with the regime may actually end up neutralizing the protest movement and disorienting its members.

Combining political and socioeconomic protest has been another serious issue debated by the anti-system activists. Tatiana Vorozheikina was among the first to point out the need to broaden the agenda of the protests in the big cities to include social and economic issues. She wrote:

*Democracy in Russia is impossible without integrating the social demands of both consumers and producers who are made redundant by the economic development. Without integrating these segments, without considering their interests – which are quite often antithetical to liberal ones – the democratic regime will be superficial and reversible.*

Indeed, the building of a bridge between metropolitan and provincial Russia and between political and social demands (for example, between the notions of freedom and justice), is one of the most pressing issues for society.

Meanwhile, the regime is pursuing policies of division, apparently with some success. It is inciting the poorest, the least educated, and the most assistance-dependent parts of the population against the most dynamic parts of the population concentrated in Moscow and other large cities, and this “divide and rule” policy is still successful. The conflict between these two segments of the population may complicate Russia’s transformation.

For the liberal part of the opposition, the inclusion of socio-economic demands in the agenda is the only way to get through to the majority of the population and give its thoughts and feelings some expression. Besides, combining political demands (for example, demands for freedom, the rule of law, free competition, and the release of political prisoners) and socio-economic ones is the only way of purging the latter of populist and anti-free-market measures.

# AND NOW A FEW WORDS ABOUT PROPAGANDA STEREOTYPES AND THOSE WHO SUPPORT THEM

Initially, I was not going to write about the Kremlin's main propaganda points. They are well known and do not show much imagination. More importantly, they are not worthy of any attention. Independent experts have already given them an extensive and persuasive rebuttal.

However, I find that Western authors persistently use these same, worn-out arguments, and not even the most persuasive ones. Perhaps they are not aware that they are parroting the language of the Kremlin talking heads, or perhaps they are aware, and they just happen to agree with them.

I have to admit that prominent, widely known and respected Western experts try today to be more cautious in their assessments of Russia. Most have stepped back from the initial optimism inspired by Medvedev's fake presidency. There are still Western observers, however, who apparently believe the Kremlin's mantras and are willing participants in their dissemination, so it makes sense to at least briefly mention and respond to some of the Kremlin's arguments most widely repeated by Western observers, journalists, and even politicians.

*"Russia is not ready for democracy. Any expansion of freedom will lead to a wave of left-wing populism and nationalism. Therefore, the personalized-power regime is the only possible way to rule this country."*

I have argued with the supporters of the "Russia is not ready for democracy" theory numerous times. For instance, I had an argument with Richard Pipes, who claims that Russia, due to its history, culture, and mentality, is not ready to be a liberal democracy. I still cannot understand where this condescending attitude (or perhaps it is a lack of hope?) comes from. If Filipinos, Koreans, Mongolians, Poles, Romanians, and members of other nations, with their own unique cultures, mentalities, and traditions, have shown themselves to be ready for democracy, why is it necessary to argue that Russians are unable to adopt democratic values? Did the Russians that took to the streets in 1991 and in 2011-12 do so in support of dictatorship?

There is a lot of evidence that the overwhelming majority of Russian society supports norms that will make life more dignified. Even those Russians who support the leader hope that he will be able to ensure the supremacy of law, justice, and human dignity for all Russians.

Some might counter that there are polls showing Russian society's commitment to traditional values, its suspicion of the West, its readiness to submit to a leader and to authority, and its rejection of private property. My answer is that one has to take a critical look at these polls and see how their questions are formulated. If one asks, for instance, "Do you want Russia to remain a superpower?" the majority will answer "Yes," but if one asks, "Are you ready to pay the price in order for Russia to remain a superpower?" only 10-24 percent of respondents will say "Yes." In 2002-03, the sociologists Tatyana Kutkovets and Igor Klyamkin conducted a survey that found only 7 percent who said they supported all the premises of the Russian matrix. In 2012 the Levada Center asked the same questions and got nearly the same results.

Of course, we should not overstate the modernizing aspirations of Russian society, which is still dominated by vacillating and dormant segments. However, the important thing is that, for the first time in Russian history, the vast majority of society will not resist if a new, modern way of organizing life is offered to them. One may read my arguments on this issue in my book, "Putin's Russia" (2005).

As for left-wing populism and nationalism, these began to grow under Putin. One can be sure that there will be even more growth in both given the further retention of power by a regime that discredits liberal values and intentionally tries to demoralize the population.

*"Russia can become democratic, but only slowly, gradually, and 'from the top.'"*

I have already discussed this argument above.

*"Russia should modernize its economy first and then proceed to political liberalization."*

That is what the Kremlin has been trying to do since 1991, but it could accomplish neither economic reforms nor political democratization. How much longer must one toy with this model before admitting the obvious conclusion that it does not work?

*“Russia is democratizing already. The current institutions are consistent with its needs.”*

To call the artificial Kremlin-ruled institutions democratic is to mock democracy. Besides, who decides on behalf of Russian society that political imitations meet its needs? If they are “consistent with their interests,” then why do people take to the streets to protest them?

*“Putin has brought the country economic growth and prosperity. He has restored the integrity of the state.”*

Russians under Putin do enjoy better lives, but this is due to high oil prices. Sponging off oil, however, resulted in the creation of a corrupt economy based on natural resources, the appearance of a rentier class, and a sharp and growing gap between the rich and the poor, which revived class hatreds. A drop in the price of oil could spell the collapse of the economy and, subsequently, of the political regime. Further, how can we be sure that the Russian economy is growing if the real economic data are kept secret?

As for “the restoration of state integrity,” the appearance of a de facto independent sultanate in Chechnya signaled the beginning of the disintegration of Russian statehood. It was Putin who dealt state integrity a blow by agreeing to establish and paying tribute to a local dictatorship in Chechnya.

*“Russia needs to protect its sovereignty.”*

Who is going to deprive Russia of its sovereignty, and what kind of state is it if, after twelve years of Putin’s lifting Russia “from her knees,” it must still protect its sovereignty?

*“The West has no right to criticize Russia, since it shares many of the same flaws.”*

If no one has the right to criticize Russia, then Russia should leave the Council of Europe. By joining it, Russia confirmed that its internal affairs are not its exclusive domain. If no one has the right to criticize Russia, then Russia should leave the G8, which includes only liberal democracies. It should rescind its signature on all treaties that mention normative values, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

*“All legislation passed by the Kremlin – the laws limiting the rights to assembly, the laws that declare NGOs ‘foreign agents,’ the laws that establish controls over the Internet – have their counterparts in Western bodies of law.”*

This is an outright lie. No Western legal system has laws that would deprive the public of the rights to assembly, protest, and free speech. No liberal democracy rejects basic constitutional norms that recognize the freedoms and rights of society. If this is not the case, we are dealing not with liberal democracy but a different type of system.

*“The Russian opposition has neither a plan nor a policy agenda.”*

The policy agenda of the Russian opposition is a work in progress. However, the proposals that it has already put forward are worthy of extensive public debate. Why, then, do the authorities deny the opposition an opportunity to do so? And why does the Kremlin think that no one can lay claim to power other than those who have already concentrated it in their hands?

So much, therefore, for the main products of the Kremlin’s propaganda machine. One would have thought that, with Putin’s return to the Kremlin and its repressive measures, the regime itself has done everything it possibly could to dispel all remaining illusions regarding its intentions and essence. But no! When I read some Western publications or talk to some Western observers, I still hear the familiar Kremlin refrain. It means that there are Kremlin arguments that still seem convincing to the Western audience, and so I try to refute them yet again.

I will cite a few examples of ways in which some Western politicians, diplomats, publicists, and journalists have become protectors of the Russian system (unwittingly, I hope). This is happening at a time when there can be no doubt that the Russian regime’s authoritarianism is strengthening; at least, those who understand the current Russian developments and the Kremlin agenda should have no doubt.

Let me begin with Gernot Erler, a respected and widely known German politician and historian. Dr. Erler definitely understands what is happening in Russia, something he reconfirmed for me when he spoke at the same panel in which I was participating. In a collection of essays newly published in Germany (“Die Europaisierung Russlands. Moskau zwischen Modernisierungspartnerschaft und Grobmachtrolle,” Frankfurt-am-Main: Campus Publishers, April 2012), Dr. Erler expressed his belief that Russia is dominated by what he called “Europeanization.” This Europeanization is reflected, among other trends, in the development of the political and social

system on the basis of common European values, such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and the role of civil society. If the book had been published, let's say, in 2008-11, during the modernist pretense of Medvedev's presidency, I admit that it could have inflated hopes for the system's Europeanization, but the book was published after the Kremlin's intentions were plain for all to see. Today, to argue that Russia is developing along the lines of European standards is to stop understanding Russian reality or... Well, one can guess what the motives are for such a position if its author understands the reality.

To be sure, during the debate on Russia in the German Bundestag in November 2012, Gernot Erler did not mince words in describing Russian domestic developments. He described the most egregious cases in the Kremlin's crackdown on human rights, admitting that the Russian leader had "disappointed many who had hopes," and that the Russian authorities "scared the opposition on all levels of the Russian society." But then, how does all of this fit into his concept of "Europeanization?"

However, Dr. Erler can't compete with former U.S. Ambassador John Evans, who recently puzzled an audience with his revelations in *Russia Beyond the Headlines*. Ambassador Evans served as a consul general in St. Petersburg when Putin was serving as a member of Mayor Anatoly Sobchak's team. Today Ambassador Evans complains that the Western assessment of Russia is too bleak. According to him, Russia is not an autocracy. "There does exist an unprecedented degree of freedom of speech in Russia," he says, and Putin's "main frame of reference is a legal one" ("he might as well have been a lawyer"). Ambassador Evans finds it ridiculous that "everything that happens in Russia, be it the murder of a journalist or a case of corruption, is automatically taken to be Putin's fault."

As for Putin's "legalistic" approach, is this what he has demonstrated in his attitudes toward Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Pussy Riot, and other political prisoners? Is it "legalistic" to reject constitutional freedoms? Evans believes that it is not fair to accuse Putin of "everything that happens in Russia." Fine! But the problem with this is that Putin is sitting on the top of the "presidential vertical" and has liquidated all other independent institutions that could have been called to account for what is happening in Russia.

After some reflection, I have come to conclusion that Ambassador Evans admires Putin, not only because he had a good working relationship with him in the 1990s, but for another reason: Evans believes that Russians should be happy with what they have. "By historical standards," that is, compared with Soviet times and Stalinism, Russians today have a lot: free travel and the right to emigrate! What else do they want? Those Russians have to be happy with what they've got!

Ambassador Evans is right to say that “there is the simple question of having some elementary sympathy for Russia and Russians.” The problem is that the Russians for which he demonstrates sympathy are in the Kremlin and the personalized-power regime. In other words, he confuses the regime and the society. They really are not the same thing.

And one final note: Ambassador Evans reminds his readers that “the KGB was the Russian Harvard.” This has to mean that the KGB people were the best and the brightest of the Soviet elite. I can assure him: the KGB is not Harvard. Ask the people who were unlucky enough to deal with either the KGB or its successor, the FSB.

Here is an interesting example of a discussion that brought out many typical Kremlin myths. In May 2012, Ian Bremmer and Nouriel Roubini published an article in the *Financial Times* (“Time to Blackball Russia’s Autocratic State”) that presented a critical assessment of the Russian regime and state that even members of the Russian elite could agree with. However, the article provoked the ire of certain authors who have long specialized in accentuating the positive in the Russian regime.

Two of these authors, Mark Adomanis, writing for *Forbes*, and Ben Aris, the editor-publisher of *Business New Europe*, both found serious flaws in the Bremmer and Roubini critique. The logic of their rebuttals offers plenty of material for irony seekers and provides great examples of distorted perceptions of reality and wishful thinking. I will address only one of their arguments. Adomanis tries to refute the statement that Russia is a corrupt and authoritarian state. China is much more corrupt and authoritarian, he exclaims. Perhaps it is, but China is not a member of the G8 and is not seeking to join the Western club. China also never sought to be called a democracy, as the Kremlin constantly does. Some indicators, Adomanis enthusiastically continues, reveal that corruption is much less of a problem in today’s Russia than it is in Brazil. I have no idea where Adomanis is getting these corruption indicators. According to Russian studies, corruption in Russia continues to rise, and even the Kremlin has been forced to acknowledge the problem, via Prime Minister Medvedev. But even if Brazil is more corrupt than Russia, could this be seen as evidence of Russia’s progress?!

However, Adomanis is not so easily convinced. He finds another reason to be optimistic about Putin’s Russia: its economic growth. On this score, perhaps he should read Alexei Kudrin, the former finance minister and deputy premier, as well as other truly knowledgeable analysts (including people close to the regime and the system, who are not even real opponents of the Kremlin). They could explain the true nature of Russian growth: that it is the outcome of high oil prices, and that, despite (questionable) growth



indicators, Russia has entered a crisis phase that promises to be even more complicated and painful than the last one. Let me quote Kudrin's August 2012 comments: "Russia is a country of huge commercial risks... The Russian budget in 2013 could have a deficit... The explosive device has been ignited and we are entering a crisis period... economic growth totally depends on commodity price... if the EU recession continues the Russian financial system could face implosion." Are these comments enough to begin a sober process of thought concerning Russia's economy?

It would also be wonderful if our "optimists" could understand one truth: there can be economic growth without development, that is, an organism can grow larger (as it did during Soviet times!) but still be rotten on the inside.

In his next article, though, Adomanis acknowledges that "the Russian economy is flagging and Putin's primary source of budget revenue is rapidly drying up" (just a month before he wrote that the economy was doing fine, but never mind). Nevertheless, he still refused to surrender his inexhaustible optimism. In response to an article in the *Guardian*, which harshly criticized both Putin and the regime, our Brave Optimist weighed in with two arguments that are now being offered by all Kremlin defenders. First, said Adomanis, in the summer of 2012, Putin's approval ratings began to grow again, reaching 67 percent. Second, the price of oil remains high, which means that the regime has a strong economic base and is not going to fall. Since these arguments are popular ones, I will comment on them.

First, as to Putin's high approval ratings, the December 2011 protest wave occurred when Putin's rating was pretty high. Nevertheless, people in Moscow took to the streets, paralyzing the Kremlin. According to all predictions, the ruling United Russia party should not have had any difficulty winning the parliamentary elections. Forecasts had Putin winning the presidency by at least as big a margin as in 2004. Yet, in reality, the regime had to resort to unheard of pressure and electoral malfeasance to guarantee United Russia's majority and Putin's victory in the first round of the presidential election. Even the most reliable predictions and sociological forecasts turned out to be mistaken; people have stopped telling the truth when asked about the regime and Putin in particular. They may tell pollsters that they support Putin, but when it is time to act they often vote for someone else or do not vote at all. Some take to the streets. True, today people are more open about their feelings toward Putin and the Kremlin, with only about 34 percent saying they would like Putin to stay in power for this new presidential term.

What is one to make of this phenomenon? We may conclude that sociology does not always work under an authoritarian, increasingly repressive re-



gime, simply because people are afraid to tell the truth. That is why Putin's high approval ratings can distort the picture one forms of Russian politics. The surveys indicating that Putin's base of staunch supporters amounts to 15 percent of the population appear closer to the truth. The rest constitutes the rather murky swamp of the public that, as Lev Gudkov from the Levada Center says, does not like Putin or even loathes him but votes for him because it sees no alternative and fears the implosion of the state.

The most important thing is the Muscovites' opinion of Putin, given the fact that Moscow has always sealed the fate of Russia's rulers. Today, the majority of Muscovites has stopped supporting Putin. That is the most important thing, not what Putin's approval ratings are in the ethnic republics or the frightened provinces.

As for the price of oil, it is no longer a decisive factor. The Russian protests happened when the price of a barrel of petroleum exceeded \$100. Relatively well-to-do people participated in the protests, and it was their financial security that allowed them to start thinking about freedom. Of course, when the oil price drops, public-sector employees will show their bitterness. However, discontent can be provoked by other factors as well, including the ongoing disintegration of the Soviet industrial infrastructure.

"The Pussy Riot trial is bad, but it's definitely not 'Stalinism,'" argues Adomanis. True, Putinism is not Stalinism. The regime does not murder "enormous numbers of people upon any basis you can think of." However, this could give one the impression that Putinism is merely "vaguely distasteful or unpleasant," and that it still is much better than the old dictatorship, which means that Russia must be evolving in the right direction. Russians should be happy because they aren't being killed anymore! They, like Mikhail Khodorkovsky, just rot in prison now! See, it's progress!

Adomanis and others simply don't understand the cynicism toward Russians embedded in such arguments, as if Russians represent an inferior race that should be content with a life that the average Western person would abhor.

I will quote one more minstrel of Russia's "success:" Ben Aris. Aris was also outraged by Bremmer and Roubini's critique: "Bremmer and Roubini should be ashamed of themselves as they engage in the most blatant fact-twisting and hyperbole that is designed to do nothing than to reinforce the dogma that 'Russia is evil.'" I personally found nothing in Bremmer and Roubini's article that would convict them of believing that "Russia is evil." I did see evidence that indicates that the Russian regime is evil, but that is a totally different kettle of fish. Besides, Aris himself happens to be pretty good at fact-twisting. He lacks imagination, though, and is forced to resort to the argu-

ments that the Putinist propaganda machine has churned out. For instance, Aris reminds his Western audience that on Putin's watch Russian GDP has grown tenfold. Ah, but how much more would GDP have grown if not for corruption and the Kremlin's complete annihilation of the rule of law?

Other BRIC countries, continues Aris, are weaker than Russia. So what? Does that fact make Russia a successful economy? "Russians are enjoying the fastest-growing personal wealth of any country in the world," Aris claims, flipping me out completely. I am left to ask our "analyst" just one thing: which Russians is he talking about? Does he mean the Russian oligarchs and the ruling gang who have bought half of Europe? Then he is right. But there is the other Russia: that of millions of ordinary people who live from hand to mouth and can only dream of acquiring a new television or refrigerator. Even those who have recently emerged from poverty are not satisfied with their situation and have a dim view of the future. Let me turn to a Levada Center survey that will tell you what Russians are really thinking about their social and economic situation. Only 9 percent of Russians view the Russian economic situation as "positive;" 50 percent think that they and their families "have lost" during the last years of Putin's rule. Only 18 percent view their economic situation as "good" or "very good." Here is a more detailed survey on the well-being of Russian families: 46 percent of respondents say that they have money enough for food and clothes but not for other more expensive goods; 30 percent say that they have enough money only for food; 9 percent barely make ends meet; and only 1 percent of respondents have no problem with purchasing expensive things like houses or cars.

Finally Aris finds decisive proof that Putin's Russia is going to be a "success story." In September 2012 he quoted megastar investor Jim Rogers. Rogers had been famously "down on Russia" and said in the past that he would never even look at it as an investment destination; now he says that he "might start" investing there. That rather equivocal endorsement was enough for Aris to spin up a breathtaking forecast:

*Russia is looking more attractive than ever. The political fears that followed the first street protests have diminished as it becomes increasingly clear there will be no Russian spring as the opposition has failed to make any progress in transforming itself... into an effective political force.*

Aris forgot to finish Jim Rogers' quote, however. "I am not investing in Russia yet," Rogers said. "If I decide to invest, I will look around." He had better look around. With respect to Aris' hope that the protests have subsided, he should have been more cautious and waited. He may not wait long to be surprised.

Rather than admit that the Kremlin is actually doing something wrong, for example, by supporting the bloody Assad regime (something even Aris does not dare claim is right), Aris employs another Kremlin trick, rhetorically asking: “Doesn’t America have such bad friends?” But two wrongs don’t make a right: America’s cynicism and double standards do not make the Kremlin’s policies respectable.

“Russia’s macro fundamentals are among the best in the world,” say all Kremlin fans. But so what? Russia boasted the same “strong fundamentals” before the 2008 crisis, and this did not prevent the huge slump from which the country has yet to emerge. And why, despite these fundamentals, do Russian businesses escape the country the first chance they get? Why do the clans close to the Kremlin move their money to the West?

Charles Robertson, global chief economist at Renaissance Capital (London), sings the same song, repeating the assertions that Brazil, China, and India are much worse off than Russia in terms of their problems with corruption, politics, and business. What can I say? Businessmen, especially those who are interested in doing business in Russia, have their own perspectives. They understand perfectly that if they want to maintain their business in Russia, they should not criticize the regime. But why go to the trouble of praising it, especially when the situation continues to deteriorate? Perhaps by doing so they are trying to ensure their business in Russia? While Robertson painted his idyllic picture of business in Russia, the head of the Russian Central Bank, Sergey Ignatiev, reported that capital flight had reached \$42 billion in the first half of 2012 (in 2011 it amounted to \$80 billion).

However, the Western businesspeople operating in Russia stubbornly try to see, or rather pretend to see, an idyllic picture. For instance, on June 28, 2012, Chrystia Freeland wrote about how Klaus Kleinfeld, the chief executive of Alcoa and chairman of the U.S.-Russia Business Council, tried to persuade her that Putin “stays on the course of modernization.” When she suggested that Putin might instead be taking Russia backward, she writes, “Kleinfeld demurred.” Of course, he did not want to listen to any arguments that would clash with his view of a Russian reality in which he and Alcoa have found their niche. To find a niche in Russia, a business must support the Kremlin’s worldview.

One can understand that members of the business community perhaps have an interest in not upsetting the regime’s apple cart, but when analysts start to embellish Russian reality, it makes one wonder about their motivation. Take a look at yet another “artist” producing an optimistic portrait of the Russian landscape: Gordon M. Hahn. Here is how he tells his own “history of Russia” (keeping in mind that in fact he wrote all of this long

after it was clear who Medvedev was and where Putin is heading). “Medvedev’s presidency was marked by a political thaw and significant liberalizing reforms,” (!) Hahn writes. He is saying this when even former close associates of Medvedev, such as Igor Yurgens and Evgeny Gontmakher, have been forced to admit that he failed at liberalization. After the rigged elections and Putin’s return to the Kremlin, Hahn insists that Russia has experienced a “return to democratization and market reforms... After the elections, the new Duma began to function more democratically... The Kremlin has responded [to the protests] by expanding the space for political expression, participation and competition.” Putin and Medvedev, he argues, “would prefer a gradually imposed transition,” but they are “likely to be forced into moving more rapidly or even negotiating a transition pact with opposition moderates.” In fact, Russia after the election has proceeded in precisely the opposite direction! True, Mr. Hahn was soon forced to admit that Putin has begun to act in a way that is not quite in keeping with democratic values, but he continues to insist that this does not mean “that the thaw will not be rolled back entirely or even stopped.” One could only raise one’s hands in despair: what country he is talking about?!

There are other ways to support the Kremlin. Peter Lavelle of Russia Today (the Kremlin-funded television channel that broadcasts in English and aims to burnish the Kremlin’s image abroad) blasts the Russian “creative intelligentsia” for its “sad history of failure, arrogance, and irresponsibility.” He tries to assure the Western audience that “These same people say they are interested in democracy, but they know they cannot win elections because their priorities do not match the interests of the majority of voters.” Mr. Lavelle, of course, is never so critical of the Kremlin and apparently finds that it has the right to rig the elections and pretend that it “matches the majority of voters.” This is only natural: who would bite the hand that feeds it?!

I cannot fail to mention the Valdai Club members, who constitute a faithful army of Kremlin propagandists. Here is one of them: Ján Charnogurský, a prominent Slovakian lawyer and former prime minister and minister of justice. He goes through a lot of intellectual gymnastics to prove that the few negative Russian developments that he has to acknowledge are not unique but rather reflect general trends that exist in democracies, too. Russians mistrust the courts? “Mistrust of courts is not unique to Russia,” argues our lawyer. “Sociological surveys show a high level of mistrust for the judiciary in all the countries of the former Eastern bloc.” Charnogurský does not explain how mistrust of the judiciary in EU countries differs from that in an authoritarian state, however.

The West is critical of the Pussy Riot sentence? The respected lawyer informs us that in Slovakia the girls would “face a prison sentence of six months

to three years for hooliganism, and another two to five years in jail for defaming national and moral dignity.” So, Charnogurský concludes, “The Pussy Riot girls are lucky to be in Russia, not in Slovakia.” Our lawyer does not mention, however, that the girls were not sentenced for hooliganism but for “undermining the constitutional basis of the state.” Can you imagine, Mr. Charnogurský: two years of Russian prison for 50 seconds of dancing that is viewed as “undermining” the state?! Moreover, their verdict was justified on the basis of their “behavior” in court! Before the trial the girls had been kept in prison as criminals for half a year. Does this fit Charnogurský’s understanding of law and the proper role of the judiciary?

Dr. Charnogurský calls on Russians to brush aside Western criticisms: “Why do you think the West keeps criticizing the Kremlin for a lack of democracy [in Russia] and limited effectiveness of [the country’s] judiciary? In my view, Russia puts too much stock in the West’s opinion of it.” His argument is that the West is just as bad, or possibly even worse! Remember the O. J. Simpson trial?! “Eventually, Simpson was set free despite conclusive evidence proving his guilt. There may be many more such cases in the U.S.,” he sagely reminds us.

What an interesting coincidence that this rhetoric echoes that of the Russian president. In an interview with *Russia Today* on September 6, 2012, responding to a question about the Magnitsky Bill, Putin went on and on with a long and emotional tirade:

*There are people who need an enemy. They are looking for an opponent to fight against. Do you know how many people die while in prison in those countries that have condemned Russia? The numbers are huge! Look at the US that came up with the so-called Magnitsky list. As you know, there is no death penalty in Russia while the US still keeps it on the books. Anyone, including women can be executed.*

Every time Putin is reminded about something unpleasant in Russia, he responds that the West has the same problems!

Here is how Putin responded to a question about the Russian protests:

*You might also remember the mass riots that shocked the UK some two years ago. A lot of people were injured and lots of businesses damaged. Do we really need to stand idly by until it turns into a mess and then spend a year tracking down and locking them up? I think it’s best not to let things go this far.*

On Russian corruption:

*Corruption is a problem for any country. And, by the way, you will find it in any country, be it in Europe or in the United States. They have legalized many things. Let's take the lobby for private corporations – what is it, is it corruption or not?*

On the judiciary:

*We are constantly lectured on how independent Britain's judiciary is. It makes its own decisions, and no one can influence that. What about Julian Assange? They have ruled to have him extradited. What is it if not an evident example of a double standard?*

Perhaps Putin and Charnogurský could discuss their views, or bask in their unanimity. In any case, the latter's arguments should guarantee him a permanent membership in the Kremlin's Valdai Club.

I should have stopped here, but unfortunately I looked at the Valdai Discussion Club site and had the distinct pleasure of reading a well known German expert and Kremlin loyalist. Alexander Rahr promised that “in a couple of decades Putin will be probably be compared to Charles de Gaulle in France or to Konrad Adenauer in Germany... he established a functioning economic and political system in Russia...”

This will not be the end of my sufferings. Here is also a French representative of the Valdai community, Jacques Sapir, director of studies at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, who in his interview for the Valdai website argues:

*The Russian leadership seems to me up to its task... There are certainly a lot of things in due need of a fix in Russia. But there is a pragmatic process of corrections and adjustments. And there is certainly what we could call a “vision” of the Russian future. Now if we look at a world level the picture is much less rosy.*

Mr. Sapir was pretty blunt implying that the European leaders – Merkel, Holland, Monti, and even the U.S. president, Obama – could not boast to have a “vision” comparing to that of the Russian leader. Maybe Sapir was right in his critical assessment of the Western leaders, but to make Putin a Visionary!



But I couldn't read any further; I felt it was dangerous for my mental health...

The question of what motivates all these views on Russia, the Kremlin, and Russian society could be an interesting analytical exercise. I don't have much time or space for that and will definitely make the attempt to deal with this at some point in the future. However, two things are apparent: first, the Kremlin's fans who can't resist being seduced by the Kremlin's dark and morbid power in this way are actually admitting to having a totalitarian mentality. (How else can you define a mentality that supports the personalized-power system?) Second, there is definitely a kind of Russophobia on display with respect to the belief that Russian society is somehow undeserving of freedom and normal lives.

No wonder the Kremlin ideologues find the arguments of these Western optimists very helpful for criticizing "the enemies of the Fatherland." Andranik Migranian, who is close to the Kremlin, did so in an article under the telling title, "False but Persistent Propaganda of the Russian Political Regime Opponents Becomes Dangerous." The article generously quotes some of the above-mentioned Western "analysts" as proof that the Kremlin chose the right course. As we can see, the Kremlin enjoys quality support internationally, but the very fact that such support exists only raises doubts as to how adequate the arguments of both sides are.

I mustn't forget to mention one more category of observers: former Russian citizens who now observe Russia from abroad. They usually make their observations from developed Western countries. Among them, there are keen observers who genuinely sympathize with Russia and try to find ways to help it. The rest can be tentatively divided into two categories. The first includes those who champion Russia's superpower image and thus can bear no criticism of Russia whatsoever. The reasons for their "patriotism" are understandable. It is a way for these people, living in foreign lands and deprived of an anchor, to work out their own issues and compensate for their own insecurities by reminding themselves and others that they are former citizens of a superpower.

The other category is of greater interest. These are the radical observers. They demand quick revolution and mass resistance, and they constantly criticize those of us who still live in Russia for our sluggishness. This category is well represented on the Internet. These émigré revolutionaries constantly lecture us and are permanently unhappy that we are slow learners and bad fighters against authoritarianism. One of the loudest and most persistent of such tribunes is Irina Pavlova, who keeps saying, on the one hand, that the "young" authoritarianism that has sprung up in Russia is evolving toward neo-totali-



tarianism, and, on the other hand, demands that we actively resist it. Pavlova scathingly criticized Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev for not using the courts as a platform for condemning the regime during their trials. I am itching to tell her: if you understand that the regime is drifting toward neo-totalitarianism, you should also understand how it will be settling scores with those whom you are calling upon to fight against it. If you are so willing to hasten the revolution in Russia, then why don't you return home to lead it?

There are also those émigré experts who are still trying to tell the West all about Russia long after they have lost touch with what is happening there. One of them is a former Soviet sociologist, Vladimir Shlapentokh, who is trying to prove that leaders, not the society, effect change in Russia. Consequently, we must wait for a truly liberal Russian tsar to make our life happy. Thank you, Mr. Shlapentokh, but we are tired of waiting!

Some might wonder why I am concentrating on obscure characters of little or perhaps no influence. The reason is that it is likely that someone out there reads them and believes them. I, for one, constantly hear similar arguments in conversations with my Western counterparts. Therefore, it is worthwhile to expend a bit of effort to say that the pictures these “analysts” paint often bear no resemblance to Russian realities. They are frequently not even caricatures of reality – I have no idea what you might call them!

## AFTERWORD

Long ago, at the turn of the 20th century, when revolutionary fervor was on the rise in tsarist Russia, society was not ready to exit the system of personalized power. It was still relying on a sacral authority that was placed well above society, which relied on it to provide a better life. The representatives of Russia's intellectual and political elite (not numerous, to be sure) tried to plant the idea of a rule-of-law state in society's consciousness, but they suffered defeat. Russia followed the others, the ones that discovered a new form of personalized power in the shape of communism and the Soviet empire, thus extending the Russian system's lifespan by another seventy years. In 1991, personalized power was able to extend its life once more by giving up on the Soviet Union and assuming a new form, but today the bankruptcy of the Russian system has become evident even to its ruling class.

For the first time in its long history, Russian society is ready to leave the legal vacuum and accept new rules of the game. It is true that only a minority is ready to publicly stand up for these rules. It is more important, however, that the vast majority of Russians does not reject the idea of the new order and is ready to accept it, if it is offered to them. At this point, however, the major part of the demoralized and corrupted Russian ruling elite is not ready for such a transition and is rather seeking ways to preserve the system that provides for its corporate and personal interests. The Russian opposition, for its part, has so far failed to convince society to follow it in a peaceful transition to a rule-of-law state.

Under these circumstances, if society, or rather its vacillating part, is to support the transition to a rule-of-law state, it has to be convinced that the alternative state and the old system are far greater evils than the uncertainty of a transition to a new system. In short, society has to realize that the price of preserving the Russian system is much higher than that of a transition to a new one. Unfortunately, the most convincing argument for this would probably be an economic and social crisis. We have to acknowledge that shock therapy is a dangerous remedy for overcoming hopes and illusions. It may cure society, but it may also thrust it toward a new authoritarianism or even an attempt to build a dictatorship.

More importantly, Russian society itself erects no insurmountable barriers to the formation of a rule-of-law state. Mentality, culture, historical memory, and political habits do not make a democratic transition impossible, as the experience of other civilizations has demonstrated. The decisive role has to be played by the intellectual and political elite, which has so far been apprehensive about making a change. Apparently, only the impossibility of living the old life may force it to resolve to start looking for an exit from the Russian system. This understanding, in turn, can probably come only as a result of a social and economic upheaval, rather than through the gradual internal evolution of the elite.

There is no doubt that Russia's moment of truth is fast approaching. The question is whether the confluence of a few factors will occur in the same time frame. These factors include: public pressure on the regime; the alliance of the non-system opposition; the split of the ruling elite, with its pragmatic part joining the opposition; the power structures' reluctance to defend the old order; and the opposition's creation of a "road map" for the transition to the new rules of the game. We don't know when or even whether it will happen.

Meanwhile, the regime itself is accelerating developments by becoming even more repressive and attempting to eliminate all outlets for limited freedoms. It is trying to close a half-opened window. However, society has already gotten used to living with certain freedoms and will react forcefully if their source of fresh air is suddenly cut off. Moreover, the new generation – the first Russian generation that has never known a truly repressive system and is not scared of the authorities – hungers to expand its freedoms. These young people are ready to rock the boat, but we don't know whether they are ready to create the viable alternative.

There is another factor we should take into account: The system no longer has adequate resources to manage society through means of mass coercion and force; the resources required for that are being quickly depleted. By opting for harsher management instruments, the regime will significantly truncate its own support base. By suppressing the relatively moderate opposition, which is trying to express itself openly and constitutionally, and by rejecting constitutional rights and freedoms, the Kremlin itself will breed a radical and destructive opposition that will act clandestinely and opt for violent methods. It is the Kremlin that is shoving these differences of opinion and opposing viewpoints into a revolutionary niche.

In its attack on pluralism, the regime is not only radicalizing the conflict and accelerating the political cycle, it is also reducing the chances of reaching an agreement between the opposition and a part of the ruling elite. As it

tries to shift responsibility for the use of force to all of the elite, the Kremlin impairs the chances for the formation of a pragmatic wing ready for a peaceful exit from the Russian system.

No less serious is the fact that the current ruling elite, feeling that it has been cornered and apparently beginning to understand the nature of the challenges, has started to consciously pursue a policy that will deepen the degradation of society, preserve its atomization, and provoke ethnic and social hatreds. This is the goal of the Kremlin's propaganda and policy: to prevent society's consolidation against the authorities and to provoke conflicts and tensions that make the authorities the arbitrator. If this policy is successful, Russia is doomed.

The search for ways to exit the Russian system will be guided by the direction in which the more staunch authoritarianism develops and how society and the ruling class react to that development. So far, the regime has rejected the option of exit through dialogue. Consequently, its upper echelon will not participate in the search for a solution. It remains to be seen if the other echelons of the political class will be able to join this search. They may be too involved in repressive policies, rendering impossible a constructive role for them in the formation of a new order.

The agenda for the upcoming political season contains a few objectives. One of them is consolidating the opposition and formulating an agenda that is responsive to the challenges posed by a more repressive regime. Another objective is integrating political and socio-economic demands. Yet another is uniting all of the opposition factions and the moderates within the system ready for change under the banner of universal democratic demands and the peaceful transformation of the system.

The fast-paced events of the day and the degradation of the system may call for some ad hoc changes to the agenda, but one objective remains paramount under any circumstances: the pledge by all participants in the political process to renounce personalized power and to step down from positions of power in case of electoral defeat. This has never happened in Russian history. If Russia finally manages to do it, it will have reached its "end of history" and the beginning of a new one.

# ABOUT THE CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

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In 1994, the Endowment launched the Carnegie Moscow Center to help develop a tradition of public policy analysis in the states of the former Soviet Union and improve relations between Russia and the United States. It thereby pioneered the idea that in today's world a think tank whose mission is to contribute to global security, stability and prosperity requires a permanent international presence and a multinational outlook at the core of its operations.

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# RUSSIA XXI: THE LOGIC OF SUICIDE AND REBIRTH

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