

Why Predictions Fail: Forecasting Russia's Future

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and one from the Tsarist Empire (its vast territorial expanse).

Perhaps the most obvious frame for understanding Russia is that of a return to empire. That is the position, for example, of Stephen Kotkin (Remnick 2022). However, such an approach is a minority view among Russia specialists, who see it as cultural essentialism and excessively determinist.

The dominant discussion among U.S. scholars takes place around the need to “decolonize” Russian studies. (That is the official theme of the annual convention of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies, to be held in November 2023.) This is a positive development, in the sense that it means turning attention away from Moscow-centric narratives and

exploring the perspectives of groups on the periphery of the Russian Empire. However, there are some problems with the decolonization approach. First, it often involves *deconstructing* the concept of empire by stressing the hybridity and fluidity of colonial categories. Second, it is drawn directly from post-colonial studies of the European oceanic empires, whose empires were dismantled 50 years ago. Russia is currently actively engaged in imperial conquest, so it is not clear that “decolonization” is the most appropriate analytical framework.

At some point, the war will end. And at some point, Putin will leave the Kremlin. But given the deep structural forces that have driven Russia to war, it is hard to be optimistic about the prospects for radical change in the political regime any time soon.

About the Author

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Further Reading

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Why Predictions Fail: Forecasting Russia’s Future

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For experts on Russia, there is probably nothing more in demand, and at the same time more speculative, than the business of predicting Russia’s political future. Many experts are valued in the eyes of policymakers, as well as those of the public, primarily for their forecasts, rather than for their theoretical explanations, methodological sophistication, and data analysis. If someone is able to make assumptions that prove to be factually correct over time, then he/she may be rewarded irrespective of the substantive grounds for his/her predictions. With regard to Soviet studies, Hélène Carrère d’Encausse is probably the best-known example of such predictions. In 1978, she published a book in which she argued that the Soviet Union would collapse by 1990 due to the rise of the Muslim population in Central Asia, which would cause Islamic revolt and a drive for independence from the Soviet empire. Although the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 for completely different reasons, she received outstanding academic recognition and became a permanent secretary of the French Academy, despite the fact that the academic value of her forecast was dubious.

The problem, however, is not only that experts’ forecasts of Russia’s future are no more precise or substantively grounded than predictions made by taxi drivers. Virtually all forecasts of this kind (not only with regard to Russia), whether made by professionals or amateurs, are based on projecting a current state of affairs into the future—albeit with some corrections and reservations, adjusting for either positive or negative factors. This has contributed to a status-quo bias, as major breakthrough changes tend to remain beyond the scope of forecasts. However, in response to major exogenous shocks such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine, the amplitude of predictions has multiplied greatly, paving the way for numerous far-reaching expectations, ranging from nuclear war to Russia’s territorial breakdown. These expectations are often less grounded in data-driven analyses than they are reflective of the fears and/or hopes of those experts who tend to make such predictions. Meanwhile, real-world developments often follow a different logic, due in particular to “wild cards”—unexpected and sometimes unpredictable factors that alter possible scenarios.

It should therefore come as no surprise that forecasting Russia's future can turn into a lottery, especially given the acceleration of all developments after February 24, 2022, the invasion having shortened the time horizons not only of all domestic and international actors, but also of observers.

Attempts to forecast Russia's future come up against the unavoidable problem of multiple unknown variables. These cannot necessarily be defined and measured even at the present moment, making reasonable estimations of how they may change in the future exceedingly challenging. In present-day Russia, the limited availability and conflicting interpretations of some data (such as economic statistics) and the dubious reliability of others (such as public opinion surveys) aggravate these problems, making efforts to determine the probability of certain developments in the country all but pointless. The unclear situation on the front lines, covered by the "fog of war," greatly increases this uncertainty. As a result, forecasting is more difficult than ever.

Experts often seek to compensate for a lack of data by referring to parallels with certain episodes in the history of Russia and/or of other countries, ranging from the First World War to the Soviet invasion to Afghanistan. These parallels, however, tell us little about potential developments in post-2023 Russia, as each episode had a different set of initial conditions and factors driving changes (or a lack thereof). This is why making full-scale comparisons of certain cases in the past is not always useful for making predictions about the future. Even large-N comparisons of multiple episodes of wars and their impacts on autocracies in the past can at best tell us the statistical probability of certain trajectories in the future, rather than enabling us to make predictions about present-day Russia.

To summarize, more focused, partial, and short-term predictions are usually more precise and more useful than full-scale, comprehensive, and long-term forecasts, especially in times of major crises. This is why, instead of attempting to trace Russia's future trajectories, I propose a different intellectual enterprise: attempting to rule out those scenarios that are widely considered in the media but do not appear to be grounded in evidence. Among these, three major delusions merit special objections:

First, predictions that see Russia's territorial division into several states as inevitable. These are based upon parallels with the collapse of the Soviet Union and/or other empires. However, despite Russia's ethnic diversity and problems with governing certain areas, it should be admitted that present-day Russia is a relatively homogenous country. It therefore has much less potential for

disintegration than the Soviet Union or Austria-Hungary, especially given that regional governance in Russia is based on different institutional foundations. And even if one might expect separatist attempts in some ethnic republics, there is no reason to predict that Saratov will separate from Volgograd or Pskov from Novgorod.

Second, predictions of major nation-wide mass uprisings against the Russian regime if and when Russia's military effort fails completely. These expectations ignore the fact that Russia lacks formal and informal organizations that might organize anti-regime collective actions and coordinate this activism across the country for some period of time. Such organizations rarely emerge from scratch without major support from elites, hence even large-scale public discontent is unlikely to contribute to such an outcome. Localized protests in certain cities and regions seem much more plausible, but they may not necessarily constitute a major challenge to the regime.

Third, predictions that "after Putin there will be Putin"—in other words, that if and when Putin's rule comes to an end, Russia will continue to pursue its militant and aggressive domestic and foreign policy agendas, perhaps even in a harsher way. Irrespective of the timeframe within which they are expected to unfold (that is, whether they envision Putin remaining in power for years or decades), these predictions ignore the highly personalist nature of the Russian political regime. Putin's policy agenda cannot be transferred to the post-Putin leadership without major changes. Equally, nor should one expect the immediate full-scale democratization of post-Putin Russia: such an outcome is not entirely outside the realm of possibility, but this path will not be taken by default.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the unrealistic scenarios that have been propounded, but it is important to limit the pool of predictions and concentrate on realistic drivers of continuity and change in Russia instead of drawing of rosy or gloomy pictures of the future. One must admit that scholars may be factually incorrect in their forecasting of Russia's future and not fear these almost inevitable errors. However, thinking about the possible paths and forks of Russia's development will not only help experts to interpret potential changes in the future, but also provide a certain perspective that is useful for understanding the present. This understanding should be based on experts' awareness of the limits and constraints of Russia's possible trajectories, but should also take into account the possibility of unexpected dynamics at critical junctures—in Russia and elsewhere.

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Vladimir Gel'man is a professor of Russian politics at the Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki. His most recent book is *The Politics of Bad Governance in Contemporary Russia* (University of Michigan Press, 2022).