



Russia's Rotting Empire

Nina L. Khrushcheva

There is one thing important to keep in mind when talking about Russia—it doesn't change. Not that it doesn't change at all, of course. Buildings, fashions, leaders, regimes, or at least regimes' names, all these change. And over the next quarter century, inevitably, revolutions will roar, the ruble will collapse or soar, just as over the past quarter century Soviet dissidents or Russian oligarchs, have been imprisoned or exiled. This all happens. But neither the late czarist system, nor late-communism, nor post-communism was able to generate a viable alternative to a society where changes, when they do happen, result in a destructive and malfunctioning social order. This, I fear, is what Russia has in store for itself—and for the world—over the next quarter century.

Russia's problem is that it is an "absolutist" country. While it welcomes revolutions, it has a difficulty developing in any evolutionary fashion. Indeed, the twentieth century alone saw it move from one absolutist regime to another—absolute monarchy, absolute anarchy, absolute dictatorship, with brief romps through tyranny, totalitarianism, and some short periods of reforms. The periods of "remission" (a retreat from total dictatorship) or reforms, and periods of "oppression" or stability have alternated consistently in the last century: Nikita

Khrushchev vs. Joseph Stalin, Mikhail Gorbachev vs. Leonid Brezhnev, Boris Yeltsin vs. Vladimir Putin. Who then 25 years from now? No doubt another similar figure who has yet to make his or her appearance on the world stage.

Each successive leader always seeks to eliminate the past and establish himself as the only ruler capable of bringing Russia the greatness it has so deserved yet that has so eluded it—either through reform and opening up to the West, or by clamping down on freedoms and building "the iron curtain" to protect Russia from destabilizing Western influences. There is no evidence to date that Russia's future leaders will not have the same failed aspirations.

The reformers invariably fail because they want to change Russia too quickly, bringing revolutions and chaos to the established and familiar, thus instilling fear of disorder in people, making them wary of reforms—any reforms—as they are seen as undermining the stability of the state. The autocrats fail because they don't want to change Russia at all and thus always go too far in protecting the country from the unpredictability of free will, free speech, and free markets. Of course, ultimately the horror of Gulags become unbearable, bringing dissent, rebellion, and then another revolu-

tionary/reform cycle, which after a short while gives way to yet another period of oppression.

Democratizing Russia?

Historian Richard Pipes has consistently warned of the challenge of democratizing Russia. People there need, even want, protection from themselves, and so crave a stately strong hand. Over the next quarter century, just like under the monarchy or communism, they will continue to seek a “father of the nation,” and whoever may be occupying the Kremlin, as always, will be eager to fill that role. In short, inherited attitudes and patterns of behavior hamper reform in some Russian leaders, and most Russian people.

The trouble with Russia is that the state develops, but society doesn't. The structures of democracy today are as underdeveloped as they were under Peter the Great and will likely remain as underdeveloped in 25 years as they remain today. The good of the people is sacrificed for the good of the nation. And people themselves are ready to believe that they should be willing to forfeit their freedoms for the sake of the greatness of the state, which wins wars and launches Sputniks. A free press, free speech, and free elections, it is feared, may diminish the brute power that is needed for Russia to assert itself.

Although Russia's position in the world could never exist in a vacuum, with a remarkable consistency the country insists on defining its global role on its own, as a unique and special nation. The Russians insist that their destiny to rule the world isn't influenced by other international conditions, such as economy, war, or energy and natural resources supply and distribution. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin together with President Dmitry Medvedev continuously evoke an image of Russia as a supremely ordained nation, a global power, destined to

withstand on its own the decay and destruction of the West, suggesting that controlling much of the world's supply of oil and gas has now given them some special powers.

Indeed, the Kremlin's enjoyment of Russia's economic success is brought about by the enormous oil and gas revenues due to the world's energy crisis, not by some divine intervention that has allowed for billions of petrodollars to flow into state coffers. Emboldened by its wealth, Russia under Putin (so far, Medvedev has been serving as a decorative president) feels it can afford to become confident and assertive, even militant, because—as at the time of communism, or even further back in history of the Russian empire—it still has to protect itself from the deceitful Western influence that is so eager to bring Russia down.

With this grand reason in mind Putin feels completely justified returning to Russia's authoritarian past—silencing critics, manipulating elections, sending its military across international borders, and appointing friends and cronies to the high government and business positions. In the last few years he has been acting (even more than a communist and a KGB disciple) as though he is the direct descendant, not just of the Russian czars, but of the Byzantine kings.

To him, Moscow remains the “Third Rome” it declared itself to be in 1472. Indeed, the Byzantine Empire fell in 1453, but you wouldn't know it in Russia, which today fashions itself as a new Byzantium with Mercedes-Benzes and supermarkets, boutiques for Hermes and Rolex. No doubt, if oil is to continue to pump at least through 2033, there will only be more of all of this.

The “Double Eagle” emblem, the heads facing East and West—originally adopted in Russia around the time of the Byzantine demise—was brought back after 1991 as a state symbol, once again meant to signify

the country's dream of domination over both Europe and Asia. Under Boris Yeltsin the double eagle got little play, while in the Putin years its significance has come to equal that of the communist red star. Byzantium and its symbols are discussed on television talk shows, their imperial grandeur cited as an example for Russia's own future glory, and distinguished Orthodox priests with long, flowing beards read sermons on how Russia, if it is to achieve greatness in the future, must look to its Christian predecessor's past. The not-so-subtle idea behind all this nostalgia for Byzantium is that Russia can (and should) exist only in opposition to the West, which hated the Byzantine Empire before and which hates its spiritual heir, Russia, today.

The question, of course, is how are these Byzantine traditions still possible, and will they resolutely endure for a quarter century more and well beyond? After all, Russia's "window into the West" has opened significantly since Peter the Great; the Iron Curtain was all but demolished in the 1990s; Russians are free to travel and, on average, live better than ever before.

The 2033 Russian Byzantium, however, will be of a modernizing sort. Putin indeed sees himself as a "modernizer," who also believes that Russia is part of the West—a

spiritual and cultural counterbalance to Western domination, a belief he shares to a certain degree with other Russian rulers of



Racing toward Byzantium.

the past—Peter the Great, Alexander II, Mikhail Gorbachev, or Boris Yeltsin. With all his indignation towards the West, Putin still wants to go down in history, not as a brutal autocrat, but as the man who transformed Russia from a post-communist punching bag into a great power, whose

natural resources will provide it with an important place on the international stage for decades to come. However, like Joseph Stalin, he believes that Russia can only become a member in the world's most powerful nations club by using a strong hand. Putin indeed subscribes to the traditional thinking of most Russian rulers: fear equals, or even trumps, respect. And with Moscow's newfound prosperity and power enabled by resource wealth, it is very likely that most Russians will still believe in 25 years as they do today—why rock a very lucrative boat?

However, the old ideals and symbols that Putin has employed to strengthen Russia's self-image no longer correspond to the future's global realities, nor do they reflect Russia's present capabilities. Yes, the double-headed eagle once signified imperial power, but today it seems more emblematic of the country's split personality, its endless self-destructive swings between oppression and reform.

Obsession and Reform?

The August 7, 2008, military invasion of Georgia over its de-facto independent republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia made clear that the unifying context of Putin's leadership—Russia will be great and strong—had become more than just a slogan from the Stalinist era or a Byzantine dream of imperial world domination. The Kremlin argues (and not without justification) that its military actions were provoked by Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili's August 6 attack on Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. But the readiness with which Russia went in and then remained in Georgia, despite the cease-fire agreement, makes the Kremlin explanation suspect.

Indeed, for the Kremlin, the Georgian affair became an excellent opportunity to strengthen its message—Russia has interests, or as President Medvedev put it, “a claim to a ‘privileged’ sphere of influence in

the world,” and it is will stand up and draw lines that are not to be ignored. Putin, together with Medvedev, believes that Moscow's quick show of force has taught a lesson to the United States, Georgia, and all of the former Soviet satellites, most of all, Russia's Slavic neighbor, Ukraine.

The message is clear: seeking closer ties with the West is now and will forever be a non-starter. And if the West continues to disregard Russia's interests, they insist, given the Kremlin's popularity (Putin's proud disinterest in Western criticism over Georgia won big points at home), it won't be difficult to convince the Russian people—who feel that in the shock of the 1990s they lost not only their superpower status and the state ideology, but also the state of national identity—that Tbilisi, Sevastopol, Kiev, or Tallinn still belong to Russia. If necessary, they should be taken by force. If that doesn't happen tomorrow, there's a good chance it will by 2033.

Given this state of affairs, Vladimir Putin could remain a prime minister for many years to come. Now only 56, in 25 years he will be just a few years older than Leonid Brezhnev or Joseph Stalin who both died in office in their mid-70s. After all, Russian autocratic regimes do tend to last for decades. With some 30 years of Stalin and 20 years of Brezhnev, Putin could easily split the difference and stay on for 25.

If that forecast holds true, Russian presidents will continue to be nominally elected, but hold no power compared to Putin. Russia will remain one of the world's main energy suppliers, enjoying high revenues while digging deeper into the Byzantine past, going so far as to rename businesses to add a tinge of modernity to the past imperial glory. Instead of Gazprom and Lukoil there will be Byzprom and Byzoil, while the main bank that caters to Kremlin affairs will get the proud name Byzantium National. This neo-Byzantine state will do little to advance

technological innovations, shy away from corporate responsibility, invest only meagerly in the modernization of products and services, and neglect wholesale the areas of social and political reform. What's worse, it will threaten (and invade) neighbors with its largely unchecked growth of military power and increasingly rusty stockpile of Soviet-era nuclear weapons.

In fact, the threat of a possible nuclear war became even more dangerous

on September 8, 2008, when President George W. Bush canceled a once-celebrated deal for civilian nuclear cooperation with Russia. As the United States backed out of this agreement, Putin was rewarded with another excuse to further assert his power: America doesn't want to cooperate with us peacefully, so we are going to develop militarily.

Indeed, Putin will retreat even deeper into his thinking of "protect Russia, the new Byzantine empire," if America continues to speak to him with the heavy-handed tone and rhetoric personified by Condoleezza Rice. "What is more disturbing about Russia's actions [in Georgia] is that they fit into a worsening pattern of behavior over several years now," says Rice. "I'm referring, among other things, to Russia's intimidation of its sovereign neighbors, its use of oil and gas as a political weapon, its unilateral suspension of the CFE [Conventional Armed Forces in Europe] Treaty, its threat to target peaceful nations with nuclear weapons, its arms sales to states and groups that threaten international security, and its persecution—and worse—of Russian journalists, and dissidents, and others. The picture emerging from this pattern of behavior is that of a Russia increasingly authoritarian at home and aggressive abroad."

In her September 2008 address to the German Marshall Fund, Rice went on to cite external reasons and international actors—from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion towards Russia's borders, to the U.S.-supported missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic—explaining

“With some 30 years of Stalin and 20 years of Brezhnev, Putin could easily split the difference and stay for 25.”

that these are not to blame for what now seems to be the brink of a new Cold War. Only Russia is to blame, she said, echoing Dick Cheney's hawkish words in Italy earlier in the month: "Russia's leaders cannot presume to gather up all the benefits of commerce, consultation, and global prestige while engaging in brute force, threats, or other forms of intimidation against sovereign, democratic countries. To succeed and prosper in the modern world, Russia must relate to the world as a responsible modern power."

These messages suit Putin just fine, as they only prove his "West against Russia" argument. Russia is blamed for everything, while America is cunning, speaking out of both sides of its mouth. Still there is now and will no doubt be more than enough blame to go around. The notion that Georgia is a democracy, for instance, is *prima facie* absurd. After the November 2006 crackdown by President Mikheil Saakashvili on the Georgian opposition and the two elections since then, many who study or follow Georgian politics (particularly in Europe) are skeptical about many of its fundamental structures and have raised serious questions about judicial independence, media freedoms, and divisions between party and government.

The argument further goes: If Russia is truly a partner of the United States, why after 1991 was the country not removed from the 1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment, meant to deny unconditional normal trade relations to Moscow at a time when the state had restricted emigration rights and no market economy. If Moscow is truly a friend, why is NATO training armies and supplying weapons to nations that border Russia? If Kosovo can be independent, why can't South Ossetia and Abkhazia? If the United States can invade Iraq (half a world away) under the pretext of saving Iraqis from a brutal dictator and his weapons of mass destruction, why can't Russia assist a republic striving for independence right along its border? With a 36,200 mile border (the world's longest) there will no doubt be many future discussions of this sort over the next quarter century.

Putin, who looks to the past in order to define Russia's future, has difficulty moving forward. The Cheney/Rice ideological approach to Russia certainly hasn't helped matters. Caught in their own "we *are* the world" paradigm, they have far overplayed their hand. Expanding NATO is understandable, but is an East European missile shield really that necessary? Support for Georgian democracy is fine, but how productive is the anti-Russian chest-thumping?

Although the current American administration will leave office in a few months, it has already succeeded in rekindling the flames of the new Cold War, which has a chance of becoming even hotter than the previous one. Any basis for mutual understanding, let alone cooperation, for the next quarter century is quite tenuous indeed.

Whoever comes to occupy the White House for the next four years needs to have the restraint that both John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev displayed 46 years ago, during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

The next U.S. president must succeed in talking to Moscow on reasonable terms, more closely resembling the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower that invited Khrushchev to the United States in 1959 despite fierce opposition from his own party; Richard Nixon's initiation of the policies of détente with Leonid Brezhnev; or Ronald Reagan, who encouraged Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*. These American presidents recognized that an engaged Russia would have fewer reasons to start settling scores.

In his landmark article "On American Principles," George Kennan quoted John Quincy Adams: "America goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will recommend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example. She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assumed the colors and usurped the standards of freedom. She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit."

Too Much Wishful Thinking

There's another scenario—perhaps more likely. The ripple effect of the ongoing American financial crisis will not strengthen Russia's oil boom, but rather weaken the artificial conditions of the Kremlin's current economic success. It could soon enough bring a crisis similar to the communist collapse of 1991 or Russia's financial meltdown of 1998. Widespread corruption at every level of Russia's private and state bureaucracy, coupled with the fact that the state

rarely reinvests petrodollars into oil and gas service and production, and combined with a once-again adversarial relationship with the West could start to spin the economic and political balance out of control, creating international isolation, inflation, and ultimately dissent. That would bring the Putin-Medvedev Kremlin down long before Putin's 25 years in office run out.

Just as in the 1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power with no choice other than to invoke the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, over the next quarter century, an economically, politically, and internationally weakened Russia would have to find once again the solutions to its old paradigm of greatness and paranoia—solutions that traditionally find answer in natural resources or military capability.

After all, the Soviet Union collapsed, not so much because of Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" space-based anti-ballistic missile program or by a rapid acceleration of the arms race with which the communism system was unable to militarily and economically compete, but because by the 1970s, the old industrialization paradigm had been replaced by one of modern technological development. This in turn allowed for a free flow of information that, in essence, made unsustainable and obsolete the notion that a Soviet model could compete with capitalism as a renewable, self-corrective system. No such paradigms are on the Russian horizon. Then again, 25 years ago, a world without communism was all but unimaginable.

Although 20 years have passed and the Soviet Union is no more, Russia remains a country that has been continuously living off its oil and gas reserves—the funds gener-

ated continue to only encourage delays of necessary but painful economic and political restructuring, just as in the final days of the Soviet Union. Thus far, Russia's development is less a means of improving people's lives than proving the state to be superior to all others. Ultimately, the material achievements of Russian development always come

“The ripple effect of the ongoing U.S. financial crisis will weaken the artificial conditions of the Kremlin's current economic success.”

with a body count—a count that will only mount over the next 25 years. Joseph Stalin's industrialization killed millions, but didn't survive post-communism. Putin's militant oil and gas-based politics will be equally unsustainable, though it may take more than a quarter century before the oil and the power of Putin or his chosen successors begin to run out.

As Vladimir Bukovsky, the one-time Soviet dissident, wrote in 1989, “the problems that the Soviet leaders have to solve simply have no solution.” Maintaining a welfare state solely reliant on natural resources ultimately will destroy a system from within.

So the main question for Russia over the next 25 years and beyond is not so much whether another cycle of democratizing reforms will happen. It will.

But can these reforms sustain themselves, lasting longer than the eight years of Khrushchev, or the six years of Gorbachev, without giving way to more assertive, reactionary, authoritarian, if not fully totalitarian leadership? Will Russia at last start developing an economy of goods and services and begin to invest in its deep pool of human

capital—the first order of business for every responsible capitalist nation?

Unfortunately, as evolutionary thinking is in short supply in Russia, in 25 years the nation will likely remain much the same as it is today, continuing to perpetuate the past, still trapped in the cycles of remission and oppression. Usually countries change through a shattering crisis, which deeply affects their world view—take Germany, Spain, or Austria after fascism, for instance. But Russia had at least three such grand opportunities in the last century—1917, 1991, and 1998—and still failed to foster much substantive change in cultural and political attitudes.

There may be one remaining possibility that could radically influence this process of change, once and for all putting to rest the centuries of the remission/oppression cycle. This possibility centers on Kiev, and specifically whether Ukraine achieves success in the direction of European development that it has chosen. After all, it was Ukraine's break with Russia—not Georgia's—that was perhaps the most wrenching both for those in the Kremlin nostalgic for imperial control and for ordinary Russians, who see Ukraine as the wellspring of Russian civilization.

The Orange Revolution of 2004, which overturned a rigged presidential election, proved that Ukraine was no longer a Malorossiya (a small Russia), an inferior and subordinate Slavic brother. Indeed, that peaceful revolution, even with all the imperfections of current Ukrainian politics and the constant bickering between President Victor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko, was a reminder of how enlightened the tenth-century empire known as "Kievan Rus" had been, before it was forced to give way in the twelfth century to the despotic princes of Moscow.

Malorossiya, for the majority of Ukrainians, remains a thing of the past. Ukraine is

not a threat to the security of Russia—even if Kiev were to join NATO at some point over the next 25 years. But Ukraine can be even more dangerous: as a real threat to the Putin model of the corporate, authoritarian state, unfriendly to the West. For the Kremlin occupants now and in the future, it is a matter of life and death that the experience of their former communist neighbors, who chose a different model of development, should never become attractive to Russian citizens.

The Baltic countries don't count; they have always been foreign to the Soviet system. That's why they are the only ones that have secured the sort of independence dreamed of in 1991. Georgia, which is both European and Asiatic, has been teetering on the edge of instability, electing presidents who after loudly declaring themselves enlightened and democratic, end up brutal, corrupt, or both. Traditionally Asian Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have resumed the tribal forms of autocracy they practiced throughout the centuries. And Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have in essence become their presidents' wholly-owned family fiefs.

But Russians know that Ukrainians are the same as them, a people similar in their culture and mentality. If they have made their choice, why can't we do the same? Thus, if Ukraine succeeds over the next 25 years, it may herald the political death of Putinism—a successor to all the autocratic politicians that Russian history has endured.

If Ukraine survives its choice of European civilization, if it is able to make it work, its success will be a very strong argument in a long-lived debate within the Russian culture—Russia as the new Byzantium, or as the new West.

The best way to help Russia today is to help Ukraine over the coming decades support its claim that it belongs within the Eu-



Ukraine comes marching in.

ropean fold, among European institutions. This will influence the Russian thinking like nothing else.

For Russia, this scenario may be way too optimistic. But even in a worst-case scenario, Ukraine will become Russia's salvation. If Moscow's anti-Western paranoia continues and the Byzantine fantasy lasts for the next 15 to 25 years, both forces will lead to China, the new global superpower, swallowing whole the Far East and Siberia. A vastly weakened Russia then will lose also the Northern Caucasus and the Volga region to their growing Muslim population, and

Kaliningrad will once again become German Königsberg.

Russia will lose its 11 time zones and would then no longer have claims to be Greater Russia. So the remaining lands will have no other choice but to attach themselves to Ukraine, by then a successful member of the European Union. And only then will Moscow return to its historical origins, Kievan Rus—after 1,000 years wandering the paths blazed by Mongol hordes, empire, communism, and Putinism—and complete a historical circle that will finally bring change to Russia. ●