

The Resistible Rise of Vladimir Putin

Russia's Nightmare Dressed Like a Daydream

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How did twenty-first-century Russia end up, yet again, in personal rule? An advanced industrial country of 142 million people, it has no enduring political parties that

organize and respond to voter preferences. The military is sprawling yet tame; the immense secret police are effectively in one man's pocket. The hydrocarbon sector is a personal bank, and indeed much of the economy is increasingly treated as an individual fiefdom. Mass media move more or less in lockstep with the commands of the presidential administration. Competing interest groups abound, but there is no rival center of power. In late October 2014, after a top aide to Russia's president told the annual forum of the Valdai Discussion Club, which brings together Russian and foreign experts, that Russians understand "if there is no Putin, there is no Russia," the pundit Stanislav Belkovsky observed that "the search for Russia's national idea, which began after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, is finally over. Now, it is evident that Russia's national idea is Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin."

Russia is classified as a high-income economy by the World Bank (having a per capita GDP exceeding \$14,000). Its unemployment remains low (around five percent); until recently, consumer spending had been expanding at more than five percent annually; life expectancy has been rising; and Internet penetration exceeds that of some countries in the European Union. But Russia is now beset by economic stagnation alongside high inflation, its labor productivity remains dismally low, and its once-vaunted school system has deteriorated alarmingly. And it is astonishingly corrupt. Not only the bullying central authorities in Moscow but regional state bodies, too, have been systematically criminalizing revenue streams, while giant swaths of territory lack basic public services and local vigilante groups proliferate. Across the country, officials who have purchased their positions for hefty sums team up with organized crime syndicates and use friendly prosecutors and judges to extort and expropriate rivals. President Vladimir Putin's vaunted "stability," in short, has turned into spoliation. But Putin has been in power for 15 years, and there is no end in sight. Stalin ruled for some three decades; Brezhnev for almost two. Putin, still relatively young and healthy, looks set to top the latter and might even outdo the former.

In some ways, observers are still trying to fathom how the revolt against tsarist autocracy in 1917—the widest mass revolution in history up to that point—culminated in a regime unaccountable to itself, let alone to the masses. Now, after the mass mobilizations for democracy that accompanied and followed the 1991 Soviet collapse, a new authoritarianism has taken shape. Of course, Putin's dictatorship differs substantially from the Soviet communist version. Today's Russia has no single ideology and no disciplined ruling party, and although it lacks the rule of law, it does allow private property and free movement across borders. Still, the country is back in a familiar place, a one-man regime.

The methods Putin used to fix the corrupt, dysfunctional post-Soviet state have produced yet another corrupt, dysfunctional state. Putin himself complains publicly that only about 20 percent of his decisions get implemented, with the rest being ignored or circumvented unless he intervenes forcefully with the interest groups and functionaries concerned. But he cannot intervene directly with every boss, governor, and official in the country on every issue. Many underlings invoke Putin's name and do what they want. Personal systems of rule convey immense power on the ruler in select strategic areas—the secret police, control of cash flow—but they are ultimately ineffective and self-defeating.

Russia just might be able to get out of this trap, in part because of the severity of the various crises currently besetting Putin's regime. But perversely, even that hopeful scenario would require yet another act of personal rule.

FROM LENINGRAD TO MOSCOW

Putin was born in Soviet Leningrad in 1952, the only surviving child of parents who had lived through the Nazi siege of the city a decade earlier. He grew up in a rough section of Peter the Great's showcase, took up martial arts, graduated with a degree in law from Leningrad State University, and begged his way into the KGB, eventually being posted to Dresden, East Germany, in 1985.

In 1990, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the KGB recalled him to Leningrad and assigned him to his alma mater, where his former law professor Anatoly Sobchak still taught part time. Sobchak eventually became chair of the city council and then mayor, and Putin served as his top deputy, responsible for difficult assignments, including feeding the city's large population during the years of post-Soviet economic depression. He discovered that Leningrad's self-styled democrats could get almost nothing done and that he could embezzle money both to help address the city's challenges and to enrich himself and his cronies. When Sobchak lost a bid for reelection in 1996, Putin found himself unemployed at 43. But a year later, through connections (notably Alexei Kudrin, another official in the Sobchak mayoralty who had become deputy chief of staff to Russian President Boris Yeltsin), Putin moved to Moscow and obtained a series of positions in the presidential administration, the successor to the old Soviet central-party apparatus.

There are indications that Putin might have coveted the lucrative, powerful CEO job at Gazprom, Russia's monopoly gas behemoth, but if so, it eluded him. Then, in July 1998, lightning struck: Yeltsin appointed the former lieutenant colonel above hundreds of higher-ranking secret police officers to head the FSB, the successor to the KGB—and the following year appointed him first acting prime minister of the Russian Federation and

then acting president. So the simplest answer to the question of how Putin came to power is that he was selected.

Yeltsin's inner circle, known as "the Family"—in particular, Valentin Yumashev (the ghostwriter of Yeltsin's autobiographies) and Yumashev's future wife, Yeltsin's daughter Tatyana—picked Putin over others who failed their auditions. He had shown a basic competence in administration and had demonstrated loyalty (having arranged in 1997 for Sobchak, then under threat of arrest, to escape to France without submitting to Russian passport control). It was hoped that he would protect the Family's interests, and maybe those of Russia as well. Putin secured victory in the March 2000 presidential election through control of the country's main television station, Channel One (thanks to Boris Berezovsky, a secondary member of the Family); ruthless manipulation of the Chechen terrorist threat; and access to all the perks of incumbency. Some fraud, too, cannot be excluded. In the reported results, Putin received nearly 40 million votes, 53 percent of those cast, a majority that enabled him to avoid a runoff. Second place (29 percent) went to the Communist Party candidate-bogeyman. Nine other candidates split the rest of the votes.

Interestingly, when Putin took office, he had little effective power. His chief of staff, Alexander Voloshin, was a core member of the Family and would remain in his commanding position for two more years. Berezovsky continued to control Channel One, and the second most important station, privately owned NTV, belonged to the independent actor Vladimir Gusinsky. The mammoth cash flow generated by the state gas monopoly had been largely privatized into the hands of a cabal led by Rem Vyakhirev (a protégé of the former Soviet gas minister, later the Russian prime minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin), and much of the oil industry had been formally privatized, a lot of it into a huge new company, Yukos, controlled by Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Russia's then 89 regions were in the hands of governors who answered to no one. Chechnya had de facto independence. The Russian state was floundering.

Bit by bit, however, using stealth and dirty tricks, Putin reasserted central control over the levers of power within the country—the TV stations, the gas industry, the oil industry, the regions. It was a cunning feat of state rebuilding, aided by Putin's healthy contrast to the infirm Yeltsin, hyped fears of a Russian state dissolution, well-crafted appeals to patriotism, and the humbling of some oligarchs. Some fear of authority was necessary to tame the utter lawlessness into which the country had sunk. Putin instilled that fear, thanks to his own history and persona and some highhanded political theater, such as the arrest of Khodorkovsky, who was taken right off his private jet, which was shown again and again on Russian TV. But Putin's transformation into a dominant political figure

required more than a widely shared appreciation that he was saving the Russian state. It also took a surprise economic boom.

From 1999 through 2008, Russia's economy grew at a brisk seven percent annually, thereby doubling its GDP in ruble terms. Real individual income growth was even brisker, increasing by two and a half times. In dollar terms, because of the ruble's appreciation over time, the increase in GDP was exceptionally vivid: from a nadir of around \$196 billion in 1999 to around \$2.1 trillion in 2013. A new, grateful Russian middle class was born, some 30 million strong, able to travel and shop abroad easily. More broadly, Russian society was transformed: cell-phone penetration went from zero to 100 percent, unemployment dropped from 12.9 percent to 6.3 percent, and the poverty rate fell from 29 percent to 13 percent. Wages rose, pensions were doled out, and the immense national debt that had been accumulated by previous leaders was paid off early. Foreign investors reaped rich rewards, too, as Russia's stock market skyrocketed, increasing 20-fold.

Many analysts have attributed the Russian boom to luck, in the form of plentiful fossil fuels. Yet although oil and gas have generally brought in approximately 50 percent of the Russian state's revenues, they have accounted for no more than 30 percent of the economy at large—a high number, but significantly lower than Middle East petrostate proportions. Even adding in all the knock-on effects around hydrocarbons, the most sophisticated analyses of Russian economic growth credit oil and gas with at most 40 to 50 percent of GDP during the boom. An immense amount of other value was created during these years as well, and Putin was partly responsible.

As president, Putin delegated handling of the economy to Mikhail Kasyanov, his prime minister; German Gref, the minister of economic development and trade; and Kudrin, then the finance minister, who introduced a raft of anti-inflationary and liberalizing measures (Gazprom excepted). Tax cuts increased incentives to work and reduced incentives to hide income. Simplification of business licensing and reduced inspections led to a burst of entrepreneurialism. Financial reforms and sensible macroeconomic policy facilitated investment. And land became a marketable commodity.

The impact of these pro-market reforms, which Putin supported and signed, was magnified by favorable trade winds. Russia had undergone a searing debt default and currency devaluation in 1998, and most commentators thought the country would be devastated. But in fact, the devaluation unintentionally made Russian exports cheaper and thus more competitive. At the same time, China's ongoing rise lifted global prices for Russian products, from fertilizer and chemicals to metals and cement. Insatiable Chinese demand brought Soviet legacy industries back from the dead. Brand-new sectors surged as well, such as retail, food processing, biotechnology, and software, driven by increased

domestic demand and global outsourcing. Many of the Soviet legacy industries, such as coal and steel, underwent significant rationalization, as unprofitable mines or plants were phased out. (Agriculture, however, was never really revived, let alone rationalized, and Russia became dependent on food imports.)

Skeptics take note: oil prices during Putin's first presidential term, when growth was robust, averaged only around \$35 a barrel; during Putin's second term, the average grew to around \$65 a barrel. In recent years, with oil prices consistently at or above \$100 a barrel, Russia's economy has stagnated.

China's rise, the ruble's devaluation, and a pent-up wave of structural reforms were critical to the Russian boom, but as the man in charge, Putin took the lion's share of the credit. His critics refuse to acknowledge his contribution, and some have improbably made him out to be a nonentity. In her 2012 biography, *The Man Without a Face*, for example, the Russian American journalist Masha Gessen offers the ultimate portrait of Putin as an accident. A well-written, impassioned compendium of facts, hearsay, and psychologizing about Putin's life and career, Gessen's book makes Putin out to be a mere thug and self-dealer, a murderer but ultimately a small man. Yet accidents and nonentities do not stay in power this long.

Mr. Putin, by Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, two Russia hands at the Brookings Institution, offers less drama but more balance. It characterizes Putin as moving back and forth among six different personas: the Statist, the History Man (celebrating tsarist Russian statesmen), the Survivalist, the Outsider (not a Muscovite, not an apparatchik, not even a typical KGB officer), the Free Marketeer (actually, crony capitalist), and the Case Officer (who wins people's confidence through manipulation, bribery, and blackmail). It is a nicely rounded portrait. It is not, however, an intimate one.

Refreshingly, Hill and Gaddy refrain from imputing motives to Putin. They have met with him briefly in a large group but rely mostly on many of the same few voices that are quoted in Gessen's book, as well as in foundational biographies by Oleg Blotsky and Alexander Rahr, and on a published interview with the former Kremlin insider Gleb Pavlovsky. In their best chapters, Hill and Gaddy delineate the self-defeating cross-purposes among the six Putin personas, along with Putin's limitations when it comes to public politics. They rebut the prevalent American narrative about a tragic Putin betrayal of a Yeltsin-era trajectory toward democracy, bending over backward to make understandable the alternative Russian narrative of a Putin-led rescue from a 1990s "time of troubles." But they do not advance their own explicit, systematic explanation for how it was possible, in such a vast country, to establish what they dub a "one-boy network" political system.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

Western sanctions levied against Russia over its actions in Ukraine have targeted not economic sectors but individuals. *Putin's Kleptocracy*, by Karen Dawisha, shows why such an approach makes sense. It offers a comprehensive catalog of Putin's cronies: Arkady and Boris Rotenberg of gas pipeline construction fame, Gennady Timchenko of the Gunvor Group, Igor Sechin of Rosneft, Alexey Miller of Gazprom, Sergey Chemezov of Rosoboronexport, Yuri Kovalchuk of Bank Rossiya, Matthias Warnig of Nord Stream pipeline, and many more. Although a few of these individuals rose to power during the last decade and a half, most got to know Putin early, during his St. Petersburg years. (Warnig's relationship with Putin dates back to Dresden.) Dawisha details how they all got filthy rich thanks to the noncompetitive privatization of state assets, no-bid government contracts, dubious loans, fake bankruptcies, phantom middleman firms, tax "refunds," patriotic megaprojects (such as the Olympics), and other favors. She maintains that Putin, too, is a thief, and, calling attention to the \$700,000 worth of watches publicly spotted on his wrist, she repeats guesstimates that put his personal wealth at \$40 billion.

A political scientist at Miami University in Ohio, Dawisha has, for the most part, not uncovered new information but assembled in one place nuggets from the diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks, investigative reportage, old Stasi files, comments made by an important Russian defector, and other sources, all of which she has posted online. Her prose is workmanlike, and not all the disparate materials fit easily into her simple storyline.

Particularly striking is the fact that most of the book is devoted to the period before Putin first became president. Dawisha reminds us that the KGB's role in private business began even before the Soviet collapse, and she argues that these are the roots of Putin's kleptocracy—challenging the conventional wisdom in which the 2003 arrest of Khodorkovsky and the confiscation of his private oil giant, Yukos, marked a key turning point. "Like other scholars of Russia, I have spent a significant portion of my career thinking and writing about how the post-Communist states might make a transition toward democracy," she confesses, but says that eventually she got wise, concluding that Russia was not "an inchoate democratic system being pulled down by history, accidental autocrats, popular inertia, bureaucratic incompetence, or poor Western advice." Rather, "from the beginning Putin and his circle sought to create an authoritarian regime ruled by a close-knit cabal with embedded interests, plans, and capabilities, who used democracy for decoration rather than direction." Putin's nasty tendencies, in other words, cannot be blamed on external factors, such as NATO expansion.

Questions about her analysis can be raised. Dawisha never really clarifies, for example, the extent to which sincerely held beliefs bind the Putin kleptocrats (as they did, say, the old Brezhnev clique, who also were said to be a bunch of cynics). She quotes Nikolay Leonov, the former head of analysis for the KGB, as saying of Putin and his KGB associates back in 2001, “They are patriots and proponents of a strong state grounded in centuries-old tradition. History recruited them to carry out a special operation for the resurrection of our great power, because there has to be balance in the world, and without a strong Russia the geopolitical turbulence will begin.” So is the enrichment an end in itself or a means to an end?

Most fundamentally, Dawisha’s assertions about near-total intentionality—kleptocracy by “intelligent design”—strain credulity. Russia has known lots of designs, including those of Mikhail Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and what happened to them? She concedes that under Putin, “not everything went as planned,” but her telling of the story makes it seem otherwise. This misses the fact that Putin and his cronies, as well as his mass base, were largely losers under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Notwithstanding its private-sector and offshore machinations, the former KGB was initially cut out of the really big money in oil, gas, metals, diamonds, and gold. A strong continuity argument obscures the shifts and contingencies that have occurred, as well as the progressive radicalization in the kleptocracy that has taken place over time—not only after 2003 but even over the last two years. Dawisha also overlooks any dynamic beyond Putin. Property is continually being expropriated by regime loyalists because that is a major way they mark their relative status in the pecking order—and how they survive, warding off attacks from others by going on offensive raids themselves.

Dawisha’s portrait of Putin’s supposed primordial will to enrichment leads her to dismiss not just his first-term structural reforms and the vision behind them but also the four-year presidential term of his junior crony, Dmitry Medvedev—an episode that followed Putin’s decision to respect, at least formally, the constitutional limit of two consecutive presidential terms. The dismissal may be understandable: Medvedev was (and is) derisively known as “the Teddy Bear” (*Medvezhonok*). He was picked for a reason. And yet throughout his tenure, Medvedev was urged by his own entourage and various powerful interest groups to dismiss Putin from the prime ministership.

One can debate the seriousness of the Medvedev-approved investigation of the Kremlin’s own Khodorkovsky prosecution, the pressure campaign against Sechin and other Putin cronies serving on the boards of private companies, the timid moves toward economic diversification and redemocratization, and the improved relations with the United States. One could even implausibly assume that all of that was brilliant manipulation by remarkably clever and effective puppet masters in order to fool the Russian people and

the West. But the fact remains that Medvedev had full authority to dismiss Putin, to deny him access to state resources in a campaign, and to declare his own intention to run for reelection. That the Teddy Bear did not make a move does not mean he couldn't have.

EMPEROR WITHOUT CLOTHES

In *Fragile Empire*, the journalist Ben Judah sees Putin's return to the presidency for a third term as a severe blow to the regime. His punchy book can be flip, but he talked to so many people, and lets their voices be heard, that his own snark and contempt are somewhat offset. "You see this man had good qualities, too," Alexander Belyaev, the former head of the St. Petersburg city assembly, tells him of Putin. "He was an expert at making friends, of being loyal to those friends. He is a brilliant observer of human nature, and he is very good at tactics." Similarly, Sergei Kolesnikov, a member of Putin's St. Petersburg clique who had been helping finance a palace for Putin in the south before choosing to expose his corruption and then going into exile in Estonia, tells Judah, "I was surprised when Putin became president. Of course I was surprised, everyone was surprised. At first I really wanted to support him and help him in any way I could. The 1990s had been a criminal, dangerous time. I hoped for something different." The something different turned out to be a personal dictatorship.

Judah has actually written two books. One is about what he calls Putin's "telepopulism," in which he discusses the Kremlin's spin doctors and puppeteers, such as Vladislav Surkov, and how the George W. Bush administration's aggressions and transgressions proved to be a gift to their manipulations. But the concept of the Putin regime as a "videocracy" dead ends, because, as Judah himself demonstrates, the propaganda is not always so effective and Putinism is more than mere show; it is a society. Judah details how Russian state spending on security, law, and order went from \$2.8 billion in 2000 to \$36.5 billion by 2010. More than 40 percent of the new middle class works for the state, and therefore they are not independent people. The regime's social base, in other words, is itself.

The other book is a vivid portrait of Moscow as an oppressive colonial power in its own lands. Judah travels out to remote locales and finds the little Putins, the feudal lords presiding over near statelessness and profound despair. He makes it to desolate Tuva, once part of Mongolia, in southern Siberia, where Putin is said to have posed topless for the cameras on a faux hunting expedition. "Putin?" a villager from Erjei says to the author. "He never did anything good for the country. He just took all the money from oil and gas production and took it for himself and his mates. . . . Why the hell would we support Putin?" Judah also travels to Birobidzhan, the improbable Soviet Jewish homeland on the border with China, and finds no sign of a feared Chinese demographic

invasion. “Are you worried that in the future the land will not be Russian and will be controlled by China? That there will be no more motherland here?” he asks mushroom sellers in a Russian area leased to Chinese farmers who grow soybeans. “Who gives a fuck about the motherland,” the mushroom sellers answer. “There is no fucking motherland.”

How representative such interviews are remains unclear. Judah apparently spent little time in Russia’s many bustling provincial cities, such as Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, or Lipetsk, which are clearly better off today than they were even just a few years ago. His reporting is designed not to offer a full picture of Russia but to show how the lawlessness Putin sought to fix is worse than ever. He finds the predominantly Muslim North Caucasus, a place where Putin pays colossal tribute for a sheen of loyalty, nearly fully de-Russified. Whereas previously it was the Chechens who wanted out of Russia, Judah writes, now many Russians would not mind seeing Chechnya go, since they detest the massive budget transfers to the region (\$30 billion for nine million inhabitants between 2000 and 2010).

Judah has some smart things to say about the Russian Internet, pointing out that “unlike in other Eastern European countries, the platforms that hosted it were largely indigenous because of the Cyrillic script, allowing it to become a ‘pole’ in the emerging online world, like China, which also uses home-grown platforms.” Russian equivalents for Google and Facebook, moreover, have operated largely beyond the suffocating regime. “The Internet grew in Russia in a kind of utopia—where there was no state,” one interviewee tells Judah. “This was the only part of the economy where to be a player and to be a winner you needed no political connections, no United Russia membership card, and no visits to the Kremlin.” All that has been changing, however, since the book was written.

Judah rips into the Internet-savvy opposition to Putin for being out of touch with the common people. He describes Alexei Navalny, the blogger who rose to fame as a critic of corruption, as a xenophobe and a “pure product of Putinism.” Judah heaps disdain on the tens of thousands of Muscovites who risked going out into the streets in 2011–12 to protest the regime, calling them “the demographic in Russia . . . most accustomed to skiing in France” and asserting that “the protests failed because Moscow is not Russia.” (Protests occurred in many cities.) His condescension descends into incoherence when he writes of Pussy Riot, the punk band that carried out an ill-fated performance act in an Orthodox church, that they “captured the vanity and, ironically, the unpolitical nature of the radical art scene. They were interested in protest, not politics.” Readers are likely to find this an often engaging book marred by an excess of attitude.

Still, Judah offers one of the best accounts of how Putin built his personal regime out of the mundane process of addressing the pathologies of the Russian state he inherited. To clean things up, an undertaking for which Putin had wide support, he had to acquire ever more power. All the while, a bogeyman served him well—not a return to communism, Yeltsin’s scarecrow, but the chaos of Yeltsinism. “The power to control the Russian nightmare of total collapse brought [Putin] to power and has kept him in power,” Judah succinctly summarizes.

But none of this unfolded automatically; the construction of such a regime required certain skills and real work. Putin seized an opportunity provided by historical contingencies, and he proved up to the task. He made himself indispensable to all factions and interests, their guarantor—or not—in a system in which uncertainty besets even the richest and most powerful. He shamelessly monetized his political position, but he also turned out to be dedicated to the cause of Russian statehood, in his own KGB way. Certain kinds of leaders do seem to fit certain moments in a country’s history. Putin only looks like an accident. And it is precisely because he is not a nonentity that he has been a calamity.

THE LONELY POWER

Remarkably, this pattern keeps repeating itself in Russia. About a decade ago, Stefan Hedlund, an expert on Russia at Uppsala University, in Sweden, wrote an impressive overview of 12 centuries of Eastern Slavic history in an attempt to explain Putin’s authoritarianism. He pointed out that Russia had essentially collapsed three times—in 1610–13, 1917–18, and 1991—and that each time, the country was revived fundamentally unchanged. Despite the depth of the crises and the stated intentions of would-be transformative leaders, Russia reemerged with an unaccountable government, repression, and resistance to the imposition of the rule of law. Hedlund’s impressive tome was titled *Russian Path Dependence*, but rather than complete determinism, he perceived choices—albeit choices heavily conditioned by culture. He noted that efforts at institutional change in Russia had always failed because they had not altered the country’s underlying system of norms, which rested on a deeply ingrained preference for informal rules. “Modernization reinforced archaism,” Hedlund grimly concluded, quoting the historian Geoffrey Hosking; “increasing state control meant entrenching personal caprice.”

Hedlund’s attention to values yielded exceptional insight, but he overemphasized the institutional continuities supposedly at work from ancient Muscovy onward and underplayed the power of Russia’s relations with the outside world. Not just a preference for informal rules but also Russia’s quest for great-power status, and especially its

perennial difficulties competing with stronger powers, has produced both the collapses and the trying aftermaths, during which an imperative to revive national greatness comes to the fore. “Russia was and will remain a great power,” announced Putin’s original presidential manifesto, posted online in late 1999. “Russia is in the middle of one of the most difficult periods in its history. For the first time in the past 200–300 years, it is facing a real threat of sliding into the second, possibly even the third, echelon of states.” In response, he offered an abiding vision of Russia as a providential power, with a special mission and distinct identity. Exceptionalism has been the handmaiden of personalism.

Putin resembles a villain out of central casting. He has repeatedly revealed himself as cocksure, patronizing, aggrieved, vindictive, and quick with a retort for Western critics. But he is hardly the first Russian leader to make demonization of the West a foundation of Russia’s core identity and its government’s claim to legitimacy. Moreover, today’s Russia is significantly more ethnically homogeneous and nationalist than was the old Soviet Union, and Putin has perfected the art of moistening the eyes of Russian elites assembled in opulent tsarist settings, plucking the strings of mystical pride in all things Russian and of resentment at all things Western. They see reason where critics see madness. From the Kremlin’s perspective, as Washington engages in stupid, hypocritical, and destabilizing global behavior, Moscow shoulders the burden of serving as a counterweight, thereby bringing sanity and balance to the international system. Russian lying, cheating, and hypocrisy thus serve a higher purpose. Cybercrime is patriotism; rigging elections and demobilizing opposition are sacred duties. Putin’s machismo posturing, additionally, is undergirded by a view of Russia as a country of real men opposing a pampered, gutless, and decadent West. Resentment toward U.S. power resonates far beyond Russia, and with his ramped-up social conservatism, Putin has expanded a perennial sense of Russian exceptionalism to include an alternative social model as well.

Paradoxically, however, all of this has only helped render Russia what the analyst Lilia Shevtsova has aptly called a “lonely power.” Putin’s predatory politics at home and abroad, his cozying up to right-wing extremists in Europe, and his attempted engagement of a powerful China hardly add up to an effective Russian grand strategy. Russia has no actual allies and has damaged its most important relationship, that with Germany. Winning domestic plaudits at Western powers’ expense is politically useful, but those countries, as always, continue to possess the advanced technology Russia needs, especially in energy exploration and drilling. Over the long term, realizing the ambitions Putin and his supporters have articulated would require new and deeper structural reforms, a dramatic cutback in bureaucracy and state procurement shenanigans, and the creation of an environment supportive of entrepreneurialism and investment. Medvedev made gestures in such a direction, but Putin has ridiculed those, choosing the path of least resistance in the short term and thus risking possible long-term stagnation or worse. A

revival of Russia's latent Soviet-era industrial capacity was a trick that could happen only once.

Emotive nationalism and social conservatism have long been present in post-Soviet Russia, but they have intensified in state propaganda since 2012. This was due partly to the outbreak of street protests in the winter of 2011–12 challenging Putin's announcement that he would return to the presidency. But more fundamentally, it was also because the other possible way forward—a second round of structural reform—would have been incredibly hard to carry out, not least because it might have threatened to undermine the current elite's suffocating grasp on power. As it happened, the mass Ukrainian uprising against misrule that began in late 2013 and culminated in President Viktor Yanukovich's cowardly abandonment of Kiev in February 2014 reconfirmed the long-standing Kremlin line of a scheming West committed to encircling and overthrowing the regime in Russia. Putin's seizure of the southern Ukrainian region of Crimea, in turn, strongly reinforced the trend in the Kremlin away from facing the tough policy choices that would actually bolster Russia's great-power status.

Given the West's imposition of sanctions and dropping world oil prices, it might be tempting to write Putin off. Authoritarian regimes often prove to be at once all-powerful and strikingly brittle, and Judah, for one, sees Putin's rule as almost on its last legs. And yet, despite the Russian population's seething anger over its predatory state and educated urbanites' despondency over the absence of a modernizing vision for the future, much of the elite retains a strong sense of mission and resolve. Dawisha concludes that "Putin will not go gentle into the night," and she is probably correct. Judah underestimates the ways this new kind of flexible authoritarianism has found to adapt to often self-created challenges, and his book is bereft of any discussion of foreign policy, a vital instrument in the tool kit of authoritarianism.

Putin's Russia possesses powerful resources as a potential international spoiler, including the ability to apply economic pressure, buy off or co-opt powerful foreign interests, engage in covert operations, wage cyberattacks, and deploy a modernizing military force that is by far the strongest in the region. Ironically, Russia's greatest source of leverage might be the fact that the West, especially Europe, needs its neighbor's integration into the international order. Managing such integration would be a lot less difficult if Putin were just a thief, à la Dawisha, or a cynic, à la Judah. But he is actually a composite, à la Hill and Gaddy—a thief and a cynic with deeply held convictions about the special qualities and mission of the Russian state, views that enjoy wide resonance among the population. So what happens now, especially given that the Russian leader has managed to trap himself in the latest and largest of his so-called frozen conflicts, enraging the West and setting himself on a path toward isolation and creeping autarky?

A WAY OUT?

Neither Putin nor his Western counterparts planned to get embroiled in a prolonged standoff over Ukraine. Russia's seizure of Crimea and support for separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine violated international law and, following the downing of a civilian airliner (almost certainly by Russian-assisted rebels), provoked the imposition of significant Western sanctions. But the crisis is not simply about Russian aggression, nor can it be solved simply by trying to force Moscow to retreat to the status quo ante. Even an unlikely retreat, moreover, would not necessarily last.

Ukraine is a debilitated state, created under Soviet auspices, hampered by a difficult Soviet inheritance, and hollowed out by its own predatory elites during two decades of misrule. But it is also a nation that is too big and independent for Russia to swallow up. Russia, meanwhile, is a damaged yet still formidable great power whose rulers cannot be intimidated into allowing Ukraine to enter the Western orbit. Hence the standoff. No external power or aid package can solve Ukraine's problems or compensate for its inherent vulnerabilities vis-à-vis Russia. Nor would sending lethal weaponry to Ukraine's brave but ragtag volunteer fighters and corrupt state structures improve the situation; in fact, it would send it spiraling further downward, by failing to balance Russian predominance while giving Moscow a pretext to escalate the conflict even more. Rather, the way forward must begin with a recognition of some banal facts and some difficult bargaining.

Russia's seizure of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine do not challenge the entire post-1945 international order. The forward positions the Soviet Union occupied in the heart of Europe as a result of defeating Nazi Germany were voluntarily relinquished in the early 1990s, and they are not going to be reoccupied. But nor should every detail of the post-Cold War settlement worked out in 1989-91 be considered eternal and inviolate. That settlement emerged during an anomalous time. Russia was flat on its back but would not remain prostrate forever, and when it recovered, some sort of pushback was to be expected.

Something similar happened following the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, many of the provisions of which were not enforced. Even if France, the United Kingdom, and the United States had been willing and able to enforce the peace, their efforts would not have worked, because the treaty had been imposed during a temporary anomaly, the simultaneous collapse of German and Russian power, and would inevitably have been challenged when that power returned.

Territorial revisionism ensued after World War II as well, of course, and continued sporadically for decades. Since 1991, there have been some negotiated revisions: Hong Kong and Macao underwent peaceful reabsorption into China. Yugoslavia was broken up in violence and war, leading to the independence of its six federal units and eventually Kosovo, as well. Unrecognized statelets such as Nagorno-Karabakh, part of Azerbaijan; Transnistria, a sliver of Moldova; Abkhazia and South Ossetia, disputed units of Georgia; and now Donetsk and Luhansk, parts of Ukraine—each entails a story of Stalinist border-making.

The European Union cannot resolve this latest standoff, nor can the United Nations. The United States has indeed put together “coalitions of the willing” to legitimize some of its recent interventions, but it is not going to go to war over Ukraine or start bombing Russia, and the wherewithal and will for indefinite sanctions against Russia are lacking. Distasteful as it might sound, Washington faces the prospect of trying to work out some negotiated larger territorial settlement.

Such negotiations would have to acknowledge that Russia is a great power with leverage, but they would not need to involve the formal acceptance of some special Russian sphere of interest in its so-called near abroad. The chief goals would be, first, to exchange international recognition of Russia’s annexation of Crimea for an end to all the frozen conflicts in which Russia is an accomplice and, second, to disincentivize such behavior in the future. Russia should have to pay monetary compensation for Crimea. There could be some federal solutions, referendums, even land swaps and population transfers (which in many cases have already taken place). Sanctions on Russia would remain in place until a settlement was mutually agreed on, and new sanctions could be levied if Russia were to reject negotiations or were deemed to be conducting them in bad faith. Recognition of the new status of Crimea would occur in stages, over an extended period.

It would be a huge challenge to devise incentives that were politically plausible in the West while at the same time powerful enough for Russia to agree to a just settlement—and for Ukraine to be willing to take part. But the search for a settlement would be an opportunity as well as a headache.

NATO expansion can be judged to have been a strategic error—not because it angered Russia but because it weakened NATO as a military alliance. Russia’s elites would likely have become revanchist even without NATO’s advance, because they believe, nearly universally, that the United States took advantage of Russia in 1991 and has denied the country its rightful place as an equal in international diplomacy ever since. But NATO expansion’s critics have not offered much in the way of practicable alternatives. Would it

really have been appropriate, for example, to deny the requests of all the countries east of Germany to join the alliance?

Then as now, the only real alternative was the creation of an entirely new trans-European security architecture, one that fully transcended its Cold War counterpart. This was an oft-expressed Russian wish, but in the early 1990s, there was neither the imagination nor the incentives in Washington for such a heavy lift. Whether there is such capacity in Washington today remains to be seen. But even if comprehensive new security arrangements are unlikely anytime soon, Washington could still undertake much useful groundwork.

Critics might object on the grounds that the sanctions are actually biting, reinforced by the oil price free fall—so why offer even minimal concessions to Putin now? The answer is because neither the sanctions, nor the oil price collapse, nor the two in conjunction have altered Russia's behavior, diminished its potential as a spoiler, or afforded Ukraine a chance to recover.

Whether they acknowledge it or not, Western opponents of a negotiated settlement are really opting for another long-term, open-ended attempt to contain Russia and hope for regime change—a policy likely to last until the end of Putin's life and possibly well beyond. The costs of such an approach are likely to be quite high, and other global issues will continue to demand attention and resources. And all the while, Ukraine would effectively remain crippled, Europe's economy would suffer, and Russia would grow ever more embittered and difficult to handle. All of that might occur no matter what. But if negotiations hold out a chance of somehow averting such an outcome, they are worth a try. And the attempt would hold few costs, because failed negotiations would only solidify the case for containment in Europe and in the United States.

It is ultimately up to Russia's leaders to take meaningful steps to integrate their country into the existing world order, one that they can vex but not fully overturn. To the extent that the Ukraine debacle has brought this reality into sharper focus, it might actually have been useful in helping Putin to see some light, and the same goes for the collapse of oil prices and the accompanying unavoidable devaluation of the ruble. After the nadir of 1998, smart policy choices in Moscow, together with some lucky outside breaks, helped Russia transform a crisis into a breakthrough, with real and impressive steps forward. That history could replay itself—but whether it will remains the prerogative of one person alone.