

Images of the Future

George W. Breslauer

Abstract: This concluding essay outlines several alternative futures for Russia in the coming decades, building upon the perspectives and information in the preceding essays in this volume and relating these to my own thinking about the future of Russia. Hence, this essay does not represent a consensus of the issue's twelve authors, but rather a meld of their thoughts and my own.

After the collapse of Communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most Western observers were hoping that Russia would eventually evolve into a liberal democracy. Nobody thought it would be either quick or easy, but the fascination of the time was to speculate about the steps that would need to be taken to bring about, first, a “democratic breakthrough” and, later, “democratic consolidation.” We all thought and wrote a great deal about indicators of, and strategies for, such a transition. We applied those insights or presuppositions to a continuous tracking of changes under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. As the Yeltsin years rolled on, contention intensified over whether the first post-Soviet president of Russia was leading the country through a difficult transition or was regressing toward authoritarianism and poisoning the nascent shoots of liberal democracy.

Putin's actions during the early 2000s were less ambiguous and helped to rebuild consensus among most Western analysts. But this time, the consensus was that the Putin regime represented “de-democratization,” or authoritarian consolidation. It became increasingly difficult to imagine how this might be reversed. Indeed, in the collection of essays in this volume, no author predicts a democratic breakthrough toward the rule of law, a flowering of civil society, or liberal democracy over the next ten to fifteen years. Transition to liberal democracy is now

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viewed, at least within the stipulated time frame, as somewhat chimerical. Moreover, there is widespread agreement among our authors on how to characterize the current regime. Steeped in the comparativist literature on varieties of authoritarian regimes, they would all define Putin's regime as some adjectival version of authoritarianism, be it "competitive," "electoral," "kleptocratic," "autocratic," "patronal," or "statist." These adjectives are not mutually exclusive; indeed, most authors in this volume would agree that they all capture some important feature of the system. Our authors differ, though not sharply, on what it would take to break out of this regime type, but none of them effuses optimism that such a breakout is likely.

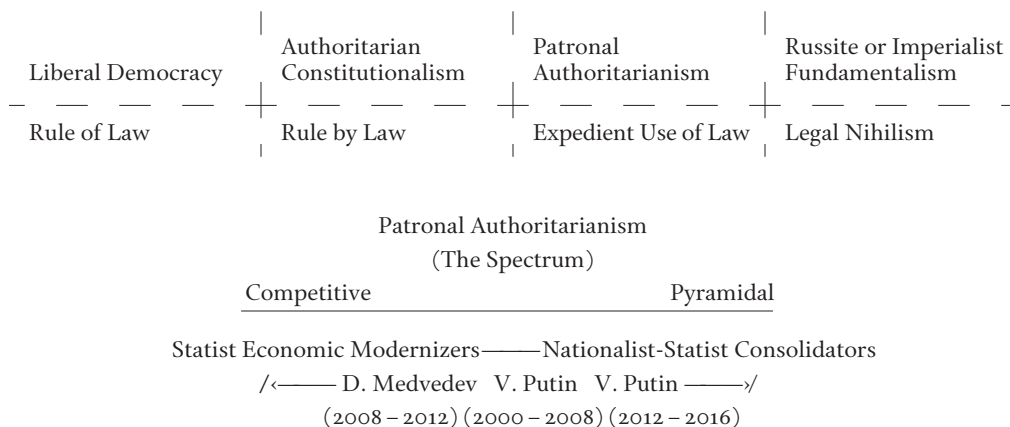
So we have gone from guarded optimism about liberal-democratic futures to thinly qualified pessimism about the ability to escape a situation that, borrowing from political scientist Richard Rose and colleagues' observation about a different set of issues, we might refer to as a "low-level equilibrium trap."¹

What might be considered possible alternatives to this type of regime (see Figure 1)? Having eliminated liberal democracy as a likelihood, we can look to the other end of the political spectrum. There we might imagine a "Russite" or imperialist-fundamentalist reaction: a reversion to some kind of revanchist fascism, which is the nightmare of moderates and liberals along the political spectrum in Russia today, and which now looks like only a possibility, though a decidedly more likely possibility than a successful transition to liberal democracy. None of the essays in this issue assigns this fascist scenario a high probability in the next decade or two. But given Russia's travails at home and abroad and the escalation of revanchist and Russite-fundamentalist political rhetoric in the past five years, it is not difficult to imagine that a political-economic breakdown of some sort,

or an international security failure, could conceivably lead to the ascendance of a regime that is pogromist at home and militarily revanchist abroad.

With liberal democracy and Russite or imperialist fundamentalism at the two extremes, a middling alternative to the current regime is what Maria Popova calls "authoritarian constitutionalism": not rule *of* law (an attribute of liberal democracy), but rule *by* law. This intriguing possibility – to which Popova lends credence but does not assign high probability – might be driven by the urge on the part of business elites and their political and ministerial patrons to gain stable expectations about how they and their property rights will be treated in the political and legal arenas. Popova calls this *authoritarian* constitutionalism because, while it would provide stable expectations to business elites, it would retain an authoritarian and exclusionary posture vis-à-vis the masses of the population. Brian Taylor's evidence of the military and security services only asserting themselves to avoid a breakdown of the state speaks indirectly to this possibility, since it leaves room for statist elites to renegotiate the terms of intralite reciprocity behind the scenes, with confidence that the *siloviki* will prevent a breakdown of the state's authority vis-à-vis the broader population. This accords with Stanislaw Markus's observation that some business elites have a material stake in remaining open to the global capitalist economic order, which, in my opinion, could become part of such an intralite pact. Thus, even though Popova emphasizes how difficult it is to effect a breakthrough even toward rule *by* law, her essay introduces into our imagination an intermediate image that contains some degree of plausibility. Thinking about this possibility may be a useful antidote to thinking that the only alternatives to Putinism are a breakthrough far to the right or far to the left.

Images of the Future
Figure 1
Images of the Future



Whether one anticipates systemic alternatives to Putinism hinges in part on how one understands the regime currently in place. Most scholars would depict it as electoral authoritarianism, led by a strong presidency, in which the formal institutions that might check the power of the presidency, including presidential elections, have been neutered and hollowed out, but remain under the control of competing and interlacing patron-client networks that owe their allegiance to entities and individuals outside those hollowed-out institutions. A major feature of this “patronal” regime, as Henry Hale aptly calls it, is its ideological signature. It is supported by a broad, centrist coalition that marginalizes both the radical liberals or democratizers on the left and the most intolerant nationalist-chauvinists or fascists on the right. Elena Chebankova expounds on the breadth of this ideological spectrum, depicting a condition of “paradigmatic pluralism”: a multitude of paradigms that all stay within the parameters that Putin has defined as legitimate discourse. The center of gravity of this ideational pluralism is, according to

Chebankova, “a hegemonic discourse of state-centered conservatism.” And as Hale and many of our authors argue, the center of gravity of this networked, patronal regime is Vladimir Putin, the patronal network he heads, and the extended networks that compete for access to resources and influence on the president.

Marlene Laruelle usefully distinguishes among state, parastate, and nonstate actors, and their respective conceptions of Russian nationalism. Many state and parastate actors are networked into this regime, even as they compete among themselves for resources. And because the ideological signature of the regime is so broad, Putin, as the ultimate arbiter in this political system, is able to tack back and forth among networks and among points on the broad ideological spectrum as circumstances dictate. He can make side payments that keep people under the umbrella, even as he curries support from the other side. And as the ultimate arbiter among competing networks, he is able to play them off against each other. He may not always get his way, but he chooses his battles and has the re-

sources to define the general course and to punish defiance.

This strategy has clearly manifested itself during the past five years. After taking back the presidency from Dmitrii Medvedev in 2012, Putin shifted the balance within this coalition decidedly to the right, enforcing further restrictions on civil society, a more defiant posture abroad, and increasingly chauvinistic and xenophobic doctrinal formulations. This peaked after the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 and the Russian seizure of Crimea, when Putin explicitly invoked romantic Russian nationalism to justify his policies in Ukraine. But while he has remained defiant of Kiev and the United States, he soon backed off from using his most chauvinistic rhetoric and distanced himself from spokespersons, emboldened by Russia's intervention in Ukraine, who urged that he go still further. He had tested the edges of this paradigmatic pluralism and decided that it could be destabilizing in a multiethnic society to push the center of gravity too far to the right. Indeed, more recently, and in the wake of Western economic sanctions, Putin has granted greater leeway to talented economic reformers like Aleksei Kudrin to devise plans for modernizing the Russian economy, though it remains to be seen whether those plans will be granted a fair hearing in the corridors of power. In the wake of the arrest of Putin's economics minister in November 2016, it also remains to be seen whether economic reformers will retain such influence as they currently enjoy.

Within this broad coalition there is a spectrum that ranges from internationalist economic reformers, at one end, to "Russia-first" nationalist-statist consolidators, at the other. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive viewpoints; they focus on different types of issues and therefore do not necessarily compete along the same dimension. But, in practice, they are in tension with each other, since moderniz-

ing the Russian economy will require its greater integration into the capitalist international economic order, which in turn could be incompatible with a neoisolationist, Russia-first mentality. In principle, one could imagine neoisolationist, nationalist-consolidating economic reformers, though you would have to look hard for them. Thus, the coalition has a built-in tension, since most economic reformers are skittish about the prospect that nationalist consolidators would constrict both political and economic freedoms, and would inhibit Russia's integration into the international economy through confrontational policies abroad. In turn, many nationalist consolidators are apprehensive that economic reformers would unleash forces that might weaken political controls, reduce opportunities for rent-seeking through corruption, and appease adversaries abroad in pursuit of economic integration. When Medvedev was president from 2008 to 2012, the rhetoric he endorsed was more in the direction of the economic reformers. That rhetoric was marginalized after Putin returned to the presidency.

What factors might drive change within this broad coalition? And what would determine whether the Putin pendulum swings to the moderate left or to the moderate right? International events and the state of the international environment are certainly among those factors. On this score, the contrast between Keith Darden's essay here and Stephen Kotkin's recent work in *Foreign Affairs* on the same subject is stark.² Putin's post-2012 shift to the right within this coalition could be viewed as an expression of his preexisting personality and preferences in the face of protests at home. Or it could be viewed as a reaction to perceived provocation abroad. If Putin's revanchist initiatives are a product of political-cultural predisposition, then a Western strategy of containment and deterrence might

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be called for (depending upon one's values and aversion to risk). But if it is a reaction to provocation – which Moscow defines as NATO expansion, U.S. and EU democracy promotion in the former Soviet Union, and the United States' self-serving dictation and redefinition of the norms of international relations – then a Western strategy of reassurance and flexible negotiation might be called for.

One could argue that Gorbachev's reforms at home and his "new thinking" abroad validate the containment approach. Ronald Reagan held firm on his policies of deterrence and provocation (the Strategic Defense Initiative, or "star wars," among others) and Gorbachev soon decided that he could not win this game. His "new thinking" about foreign relations broke decisively with the Leninist paradigm that had previously informed Soviet foreign (and domestic) policy. Why should we not expect the same from Putin or his successor, as long as the West stands firm against Russian adventures abroad?

One could argue against the desirability of such a strategy, whatever its theoretical persuasiveness as a feasible "game" in international relations, by citing the risks and dangers of accidental military clashes with Russia resulting from tit-for-tat escalations on several fronts. On this score, the current situation may be more dangerous than during the early and mid-1980s. But putting aside the risks, the differences between Gorbachev and Putin predict lesser success for a Western strategy of containment today. For one thing, Gorbachev was a democratizer who built his authority by promising to liberalize the political order at home and reduce international tensions abroad. And he was steeped in a socialist ideological tradition, recast in his mind by the influence of Eurocommunism, that led him to believe – chimerically, it turned out – that he could engineer a stable equilibrium at home and abroad

by building "socialist democracy" within the USSR and a peaceful global partnership between reformed socialism and capitalism. Hence, faced with Reagan's recalcitrant posture, Gorbachev became conciliatory, rather than defiant; faced with opposition from conservatives and reactionaries at home, he became still more radical in his domestic political reforms.

Putin, by contrast, has built his political authority by playing to the themes of constructing a strong, centralized, authoritarian state and recovering Russia's former status as a great power that adversaries will be forced to respect and deal with as an equal. He is not steeped in an ideological tradition suggesting that a conciliatory posture abroad and a loosening at home might effect a desirable and stable equilibrium, either domestically or internationally. He views the United States as a revisionist superpower that is seeking to transform the world order to its advantage and in its image. He, in turn, calls for spheres of influence based on mutual respect for how the other defines its security interests, without attempting to transform the other's political order. Thus, a contemporary variant of "idealist" American Wilsonian thinking confronts a contemporary variant of "realist" Russian balance-of-power thinking. The historical irony is that, forty-five years ago, the reverse obtained: American balance-of-power thinking (Nixon and Kissinger) confronted Soviet thinking committed to "making the world safe for anti-imperialism."

Hence, Putin's nationalist-statist, spheres-of-influence ideology predisposes him to believe that reinforcement of controls at home, and defiance of provocation abroad, is the only route through which Russia "will be great again." Such nationalism also predisposes him to believe that the Russian people will sooner suffer economic austerity than another loss of national pride. And it has predisposed him, most recently, to de-

fine the relationship with the West in civilizational and confrontational terms, with the “postmodern” values of the West (gay/transgender rights, for example) meeting a hostile reception from both Russian elites and the broad population. Hence, a U.S. strategy of active containment and Western aversion to a “grand bargain” based on significant Western concessions are less likely to induce Putin to become conciliatory than was the case with Gorbachev. Rather, what we have seen thus far is that Putin has moved decidedly to the right within the broad coalition in response to his perception of Western provocation. Some of his economic-reformist advisers have unsuccessfully urged him to reduce international tensions (such as by not responding to provocations tit-for-tat) as a prerequisite for Russia’s further integration into, and benefit from, the international economy. Putin has thus far rejected such advice, invoking great-power prerogative and arguing that the first conciliatory moves must originate in the West. At the same time, he has given his economic reformists the task of devising plans for the modernization of the Russian economy despite international tensions. In one respect, though, Putin has tried to exercise a moderating influence. He appears to remain committed to “internationalism” within Russia, apparently believing that a pogromist posture toward ethnic minorities within Russia would prove both destabilizing and unworthy.³

Of course, Russia is not insulated from pressures in the international environment. Putin’s “team” cannot but fear that a military accident could spiral out of control, which could make them receptive to Western suggestions of accident-prevention measures. (Under President Kennedy and First Secretary Khrushchev, for example, the telephonic “hotline” between the White House and the Kremlin was one such measure that gained traction after the mutual fright induced by the October 1962 Cuban

Missile Crisis.) Beyond the military realm, the international environment puts constant, albeit incremental, pressures on Russian business interests to engage in adjustments to global markets. Putin, in his rhetoric, may be expressing his disillusion with the United States and the European Union, and he has been talking more about integration with the Asia-Pacific region. But integration with Asia-Pacific economies would still generate international pressures for rationalization and greater transparency of the Russian economy, which economic reformers within Putin’s coalition would welcome.

Shifting our attention from external to internal factors that might induce shifts of emphasis within Putin’s expansive coalition, let us focus on society, civil or not. Samuel Greene’s essay reminds us that, beyond the educated urban middle class (which predominated in protests against Putin in 2011–2012 following rigged parliamentary elections), the Russian people – while conservative in orientation, viewing the state as “simultaneously dysfunctional and yet legitimate, unjust and yet worthy” – are not an inert mass. They can be activated by circumstances. What might be the consequences of anomic outbursts (like the “wildcat” labor strikes of the late 1980s), shocks to the economy (like a budget crisis that compromises wage payments in state enterprises), sustained austerity that becomes increasingly difficult to blame on some plot hatched in Washington, a drop in the president’s popularity, or growing popular anger about corruption at local and regional levels? How would a Russia beyond Putin respond to efforts by Russia’s regions – especially those in the Far East, the Lower Volga region, and the North Caucasus – to seize back greater autonomy from Moscow and/or further integrate their economies with neighboring countries, regardless of Moscow’s wishes. Although this issue of *Daedalus* does

not explore in-depth the centrifugal potential within Russia's regions, it seems apt to imagine how a messy political succession could intensify such forces.

All these kinds of issues and triggers may not lead to a breakout toward either liberal democracy or Russite-fundamentalism, but they are likely to lead to shifts of emphasis within the elite coalition, and growing contradictions (and in-traelite political struggle) if those shifting emphases prove ineffectual. For example, to buy off such anger, Putin could dictate that local elections be made more democratic, attempting to deflect anger away from Moscow and toward local incumbents. Absent loosened restrictions on civil liberties, this might not make those elections "free and fair," but it could make them more competitive and less rigged. Or a would-be successor could try to push things still further to the right, as a means of mobilizing sentiment for a "Fortress Russia" mentality.

The issue of corruption, both petty and grand, is also likely to become a matter of public contention in a post-Putin succession context. In times of economic expansion, such as Putin's first two terms as president (2000–2008), popular gall about inequality and corruption could be muted and offset by a perception of economic betterment at both the personal and societal levels. Under such circumstances, individuals can rationalize that it is worth taking advantage of opportunities for personal economic betterment and upward social mobility than to dwell on, much less protest, the injustices of petty and grand corruption. But in times of economic contraction, the so-called inert mass can be activated by this issue, in both the regions and the center. Eruptions like the Arab Spring or the color revolutions are often triggered by economic austerity and a sense of indignation about the existing *political* order. (A demand to be treated with "dignity" is driven by a sense of "in-

dignation"; the words have the same root.) Russia's population, even beyond the urban middle class, is quite educated and therefore susceptible to indignation about levels of corruption and inequality that restrict their life chances and insult their intelligence and dignity. Is the current level of corruption and inequality in Russia, during a prolonged economic contraction, politically sustainable in a high-income, highly educated country? And if so, for how long? This disjuncture between Russia's high-income status and its deficit of democracy is one of the "paradoxes of Putinism" that Timothy Colton highlights in his contribution to this volume.

If the issue of corruption becomes a focal point of political competition, the initiative for response could come from the top as well, not just from disaffected portions of the broader population. Anticorruption campaigns are mechanisms for consolidating one's authority. They were Yurii Andropov's signature initiative in 1983; they are a key feature of Communist Party leader Xi Jinping's policies in China today. Whether they would work to the benefit of economic reformers or of nationalist-consolidators might depend on the motivations of the leader who is prosecuting the effort. As Popova notes, in November 2016, Putin's minister for the economy, Aleksei Ulyukayev, was arrested on corruption charges.

There are other circumstances that could induce shifts along the political-ideological spectrum. Elections, political succession, and incapacitation of the leader all are moments during which people – both state actors and nonstate actors – start thinking about alternatives and perhaps begin acting in pursuit of them. They are moments for the mobilization of pressure, both within the political elite and within the broader society. Of course, shocks like domestic terror attacks could, depending

on their scale, location, and intensity, shift the political calculus, more likely than not to the right. Or, during a political succession, there could be publicized splits within the elite – ministerial officials, the security services, and the military – as competing patron-client networks seek to position themselves to protect their privileges, which are often in conflict with those of other networks. The essays by Henry Hale, Stanislav Markus, Fiona Hill, Valerie Bunce, and Brian Taylor amply suggest the possibility, indeed likelihood, of splits or struggles within the elite at moments of high political uncertainty. And therein lies a connection between elite division and popular mobilization, for political activists are more likely to take risks when they perceive that divisions within the political elite make change not only desirable, but also feasible. Bunce’s essay lays out the many ways in which the situation in Russia is similar to, as well as different from, the situation in countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union that experienced color revolutions. On balance, Putin appears to have learned from those experiences and has, largely through coercion and countermobilization, prevented the similarities of circumstance from becoming predominant. But in the context of a “messy” post-Putin succession, his would-be successors may not be as clever or potent in anticipating challenges.

The prospect of a messy succession is heightened by Putin’s strategy of hollowing out the political and societal institutions that might check his power. This has left Russia without an institutionalized means of regulating the succession process, a point that several authors in this issue make, and that Fiona Hill emphasizes especially. Presidential elections remain as the prime mechanism for the formal expression of public will about who should govern the country. But who gets to compete in the elections, and how those people are chosen (or

blocked) remains up for grabs in future scenarios. Under Yeltsin, the choice of Putin first as prime minister, and then as acting president was highly personalized: Yeltsin made the choice and his right to do so was not challenged. Conceivably, Putin could choose his successor in this manner as well, though today there are many more entrenched and competing patron-client networks that have a lot at stake in that choice. Fiona Hill reports that there are signs that Putin’s team is seeking to preempt the possibility of a messy succession by exploring mechanisms that have been employed elsewhere for containing the intensity and visibility of political conflict during succession. This could provide incentives for Putin to retire gracefully at some point, and perhaps allow him to retain his wealth, his privileges, behind-the-scenes power, or – should an anticorruption campaign be launched by a successor – his freedom.

As we ponder the possibilities, we must bear in mind that the absence of a breakout to either liberal democracy or revanchist fascism does not mean that no significant change has taken place. By this definition, none of our authors expects systemic change; even “authoritarian constitutionalism” remains within the “authoritarian” genus. But the essays in this volume do lend credence to the possibility of significant change that is not systemic, which could entail significant shifts along the spectrum of the currently regnant paradigmatic pluralism. There is a human cognitive tendency to project continuity into the future, which some critics might characterize as a failure of imagination. But whether the projection constitutes continuity or not depends on one’s definition of significant change. In the present case, the very breadth of the reigning coalition, and the possibility of an in-traelite bargain such as authoritarian constitutionalism, mean that Russia beyond Putin might be marked by any number of significant changes.

Putin has tacked along the political spectrum while firmly – some might say brutally – policing the boundaries of this coalition. This has required no small measure of political skill and instinct on his part. If he seeks to remain president through 2024, and if the international environment does not freeze him into a preference for the right of the spectrum, we may see him tack back to the left when and if he decides that modernization of the manufacturing and service sectors of the economy has become an imperative. Such a switch would compete, of course, with rent-seekers within the patronal pyramid who would be most attentive to protecting their access to opportunities for self-enrichment. Were the balance among competing patron-client networks to shift, this could result in a shift toward what Hale calls a “competing-pyramid” (as opposed to the current “single-pyramid”) patronal system. This is especially

likely in the context of a political succession, and could contribute to the “messiness” and open-endedness of that process. (To the extent that competing pyramids check each other’s powers during a succession, a stalemate might increase the chances of a move toward authoritarian constitutionalism.) The system would still constitute patronal authoritarianism, but would presumably open up new possibilities for shifts along the current political spectrum. Tacking along that spectrum may constitute insignificant change in the eyes of those who prefer a breakout to the far left or far right. But it may constitute significant change in the eyes of those who see a multitude of possibilities within the current spectrum, some of them normatively repulsive and some normatively attractive, depending on the values of the observer – or of the Russian citizens who must live under that regime.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Richard Rose, Neil Munro, and Stephen White, “How Strong is Vladimir Putin’s Support?” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 16 (4) (2000): 287–312.
- ² Stephen Kotkin, “Russia’s Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern,” *Foreign Affairs* 95 (3) (2016): 2–9.
- ³ A thought experiment comes to mind. Suppose Yurii Andropov had lived for five to ten more years, instead of dying within sixteen months of his selection as General Secretary of the Communist Party. Would Andropov’s initially hard-line reaction to Reagan have been sustained throughout Reagan’s presidency?