

Reforum

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Introduction

All discussions on the vision of the future for Russia face a rhetorical (although not purely so) obstacle: how can we talk about reform and a better composition of society in the situation wherein there is seemingly no opportunity to change the regime, or at least force it to make improvements? Discussions about the future, especially a positive one, come off as unhinged optimism.

Even the pointless war in Ukraine, which may – only may – end with the inglorious defeat of the Russian military forces, does not provide us with a meaningful hope for change. Ukraine has no foundations for “liberating” the territories of its neighboring nuclear superpower; all Ukrainian allies view a direct conflict with Russia at its turf as a sure risk of nuclear war (and they are not wrong). Even the Crimean issue hangs on this nervously trembling thread: would the Kremlin consider attacks on the territory of Crimea (whose incorporation into the composition of the Russian Federation is not recognized by any of the prominent world countries, including the allies from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)) as attacks on national territory? Would it provoke the use of tactical nuclear weapons?

The situation with the country’s future is therefore a dead-end one, and some [authors](#) offer to accept it as a status quo. The super-institution of the President (and Putin personally) wants to remain in power and continue its policy, including aggression against Ukraine. Other branches of government are fully subordinate and do not possess the efficient status to change or at least correct the current trajectory of the president. The Government is absent in the political field as it is preoccupied with the restoration of the economy, and the Central Bank is doing the same. The quantitatively significant opposition has been forced into exile, incarcerated in prisons and detention centers, and continues to struggle for the preservation of at least a marginal influence on the public opinion.

This pessimistic image and the sad conclusions drawn from it dominate the current political analyses

and discussions; at the recently held Forum of Free Russia in Vilnius, most [speakers](#) acknowledged that change is impossible “as long as Putin is alive”. At the same time, the absence of a demand for change inside Russia is interpreted in the framework of a deficit of supply.

Nonetheless, meaningful discussions on the future and the prospects of various scenarios coming to life are possible and necessary. As a basis for such discussions, one can use many various analysis methods – or refrain from analysis altogether and instead rely on our feelings, intuition or Tarot cards. We offer to arm ourselves with a long-standing methodology, which allows us to view the future changes from a formal point of view, evaluating not only the feasibility of the manifestation of what we want, but also the desirability of what is possible.

This method is known as the theory of change. It was offered by Peter Drucker in the mid 1950s as a business instrument and was developed in more detail at the Aspen Institute in the 1990s. The theory of change can be applied to most processes in society and is actively used in planning by American public and charitable organizations.

The basic parameters that we must define for the analysis in the framework of theory of change are as follows: a desired result (or a certain pattern of results), the participants of the change process, the available and necessary resources, forces that counteract change, and, finally, potential allies.

In the case of the future of Russia, the theory of change will help not only to check the feasibility of our desires, but to also to evaluate what efforts and what time frame will be necessary to achieve, let’s say, the minimal desirable outcome, and how much time and toil will lead us to the perfect results.

Let’s say that we’ve defined the minimal result in the pattern of what we desire is **the end of war in Ukraine, a return to diplomacy, and to at least the basic principles of international relations**. The maximal desirable result is **the reinstatement of normal representative democracy, human rights and political freedoms in Russia, as well as the**

conduction of peaceful, constructive (albeit non-aligned) and independent policy.

A possible result is almost always more realistic than the desired result, since it is to a higher degree determined by natural logic, the desires of the internal participants of the process, and the macro characteristics of the system (as applied to Russia – the

qualities of its quantitatively large institutions, such as the army, the security service and the law enforcement organs). The object of the analysis is, simultaneously, its subject with its own internal will and conflict. At the end of each chapter, we will draft the most likely scenario and evaluate its desirability based on the principles mentioned in the previous paragraph.

The goals are defined, the tasks are set

The main minimal goal of our theory of change is the end of military actions. Subjectively, the war may be stopped by the Russian administration in a single moment; one can suppose that any offer of a ceasefire will be accepted by the Ukrainians – at least tactically.

What could potentially form the desire for a truce among Russians? With the exception of a voluntary decision by the commander-in-chief, Russia may seek a truce for the following reasons:

1. a moment when it understands **the exhaustion of resources necessary for waging a war** (the risks of disruptions and problems with the continuation of operations become too significant);
2. when it faces **critical disciplinary problems in the front-line units**, which entail the potential fall-through of the fronts;
3. when **the depletion of all ammunition for the artillery, rocket systems and strike aviation** will force the commanders to pause active military endeavors and seek a ceasefire.

Other problems – such as the difficulties with restaffing military units, critical logistical problems, significant local defeats and losses – are not as significant and will not serve as a basis for a Russian ceasefire.

The grassroots anti-war movement, first and foremost the voices from the mothers of the killed, wounded and imprisoned soldiers, and the families who refuse to give their children to the Army Moloch, are not yet able to influence the determination of Putin and other members of the administration to continue the war. In order for this situation to change, the scope of losses must drastically exceed the current one, and,

most importantly, move towards the central regions of the country from the depressive outskirts where most of the recruitment is taking place. The Russian Guard and the police, in their turn, would have to refuse to beat and arrest the heartbroken wives and parents. This scenario cannot be excluded; although, unfortunately, relying on it would be absurd.

Something similar can be said about the depletion of the propagandist effect of the Kremlin-sponsored media. In order for Putin and the Kremlin to begin to shut down the war, we need more than the population's refusal of the propaganda and the slogans integrated by it, but also an active growth of the anti military sentiment with a simultaneous refusal to suppress the rallies of pacifist activists on the part of the security forces.

Let's move on to the effects of sanctions and economic isolation: under what circumstances can they trigger a change in Russian policy? This depends on the scope of the problems, their connection with the army's opportunity to continue the struggle, and the potential of the consumerist economy. Based on the condition as of early fall 2022, the Russian economy is holding under the sanctional pressure (albeit not very steadily), there are no obvious effects of the sanctions on the army's offensive power, and the consumerist economy is adapting to the reorientation towards domestic manufacturers and the primarily Asian replacement.

However, one cannot exclude a scenario wherein all the listed non-critical problems may influence the trajectory of the Russian administration **if they all worsen at the same time**. Let's say that a deficit of an important component (such as pulleys) turns into an absence: this would lead to simultaneous logistical problems of supplying both the army waging war in

Ukraine, and the centers of distribution that are the most nerve-wrecking for the administration due to the transportational problems caused by the impossibility (due to, amongst other things, a deficit of parts) to reconstruct the rolling stock of the railroads and the trucks, becoming critical. Stripped of their supply, the units in the East and the South of Ukraine lose their offensive power and leave the fronts...

Finally, it is very tempting to say that “eliminating Putin” will solve all the problems, but, unfortunately, that is not so. Let’s analyze the goals of the most important opponent of the ceasefire, the reason and the mechanism behind the war – the seventy-year-old lieutenant colonel of the secret services Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.

What does Putin want?

In an attempt to answer the question of what are Putin’s goals in the current war and what result of military action will be an acceptable result for his ego, we need to overview the general vision of the future as seen by Putin.

Trying to read someone else’s thoughts is an ungrateful task, but, in the case of public politicians we can study their speeches, evaluating which statements should be taken literally, which should be discarded, and which interpreted inside out. The 23 years of our acquaintance with Putin, the public politician, provide us with enough material for such an analysis.

In most cases, Putin’s direct statements on the future of Russia are extremely ambiguous: he sees the country as “great”, “thriving”, “modern”, “sovereign” and “comfortable”. These definitions are repeated in his annual addresses, public speeches and articles. Out of all the chosen adjectives, “sovereign” is the only unambiguous one, and Putin himself directly states that the presence of “full sovereignty” is a sign of a strong superpower. He interprets sovereignty as the complete autocracy of the country (or, to be more precise, of its leader) who can make decisions unrestricted by any kind of dependence on more powerful states. And countries that are smaller in size and weaker in terms of military power are a priori less sovereign than Russia.

However, greatness, thriving, modernity and comfort can only be defined by a comparison with other countries and territories. Except for one anecdotal occurrence, Putin tends to avoid such comparisons.

We should separately highlight the 1999 thesis on that we need to catch up to and surpass Portugal

(at the time one of the poorest states in the European Union) in terms of GDP per capita. It appears that this idea was imposed onto Putin by the pragmatic dreamer Herman Gref, collectively derided by political players from all sides and excluded from the daily agenda rather quickly. After this rhetorical failure, Putin almost never attempted to “size up” the future; moreover, he personally distanced himself from such attempts on the part of the “United Russia” in 2004, and granted little approval to the visions and promises of his replacement Dmitry Medvedev in 2008-2011.

However, if we are to pay attention to what Russia’s future should **not** have in Putin’s vision, the vision becomes much more specific.

Starting approximately in 2010, Putin’s statements include the phrases “Russia should have no place for” and “must be excluded”. In a fast-paced tempo, “should not have” and “excluded” began to be incorporated into the legislation – from the ban on offending the feelings of religious believers to the emergence of lists of “undesirable” organizations and “foreign agents”. In Putin’s sovereign model of the future there “should not be” any independent journalists, mass media, non-commercial organizations and especially foreign foundations.

Putin sees the future Russia as “mighty”, implying primarily military power strengthened by levers of economic influence on the surrounding world. The “might” of the future is calculated by Putin (and those who feed the ideas of the Military-Industrial Commission to him) not through the quantity, but rather the specific quality of armaments. For example, the president is especially fond of the “Poseidon” system: a nuclear rocket with an enormously powerful warhead. It is a part of the so-

called “dead hand” system; it is a weapon of revenge which will be used even if the aforementioned decision-making centers in the Russian Federation are destroyed. Under roughly the same logic Putin described a project of a winged rocket with a nuclear engine which may stay in air nearly indefinitely. And the hypersound warheads, the development of which is a big source of Putin’s pride (that is, if they actually do fly with all their claimed characteristics) are the weapon of a hooligan who demands attention and respect simply because he owns the sharpest knife.

Other details of the future in Putin’s vision include some incredibly cool education tracks in Russia, which would prepare theoreticians and constructors of increasingly perfect weapons (he discussed this at the presentation of the Sirius educational center), the creation of centers of ultra technological medicine (which, coincidentally, is the occupation of both his daughters) and some abstract visions, in particularly of patriotism as an ideology.

So, Putin’s vision of the future of Russia is composed out of one foundational and three key desires:

- his personal neverending power;
- a mighty army that is supplied with weapons that are dangerous for everyone, and in the interests of which science and manufacturing are continuously working. Authority that is militarized and guarded by security officials should be able to preserve the situation for a long time, at least until the death of the leader;
- a moderate technological progress combined with an organized lifestyle in the main cities (Sobyanin’s Moscow) with a high level of political control. Progress cannot be eliminated completely (the people are used to it) – and, additionally, in the opinion of Putin and his circles, the “uprooting” of oppositional journalists, academics and professors has benefited the people’s unity;
- a harsh, rigid foreign policy that is built not as much on the defense of Russia’s own interests, as on the denial of interests of others, first and foremost the former Soviet republic states, which can lead to, as we can see starting from February 24th, 2022, to open and aggressive war.

Having projected these goals on the specific circumstances of the war in Ukraine, we can make the following specifying conclusions:

- Since one of the reasons behind the war is the achievement – through the subordination of Ukraine – that same abstract “greatness” of Russia, any territories that are defended or surrendered by Ukraine may be recognized as “the reinstatement of greatness” even without complete military and political subordination.
- A war that continues for much longer than anticipated does not strengthen Putin’s power, but, instead, leads to its erosion and diffusion. Putin either knows this already, or will realize this once the oppressor police institutes* will show independence.
- Military losses (just as the losses in prestige) have not yet undermined the security forces’ ability to keep society contained, and the active army is not yet running or surrendering in mass; thus, the threat of armed destabilization does not rule the policy (yet).
- Russia has not conducted foreign policy harsher than the one of the past few months since the times of post-WWII Stalin, and this satisfies Putin perfectly (this includes the gas blackmailing of Europe and the provocational work on the recruitment of “agents of Russian influence” of all kinds).

So how does all this relate to the theory of change?

First and foremost, the main actor of Russian policy and war Vladimir Putin does not want a future. He is satisfied with the nightmarish present of Ukraine and Russia, forged through his own decisions. He may believe that he is enacting (or has already enacted) a calling that is the product of his own imagination – he returned the country to “greatness”, having mixed a cocktail from the Russian Empire, the USSR, and his own autocratic model. In fact, however, he forced Russia into movement that is, if not entirely backwards, sideways on the axis of time: while there is Putin, there is war, and while there is war, there is Putin, if we are to adapt a rather stupid quote from Vyacheslav Volodin.

However, Putin’s “disappearance” is a mandatory but insufficient condition of the future changes. For the future to become possible we need to look at the desires of the political class, the “siloviki” and other groups who have access to administration.

What kind of future does Putin's circle want?

While momentarily obeying Putin's model of the present and future, his circle is seeing much more diverse coming times.

His closest circle, which can be conditionally marked down as the Ozero co-op, includes a number of former ministers, high-ranking military officials and other security officers (siloviki). All of those people, and their families on a generation or multiple generations upwards – have received from Putin everything they have through a trickle-down process, including money, power, real estate, status and that same anticipation of the future that is nothing more than an extended present. For the innermost circle, the only condition for them and their families to thrive is for Putin to stay in power. Nearly everybody in this group is personally devoted to Putin, connects their life with his life and puts aside the thought of “what happens when he's gone”, and, as I imagine, believes that even if Putin dies, their delegated power will continue. This group includes, for example, the directors of the three largest state corporations: Sechin, Miller and Chemezov.

Two other regime cornerstones are slightly bigger: the administration of security establishments plus key offices in the decision-making chains and “governmental technocrats”. Putin is in constant close contact with both groups, but he addresses all those people from a formal distance. They clearly understand that their place in the hierarchy is lower than that of his old friends and allies. If we can only guess the goals of the siloviki, the technocrats are fairly transparent: this group does not want a deepening of the conflict with the West, does not want a penetrating militarization (but still is not able to protest the war in Ukraine), does not want the isolation of the country, since it understands the consequences – political, social and especially technological. Siloviki, on the other hand, are confident that the suppression machine will be handle all potential mutiny, and that if the trajectory will not be defined by them personally, it will be defined by those who won't be able to ignore their opinion (and will not have the power resource necessary to liquidate it).

Somewhere in between those groups are the pro-Kremlin propagandists, the real paid instigators of the war – the administration of the Russian mass media, the most prominent TV and radio hosts that are

included in the process of formulation and delivering the key messages. On one hand, the influence of these characters seems significant – after all, they were the ones to impose the vision of the war in Ukraine as an existential conflict with the West, the USA, or NATO in the consciousness of the mass consumer. On the other hand, they fully depend on “the giving arm” (i.e., state finances) and “the watching arm” (the siloviki, and in their case the most thuggish administration of the FSB on the defense of constitutional foundations). Additionally, they have personally nursed a whole army of pro-war Telegram bloggers that are more difficult to handle than the editorial staff and are much closer to the military personnel than to the Kremlin/the government or the FSB. In the situation of the intra-elite conflict we will most likely see a re-emerging pluralism of cannibalistic opinions (from both sides) and several sudden disappearances of the “alien” propagandists from the broadcasts. Therefore, this group does not have any other visible interests except for things to remain as they are.

Those are the peak and the higher levels. The foundation of the authority pyramid, however, lies in three groups with completely different interests. Those are the regional elites, the military (aside from intelligence, which is privy to the second circle of Putin's hell) and a large company of directors of important state organizations ranging from economy to education. Prominent businessmen, whose opinion has weight, but who at the same time serve as the “feeding base” for security organizations who suspect them of disloyalty, also belong at this level. Support of Putin's vision of the future in these groups is neither full nor sincere: moreover, each of these groups has honest critics, who have now been gagged. Unlike the first and second level of Putin's support, those people can envision a life post-Putin, and, correspondingly, can see at least two possible scenarios – a continuation of the regime and its demise.

Let's list the indicators we believe to be important.

- 1. None of the elite groups want an acceleration of time – on the contrary, they are likely to be interested in conservation and hindrance.** Therefore, from all options that are proposed for discussion and left for the head of the state to decide, the most conservative ones will receive

the most support, thus forming a policy line that is more than lagging.

2. The war heightened the tensions between the “security groups” close to Putin, especially between the military and the FSB.

At the same time, each side foresees a number of issues arising in case of a ceasefire, and the beginning of a “who’s to blame” investigation. Therefore, two key weapon-possessing groups are clearly not interested in ending the war in Ukraine, and, in parallel to their main activities, are building up compromising materials for potential enemies in the framework of the system. If Putin’s control gives way, the conflict between the army and the FSB may turn into something more serious.

3. The regional elites continue to pretend that they serve the interests of regional elites –

in particular by forming voluntary battalions, campaigning and persecuting dissidents in accordance with the local traditions (killing them in the Chechen Republic and “warning them” in the Northwest). The true regional sentiments are deeply concealed and washed out by the federal media propaganda, as well as the commercial draft*, especially in Russia’s poorest regions (Republic of Tuva, Republic of Buryatia, and Altai Republic). Six months of war is too short of a term in order for its negative impact on the local communities to radically change their attitude towards the war-waging authorities, although the decision on partial mobilization can significantly accelerate this process. But in the Russian Federation, unlike the USSR, a number of national republics build their identity specifically based on the separation of the indigenous people’s interests from the interests of the country as a whole. The political and social minefield that was created by the national policy of Tatarstan, Yakutia and Bashkortostan can become a serious and dangerous challenge for the federation.

4. It was not accidental that the federal authorities wavered in regards to mass mobilization for war in Ukraine for so long.

First, a compulsory draft inevitably involves certain “bends” – from a growth in violence to multiple errors (when individuals immune from the draft are drafted anyway). As shown by the experience of the war in Afghanistan, the returning current of “cargo 200” (casualties)

rather quickly leads to the mass fleeing of mobilized individuals, to desertion and a growth of corruption around military commissariats. Increasing the financial motivation both for volunteers and for the “partially mobilized” does not just entail additional budgetary spending, which no one had planned for, but also created an additional source of tension. In fact, the double principle of recruitment for the military forces of the Russian Federation becomes an additional trap for draft plans in the situation of a limited military conflict.

5. And, most importantly: a personalist dictatorship gives priority to loyalty in the critically important hubs of authority.

Even under less tense circumstances, the Putin regime preferred loyalty over professionalism and expertise; and in wartime, blind devotion is worth even more. The qualitative degradation of administration systems grows stronger not only due to organic problems (such as the choice of the least risky options), but also due to the aim to show one’s loyalty and obedience.

To sum up what was said in this chapter, let us state this once again: evaluating the collective consciousness (and more so the unconsciousness) of several tens of thousands of people is a pointless and ungrateful task. Our conclusions are purely intuitive and are based not on immediate knowledge, but rather on the well-known qualities of human nature under certain uncomfortable circumstances.

For a usable analysis in the part of theory of change, the following conclusions are important:

- **Putin’s circle is heterogenous and likely has different visions for the future.** Tactically, even the groups that hate each other can create alliances both to influence the still-living Putin, and to dominate and suppress in the “excluded Putin” scenario.
- Under the condition of isolation in terms of economy and the foreign policy, **most of the elite groups have to remain loyal** – otherwise they may be destroyed, among other scenarios, physically. The opportunities for a second track in the relationship between the Russian elites and the West are currently quite scarce, and the appearance of “parliamentarians” will only be possible when Putin’s personal control will weaken or disappear altogether. This situation does not help neither to lower the risks nor to

understand the situation in the Kremlin and around it.

- Even **the pro-West and neutral groups that have significant financial and other interests outside of Russia are as of today rejected by both the Kremlin and the West**, and thus feel twice as humiliated. While most people in Putin's circle are directly to blame for launching an aggressive war, their complete isolation does not help neither to understand the situation nor to resolve it.

Putin's circle and the "pillars" of his regime depend on their leader first and foremost. While he is alive and strong, they support his attitude towards

the future: "a never ending present is much better". However, Putin's weakening, his "exclusion", or a possible appearance of a successor and a reconfiguration of power in 2024 will instantly reveal two, and possibly more, main currents: aggressive and moderate. The former will not only insist on continuing the war in Ukraine, but will possibly undertake radical steps which Putin himself currently abstains from. The latter will, most likely, attempt to "fold away" the war in the hopes of preserving the economic situation and stop the accelerated militarization in favor of development, albeit an isolated one.

What kind of future does the Russian population want?

One would think that 140 millions of people who are very different and who live in highly varying conditions are an impossible field for analysis, and, in the best case scenario, the authors can rely on the hints from sociological studies. But, unlike the elites, the national population possesses certain traits that make the analysis somewhat easier.

First, large masses of people are more **inert**. Their priorities remain in place for a long time and change slowly.

Second, for the past few decades the Russian mass consciousness has been demonstrating **an ambivalence towards national and local priorities**. The problems of their neighborhood, city or village are more engaging for Russian citizens than the "national" issues. Landfills, environmental problems, the local education and anything that directly touches upon real life causes grassroots protests, leads to rallies, even under the condition of a factual ban, to the growth of self-organization and other manifestations of a vibrant civic society. The attention to "national problems", however, is so scarce that the authorities have to compensate people at least for a formal, "performative" involvement in the daily agenda.

Third, if we are to rely on the surveys taken before February 24th, 2022, **the challenges and priorities of regular Russian citizens did not change much**

since the early 2000s. They are concerned with social justice (we will discuss the meaning of this term later), the state of education, healthcare and social security/retirement system, criminal safety and the levels of crime, employment and adequate wages and salaries. They are much less concerned with "greatness" and the status of a superpower, the offensive capability and more so foreign policy, even though the imperial ambitions and Great Russian chauvinism find some support among roughly a quarter of the Russian population.

As mentioned above, the "partial mobilization" that began on September 21st, 2022 can have a **catalyzing effect on many tender spots in the relationship between society and the authorities**; however, the first shock that we are observing today, with a mass exodus to no-visa countries, conflicts between mothers and military commissariats, and even anti-war terrorism, unfortunately only includes diffused and weak symptoms.

So what conclusions can we make?

The priority of social justice in the surveys most likely meant (and, we are sure, still means today) a mass sentiment of its deficit. The world of a Russian small man is surrounded by injustices – from small uncomfortable apartments to miniscule salaries and pensions. Many of those injustices were created by

the state (including during the Putin period), and that same state continuously and consciously – from a regular person’s point of view – ignores his problems, preoccupying itself with what is not the topmost priority from the mass consciousness’ point of view (such as the war in Ukraine).

The inertia of desires (and, correspondingly, of visions of a desirable future) is a separate unique problem of any promising transformation. The 1990s, which were already dramatic for many, have been continuously demonized during the years of Putin’s rule: the fear of change became one of the characteristics of the Russian mass consciousness. Based on that, could we suppose that **any** reformational agenda will lose to a conservative one? What if the population takes to the streets to defend Putin’s “eternal present” if it is suddenly opposed by a disturbing, tumultuous and unclear future? The answer is fairly obvious. No, the population will not defend the past; it will simply not be thrilled about change, and we will need to beg them to support it – or at least not actively resist.

The desire for more social justice can be interpreted two ways: a more radical one supposes a “vengeance” against those who committed injustice earlier, with the following establishment of a more just world. A less radical sprouts from the necessity to make reparations for those unjustly deprived. This is, in a way, the track of “positive discrimination”, similar to the one chosen in the USA to smooth over the consequences of slavery and segregation. In conversation we suppose that many Russians are in favor of the first, more radical option, but in reality, if they are offered a choice, will agree to the second one.

A separate question is whether Russians want war. It has two mutually exclusive answers. Prior to September 21st, under the pressure of lengthy daily propaganda with theses such as “if we began, we must go through to the end” – yes, most likely the majority of Russians supported the war. Another issue is that they supported specifically **a colonial war, waged by a professional paid army** somewhere far from them, their cities and villages (as sung by Irina Bogushevskaya – “someone else’s war goes on somewhere far away”). That was also the attitude of the majority towards the Chechen wars. Sending loved ones, who are completely non militarized, to the front, will doubtlessly impact this point of view, and, most likely, not in the direction desired by the authorities. Even the ideological pass of “including Donbass” in

the territory of the Russian Federation, after which the war will make a rhetorical transformation from aggressive into liberational, will not become a saving grace, as we believe. To speak figuratively, Vladimir Solovyev is no Yuri Levitan, and won’t ever become him either.

The second response, purely negative, is given by society when asked about the support for a total war, a war with the entire surrounding world. Despite the imperial syndrome, and the cocktail mixed from both the superiority and the inferiority complexes, Russians – with a small exception for those who are completely insane – are in favor of a peaceful coexistence.

Some recent sociological studies show that 20-25% of the surveyed are united by an interesting special feature: their opinion on policy, both domestic and foreign, is in strict correspondence with the current opinion of the Kremlin/Putin/the state. The representatives of this group carefully watch “the party line bends” and repeat them diligently, reading both the media messages and those in personal communication. Unlike the more conservative and “patriotic” groups, the representatives of this stratum are not aggressive and do not attempt to convince the opposers of Putin, the war or the regime, if the two come face to face.

In a study by Zinc Network, that was conducted in late spring/early summer 2022, this social cluster is very aptly named “state captured”. The reason behind their “correspondence” with the informational and propagandist demands of the authorities lies not in agreement, but in the fact that they, being 100% dependent on the state, understand all the risks of dissent and carefully conceal their own opinion behind the facade of repeating the official position. These are the state officials, the administrators in places of various state and public institutions (medicine, education, social security, the Federal Penitentiary Service, immigration subdivisions of the police), a large share of the workers of state media and culture establishments, junior and middle-rank officers and a share of retired senior citizens. The attitude of this large group, just as of the “silent majority” in the middle of society, towards the state, its policy, and the war is defined by three rational factors:

1. The state’s ability and motivation to exert economic control over those groups. Several payment delays, a cancellation of pension and benefit indexation, as well as of bonuses (a

crucial component of loyalty ties) can lead to significant waverings amongst the state captured and the silent majority.

2. The state's ability to control the broadcasted messages. For control, it is equally important to restrain both the aggressive "war instigators" and those who speak on desirable peace on behalf of the state.
3. The state's ability to imitate feedback. Even though the state captured and the silent majority don't have high hopes for the generosity of the Kremlin and the government, they nonetheless form a demand for the growth of pensions, benefits and salaries among the social sectors. Thus, Putin and the Kremlin are doomed to make public handouts in order to preserve control.

These uncomplicated principles of managing the subordinate mass were known back in the day to the tyrants of antiquity; later they were systematized by Machiavelli in "The Prince". However, modern society is much more complex than that of antiquity and even that of the Renaissance.

The most likely scenario of the WHOLE Russian society's behavior in case of beginning change (or at least the appearance of appropriate circumstances for that) is careful neutrality prior to the shift of media and propagandist evaluations, as it was during the demise of the Communist Party and the USSR. Parts of the "majority" will begin to split off and openly resist the regime much earlier than the actual moment of the system's critical breakdown, but we are not to expect resistance or support for change from the main mass of civilians.

In order to use these observations in the change of theory evaluation, we should review the possible waverings in the mass consciousness in regards to three possible events that may trigger change: 1) a frontline catastrophe in the Ukrainian war that is difficult or impossible to conceal, when the army does not simply retreat, but returns to Russia, arms in hand; 2) the sudden death of Putin, wherein the elites will begin the fight for power and inevitably compromise both the balance of loyalty and the work of the propaganda machinery; 3) a sharp, quickly unfolding social and economical crisis, which specifically violates crucial logistic chains (supply of food, heating, local public transport).

A potential military defeat in Ukraine, desertion and the inevitable death of violence within the country could provoke right-leaning disturbances of the national-socialist type (remember the demands for more social justice?) that will be stronger than the defensive powers; such a scenario will lead to utmost destabilization, and, unfortunately, to civil war.

The "disappearance of Putin" prior to February 24th, 2022, would most likely have launched the constitutionally proscribed mechanism of legal inheritance: the responsibilities and powers of the president are delegated to the prime minister, who announces early elections and, using the administrative resources, state finances and the violence apparatus, calmly takes his seat in the Kremlin. Now, however, the legalistic option of inheritance is virtually eliminated, and, if something were to happen, "the ruling suitcase" will end up in the hands of a random will executor, whether that'll be the junta of the Security Council or the director of the Federal Protective Service. It is possible that this lawless inheritance will not receive mass support. This scenario does not so much create the conditions for change as it can potentially become a catalyzer of secondary processes of a wider spectrum.

An avalanche-like economical crisis is the least threatening scenario for the current regime (one can live under emergency protocols for a while, and at the same time fold away the military actions in Ukraine while the people are distracted), but strategically, it is the most dangerous for the political and territorial unity of Russia. The Moscow authorities will solve the problems of capitals and metropolises at the cost of fully abandoning "small Russia", factually provoking the regions to seek new methods of survival – including independence, reaching out to other countries for help, etc.

A population that is excluded from politics, "muffled" and non-represented in the government is not just an asset of the Putin regime, but also the sword of Damocles that hangs over it. The inability to deliver the paternalistic promises and "wants" and to preserve the living conditions of the people at a certain level may lead to an explosion which we fearfully refer to as "civil war". This is a grim perspective, but, if we do not note it, we cannot construct a vision of change.

A plethora of options

All that was said above does not add any optimism in regards to the future changes in Russia. From a biological standpoint, Vladimir Putin can remain the head of the state for at least another decade, and perhaps more. From a political standpoint, things are somewhat more complicated. 2024 is looming over Putin and the rest of Russia on the trajectory of 2022 (with the war in Ukraine, repressions and a global economic and political isolation), while pushing forward 2023 (with a potential energy crisis in Europe). Russia is becoming a point of tension for the whole world, first and foremost for its neighbors.

2024 is the year of elections, which may or may not take place. Both the decision to conduct or to cancel the elections may become explosive. Each following month of war increases the risks of unforeseen effects inside and outside of Russia. 12 months are left until the conclusive December 2023. What will take place until then?

United States midterm elections will take place in November 2022. Their most likely result is an incompetent Congress, which will not be able to adopt new laws on domestic policy, but will easily unite in support of the foreign policy trajectory of the White House (which is the trajectory for the isolation of Russia).

Winter 2022-2023 in Europe will be challenging and very significant politically. If the energy reserves and current supplies will not influence – at least critically – the conditions in the key countries of the EU (France, Germany, Italy, Poland and the Netherlands), then Putin's calculations for an internal collapse of European democracies will not manifest in reality. So far, the possibility of surviving (although not without challenges) the dangerous winter period is quite realistic. The win of right-wing populists in the Italian elections will most likely not be able to critically change anything – especially considering that even Italian politicians, who were the most devoted in the prewar period, now shrink away from “Moscow's hand”.

So far it is unclear what terms will the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China offer to Xi Jinping when establishing him as the leader of the party and the country for yet another period that goes outside the bounds of practice of the last 40

years. These terms may very well cover the support of Moscow, and rather in a context negative for the Kremlin (the Chinese economy depends a lot more on the USA, the EU and Japan than Russia).

“Undercarriage races’ , as a sequence of state funerals for the members of the Politburo in 1983-1985 was widely known, may take place in Moscow despite the success of local healthcare. This exodus of the patriarchs partially caused the organizational and political instability of the Gorbachev era, and the “lethal collapse” of the group ruling along with Putin may significantly accelerate the course of history.

Another accelerator of history is the war in Ukraine and its consequences. Military actions that continue on the front lines that are 1,500 kilometers long and under extremely varying conditions are a source of constant risk. As the first six months of war have shown, the army of the Russian Federation has no decisive advantages over the Armed Forces of Ukraine, aside from the numbers of artillery and ammunition. The Western systems, supplied within the framework of Ukrainian support – ranging from 150 mm howitzers to the HIMARS systems – provided for an “equilibration” of the front lines. As in any “trench” war, much in the Ukrainian campaign depends on artillery: the successful use of the technically more advanced HIMARS systems creates the greatest challenges for the front lines of Russian and separatist forces, but the general quantitative advantage still remains with the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

Considering the mobilizational events, Russian commanders may, as military analysts suppose, have up to 50,000 soldiers and officers from more or less prepared professional subdivisions at their disposal. Some parts of the mobilized soldiers will be sent to “plug the holes” at the extended front lines, having them cover the diminished units in the Kherson and Donetsk directions – i.e., they will be condemned to death. The removal of the homefront commander of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and his replacement with the country's cruelest general Mizinstev clearly shows that the army supply is in a horrifying state.

In the fall, the Ukrainian army will be supplied by tens of thousands of prepared and organized soldiers,

many of whom will be provided with weapons more advanced than at the disposal of the Russian Armed Forces. Since early October, the administration of the USA is receiving land lease instruments for its use and is growing military orders, including for supplying the newly available unallocated technology to Ukraine. This situation has no predetermination, but it does entail large risks for the Russian army, especially in the Southern direction.

Serious defeats do not only mean large losses, but also an inevitable transference of the problems into the internal informational and physical spaces. Ukraine was able to push through its initial losses of manpower, territory and technology due to its patriotic uplift, a factual formation of a military-political nation in real time. That required more than a charismatic president, who is able to speak to the people every single day, not only his team, who did not cover or diffuse, not only the army that was able to oppose blunt force with ingenuity, but also extremely powerful communication efforts. Doubtlessly, Ukrainian strategic communications also work in the military propaganda mode (and in accordance with its demands) – but, unlike the undertakings of the Russian media, those are sincere feelings and emotions.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that many of the limits and restrictions for the Russia of the future are being defined now, in the grasslands of Kherson and hills of Donbass. Tactical and more so strategic victories of Ukraine form one of its scenarios, but the forward movement of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation does not allow us to exclude another, a much darker one.

The war may end due to several different reasons. Let's arrange them based on their degree of influence on the domestic political situation and the potential regime change in Russia.

1. Exhaustion. It is not defeat that is most dangerous for Putin (the defeat of a nuclear superpower is a topic that has not yet been available for applied research), but a situation wherein the country no longer has the opportunities to continue the war. This would be a confirmation of the strategic mistake made by Putin, who erroneously evaluated the capabilities of the army, society, and more so the elites in regards to aggressive war, in which Russia clashed not only with Ukraine, but also the majority of the West. Losing the opportunity to conduct unrestricted military activities, an ammunition deficit,

logistical failures and a decline in the loyalty of the troops – that is the worst possible scenario akin to February 1917.

- 2. A single serious defeat.** This scenario is painful in terms of reputation, but less problematic for the preservation of the current construction of power and society. The army of the Russian Federation retreats to the guarded frontiers, and the political administration begins to actively seek a truce, possibly supposing significant concessions both to Ukraine and the collective West in the hopes of leaving everything as is “in terms of other things”. The political consequences of such a retreat vary from “nothing happened” to a true animalistic fascist resentment, but “hot” war in Ukraine will stop at this moment, and the confrontation will transfer into a regime of building up resources for the next installment of the war.
- 3. Political dominant idea.** The dragging out of the war leads to the situation wherein policy, first and foremost domestic policy, starts to play a bigger role than the factual situation on the front lines. This is a unique scenario of “exhaustion”, during which the internal problems – not as much the manufacturing or economic ones as the social and political issues – make the continuation of military activities undesirable. In the framework of this scenario, a retreat or the securing of a status quo are defined not by the factual capabilities of the society, moral and economy, but by their political interpretations. Perhaps the Minsk agreements, adopted in 2014, were defined by similar circumstances: Russia did not want to increase its involvement in the “Ukrainian internal conflict” any further, and Ukraine was not able to provide a competent military counterattack.
- 4. “All’s quiet on the Western Front”.** This is the scenario of a dragged-out “trench” conflict, which, for Putin’s model of authority is a rather manageable situation with pinpoint repressions, “partial mobilization 2.0. and so on” and other elements of the emergency regime, but not a lethal threat.
- 5. Random success.** Some kind of operation by the army of the Russian Federation similar to Tukhachevsky’s breakthrough to Warsaw in 1920, one that would not help achieve a strategic

result, but would lead to forcing the opponent into peace under profitable conditions. We cannot exclude the possibility that, despite the failures from the first months of the war, the Military Forces of the Russian Federation still have an opportunity for a sensitive raid* into the deepest home fronts of Ukraine. Of course, the new Ukraine is not likely to agree to what Putin has negotiated for back in 2015; but the Kremlin dictator also has nuclear weapons at his disposal, and if he threatens Ukraine with them – this time, sincerely – he may achieve larger cessations.

The scenario of Ukraine's defeat, the occupation of its significant territorial part and the subsequent annexation is not even worth reviewing: Russia does not possess the physical resources for the full-fledged subordination of a country with a 40 million

population and the support of the West. The political threats of establishing "Novorussia", the annexation of the Ukrainian South and a part of the left bank would not only lead to a deeper level of conflict with the West (not Ukraine, but the entire Western world), but also the nearly-inevitable sanctions of the CoCom¹ variety.

So how can war change the situation within Russia, which, as we know from the first sentences of the text at hand, static and encircled around Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, born in Leningrad in 1952, member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union since 1972, divorces, lieutenant colonel of the USSR KGB, prime minister and the president of the Russian Federation?

Several controversial statements

War does not improve governability; it worsens it.

One of the cornerstones of Putin's regime is the penetrable vertical governability. Its absence was the main criticism of Putin and his political circle during the period of power transition (2000-2003), then the drive towards governability became virtually maniacal, spreading from the state organs to everything that is at least marginally financed or administrated by the state.

A non-declared war is much worse than a formal one for any organization and state: there is no martial law (which is strictly defined), but the demands from above may – or may not – reflect it nonetheless. As a result, the executives in civic administration, the policy, the army and the military-industrial complex independently decide on whether the emergency legislation extends to them and their subordinates. Requirements that are conflicting in terms of importance, meaning and content begin to arise inside the system. Chaos ensues.

Loyalty and patriotism are not synonymous.

Putin's regime is a personalist one, just like many analogous semi-legitimate Latin American and African administrations. At the same time, a part of the loyalists are not devoted to Putin personally: they sincerely believe that their involvement, for example, in the war or in its propagandist support is the true manifestation of patriotism. Individuals like these are plenty among military officers, and possibly among security officials, detectives and policemen. A significant part of this "loyalty" is a certain form of territorial nationalism, wherein the personality of the chief is important and influential only until he does something that is unacceptable from this natural patriot's point of view.

For example, if under one of the war in Ukraine scenarios that'd be unpleasant for the Russian army, Putin would need to make efforts on negotiations of ceasefire, a truce, and, moreover, cessations, the loyalty of these groups may be "zeroed out" in just one day.

1 The Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls (CoCom) was created by the Western Bloc during the Cold War for the introduction of an embargo against member countries of the Comecon. CoCom stopped its activities on March 31st, 1994, and the then-relevant control list of goods subject to embargo was preserved by the member countries until its successor, the Wassenaar Arrangement, was created in 1996.

Wish for the best, be certain of the worst

Russian society is complex, we do not know enough about it in order to make predictions. Husserl, however, was completely right when he stated: “no matter how good a man is, in a crisis he acts like an animal”. How deep would be the crisis that could potentially change Russia, and which forces – animalistic or reasonable – will triumph?

One of the main sins of the Putin regime lies in the fact, that he began cultivating the fear of annihilation on the basis of nationality, citizenship and even cultural identity in the souls of Russians. Even though Putin speaks on the defects of Ukrainian sovereignty, he does not quite go to the level of Hitler, who declared other nations unworthy of existence based on the racial superiority of the Aryans. Putin is sly; he claims that Russian citizens and nationals are so fantastic that other nations are jealous of them and dream of their destruction. This is inverse nazism:

instead of superiority through destruction, we will be avoiding destruction through superiority.

It’s horrible that this idea has penetrated the Russian mass consciousness. Horrible that it has taken roots.

Thus, let’s ask a question: in a crisis, will the Russian population behave as normal people (i.e., save themselves, their families and property) or as cornered rats, one of Putin’s favorite visuals? The second scenario means the button, the explosion, the end.

So far, “the silent majority” seems to confirm the second – and the worst – scenario. It nods obediently and agrees with the delusional statements on the cancellation of Russian culture. It agrees to send their children, husbands and fathers to the fratricidal war in Ukraine. It is proud of the cars it bought with funeral money.

The transition will begin with the worst

Based on the conducted analysis, one may suppose that the transitional period will be tumultuous, and, most importantly, highly dangerous – both to the country itself and to the rest of the world. Let’s fantasize on how and when changes may begin.

So, here we are in the mid-2020s. The future of Russia – or, to put it more correctly, of the people who populate the territory of the Russian Federation today – will not begin with the jovial “velvet revolution”; even the bravest visionaries do not dare to forecast this scenario.

Between early 2024 and 2030, the joint forces of natural biology and public degradation will lead to a break in the current regime. Theoretically, that can happen earlier, but it is likely that the ensuing six years of presidency will be the critical ones.

War at the western borders – possibly not just in Ukraine – will become an ongoing internal political factor. It will be slow, it will vampirically drain the society’s and economy’s resources, ones already diminished by sanctions, the CoCom regime and a general rise in poverty amongst the population whose dependence on public handouts will become more and more evident.

The death of Putin around 2028 will put an end to the new “undercarriage races”, and a new generation will come to power – those will mostly be the former guards of Putin, people with a shady education and negative empathy. Society, paralyzed by fear and poverty, will not resist, although it will mumble begrudgingly. Gradually, the “guards” will push away the actors connected to the previous regime; Russia will learn many new ways of killing people, from launching them into space in civic clothes to dissolving them in acid.

The only thing that will concern Europe (and even less so the USA, now ruled by President Eric Trump) in regards to Russia is the intensity of military action on the front lines. Ukraine, using the supplies of Western weapons, managed to achieve a final stabilization of circumstances, having learned to live under the conditions of the war, but it does not have enough offensive armaments and strength to liberate its own territories.

From the moment of Putin’s death, the regime in Moscow had changed three times already. Someone Dyumin, who ended up leading the first guard junta, choked on a pomegranate seed. Mironov, successor of

Dyumin, accidentally stepped on a landmine planted by Ukrainian saboteurs, while picking mushrooms on Nikolin hill. Krivoruchko, successor of Mironov, narrowly avoided death by a landmine fastened onto the Kremlin wall in the same place where Dyumin and Mironov were buried. Krivoruchko turns out to be quite the creative type, and, not without a fight, makes his way to the so-called “red phone” (since the moment of Putin’s death, access to it was guarded by some bizzare ninjas under the command of Kirienko, but their resistance was suppressed). He tells the American president that Putin is gone, and the power now belongs to him. However, when asked about the whereabouts of the nuclear suitcase, Krivoruchko can only reply “still looking”. Hollywood begins filming

disaster films, wherein the diabolical Russian president loses the “nuclear suitcase”. Stephen Spielberg sends an investigative mission to the Sheremetyevo airport; their goal is to prevent common mistakes (such as the passport of Foma Kinyaev), as well as figure out where a naval officers, with his lifelong training of “if something happens, you’re to blame”, could have potentially fled.

We may joke as much as we want (and all that is written above is obviously a joke), but control over nuclear weapons is becoming the central problem of 2024. Putin may remain in power, or replace himself with yet another placeholder – but he’ll hold onto the ability to give the last order of his life.

Transitional ideas are more important than the desired future

One of the conclusions that explicitly follows from the analysis above goes as such: the classic theory of change is not effectively applicable to such a large, complicated system that has its own logic of development as Russia. The outside world – be it the West or China – has extremely limited instruments for influencing what happens inside the country in spite of Putin and company’s hypotheses on the horrifying foreign NCOs that could organize the downfall of his regime. The detested intelligences of the West (and the East) also have no such instruments at their disposal.

Members of the change process – as well as the conservation process – include, up to 99%, the internal forces that we have analyzed above. However, we have set aside the opposition to Putin’s regime, both the internal and the external that takes place in exile. In the final chapter we should discuss the role that this opposition may and should play in the fate of the country.

The twenties decades of the 21st century are a new technological reality. Even the dictatorships who perfected their isolationism, such as North Korea, are not able to fully separate themselves from the rest of the world; the Internet and many other methods of communications provide for the relatively free flow of information all around the world. Russia is no exception. The blocks of Roskomnadzor work

only partially, information seeps behind the new Iron Curtain, because inside there is and always will be a demand for alternative options.

External immigration plays its own important part: informing those inside about the real events at the front lines, on Russian economy, on the global position of the country. Both the mass media in exile and separate people who speak to their relatives and friends act as mediums that are always larger than the messages.

Internal opposition also prevails, despite the enormous authoritarian pressure. It has shifted into the zone wherein the ruling regime lacks focus: into local, deeply parochial politics. Of course, Putin’s authorities manage to locate and destroy free opinion, free speech and uncontrolled politics there as well – but, like grass through asphalt, this growth continues to find its way.

The biggest percentage of immigrational and local opposition is liberal. However, there are also leftists (and even far leftists), anti-totalitarian patriots, and even great-power nationalists who support representative democracy.

At the same time, unlike the Kremlin who clings to the past, nearly all Russian oppositionists, from Navalny’s allies to the new imperialists of

Roman Yuneman are focusing on the future. They are focusing on the country that somehow allowed free elections, independent mass media and political parties. Within the framework of theory of change, the opposition can be called a sub's bench. We don't know, how the regime change will be taking place, but we know the following for certain: only the

forces that are occupied with dreams for the future, the construction of what is yet to come, the details of the transitional period – only they will be critical in the moment when the form and essence of the regime in Kremlin will change, whether due to biological, military or political reasons.

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