



The Myth of Russian Weakness

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Western-centric expectations of Russian collapse in the face of its recent foreign policy and domestic setbacks fail to consider the Russian mindset, political culture, and “rules of the game,” thus grossly underestimating the regime’s and the country’s resilience.

In discussions of international affairs, it has become a commonplace for Western observers to view Russia as a declining power, destined to succumb to a string of domestic and foreign problems that have beset it for some time.

To begin with, Russia’s 2014 conquest of Crimea and its support for the Ukrainian separatists backfired in grand style as Kiev, Moldova, and Georgia signed EU association agreements and stepped up military cooperation with NATO members and other western states. Similarly, while remaining the predominant military power in Central Asia, with bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Russia has lost its economic preeminence in the region to China, which has also made important military inroads by holding joint exercises with the Tajik and Kyrgyz armed forces. No less importantly, Moscow is still reeling from the impact of the Western sanctions, which are unlikely to be lifted any time soon, while its attempt to foment far-right populism across Europe has thus far failed.

These setbacks have led Western observers to doubt whether Russians would be prepared to tolerate another six years of a Putin presidency. This year Putin’s rule - which has already lasted for full 17 years - will become the longest since Stalin’s. An entire generation of young Russians has grown up knowing no other national

leader. How much longer will they be willing to endure the calamities he inflicts upon them?

However intriguing, these Western-centric observations fail to consider one crucial fact: the Russian mindset, political culture, and “rules of the game.” While the above problems would probably suffice to bring down most European governments, Putin’s sway over his constituents has remained strong. This is because political sovereignty in the West emanates from below whereas in Russia the government relies on coercive measures to control the vast country. Not only is this state of affairs not anathema to most Russians, but they expect their leaders to be tough minded and heavy handed. Hence the Kremlin’s lack of serious concern over the anti-government demonstrations which, in contrast to their over-dramatization by the Western media, reflect a small fraction of the Russian population - hardly a real barometer of discontent. Even the nationwide anti-corruption rallies organized by then-presidential candidate Alexi Navalny probably represented no more than a tenth of the population.

This also helps explain the failure of the sanctions to exert the decisive impact anticipated by Western governments. True, the number of Russians impoverished by the sanctions has significantly grown; but whereas in the West this would have probably led to mass protests or even a change of government, nothing of the sort happened in Russia. Priding themselves on their resilience in the face of a long string of Western aggressions - from the 1612 Polish siege of Moscow, to Swedish King Charles XII early 18th century incursions, to the Napoleonic and Nazi invasions - Russians view themselves (not wholly unjustifiably) as perennial victims of Europe. This half-nationalistic, half-historic worldview helps unite the population against external enemies, real or imagined.

Sacrifice for ordinary Russians is a wholly different concept from its Western counterpart. Throughout history Russians (and their governments) have burned their entire cities (including the spiritual capital of Moscow in 1812 when entered by Napoleon); allowed cities to be besieged for months or even years (e.g., Leningrad in WWII); and showed indifference to basic needs considered vital in western societies.

Respect and obedience to authority is also a distinct element of the sociopolitical ethos of Russian society, which is neither overly democratic nor fully European nor despotically Asian. The Russians are always in the midst of a quest for a messianic formula that can help them make sense of themselves and their

aspirations. Christianity and pan-Slavism under the Romanovs, Communism in the Soviet era, Eurasianism under Putin. Russia evolves, but explaining this evolution via Western prisms rarely helps.

This different vantage point helps understand why Western pundits all too often misread the Russian picture. For while Putin undoubtedly craves the widespread approval of his subjects, his power does not entirely depend on their sentiments. Quite the contrary, Russia's strong state structures (e.g., the police, the security forces, the newly created National Guard), together with deep-rooted victimhood sentiments vis-à-vis the West, strengthens the regime's ability to harness all political, human and economic resources to the ultimate goal of political survival.

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