

SCENARIOS FOR THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN RUSSIA AFTER THE MILITARY DEFEAT IN UKRAINE

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The article considers two basic scenarios of the development of domestic political processes in the Russian Federation as a result of Russia's future defeat in the war against Ukraine. Also analyzed are possible derivatives of the basic scenarios:

1. Regime conservation scenario:

- 1.1. Vladimir Putin's lifetime retention as the head of the Russian Federation.
- 1.2. Putinocracy without Putin—Russia headed by a new nominee from the authorities, as agreed by elite groups.

2. Disintegration scenario:

- 2.1. Semi-disintegration—strengthening of regional elites (until peaceful secession).
- 2.2. Chaos—conflictual disintegration (civil war).

The aforementioned scenarios will have a negative impact on regional and global security, generating different levels of threats to other countries. Based on the analysis, an assessment is made of the greater or lesser likelihood of a particular scenario. Also, the potential level of threats to Ukraine as a result of the development of the situation in the Russian Federation under a particular scenario is determined. Some recommendations are offered to protect Ukraine from adverse effects from the territory of the Russian Federation after the end of active hostilities.

WHAT TO DO WITH RUSSIA?

The question of “what to do with Russia?” is increasingly being discussed in the world, gradually turning from a marginal issue into something that becomes a matter of strategic planning. The reason for this is the growing realization that after the collapse of the USSR, the Russian Federation failed to create a democratic model of government. The debacle of the Russian Federation in the war with Ukraine is the most obvious evidence of the fact that Putin's Russia is a “failed state.” The entire system of governance, economic model, and worldview of today's Russia (civilizational self-sufficiency) have no prospects.

Since the collapse of the Russian Federation causes a lot of fear in the world, the responsibility for the war is being personalized at the level of official communication. The arrest warrant for Putin issued by the International Criminal Court in The Hague can be seen as the beginning of the international legal fixation of the “Putin’s War” narrative. This obscures the true nature of the war, which is based on the aggression of Russia as a state and the Russian society, which is aggressive towards the outside world. This narrative is supported in the Western information field. It is key in the interpretation of the war by the Russian opposition in exile. Signals of readiness to “negotiate with post-Putin Russia” are periodically broadcast by leading politicians and centers of influence in the Western world. We should note here that similar illusions about Russia’s transformation into a democratic country friendly to the West already failed in the late 1990s due to their utopian nature.

This paper does not consider the “liberal Russia” scenario, as the authors believe it to be utterly unrealistic. This is explained by:

- the fundamental unpopularity of liberal ideas in Russian society;
- the absence of elites interested in liberalization and market economy, competition policy and building an anti-corruption governance model (the current elites have acquired and retained their resources—economic or managerial—under the current regime and rules of the “game”);
- the absence of a powerful liberal Russian opposition capable of gaining power by overthrowing the current regime and retaining it through effective reforms.

Obviously, a defeat in the war with Ukraine is not enough to bring down the Putin regime. **What is needed is the act of removing from power, not only the Russian president but also many other actors in the regime.** If such an act does take place, the one who carries it out will gain power. The option of a coup d’état conducted by some players with the subsequent transfer of power to the liberal opposition outside Russia, either in prison (Navalny) or to liberal reformers inside Russia, is unthinkable.

The future domestic political situation in Russia will be determined primarily by whether or not the current regime manages to retain power after its defeat in Ukraine. Further variations of possible outcomes will depend on this fact, as well as on whether the Center will continue to weaken and whether decentralization processes with a tendency to disintegration will begin in Russia.

REGIME CONSERVATION SCENARIO

The future defeat of the Russian Federation in the war with Ukraine will not directly result in the removal of Vladimir Putin personally from power by his entourage, or his ousting together with his entourage by a rival group of elites. Although this scenario is the most discussed in the expert and political circles of Ukraine and its partners, in fact it is rather wishful thinking.

The main argument against the development of the scenario of Putin’s removal is the absence in Russia of a group of elites powerful enough (to the point of staging a coup and taking over the entire country with all its regions), organized and interested in a

complete reformatting of the governance system.

The only organized structure capable of a rebellion and possessing significant human resources is the Russian army. The Kremlin and Russian propaganda will make the Russian generals the main culprit for the loss in Ukraine, which will trigger a corresponding reaction from the military. It is difficult to assess the level of probability of a military coup in Russia. Taking into account the historical precedent of the Decembrists—the military’s rebellion against the tsarist regime—there is a certain probability of such a scenario. That said, we should take into account a more recent historical period when the Stalinist regime’s repression of the army not only did not lead to a military mutiny, but even to the emergence of a military opposition to the regime.

At the same time, the fact that such a scenario has its potential is evidenced by the fact that since last year, anti-general actions have been regularly taking place in the Russian information space. Their main implementers are Prigozhin, Kadyrov and the so-called z-patriots (associated with the FSB). At the same time, while the war rages on, the Kremlin cannot launch large-scale repressions among the military, so it limits itself to warnings, such as the nightly tactical exercises in Moscow of the Federal Protective Service “to neutralize threats and protect the objects of higher authorities” on October 26, 2022¹.

The “junta” scenario seems unlikely, as even in the case of a hypothetical attempt of a military revolt in response to repressions against them after the defeat in the war, **it would not lead to the formation of a stable and long-term military regime in Russia. The existence of fairly powerful competitive elite groups** in the Russian Federation, deliberately created by the Putin regime as a system of checks and balances, will render a potential military coup and the establishment of a government of generals impossible. Therefore, **the junta scenario is more likely to be a stage on the way to the realization of the “chaos” scenario.** In addition, it should be taken into account that, unlike the Soviet period, when the post of defense minister was held by a reputable military general or marshal with strong military experience, the defense ministers of the Putin period are either from the KGB/FSB system (S. Ivanov) or civilians (A. Serdyukov, S. Shoigu) and do not enjoy due authority among professional military officers.

The stability of the current Putin regime will be determined, among other things, by the scale and speed of Russia’s retreat from Ukraine. The greatest risk to the regime, of course, would be the rapid loss of the Crimean Peninsula, which would cause a shock in Russian society and in the Kremlin itself. The prolongation of Russia’s military defeats in Ukraine will create a habituation and fatigue effect among Russians. The failure of the blitzkrieg (Kyiv in three days) and previous retreats from the occupied territories demonstrate that military defeats have no consequences for the Putin regime. The first shock and wave of accusations following the retreat from Kyiv and the northern regions of Ukraine, the flight of Russian troops, and the de-occupation of Kharkiv and the right bank of Kherson did not cause consequences for the regime. Significantly, the escape from the right bank of the

¹ Military equipment was brought to the center of Moscow because of the Federal Protective Service exercises near the building of the Council of Ministers of the Russian Federation (in Russian). / <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/63598d129a794757531e81c2>

Dnipro River in Kherson region was presented by the propaganda media as a “courageous and wise” retreat strategy². Today, there is little doubt that Russian propaganda can successfully spread among Russians an understanding of military defeat that is favorable to the Kremlin. The elites may not be interested in changing the “rules of the game” in Russia’s domestic political space.

However, the larger the territorial retreat of Russian troops in Ukraine up to the liberation of Crimea, the stronger the need to find the guilty ones inside Russia will be. The guilty will be the military, and, given the widespread anti-capitalist and anti-bureaucratic sentiments among Russians, representatives of medium-sized businesses, regional elites, officials, and all those who have fled the country who are not close to the Kremlin. These are mostly middle-class representatives. This scenario turns Russia into a closed, totalitarian and economically weak country.

Putinocracy without Putin

This scenario envisages the removal of Putin by the current members of the regime and his controlled replacement by another figure agreed upon by the elites. The realization of this scenario is possible only if Putin’s reaction to a military defeat gets uncontrollable (for example, demands to continue the war or use weapons of mass destruction; the desire to launch too large-scale repressions, including against those close to him). Also, the reason for launching the scenario of replacing Putin with a new president could be a failure to contain Russians’ discontent and a radical loss of trust and authority by the Kremlin—the search for a “more effective Putin.” The third argument is the formation of a common desire among the elites to “take a step back” in order to reduce confrontation with the West.

This scenario does not fundamentally differ from the scenario of Putin remaining in office, as it does not change the Russian Federation as a system, the values and aspirations of its elites and the majority of the population.

Risks of the scenario:

- preservation of the system of power created by Putin, which is designed to control the Russian Federation and mobilize the population to implement revanchist policies;
- “formatting” of the Russian Federation for another attempt at revenge, regardless of the initial declared intentions of the post-Putin government, given that Putin did not start with geopolitical ultimatums either;
- readiness of international players to fully or partially restore Russia’s access to resources (financial, technological, scientific, informational) that will be used for a new attempt of geopolitical and military revenge of the Russian Federation;
- avoidance of responsibility for the war by both the majority of representatives of the Putin regime and the population of the Russian Federation, which overwhelmingly supports foreign policy aggression and the strategy of restoring the Russian empire;

² “People’s hero”: why propaganda praises General Surovikin amid evacuation from Kherson (in Russian). / <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdpYFXF3mgc>

- continued “sinicization” of Russia as part of the Eurasian component of China’s global expansion model, which will pose even more challenges for Ukraine, the EU and the West as a whole.

Implementation of this scenario will require a consensus of the Russian elites while maintaining the passive and silent position of the bulk of the Russian population. Whether or not there is a global consensus (the West, China, the “global South”) and whether or not Ukraine accepts this scenario will have little impact on the processes inside Russia.

Besides, the scenario assumes an almost mechanical transfer of Putin’s power to the new ruler of the Russian Federation. This is hardly realistic, given the personalistic nature of the regime and the presence of a large number of groups of influence that conflict with each other and are ready to recognize Putin’s arbitration exclusively.

An additional factor of weakening will be the fact that the new presidential nominee will not have the legitimacy of Putin in the eyes of Russians at the age of 23 with a short history of relative economic prosperity. The only exception may be the personality of Nikolai Patrushev as a “loyal ally of Putin” by analogy with Stalin, who was presented by Soviet propaganda as an ally and follower of Lenin.

If the scenario of regime preservation develops, the economic crisis in the Russian Federation will rapidly deepen (inflation, increased taxation, primarily of small and medium-sized businesses, and a growing budget deficit), which will become a powerful factor of internal political destabilization and loss of control over the regions, which are largely maintained by the system of budget redistribution, and will stimulate the growth of migration from the Russian Federation to other countries, primarily to the EU. However, it is difficult to predict whether this will lead to the destruction of the integrity of the Russian state in the long term. To a large extent, the viability of the Russian Federation will be determined by the level of economic cooperation with such countries as China, India, Türkiye, Iran and others. Also, economic problems will significantly reduce the military potential of the Russian Federation.

At the same time, the level of internal and external aggression and the desire for revenge will increase in Russian society in conditions of isolation and as a result of “humiliation” by military defeat. This will result in the following **threats to Ukraine**:

- accumulation of new military capabilities with the aim of resuming hostilities, regardless of whether any agreements are signed as a result of the war or not;
- the strategy of “a thousand cuts”—constant aggressive actions and hybrid operations against Ukraine and Ukrainians: cyber-attacks, terrorism, border military provocations, periodic missile attacks and drone attacks, obstruction of the functioning of Ukrainian seaports, provocations at the international level;
- covert interference in domestic political processes in order to restore the pro-Russian lobby and turn Ukraine away from Europe, renew pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments in Ukrainian society.

The persistence of aggressive intentions against Ukraine in Russian society will create obstacles to our country's European and Euro-Atlantic integration. In view of this, **this scenario is the most dangerous and, accordingly, undesirable for Ukraine (as well as for other neighboring countries of the Russian Federation and the entire international community).**

DISINTEGRATION SCENARIO

The disintegration scenario is possible in the form of both a relatively peaceful secession and a chaotic and conflictual breakup with civil war. This scenario is feasible only if the federal center is weakened. Such a weakening can occur either as a result of the Kremlin's gradual loss of control over the country embroiled in a multi-crisis and its inability to perform the function of distributing national goods and budget redistribution due to a sharp decline in its resource base, or in the event of a power struggle to remove Putin or as a result of his ouster.

One of the important elements of the Kremlin's counteraction to the future disintegration of the Russian Federation is to maximize the disorientation of external observers as to the real state of affairs in the field of interethnic relations and relations between the center and individual regions. At the same time, the idea that Moscow itself has all the "full information" about the state of affairs on the ground and can effectively counteract disintegration processes is also an illusion.

Despite formal differences, the current situation is reminiscent of the period before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Its leadership used similar disinformation techniques to demonstrate in the international arena the absence of basic contradictions between the USSR's constituent entities, the unity of elites, and the alleged marginality of national movements. Equally important then was the argument about the economic insolvency of individual republics. To demonstrate this, in 1990, the USSR State Statistics Committee, for the first time in the history of Soviet statistics, published "balances" of expenditures and revenues of the subjects of the Union in terms of world prices. These manipulative statistics showed that all republics, except the RSFSR, were subsidized, which is similar to the way that the fact that the lion's share of the federal subjects depend on transfers from the federal budget is now cited as one of the most important arguments against the possibility/expediency of disintegration for the regions themselves.

At the same time, as in the early 1990s, disintegration processes have already been objectively launched, and no amount of "statistical" or "analytical" calculations that there is no "demand" for this and no relevant "background" (political and economic) in the regions will stop these processes.

At present, there are several factors that make it unlikely that the Russian Federation will survive within its current borders, or at least in its current form as a centralized state with a nominal federal structure.

The Chinese factor. Despite the official Beijing's constantly declared commitment to the principles of the United Nations, in particular, non-interference in internal affairs,

inviolability of borders, territorial integrity, etc., China is most interested in weakening the Russian federal center in order to strengthen cooperation with the Russian regions of the Far East, Eastern Siberia and the Arctic in order to incorporate them de facto into China's economic organism while maintaining a de jure ostensible position of supporting the integrity of the Russian Federation and the Kremlin's opposition to "manifestations of separatism." The Chinese factor can be compared to the action of a black hole that draws in weaker neighboring economies.

The Moscow factor. The Russian Federation is a hyper-centralized state in fiscal and financial terms, with the federal center, Moscow, as the main "beneficiary." With the weakening of the central government by the regions (not only national, but also ethnically Russian), this status quo will inevitably be challenged. This will lead to an unsolvable dilemma: the center's resistance to the demands of regions that "do not want to feed Moscow" will fuel separatist sentiment, while concessions will deprive them of resources to maintain their influence. The fact that the "Moscow factor" has long been a source of irritation in the regions is evidenced by the periodic attempts of the Moscow authorities to show Russians their most significant share in federal GDP—1/4 as of 2019³. Such actions cause even more irritation.

The Chechnya factor. The Chechen Republic is a territory where the laws of the Russian Federation are applied only formally and selectively, and its connection with the center is ensured by the Chechen leadership's recognition of the current Russian president as its "sovereign" and almost unlimited subsidy payments. Any positioning of Chechnya in the post-Putin period will have devastating consequences for the Russian Federation. Declaring independence would set a precedent for other national regions, while maintaining formal loyalty to Moscow would require preserving the system of opaque subsidies and extending this practice to a number of regions, which the center would simply lack the resources to do.

The factor of local elites. In a number of "national" regions, quite strong and self-sufficient "bureaucratic" elites have been preserved. The successes of the Putin period in curtailing the influence of national "managerial personnel" in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Tyva, and some other regions are not obvious. There is nothing to suggest that the current leadership of these regions, in the face of a weakening center, will behave any differently than their predecessors did in the early 1990s, i.e., demanding the maximum degree of political decentralization and a de facto transition to confederative relations with Moscow.

The factor of thirst for resource redistribution. The Russian regime, represented by the federal center, solely receives and disposes of revenues from the extraction and export of minerals, primarily revenues from the export of oil, oil products, natural gas, coal, and uranium raw materials, as well as kleptocratic appropriation of their part by representatives of the regime.

Over the past 10 years, the Russian Federation has received almost \$2.6 trillion from the

³ The economy of Moscow and the Moscow Region accounts for almost a quarter of the country's economy (in Russian). The official website of the mayor of Moscow. November 28, 2019. <https://www.mos.ru/mayor/themes/12299/6116050/>

export of energy resources alone⁴. This is more than Russia's GDP in any of the post-Soviet years (the record GDP in 2013 was \$2.3 trillion). Now, against the backdrop of 9 years of Russian aggression against Ukraine, it can be stated that most of these revenues were spent on preparing for and conducting the war, as well as enriching Putin's circle and loyal oligarchy.

The proceeds were and are used to enrich the ruling regime, strengthen the security forces, repress opponents and dissidents, eliminate opponents of the regime abroad, wage aggressive wars against neighbors such as Georgia and Ukraine, intervene and interfere in the internal affairs of a number of countries such as Syria, Venezuela, the Central African Republic, Mali, subvert Europe (Balkans) and the United States, and instigate propaganda.

Thus, the parasitic federal center has arbitrarily usurped the right of peoples to use natural resources and the income received from the exploitation of subsoil for the purposes of their development. It appropriates the income not belonging to it through monopolies created at the federal level (Gazprom, Transneft) and a limited number of large state-owned (Rosneft) as well as private companies, managed by loyal oligarchs, and uses it illegally to wage aggressive wars.

The hypercentralization of the federal center's use of financial resources generated by production in the regions amid the dynamic growth of the Russian state budget deficit stimulates the desire of regional elites to change the existing state of affairs in order to preserve their power long-term.

In this context, regional demands from below to the regional authorities and the federal center, aimed at the following:

- redistribution of tax deductions from the development of subsoil and export of mineral resources in favor of the federal subjects and indigenous peoples;
- restoring the norms in the constitutions of the Russian subjects that enshrine the right of ownership of subsoil and the receipt of revenues from its exploitation exclusively by the people of the respective national-territorial entity;
- a requirement to revise the Constitution of the Russian Federation and Russian legislation in terms of ownership of subsoil and distribution of revenues from the development of deposits and export of mineral resources, primarily hydrocarbons.

The actual independence of local elites in the event of a successful struggle with the federal center for the redistribution of resources in their favor will not automatically mean the final de jure delimitation/separation. In the short and medium term, it is likely that the “outer shell” of the Russian Federation will be preserved, but in a format close to the so-called “CIS.

The likelihood of this scenario unfolding is high, but only in the long perspective, as it will involve the Center's growing internal inability to perform its functions. The timing of this scenario is also difficult to predict, as it depends on a number of factors: the position of external players, options for denuclearization of the Russian Federation, the specifics of the

⁴ Based on 10 years of monitoring by the Center for Global Studies “Strategy XXI.”

“post-Putin” regime and its ability to impose its rules of the game by force, etc. Nevertheless, it was the disintegration scenario that was supported by half of the experts from different countries who took part in the Atlantic Council survey in the fall of 2022. 46% of leading foreign policy experts said that Russia would become a failed state or disintegrate by 2033⁵.

Risks of the scenario:

- regional conflicts (over borders, natural resources, on national grounds), which may also involve neighboring states, including Ukraine;
- the emergence of “zones of chaos”—territories where no stable state entities will emerge, power will be transferred to criminals, which could lead to humanitarian disasters and mass emigration;
- complicating the process of paying reparations to Ukraine by the Russian Federation or its successors;
- expanding opportunities for individuals to avoid responsibility for war crimes, for example, from among representatives of national minorities of the current Russian Federation;
- the problem of the distribution of the military arsenal of the Russian Armed Forces and the uncontrolled “proliferation” of weapons, including across borders..

⁵ Experts predict Russia’s collapse or transformation into a failed state by 2033 - Atlantic Council (in Ukrainian). / <https://www.slovoidilo.ua/2023/01/09/novyna/svit/eksperty-prohnozuyut-rozpad-rosiyi-abo-peretvorennya-failed-state-2033-roku-atlantic-council>

CONCLUSIONS

All of the analyzed scenarios objectively carry a list of risks and threats to Ukraine and the world. Although those scenarios that involve active concerted actions of elite groups against the current political regime in Russia seem the least likely, it is possible that they could result from a “black swan” event.

Regardless of which of the above scenarios develops in Russia after its military defeat, the Russian territory will continue to be a source of threats and risks for Ukraine for a long time. This, in turn, will require reformatting the entire national security system, restructuring transportation routes and economic ties.

It is important for Ukraine to maintain internal consolidation and ensure the dynamic development of the economy, especially the defense industry, in order to form a strong position of the state on the frontline of the confrontation between the democratic world and the alliance of autocracies represented by Russia.

Ukrainian diplomacy needs to capitalize on Ukraine’s image as a security contributor on NATO’s eastern flank and the EU’s eastern periphery, which requires accelerating integration into both alliances to strengthen Europe’s ability to withstand chaos from the East.

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