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DEMOCRACY AND ITS ENEMIES: NEW THREATS, NEW POSSIBILITIES

RUSSIA'S NEW AUTHORITARIANISM.

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The Russian personalized power system, the antithesis of the rule of law state, is demonstrating an amazing capacity for survival even in the midst of advanced stages of decay. The new survival strategy by which the Kremlin is now attempting to prolong its life includes several parts: first, staging a “conservative revolution” domestically; second, turning Russia into a revanchist power, ready to undermine the global rules in order to preserve the internal status quo; third, containing the West and forging an anti-Western International.

THE AUTHORITARIAN TRIAD

Over the past two decades, the Russian System has limped on, meeting new challenges with imitation solutions that don't change its basic substance. Throughout its struggle to reproduce itself, the System has defied a lot of predictions and ruined a lot of analytical narratives. At the end of the 1980s, it humiliated Sovietology, which had persuaded the world that the Soviet Union was as solid as a rock. In the 1990s, the System moved in the opposite direction from the one promised by transitology. In early 2000s, the System discarded the assumption that Russia would be a partner to the U.S. in its battle with terrorism, and in 2008-2012, it turned both the U.S. reset and EU Partnership for modernization program into the punch line of a joke. Just imagine how many expert and academic reputations the System has sent to the dustbin!

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Russian System reincarnated itself by dumping the Soviet state, faking 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 to a harsh authoritarianism and harbors ambitions of becoming the chief opponent of the West. A nuclear superpower state that perished in a time of peace has thus re-emerged in another geographical configuration, and in a way that preserves its predecessor's key characteristics—quite an unusual phenomenon!

The System's key innovation is its use of liberal civilization to prolong its life, first by containing it and later by imitating it, which proves that its own potential for durability is slight. From the time of the Soviet collapse until recently, all of these variables—mimicking Western institutions and norms, the emergence of comprador rent-seeking class integrated into Western society, the relative freedom citizens enjoyed in the private domain, and the limited pluralism of political life (as long as it didn't threaten the ruling class's monopoly on power)—helped both the Yeltsin and Putin teams survive. The post-Cold War world, with its “end of ideology” and its 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 take the Kremlin at face value 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 the Western clubs (the G-8 and 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 objectives.

The general impression shared by many was that this System could have lived in this gray normative zone indefinitely, undermining the West through cooptation and corruption. True, the regime's growing institutional rigidity, its crackdown on civil society, and its rejection of reforms were all signs of the System's advanced state of decay. But high oil prices, corruption (which is a way of compensating for the absence of

institutions), public indifference, and the lack of any viable alternative seemed to suggest that the slow process of decay could continue indefinitely.

All of this changed in 2012-2013, however, when the Kremlin was forced to adopt a new survival strategy: the “Putin Doctrine” legitimates a harsher rule and a more assertive stance abroad. Several circumstances forced the Kremlin’s hand here. The nature of Putin’s leadership-style—his reliance on hands-on control, his animosity toward the West, his reliance on shady deals and the mafia-style loyalty of close friends, his disrespect for law—pushed Putin toward a harsher and more assertive rule. A couple of other factors played a role as well. For the first time in Russian history, representatives of the special services, professionally trained to exercise coercion, occupied the Kremlin. Russia, which has had a despotic state throughout its history, never until now had such a *Triad regime*, in which one group had consolidated control of political power, property, and the repressive mechanisms of the state. And let’s add to this list of factors Yeltsin’s constitution of 1993, which built the framework for a regime headed by a leader who would stand above the fray and have no accountability before society. Finally, the rise of protest activity in 2011-2012, and the fear that even mild political struggle could threaten the Kremlin’s omnipotence, forced the Kremlin to turn to the machinery of coercion and containment of the West before a new wave of protests struck.

By the beginning of 2014, the Kremlin declared the impending doom of the liberal democracies, thus officially closing off the pro-Western period of Russian history that began in 1991. The irony is that the Kremlin, in looking for a way to keep going, returned to a model that by the end of the 1990s had already caused the System’s previous incarnation to go down in flames. In another ironic twist, liberal civilization once again became the stimulus for the System’s consolidation – this time through deterrence of liberal democracy.

The Ukrainian Maidan and the fall of Yanukovich regime in 2014 presented the Kremlin with an opportunity to test its new Doctrine. The annexation of Crimea and the support for the pro-Russian separatists in the Ukrainian East allowed the Kremlin to justify its military-patriotic mobilization of society around the regime and its transformation of Russia into a “besieged fortress”—the siege-laying enemy in this case being an internal one that receives support from an external adversary. The Kremlin pushed Russia onto a war footing, returning the System to its traditional means of survival in times of trouble. True, this war pattern was updated for the 21st century. The Kremlin erased the border between war and peace by engaging in military actions without admitting it, and by “weaponizing” other areas of life. Thus we now have customs wars, gas wars, information wars, culture wars, history wars). Reacting to this new type of war is very difficult.

The war tactic has worked, creating unprecedented public mobilization around the country’s leader and the defense of the Motherland, feeding off of the growing discontent of the Russian public, its anticipation of the looming troubles, its memory of failed reforms, and, at the same time, the widespread longing for hope and reassurance. There are deeper reasons for the success of Putin’s mobilization, too. Russian society today resembles a “sand heap,” lacking cultural or moral regulators. There is a paradox here: The “traditional values” that once consolidated Russian society were demolished by the Stalin regime, which subjugated individuals to the state and its leader, decimating even the embryonic horizontal ties, and family ties as well.

In its shift to a war mode, the Kremlin won’t be limited to an increased military budget and a growing role for the military-industrial complex. Russian militarism is a unique form of the *State Based on Order*, which is an alternative the *Rule of Law State*. Although turning Russia into a Stalin-era army-state 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 of course not the first time the Kremlin has attempted to solve its problems by means of a military-patriotic mobilization. It also did so during the second Chechen war in 1999 and in the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. But, as we saw in both of those past cases, military mobilization is short-lived and requires the constant validation of additional triumphs over the enemy—whether that enemy is real or imagined. It’s equally

important that these triumphs yield zero or limited casualties, since large losses of life can undermine the leader's support base. It's ironic that a country whose population is so easily drugged by militarist propaganda is at the same time so afraid of bloodshed and real war. In past instances in which Russians consolidated around their leader in the wake of military threats, the conflict was over in a matter of months. The Crimean consolidation is going to last longer, but the buzz will wear off, and the resulting hangover will eventually set in. The question arises: how will the Kremlin distract Russians from their worries and frustrations when it has played its trump card of war and the threat of war?

As the Kremlin continued its experiment with the war paradigm, it seemed that the process had slipped its bonds and acquired a logic of its own. The Kremlin can't return the country to a peacetime footing, because it can't provide for the people's welfare and stability; it needs to constantly find new threats in order to justify its continued rule, but the war strategy unleashes suicidal forces that it can't control. The Kremlin can barely manage the consequences of its undeclared war with Ukraine. Among these consequences: the strengthening of Russia's hawks, who demand "victory" over Ukraine; pressure from the military-industrial complex, which wants a bigger share of the budget; growing frustration among the Russian nationalists and imperialists, who expect Putin to subjugate other nations; the growing internal and external costs of military adventurism; and crippling Western sanctions.

The Kremlin's tactic is to show that maintaining a coherent worldview is futile; ideas must be instrumental, so that they can justify any actions that might be necessary. The Kremlin thus doesn't plan to indoctrinate Russian society; on the contrary, its goal is to atomize the people, confuse them, and convince them that everything is relative and fluid. The Russian propaganda machine can, in one moment, recite the mantra that "Russian values do not differ dramatically from European values. We belong to the same civilization," and in the next moment argue that the West is Russia's key enemy. Whether conscious or unconscious, this is a textbook case of cognitive dissonance; the Kremlin is endorsing contradictory truths, disorienting both Russia and the world, and making chaos its playground.

FOREIGN POLICY AS THE INSTRUMENT OF SURVIVAL

Foreign policy has become a crucial instrument for securing the existence of the System. Its mission is to guarantee an external environment conducive to personalized power; to compensate for the Kremlin's diminishing internal resources and the growing dissatisfaction of the most dynamic parts of Russian society; to divert people's attention from deep social and economic problems; to contain Western influence both inside and outside Russia; to prevent the unity of the Western (mainly European) community; to strengthen the Russian lobbyist network in the West. The fact that the Kremlin is trying to solve domestic problems by turning to international activity is also an indicator of the sustainability of the System.

Two goals for the Kremlin's international agenda are especially important. First, in the post-Soviet space, the Kremlin seeks to create an entity that resembles "the global socialist system" but without its unifying communist idea. This role is to be served by the Eurasian Union, including Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Armenia, with Moscow acting as its leader. Second, the Kremlin is working on developing a dual-track policy with respect to its Western states that seeks both to contain the West as a normative power and a geopolitical actor and to cooperate with it (on Moscow's terms, of course).

The Eurasian Economic Union, which grew out of the Customs Union, aims at close coordination of economic and political strategy. Moscow intends to preside over an integration bloc that will serve as a counterbalance to the EU. (It initially sought to draw Ukraine into this union; otherwise the grouping would look less Slavic. This plan, however, isn't going to materialize now.) In fact, the Eurasian Union is a club of authoritarian states, and its main goal is to preserve personalized rule in each state. The member-states are prepared to participate in this Kremlin project in exchange for subsidies and security guarantees. (This is

especially true of Armenia and of Kyrgyzstan, which is waiting to join). Moreover, the member-states don't mind blackmailing Moscow in order to get a better return on their membership. Russian subsidies, however, won't guarantee that the members of the Eurasian Union will be loyal to Moscow; they will have no trouble betraying the Kremlin as soon as a new sponsor appears, or threatening to betray them as a means of blackmailing the Kremlin for more financial resources. Anyway, the fact that Belarus has restarted customs inspections on the border with Russia only demonstrates how fragile the new alliance is.

So far, the Kremlin has managed to use nationalism in order to strengthen imperialism, and even rallying Russian nationalists around its cause. Most nationalists, who had previously opposed Putin for many years, supported the Kremlin in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. But the Kremlin will not be able to exploit these two mutually exclusive projects for long. It will have to choose the imperial idea, since only this idea will allow it to maintain control over the multiethnic Russian state (the Kremlin, in fact, has already dropped the idea of supporting "Novorossiia" in Ukraine), which may push the nationalists back into the opposition camp.

The fact that Moscow had to 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 desperate to find new ways to limp ahead. It also highlights the fact that, more than 20 years after the Soviet breakup, Russian society has not yet acquired a new identity and is still susceptible to mutually exclusive concepts.

A return to a great-power agenda by means 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; internal displays of might are no longer sufficient, so the personalized power system now requires external displays of might. However, Russia has to pay for the revival of its quasi-empire, and escalating economic troubles will soon render the Kremlin's imperial ambitions too heavy a burden for the country's budget.

The second tier of the Kremlin's foreign policy offensive is containment of the West. So far, Putin has been trying to find a new balance between cooperation with and deterrence of the liberal democracies, and he might even believe that he can return to business as usual with the West after the Ukrainian conflict is sorted out. The containment of Western civilization in Russia is reflected in the Kremlin's efforts to, first, prevent its geopolitical expansion in Eurasia; second, get it to endorse "areas of interest" in the region; and third, block all channels of Western influence within Russia, including the adoption of laws stripping Russian civil society of financial aid from the West. Anti-Western (primarily anti-American) propaganda is one of the most effective means of counteracting Western influence.

The Kremlin has also resorted to the nationalization of the elite. It demanded that the ruling class repatriate assets to Russia and give up its properties in the West (representatives of the power structure had to surrender their passports, thus preventing them from traveling to "hostile countries"). In fact, the comprador elite has 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. The following factors are forcing the Kremlin to continue its cooperation with the West: economic interests and the budget's dependence on the sale of hydrocarbons to Europe; dependence on Western investments, loans, and technologies; its 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 sectoral sanctions; the elite's personal interests in the West; the fear of losing control over escalating tensions; and the absence of serious threats to the regime from inside or outside.

These factors could steer the Kremlin toward restoring dialogue with the West, but they can't guarantee that this dialogue would be sustained. Nor can they prevent new confrontational outbursts. 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: don't meddle in Russian domestic life; accept the existence of

Russian spheres of influence; halt NATO's expansion toward Russia's borders; don't deploy NATO forces in East European and 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's never any explanation of what this term means). Most of these terms have even been accepted—not that this prevented the Kremlin's aggressiveness. In October 2014 Putin pushed the ball further, declaring that the old world order is unraveling (of course, as a result of U.S. behavior). He called for the construction of a "polycentric" order, which apparently would prevent the U.S from attempting to present itself as a hegemonic power and guarantee a balance between the liberal and illiberal world. Escalation of these demands (which are pushing well into unrealistic territory) is a way for the Kremlin to create an unending series of grievances and humiliations, which will be used as a pretext for further militaristic behavior.

However, the Kremlin will be prepared to experiment with various forms of engagement, cooperation, and even partnership with liberal democracies. Its hope for these endeavors will be to encourage disunity within the West, to support its Western loyalists, and, of course, to pursue the Kremlin's other interests. The Kremlin has perfected the operational art of provoking conflicts, playing states against one another, co-opting Western elites, penetrating Western organizations, consolidating support within Western society, and, finally, creating international deadlocks and playing the spoiler's role. Putin's elite has learned not only how to practice containment but also how to influence Western decision-making: by torpedoing the movement of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova toward Europe; by forcing European leaders to accommodate the Kremlin's energy policy; by creating a powerful business lobby in Western countries. One can't ignore tenacity of the Russian leadership in achieving its agenda by using: the disunity of the Western community; the dysfunctions of the liberal democratic model; the lack of readiness on the part of the West for new "Ideological Projects" and for emphasizing the normative dimension of foreign policy; the West's longing for a status quo; the lack of ambition and moral strength for countering hostile civilizations; and the willingness to retrench from its previous commitments.

In any case, the Kremlin will not mellow with time. The Russian elite and part of Russia's population interpret the Kremlin's anti-Western campaign as evidence of its power and prowess. Thus, any efforts to back down would be perceived as a sign of weakness on the part of the regime and its leader. The power structures will demand that Russia stick with its mobilization model. Finally, part of the brainwashed population is willing to accept their privations in exchange for basking in plausible claims of Russia's greatness, even if those claims are at heart nothing but imitation. All these circumstances will sustain Russia's militarist and imperial behavioral pattern on the world stage, unless the System is transformed.

How serious is the Russian challenge?

What made Russia return to the role of Anti-West? Was it the disrespect, even humiliation, that Russians allegedly experienced at the hands of the West? Was it the latter's expansion into Russia's areas of interest and "geopolitics", or 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 reformist role. The Kremlin's shift toward the military-patriotic mode looks like evidence of the regime's agony. Here we have a new conundrum: Russia can't build an effective militarist state because it lacks a genuine consolidating idea that responds to the interests of the people; because the Kremlin lacks reliable repressive instruments; and because a significant part of Russia's elite and society don't want to live in a "Besieged Fortress." At the same time Russia can't demilitarize and create an Open Society, because other segments of its elite and society are not ready to live in a Rule of Law State. Thus, the agony of the current regime could end in regime change, which is how the System will reproduce itself and prolong its decay.

It would be hard to embark on a new Russian transformation now, after the concept of liberal reforms has been discredited. Russians might even have to experience a dictatorship before they will try to go down this path again. One also has to take into account the formidable civilizational problem: there are no historical experiences or analogues to guide the transformation of a Nuclear Petro-state that is also a half-frozen, territorially integrated empire!

There are a few external factors that at least partly facilitated Russia's return to the past: the West's naïveté (it thought that it was helping democratization by helping Yeltsin); liberal democracies' acquiescence in Russian authoritarianism; and Western cooperation with Russia at the expense of the normative dimension. That liberal democracies ceased to be Russia's role model is one of the saddest events of the past twenty years.

Today the Kremlin is quite successfully filling the international political and ideological vacuum with its "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), windows of opportunity open up for a regime that has the will to ignore the rules, sweep them away entirely, or act as a spoiler.

How sustainable is Russia's military-patriotic mobilization? Russians still support it at present, but that support is beginning to run out of steam. True, only about 21 percent of Russians would choose the European way for Russia. As we can see, the Europe supporters are a minority, but they are concentrated in large cities and thus play a decisive role during social upheavals. It is still unclear when this minority will be able to consolidate, overcome its fear of the regime, and present its alternative to the System. A lot will depend on new waves of protests that only a deep crisis could trigger. There are a lot of tipping points one might mention, but there is no certainty on the question of whether Russia will move toward systemic crisis or continue in a gradual descent into rot and paralysis.

Even in the case of a crisis and its resulting discontent, the most likely result is that the Russian elite, for the foreseeable future, will attempt 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 regime is capable of ensuring "normalcy" will endure for a while.

We can be certain that the Russian System will further degenerate. The fact that the leader has turned to war as a survival paradigm tells us that this System has exhausted its stability-maintenance mechanisms. It is experiencing both types of decay mentioned by Francis Fukuyama: "institutional rigidity" and patrimonialism, as "the officials with a large personal stake in the existing system seek to defend it against reform."¹ However, we can also be certain about one other thing: democratic transition from the top, on the basis of a pact between the system reformers and the opposition, is impossible. Russia can escape the civilizational trap only by means of a revolution that would dismantle the System and create a chance to build a Rule of Law state. Turmoil, however, is always dangerous, especially in societies that have been purposefully forced into a Hobbesian world.

Thus, Russia is facing questions that neither it nor the West can yet answer. But the fact that these questions are being asked is certainly a positive development.

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*. Profile Books, 2011, p. 454.