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The Authoritarian Resurgence

FORWARD TO THE PAST IN RUSSIA

Lilia Shevtsova

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The Russian system of personalized power, the antithesis of a state based on the rule of law, is demonstrating an amazing capacity for survival even in the midst of advanced stages of decay. The latest survival strategy that the Kremlin, the central headquarters of this system, is now using to prolong its life includes several parts. The first is a “conservative revolution” at home. The second is the conversion of Russia into a revanchist power that will undermine the rules of the international order if that helps to preserve the internal status quo. The third is the containment of the West, combined with the forging of an anti-Western International.

Throughout its long struggle to keep itself going, the Russian system has defied many predictions and ruined many analytical narratives. At the end of the 1980s, it humiliated the entire field of Sovietology, which had persuaded the world that the Soviet Union was as solid as a rock. In the 1990s, “transitologists” said that the system would move one way, only to find it going in another direction entirely. In the early 2000s, the system discarded the assumption that Russia would partner with the United States in its battle against terrorism. And from 2008 to 2012, the system turned both the U.S. “reset” policy and the EU Partnership for Modernization program into the punch line of a joke.

Over the past two decades, the system has limped on, meeting new challenges with imitation solutions that do not change its essence. At the beginning of the 1990s, it reincarnated itself by dumping the Soviet state, faking adherence to liberal standards, and professing a readiness for partnership with the West. Today, its liberal dress-up game is a thing

of the past; it has turned toward harsh authoritarianism and aspires to become the West's chief antagonist.

The system's key innovation is its use of liberal civilization to prolong its life, first by setting out to "contain" that civilization and then by imitating it, which proves that the system's own potential for durability is slight. From the time of the Soviet collapse until recently, the teams of presidents Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin viewed the mimicry of Western institutions and norms, the rise of a rent-seeking comprador class integrated into Western society, the limited pluralism of political life, and the relative freedom of private citizens as aids to survival.

The post-Cold War world, with its "end of ideology" and fuzzy normative lines, created the ideal arena for Russia's game of misleading and pretending. The West's eagerness to engage Russia led it to believe the Kremlin when it paid lip service to Western values, which in turn discredited those values. The system proved to be extremely efficient at turning elections, the justice system, the media, liberal slogans, and even membership in Western clubs (the G-8, the Council of Europe) into instruments of personalized power. What began as a Western partnership with Russia has ended not in Russia's liberal transformation but in its return to one-man rule and the emergence of a powerful lobby of "accommodators" within the West who help the Kremlin to pursue its goals. The general impression was that the system could have gone on like this indefinitely, carried along by corruption (which is a way of compensating for the absence of institutions), public indifference, the lack of viable alternatives, and high oil prices.

Things changed, however, when the election-related protests of late 2011 and early 2012 forced the Kremlin to adopt a new survival strategy. The "Putin Doctrine" legitimates a harsher rule at home and a more assertive stance abroad.¹ Putin's background and character hardly militate against this: He prepped in the KGB; he likes hands-on control, shady deals, and mafia-style loyalty; he hates the idea of anything like a "color revolution" in Russia; and he is hostile to the West and the rule of law. For the first time in Russian history, representatives of the security services, professionally trained to employ coercion, are not just working for the Kremlin—they are running the Kremlin. Russia has had a despotic state throughout its history, but until now it has not had a "triad regime," in which one group has taken control of political power, vast stores of wealth, and the repressive mechanisms of the state.

The irony is that the Kremlin, in looking for a way to keep going, returned to a model that by the end of the 1980s had already caused the system's previous incarnation to fall apart. In another ironic twist, liberal civilization once again became the stimulus for the system's consolidation—this time through deterrence of liberal democracy.

The events of 2014 in neighboring Ukraine—the EuroMaidan protests and the fall of President Viktor Yanukovich—gave the Kremlin

an opportunity to test its new doctrine. By annexing Crimea and backing pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, the Kremlin was able to justify its military-patriotic mobilization of society and its transformation of Russia into a “besieged fortress.” This was a traditional survival maneuver, but with a new twist for a new century. The Kremlin’s style of “hybrid warfare” used military force without admitting it, and “weaponized” other areas of life. Thus we now have customs wars, natural-gas wars, information wars, culture wars, and history wars. Countering this new type of warfare is a task fraught with difficulties.²

Public mobilization around the leader and the motherland rose to a new pitch, aided by the lack of traditional cultural or moral regulators (think of the role that Confucianism plays in Sinitic societies) capable of shielding an atomized society of disoriented, demoralized individuals from the schemes of an overweening state. Ever since Stalinism’s relentless assault on all “horizontal” ties (even those of family), Russians have been tragically at the mercy of the state and its claims: Individuals are invited to compensate for their helplessness by looking for meaning in collective national “successes” that promise to bring them together and restore their pride. The annexation of Crimea has become such a “success,” giving ordinary Russians a chance to forget their woes and feel a surge of vicarious optimism. The Kremlin has seemed to say, “We will remind you what it feels like to be a great power if you forget your problems and our promises.” The confusion that befalls Russian society may be glimpsed in an October 2014 public-opinion survey. Sixty percent of its respondents agreed that Russia was moving toward a crisis, while 64 percent said that it was moving in the right direction.³

The Kremlin’s shift to a war footing will mean more than higher military spending and a resurgent military-industrial complex. Russian militarism is a unique form of the order-based—as opposed to the law-based—state. Although turning Russia into a Stalin-era armed camp is no longer possible, the Kremlin is militarizing certain walks of life and imitating militarization in other areas where it cannot achieve the genuine article.

This is not the first time, of course, that the Kremlin has tried to deflect attention from its problems by resorting to a military-patriotic mobilization. One thinks of the Second Chechen War in 1999, and of the five-day war with Georgia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia in mid-2008. The Kremlin is aware that military-patriotic mobilizations tend to be short-lived, need fueling via triumphs over real or imagined foes, and will falter if there is too much bloodshed. By these standards, the Ukraine-Crimea gambit may prove a poor choice. It is dragging on, the fighting is murky, the West has reacted by imposing painful sanctions, and the death toll is already reportedly well into the thousands.

The Kremlin’s experimentation with the war paradigm has landed the system in a quandary. There is not enough general well-being and

stability to underwrite a return to a peacetime footing, but the war strategy and the search for new threats unleash forces that are hard to control. The consequences of the undeclared war with Ukraine may already be too much to handle. Among them are the strengthening of hawkish forces that demand “victory”; a push for more resources by the military-industrial complex; growing frustration among Russian nationalists and imperialists who expect Putin to subjugate other nations; and those economically crippling Western sanctions.

It is no surprise, then, to find Putin restlessly seeking new ideas to justify his claim to unrestrained rule. His self-selected array of legitimating concepts resembles a stew whose ingredients are simply whatever the chef could obtain: Sovietism, nationalism, imperialism, military patriotism, Russian Orthodox fundamentalism, and economic liberalism. He juggles ideas borrowed from Russian conservatives as well as the Western right. He cites the Russian philosopher Ivan Ilyin (1883–1954), who in 1948 could still describe fascism (he appears to have had in mind Franco’s Spain and Salazar’s Portugal) as “a healthy phenomenon.”⁴ Ilyin also called for a “Russian national dictatorship” while warning that “Western nations. . . seek to dismember Russia.”⁵ Putin has not yet talked of such a “national dictatorship,” but he loves to complain about Western efforts to back Russia into a corner. Putin speaks of freedom as well, but by this he means not individual liberty but rather, quoting Ilyin, “freedom for Russia.”⁶

For the Kremlin, ideas are instrumental. If an action is deemed necessary, ideas will be found to justify it. An atomized people is there to be confused and given the impression that everything is fluid and relative. Thus the system’s propaganda may claim, “Russian values do not differ dramatically from European values. We belong to the same civilization,”⁷ only to posit a moment later that the West is Russia’s main enemy. Whether conscious or unconscious, this is a textbook case of cognitive dissonance; the Kremlin is endorsing contradictory propositions, disorienting both Russia and the world, and making chaos its playground.

The Regional and International Dimension

Russian foreign policy has become the Swiss Army knife of the personalized-power system’s drive to preserve itself. Like that famously versatile tool, foreign policy has many functions. It is used to guarantee an external environment conducive to personalized power; to compensate for the Kremlin’s waning internal resources and the growing dissatisfaction of the most dynamic parts of Russian society; to divert attention away from deep social and economic problems; to contain Western influence both inside and outside Russia; to undermine the unity of the Western (mainly European) community; and to strengthen the network of pro-Kremlin lobbyists and apologists in the West.

Two of the Kremlin's foreign-policy projects are especially important. First, it seeks to create in the post-Soviet space something resembling the old "global socialist system," but without its unifying communist idea. Hence the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which includes at present Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia, with Moscow acting as leader. Second, the Kremlin wants a dual approach to the West, containing it as a normative power and a geopolitical actor while cooperating with it (on Moscow's terms, of course) when that seems advantageous.

The EEU aims at close coordination of economic and political strategy. Moscow intends to preside over a bloc that will counterbalance the EU. Originally, Ukraine was supposed to be a member too, but in fact the EEU is a club of authoritarian states whose main goal is to preserve personalized rule in each state. The member states—especially Armenia and also Kyrgyzstan, which is waiting to join—are ready to take part in this Kremlin project in return for subsidies and security guarantees. But their loyalty is tenuous. They will likely have no trouble betraying the Kremlin or extorting concessions from it if a new sponsor with a better offer appears. Already, Belarus has signaled its restiveness by restarting customs inspections on its border with Russia.

The EEU, an imperial idea, is part of another Kremlin juggling act. In 2014, Putin began borrowing from Russian nationalists the idea of the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World), which is supposed to consolidate ethnic Russians globally on the basis of loyalty to the Kremlin. The annexation of Crimea was the first step in implementing this initiative. Putin has also expressed his commitment to helping Novorossiia (New Russia)—that is, Russian speakers—in southeastern Ukraine and has provoked an undeclared war in the region. The *Russkiy Mir* project is an ethnocentric initiative; its logic runs counter to the imperial or quasi-imperial nature not only of the EEU but (far more importantly) the multiethnic Russian Federation itself. Even Moscow's allies, Belarus and Kazakhstan, refused to back the Crimea takeover, and it is not hard to see why: Both countries have sizeable Russian-speaking communities.

The Kremlin has pushed ahead with both these projects simultaneously, using nationalism in order to strengthen imperialism and even rallying many Russian nationalists to its cause. Most nationalists had long opposed Putin, but with the Russia-Ukraine conflict they began supporting him. Sooner or later, however, the Kremlin will have to come down on the side of the imperial idea, since it is the only one that will allow Moscow's continued control over the multiethnic Russian state (the Kremlin, in fact, has already dropped the idea of supporting Novorossiia in Ukraine). When that happens, nationalists are likely to move back into opposition.

Moscow's resort to contradictory ideas—imperial mythology on the one hand, and a nationalism that undermines Russia's integrity on the

other—indicates that the system is growing desperate. It also underlines the lack, more than two decades after the Soviet breakup, of a new identity for Russian society, which remains susceptible to mutually exclusive visions.

Returning to a great-power agenda of expansion and spheres of influence is not an end in itself for the Kremlin. Great-power aspirations are just a way of sustaining personalized power at a time when internal displays of might are no longer sufficient.

Returning to a great-power agenda of expansion and spheres of influence is not an end in itself for the Kremlin. Great-power aspirations are just a way of sustaining personalized power at a time when internal displays of might are no longer sufficient. Russia will have to pay for the revival of its quasi-empire, however, and escalating economic troubles will soon render the Kremlin's imperial ambitions too heavy a burden for the country's budget.⁸

The EEU is not the only integration platform that Moscow controls. In 1992, Russia created the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which also includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. In 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was formed by China and Russia together with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The SCO reflects a convergence between two major powers—China and Russia—that are vying with each other for influence in Central Asia while also recognizing a shared interest in keeping Western (primarily U.S.) economic, political, and military influence out of the region. Russia is pushing for closer integration under the framework of these two entities while insisting on retaining its leading role and trying to influence the balance of forces in the member states.

So far, neither organization amounts to much more than a discussion club with loose mutual commitments. The CSTO's collective rapid-response force (meant to be able to intervene in local conflicts and support member states' incumbent regimes) currently consists of a mere four-thousand troops. And the SCO has served mainly to highlight the divergent rather than the common interests of China and Russia: The former sees Central Asia as a market for its products, while the latter is trying to achieve broader integration. It is evident, however, that both projects are directed against the West. It is possible, of course, that if any member state's authoritarian regime is threatened, the CSTO or the SCO could try to come to its aid.

The Kremlin sees the participation of the newly independent states in such projects both as a guarantee of their loyalty to Moscow and as something that legitimates Russian support for the antidemocratic regimes that rule these states. Moscow's efforts to include Georgia and

Moldova in the CSTO and the EEU while also influencing the political situation in these countries testifies to its agenda. In November 2014, heavy Russian pressure on Armenia, accompanied by Kremlin support for President Serzh Sarkisian's undemocratic regime, forced that country to drop its bid to sign an association agreement with the EU. The urge to avoid being "integrated" or "cooperated" into de facto subjugation by China or Russia is a feeling that we can expect will remain lively in the smaller countries lying near or between them.

Containing and Influencing the West

As for the Western liberal democracies, Putin has been trying to find a new balance between working with them and containing them. He may even believe that, once the Ukrainian conflict is sorted out, he will be able to go back to business as usual in his dealings with the West. Containment, in Kremlin eyes, has three dimensions: 1) Keep the West from expanding its geopolitical footprint in Eurasia; 2) induce it to endorse "spheres of influence" in the region; and 3) block all channels through which the West can exert influence inside Russia. This last dimension of containment explains why Putin has had his pocket parliament adopt laws stripping Russian civil society of financial aid from the West. In addition to funding bans, anti-Western (primarily anti-American) propaganda remains one of the most effective means of counteracting Western influence.⁹

A further containment effort consists of Kremlin moves to "renationalize" the Russian elite. The system has demanded that Russians with assets abroad repatriate them and give up their Western holdings. Representatives of the power structure have even had to surrender their passports, thus preventing them from traveling to "hostile countries." The comprador elite is to be transformed into an elite that is completely loyal to the leader and ready to cut all links to the West.

But the Kremlin is not (yet!) ready to seal the borders completely and return to a Cold War-like standoff. Cooperation with the West remains powerfully impelled by concrete interests. These include Russia's need to sell its hydrocarbons to Europe; Russian dependence on Western investments, loans, and technologies; Moscow's understanding that its military and economic resources would be sorely strained in the event of a confrontation with the West; the threat of new Western sanctions; and the elite's personal interests in the West.

These circumstances could steer the Kremlin to restore dialogue with the West, but they can neither guarantee that this dialogue would last nor prevent new showdowns. It is still unclear what the Kremlin's terms are. It is far easier to understand what the Kremlin rejects than what it proposes. Among the Kremlin's demands to the West: Do not meddle in Russian domestic life; accept the existence of Russian spheres of in-

fluence; halt NATO's expansion toward Russia's borders; refrain from deploying NATO forces in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states; stop inviting former Soviet states into the EU; accept Gazprom's monopoly; recognize Russia's claims in the Arctic; accept the Kremlin's understanding of the international rules of the game; and respect Russia's status as an "equal" (there is never any explanation of exactly what this term means).

Many of these terms have been accepted—but this has not turned the Kremlin away from aggressiveness. In October 2014, Putin pushed things further by declaring that the old world order is unraveling (the result, naturally, of U.S. misbehavior). He called for the construction of a "polycentric" order, which apparently will prevent the United States from trying to act like a hegemon and guarantee a balance between the liberal and illiberal worlds. Escalation of these demands is a way for the Kremlin to create an unending series of grievances, ready to be used as pretexts for further militaristic behavior.

Even as the Kremlin indulges in such strategic grudge-mongering, however, it will also be willing to experiment on its own terms with various forms of engagement and cooperation with liberal democracies. It will of course be pursuing its own interests and goals, which will surely include the promotion of Western disunity and the provision of support to Western apologists for Moscow and its agenda. The Kremlin and its operators have perfected the arts of provoking conflict, playing states against each other, coopting Western elites, penetrating Western organizations, consolidating support within Western societies, creating international deadlocks, and playing the spoiler's role.¹⁰

Putin's elite has learned not only to contain but to influence the West. It has stopped the movement of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine toward Europe; forced European leaders to accommodate the Kremlin's energy policy; and fostered powerful pro-Moscow business lobbies within Western countries. The Russian leadership has been tenacious in taking advantage of the West's dissensus and dysfunctions as well as Western distaste for new "ideological projects" and the normative aspects of foreign policy. Moscow has carefully studied the ways in which it can exploit the weaknesses suggested by Western longing for a quiet "status quo," to say nothing of the West's willingness to retreat from commitments and the sad lack of ambition and moral strength that today's West brings to the historic task of countering hostile civilizations.

The Kremlin will not mellow with time. The Russian elite and a segment of the Russian people see the Kremlin's anti-Western campaign as evidence of Moscow's prowess. The power structures will demand that Russia stick with its mobilization model, fearing anything that smacks of "backing down" as a sign of weakness. Portions of the brainwashed populace will even accept their privations as a fair price to pay for a

chance to bask in claims of Russia's greatness, even if those claims are at heart counterfeit.¹¹ All these circumstances will sustain Russia's militarist and imperial behavior on the world stage, unless the system is transformed.

The Kremlin's Survival Toolkit

The Kremlin has demonstrated its ability not only to use the traditional means of autocracy, but also to invent new means of prolonging its life. Among the traditional instruments of influencing the public is the elimination of any remaining channels of self-expression. Under Yeltsin and the earlier Putin, the regime tended to tolerate some protests and preferred "managed political pluralism." Today, the pocket parliament has passed a series of laws that liquidate basic constitutional freedoms and point the way to full-scale dictatorship.

There are several dimensions to this subjugation of society. First, the Kremlin has robbed elections of their meaning by barring popular candidates whom the authorities do not control, and by falsifying results. With no access to television or major newspapers, genuine oppositionists can no longer compete.

Second, the authorities have continued an unprecedented campaign of reprisals against civil society. The NGO and "anti-extremist" laws (the latter is officially aimed at fighting terrorism) feature deliberately ambiguous wording that allows authorities to clamp down on any civil activity. Since Putin left his stint as premier and returned to the presidency in 2012, parliament has imposed new restrictions on civil society. These include a law that limits public assemblies and raises relevant financial sanctions to the level of criminal fines; a law that recriminalizes libel; and a law that may expand the notion of "treason" to include involvement in international human-rights issues.

Parliament has also put new limits on Internet content and foreign ownership of media concerns. Total control over social networks, just as in China and Iran, is next on the list.

In 2012, Russia created the "Unified Register of Prohibited Information." Run by the Federal Security Service (the successor to the KGB), this web-monitoring effort can demand the deletion of "harmful" information without a court order. Decisions to delete content or ban websites are made pursuant to the expanded anti-extremist law, which treats any type of dissent (including the "public slandering" of government officials) as extremism. Liberal websites such as *grani.ru*, *kasparov.ru*, and *ej.ru* (*Yezhednevny Zhurnal*) have already been shut down as "harmful."

In 2014, the authorities began considering steps to tighten control over Internet Service Providers (ISPs). The idea is to filter content on all levels of network traffic and to prohibit DNS servers for *.ru* and *.rf* do-

mains from being located outside Russia. There is also a proposal to ban regional and local ISPs from connecting directly to foreign networks. Only Russian national service providers would be allowed to handle regional and local Internet traffic. The possibilities for online censorship are endless. As one report explains, there is proposed legislation that would allow

the [Russian] government to place offending websites on a blacklist, shut down major anti-Kremlin news sites for erroneous violations, require the storage of user data and the monitoring of anonymous online money transfers, place limitations on bloggers and scan the network for sites containing specific keywords, prohibit the dissemination of material deemed “extremist,” require all user information be stored on data servers within Russian borders, restrict the use of public Wi-Fi, and explore the possibility of a kill-switch mechanism that would allow the Russian government to temporarily shut off the Internet.¹²

In effect, the proposed law abolishes Article 29 of Russia’s 1993 Constitution, which gives citizens the right to access information freely.¹³

As the new regime of online policing indicates, the security services have been empowered to control citizens’ private lives. The institution of local self-government is being replaced by the “power vertical.” School “reforms” are being introduced in order to ensure that rising generations will absorb one idea only: The leader is always right!

The Kremlin is especially active in the areas of information warfare and propaganda, both of which are tools that allow it to limit its use of raw coercion. In the course of its military-patriotic campaign, the Russian regime has been able to militarize the media (especially television), turning media organs into war-propaganda outlets. Information warfare has been used to paint the United States as Russia’s major enemy, to brand the Ukrainian government a “military junta,” and to smear Kremlin critics as “traitors.” Unlike in Soviet times, there is no ideology on offer. Instead, the Kremlin and its minions are working “to sow confusion via conspiracy theories” and to spread disinformation with a view to eroding journalistic integrity.¹⁴ War media have bolstered popular support for the war president, created patriotic hysteria in Russian society, and warped public consciousness by broadcasting justifications for hatred, violence, and confrontation.¹⁵

Russia’s external propaganda machine is directed not only at creating a Russian “fifth column” in the West, but also at misinforming Western society and undermining its normative principles. The goal is to prove that the West is just as bad as the regimes that the West is trying to criticize. Everybody can be bought, and Western democracy is a sham: This is the mantra of the Kremlin’s media abroad, and they seem to be finding a sympathetic audience. In the nine years since its creation, the Kremlin’s RT (formerly Russia Today) television channel, with a budget worth US\$300 million—and soon to be increased

by 40 percent—has established itself as a strong global media presence. On YouTube, only the BBC's clips are watched more than RT's. In Britain, RT has more viewers than the Europe-wide news station Euronews, and in some major U.S. cities it is the most viewed of all foreign broadcasters.¹⁶

Through its absurd arguments, lies, and half-truths, the Kremlin's propaganda arm makes normal debate impossible.¹⁷ "A policy of expansionism and conquest has no future in the modern world"—this is what Putin likes to say, even after the annexation of Crimea. "We will not promote Russian nationalism, and we do not intend to revive the Russian Empire," says Putin, while doing both those things. "People . . . have certain rights . . . and they must have a chance to exercise those rights," insists the president as he takes rights away from Russians.¹⁸ The Kremlin claims that the Crimean annexation was a reaction to the threat of Ukraine's joining NATO, though neither Kyiv nor NATO had any such plans. The arguments are false, but given the intended audience's naivety, if repeated often enough they have a chance of hitting home.

The Kremlin has shown itself able to build effective lobbying networks outside Russia.¹⁹ Today the Kremlin has an influential support infrastructure in the West. This includes companies interested in doing business inside Russia; political leaders who run certain errands for the Kremlin; media personalities and experts who try to put a positive spin on the Kremlin's actions in exchange for favors and access; and the bankers and lawyers who launder the Russian elite's dirty money.

Both leftist and rightist forces in the West frequently serve as apologists for the Kremlin's policies. The left and its leading intellectuals view Russia as an alternative model to capitalism and a force opposing the United States, the country that they detest more than any other.²⁰ The increasingly influential European right, meanwhile, views the Kremlin as an ally in its struggle against the idea of European integration. Its ranks include Nigel Farage and his UK Independence Party, Marine Le Pen and her National Front in France, and Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party in the Netherlands.²¹

The Ukrainian events have triggered the emergence of this left-right International of Kremlin sympathizers. In Europe and elsewhere, politicians and intellectuals of both the right and left can be found among those who back the Kremlin's position on Ukraine. This International is injecting confusion into Western civil society and making it harder for the West to take a consistent stand regarding Putin's Russia.

The Russian and international expert community, often without quite realizing what it is doing, also helps the personalized-power system to legitimate itself. When experts argue that "the 'Medvedevian' line in Russian politics remains alive—the soft-liner strategy of gradual ameliorative change," that NATO expansion is the problem, that the West

must “accommodate Russia,” that “the EU precipitated matters by blundering into the most sensitive part of Russia’s backyard,” and that the West’s goal is “Putin’s ouster,” they only help the system to justify its actions and disorient the liberal world.²²

How Grave a Challenge?

The return of an anti-Western and revanchist Russia to the global scene was a shock to the international community—a fact which tells us that the politicians and intellectuals of the day have failed to understand the processes generated by the Soviet collapse.

What made Russia return to the role of the “anti-West”? Was it the disrespect, even humiliation, that Russians allegedly experienced at the hands of the West? Was it Western expansion into Russia’s “areas of interest” and “geopolitical space”? Or was it the liberal democracies’ decay? I would argue that this shift was preordained by Russia’s failure to use its defeat in the Cold War to transform itself into a rule-of-law state. The Russian political elite, especially the part that presented itself as liberal, failed to play a truly reformist role.

The Kremlin’s switch to the military-patriotic mode is a sign of the regime’s agony. Here we have a new conundrum: Russia cannot build an effective militarist state because it lacks a genuine consolidating idea, because the Kremlin is bereft of reliable repressive instruments, and because sizeable slices of Russia’s elite and society have no wish to live in a “besieged fortress.” At the same time, Russia cannot demilitarize and create an open society because other segments of its elite and its wider populace are not ready for life in a rule-of-law state.²³ The current agony could end in some form of “regime change”—a prospect that emerged as a topic of discussion and speculation in the world media during Putin’s mysterious disappearance from public view for ten days in early March 2015—but that may only allow the underlying system to reproduce itself in one fashion or another and prolong its own decay.

It would be hard to embark on a new Russian transformation now that the concept of liberal reforms has lost so much credibility. Russians might even have to experience a full-scale dictatorship before they will try again to take the liberal-reformist path. One also has to take into account a formidable civilizational problem: There are no historical experiences or analogues to guide the transformation of a hydrocarbon-dependent, nuclear-armed state that is also a vast, territorially integrated land empire.

A few external factors at least partly facilitated Russia’s return to its old authoritarian, anti-Western ways. One was the West’s sheer naivety (it thought that it was helping democratization by helping Yeltsin). Others included the liberal democracies’ acquiescence in Russia’s authori-

tarian turn and Western cooperation with Russia at the expense of the West's own norms. That liberal democracies ceased to provide a role model for Russia is one of the most tragic developments of the past twenty years.

Today the Kremlin is quite successfully filling the international political and ideological vacuum with its foreign-policy "breakthroughs." When the global order grows unstable, principles no longer matter, "red lines" get fuzzy, and world leaders "lead from behind" (or just plain hide in the rear), opportunities open up for a regime that has the will to give the rules the back of its hand and act as a spoiler.

How sustainable is Russia's military-patriotic mobilization? Russians still support it, but that support is starting to run out of steam. True, today only about 21 percent of Russians would choose the European way for Russia. The "European" camp is a minority, but its members cluster in the big cities and thus can play a decisive role during social upheavals. It is still unclear when this minority will be able to consolidate, to overcome its fear of the regime, and to present an alternative to the system. Much will depend on new waves of protests that only a deep crisis will be able to trigger.²⁴ There are many potential tipping points, but no one can say whether Russia will suddenly plunge into a systemic crisis or continue a gradual slide into rot and paralysis.

Even if a crisis does break out, the most likely result is that the Russian elite will try to save the system by picking a new authoritarian leader. Society is just too demoralized, and the opposition too weak, to challenge the system itself. It looks, then, as if Russians' illusion that the personalized-power regime is capable of ensuring "normalcy" may endure for a while.

We can be certain, however, that the Russian system will further degenerate. The leader's turn toward provocation and war as expedients for survival tells us that the system has exhausted its stability-maintenance mechanisms. It is experiencing both types of political decay cited by Francis Fukuyama: "institutional rigidity" and patrimonialism, as "officials with a large personal stake in the existing system seek to defend it against reform."²⁵ We can be certain that a top-down democratic transition—the kind that would flow from a pact between reformers within the system and the opposition—is impossible. Russia can escape the civilizational trap into which it has fallen only by means of a revolution that would dismantle the system and create a new chance to build a rule-of-law state.

NOTES

1. On the Putin Doctrine, see Lilia Shevtsova, "The Maidan and Beyond: The Russia Factor," *Journal of Democracy* 25 (July 2014): 74–82. See the 2013 essay by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, "Russia's Foreign Policy Philosophy," available at www.mid.ru/

brp_4.nsf/0/8D9F4382C2ACD54744257B40005117DF; and Vladimir Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," 18 March 2014, at <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/6889>. See also his September 2013 speech (in Russian) at www.rg.ru/2013/09/19/stenogramma-site.html.

2. Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money," *Interpreter*, Special Report, 22 November 2014, available at www.interpretermag.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Menace_of_Unreality_Final.pdf.

3. Alexei Levinson, "The Emergency Situation in the Minds," *Vedomosti*, 11 November 2014 (in Russian).

4. An English translation of Ilyin's brief essay "On Fascism" may be found at <http://souloftheeast.org/2013/12/27/ivan-ilyin-on-fascism>.

5. Ilyin's essay on national dictatorship may be read in the original Russian at www.pravoslavie.ru/jurnal/ideas/dictatura.htm.

6. Vladimir Putin, "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," 4 December 2014, available in English at <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/23341>.

7. Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," 18 March 2014.

8. Even before the Crimean annexation, Russia was spending about \$18 to \$20 billion a year to support unrecognized and dependent "states" such as Abkhazia. The annual spending on Crimea alone could add another \$10 or \$12 billion to the total.

9. Hostility toward the United States is on the rise in Russia. It reached an unprecedented high in May 2014, when 71 percent of respondents said that their feelings toward the United States were "mostly" or "very" bad. About 60 percent of Russians view the EU negatively now. Against this backdrop, the positive perception of China has risen from 62 percent to 77 percent; 40 percent of respondents called it Russia's closest ally (second only to Belarus). More than two-thirds (68 percent) of respondents named the United States as the most hostile country toward Russia. See www.levada.ru/05-06-2014/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-drugim-stranam.

10. James Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad* (London: Chatham House, 2013).

11. The number of those Russians who feel uneasy to pay for Russian "greatness" is growing. In March 2014, 19 percent of Russians were not ready to pay, a figure that had grown to 31 percent by December. See www.levada.ru/print/30-12-2014/maidan-krym-sanktsii.

12. Natalie Duffy, "Internet Freedom in Vladimir Putin's Russia: The Noose Tightens," American Enterprise Institute, 12 January 2015, available at www.aei.org/publication/internet-freedom-vladimir-putins-russia-noose-tightens.

13. Lyudmila Klimentjeva, "Kremlin Plans to Toughen Control over Internet Providers—'Kommersant,'" 29 April 2014, available in Russian at www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/25959451/kreml-nameren-uzhestochit-kontrol-za-internet-provajderami.

14. Pomerantsev and Weiss, "Menace of Unreality."

15. Putin secretly gave military medals to three-hundred journalists for backing the Crimean annexation and strengthening military patriotism. On how war propaganda works, see Joshua Yaffa, "Dmitry Kiselev Is Redefining the Art of Russian Propaganda," *New Republic*, 1 July 2014.

16. RT's 2,500 employees support broadcasts in Russian, English, Spanish, and Arabic, with German to be added soon. According to *Der Spiegel*, RT brainwashing has had an effect, at least in Germany. See www.spiegel.de/international/world/russia-uses-state-television-to-sway-opinion-at-home-and-abroad-a-971971.html. On the work of Russian propagandists in the Baltic states, see Inga Springe et al., "Spreading Democracy in Latvia, Kremlin Style," *Baltic Times*, 21 March 2012, available at www.baltic-times.com/news/articles/30852.

17. On this topic, see Paul Goble, "Lies, Damned Lies, and Russian Disinformation," *Kyiv Post*, 14 August 2014, www.kyivpost.com/opinion/op-ed/paul-goble-lies-damned-lies-and-russian-disinformation-360527.html and Goble, "Hot Issue—Lies, Damned Lies, and Russian Disinformation," Jamestown Foundation, Global Research and Analysis, 13 August 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/nh35kpp>.

18. These statements are from an interview that Putin gave on 3 June 2014 to correspondents from French radio and television. See <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/22441>.

19. On the Kremlin's lobbying efforts in Washington, D.C., see Luke O'Brien, "Putin's Washington: Even Money, Lots and Lots of Money, Can't Buy Him Love—A Story of Lobbying and Its Limits," *Politico Magazine*, January–February 2015, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/01/putins-washington-113894.html#_VKzSHnuigy0.

20. Von Bernd Ulrich, "The Germans and Russia: How Putin Divides," *Zeit Online*, 10 April 2014, www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2014-04/germans-russia-media-putin.

21. Doug Saunders, "Vladimir Putin's Fifth Column in the West," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 7 June 2014, www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/vladimir-putins-fifth-column-in-the-west/article19021604.

22. Richard Sakwa, "Whatever Happened to the Russian Opposition?" 23 May 2014, www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20140523SakwaFinal.pdf; Tony Brenton, "The Unfolding Ukraine Crisis Signals a New World Order," <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/16/ukraine-crisis-signals-new-world-order-russia>; John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93 (September–October 2014): 77–89; and Dmitry Trenin, "The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry," Carnegie Moscow Center, 9 July 2014, available at <http://carnegie.ru/2014/07/09/ukraine-crisis-and-resumption-of-great-power-rivalry>.

23. Igor Klyamkin, *Istoria i istoricheskoe soznanie* [History and historical consciousness] (Moscow: Liberal Mission Foundation, 2012), 137.

24. Acute economic hardship could prove a tipping point. In December 2014, 62 percent of respondents said that they were not ready to accept declining living standards as the result of sanctions. See www.levada.ru/print/30-12-2014/maidan-krym-sanktsii.

25. Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (London: Profile, 2011), 454.