

The Fourth Russian Empire?

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Forget about transitions. In Russia, the transition from Communism was over in late 1993, after former president Boris Yeltsin prevailed in battles against his rivals in parliament, in the provinces, and in various economic sectors. It remained to be seen, however, how the post-collapse regime would consolidate itself and how far it could go. We now know most of the answers; the question is their future projections.

Drift

Yeltsin's regime went through three phases:

- Chaotic-transformationist (1991-1993), in which desperate hopes were placed in self-organizing markets. The drastic reduction in state capacity had left no alternative. Hope foundered, however, when events proved that markets required many institutions. Without a socialist alternative, protective conservatism won. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) became Russia's conservative force, advocating a return to bureaucratic paternalism and imperial dignity. In the end, Yeltsin was left with little choice but to hijack the program of his opponents while dumping the Westernizing intelligentsia.
- Traditionalist retrenchment (1994-1996), or Bonapartism, in which Yeltsin, having violently suppressed the transitional parliament, attempted a restoration of state power. Politically, Moscow acknowledged that the biggest class of winners in the years of chaos were provincial governors, who had created localized circuits of exchange. Moscow presided over domestic bargaining among bailiwicks and also sought to control the nexus between the hinterland and foreign capital. In ideology, the imperial turn brought back symbols of past (mainly tsarist) power. Symbols without power, however, looked pathetic. Yeltsin succumbed to the temptations of his remaining source of power, the

inherited military, for a show of force in Chechnya.

- Oligarchic-comprador (1996-2000), which began with the realization that the Russian state was neither strong enough (as Chechen rebels proved) nor sufficiently autonomous from the West to attempt a classical post-revolutionary dictatorship. This disheartening reality was also acknowledged by the leaders of the retro-Communists. With Yeltsin's reelection in 1996 as president, the KPRF quietly succumbed and muzzled its own radicals, including potential coup plotters in the military. Henceforth, Russian politics conformed to the external expectations of democratic struggle while becoming fabulously venal and corrupt. All Russian politics, from the Kremlin down to the villages, became a kind of machine politics that would not be surprising to any mayor of Chicago. Politicians created economic opportunities for their partners, who reciprocated with kickbacks, campaign contributions, and the deployment of media power. The biggest political machine, the Kremlin, bred the biggest oligarchs by creating economic opportunities of outlandish proportions. Inevitably, greed outgrew the weak informal understandings the oligarchs had with the state, resulting in the escalation of dirty conflicts. Their unfettered battles for wealth based on manipulating state power, reinforced by the 1998 financial crisis, led to the emergence of super oligarchs. Against this backdrop, the Russian state appeared in terminal twilight, like the ailing Yeltsin himself.

Bonapartism Take Two

Commentators who have been wondering about the potential for a coup d'état in Russia missed it when it actually arrived. Vladimir Putin's ascendancy was not merely a surprise; it amounted to a coup. Since the political arena was a mess, no bloody repression proved necessary – except in Chechnya. One of the pillars of Putin's power, then, is obvious. He ascended to power at the height of machine politics, both gubernatorial and oligarchic, when the unregulated rivalry of local and economic elites threatened the very existence of the state. The function of supreme regulator, unsuccessfully asserted by Yeltsin, now found an adequate enforcer. Former KGB colonel Putin proudly associated his rule with the power ministries, whose existence becomes meaningless and illegitimate without a state. The famed energy factor certainly helped Putin by reinforcing Russia's international autonomy and greasing the internal wheels of machine politics. However, it was not his primary source of power.

Putin's charisma, which seems unwarranted by the man's appearance, has a simple sociological explanation. Charisma is not a personal trait but rather an attribute of position within networks of power. The more centralized the networks, the greater the potential for a charismatic Great Hero or Villain to arise. Typically, such centralization emerges after periods of turmoil when all previous power bases have been flattened.

At the same time, common Russians have been disempowered. The power of Soviet citizenry was derived from their lifelong employment at state enterprises, as well as from the state Marxist ideology which, however hypocritical, remained available for subversive invocation. The erstwhile state needed its citizens as both workers and potential soldiers. The new state, on the other hand, draws its power from

redistribution and trade, which require little labor input. The new state fights wars with contract forces recruited from society's bottom strata.

At the same time, control over the state is decided in elite parlors rather than on the streets or in parliament. Parties and newspapers serve to express the particular machine interests of their owners. Such a political process is insulated from the masses, except for moments of acute elite rivalries, like the color revolutions of Russia's neighbors.

The Pitfalls of Imperfect Institutionalization

Putin's regime appears to be the most stable Russian administration in decades. Moreover, it does not face traditional challenges like superpower war or foreign conquest. Nonetheless, the regime betrays a lack of competence and effectiveness. Its personnel are the key problem: most of them emerged from the Brezhnev-era Komsomol and later rose to power in the brutally unsettled 1990s; they missed the vision of Gorbachev's reformism or the élan of democratic movements (although isolated exceptions exist, like Dmitry Kozak and the business weekly *Expert*). Another problem is the shape and identity of state institutions. Putin's loyalists are *piterskie chekisty* (security officials from St. Petersburg) rather than the grand impersonal KGB. A band of colleagues is not enough to run a modern state. Recruitment, control, and promotion require an institutional structure. Internal vulnerabilities resurface at every crisis.

An effective Bonapartist regime must straddle social classes and be able to demonstratively protect its popular base and their aspirations for patriotic grandeur, while signaling to elites that the property they seized during the turmoil is theirs to enjoy, as long as they stick to their places.

When these conditions are violated, spectacular collapse may become a possibility. Alternatively, Putin could move in the opposite direction, placing his power on more robust foundations.

Prospects of a Restoration

Putin may be riding three global waves that bolster his charisma and power at home: cyclical global growth (and, thus, high energy prices), imperial restoration in a still weak Eurasia, and global disquiet with U.S. hegemony. Like any leader at a historical juncture, Putin may fail to effect a restoration of imperial power for various reasons, including the inadequacies of institutions and personnel. Nonetheless, the historical opportunity seems real enough and tempting to any ruler in Moscow.

Since its emergence in the late 15th century, the Russian state has been thrice ascendant. These rising phases are associated with the emblematic names of Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Stalin. The typical phenomena of each rising phase were as follows:

- Long-term agrarian and demographic expansion preceded the ascendant phases and supplied their resources. These good times were also remembered nostalgically.
- Political conflict arose around the issue of leadership succession which,

ultimately, involved a struggle for economic control between the state and various elites (boyars in one epoch, regional governors in another, apparatchiks and the capitalist oligarchy in a third).

- A heightened realization that Russia had fallen behind the West emerged, especially among the elites in charge of interstate competition (war, ideology, and productivity). Sheltered provincial and traditional elites were less concerned.
- The state tried to finance reforms by assaulting entrenched elites. In the past, this led to spectacular “revolutions from above,” replacing old entrenched elites with a new state nobility.
- Reforms from above found support in the ascendant enthusiasts from below. Their shared goal was to assimilate contemporary technologies of power in military, bureaucratic, and cultural realms. Industrialization and the creation of a Russian navy were hallmarks of the times.
- After defeating the elites, state centralizers expropriated the peasantry through increased taxation, labor, and military recruitment.
- Enhanced state capacity was deployed in ambitious wars. In the past, Russia easily conquered large territories in the Asiatic south and east, but fought at huge cost in the west.
- Achieving parity with the West marked the plateaus of ascendancy. After this, Russia stabilized in long periods of peace in which the new elites enjoyed the fruits of prestige and power.
- Elite prosperity and manifest social inequality provoked discontent at lower and aspiring ranks (lower nobility, the nineteenth-century intelligentsia, and the Soviet-educated middle class), who sought to expand and populate the institutions of state-directed modernization.
- Dissent, aggravated by the state’s reluctance to absorb the middle classes, escalated into another phase of contestation, pamphleteering, and, eventually, another revolutionary change of state leadership, opening a new cycle of Russian history.

Are we at the beginning of another rise?

In the past, Russia was successful in its ascendancies only when the West was also in geopolitical transition (the 16th century wars of religion, the 18th century rivalry among the absolutist states, and the world wars of the 20th century). Historically, Russia could never compete directly with a unified West. There had to be a degree of geopolitical flux in the world system for Russia to become a welcome ally. Is this condition being met today, more than in the 1980s and 1990s?

Clearly, the Russian cycle cannot be repeated on two interrelated parameters: demography and agrarian base. Russia’s post-agrarian demographic situation might look downright disastrous, except for the fact that it lies within the general population trends of industrialized countries, with perhaps just a steeper decline.

Another discontinuity involves an age-old source of social power, military might. Wars continue, but they scarcely resemble the great power clashes that occurred in the past. There is no clear answer at the moment as to the utility of standing armies or, for that matter, large navies or even nuclear weapons.

On the other hand, the world economy still depends, futuristic promises notwithstanding, on market access, capital, and an adequate supply of commodities rather than nebulous “knowledge.” The last three decades witnessed a shift from growth based upon production to finance. We seem to be emerging now into another phase of expanding production. This is a welcome development, considering how many people around the world live in various degrees of poverty and insecurity. If true, however, then higher prices for natural resources will remain for years to come.

Much speculation surrounds Russia’s new position as an energy empire. Russians themselves wryly joke that at \$15 a barrel they were an appendage to the world economy, but at \$70 a barrel they are an imperial nation. The joke is in line with a Russian tradition of self-deprecating humor, yet it also betrays a lack of understanding regarding the factors that determine a nation’s position in the world economy. The ability to capture a larger share of profits remains as crucial today as in the times of Venetian merchants and British industrialists.

Russian politicians today feel buoyed, even arrogant. Power brings arrogance, yet one can also clearly sense insecurity in the Russian elite. Since the disastrous end of perestroika, the country has slipped into the world periphery. Moscow faces many difficult dilemmas that are yet to be sorted out.

Alternative visions of Russia’s future emerge from younger and more pragmatic technocrats. They are Russian nationalists, albeit of a different kind than militaristic patriots, but we know little about this aspiring national bourgeoisie. The theories of liberal market transitions are ill-equipped to deal with a class that is capitalist while also nationalist and not necessarily liberal. The aspiring national bourgeoisie are seeking common ground with Putin’s regime around ideas of state-led development. Specifically, they advocate the investment of energy profits into a latter-day Keynesian policy of domestic industrial expansion. If the post-1945 experience of Western Europe contains any transportable lessons, we may yet see a more prosperous Russia under a broadly legitimate and inevitably paternalistic regime. A richer Russia would also seek to build a sphere of influence around itself.

Perhaps the major doubt in this scenario is this: Putin is an autocrat, but is he enough of an autocrat to force upon his own officials and capitalists the discipline necessary to make the long-term domestic investment commitments? Corruption is not a crucial problem; China is a structurally corrupt state, albeit in a different fashion. The problem is how to get Russian elites to spend their money domestically rather than behave like Arab oil sheiks.

Historical tradition suggests that Russian rulers recurrently overcame the problems of declining international status by coercively centralizing assets and then using the state’s enhanced power to direct another advance. Putin has achieved the first stage. Whether he can continue the cycle of recovery will be decided in the dramatic struggle

of the coming years.

Developments since 2000 have clarified two major questions, however. First, we now know that Russia can use its mineral reserves (rather than rob its peasantry) to finance another modernizing effort. Second, geopolitics have begun to change in ways favorable to countries like Russia. Such is the field. The game, however, is still to be played.