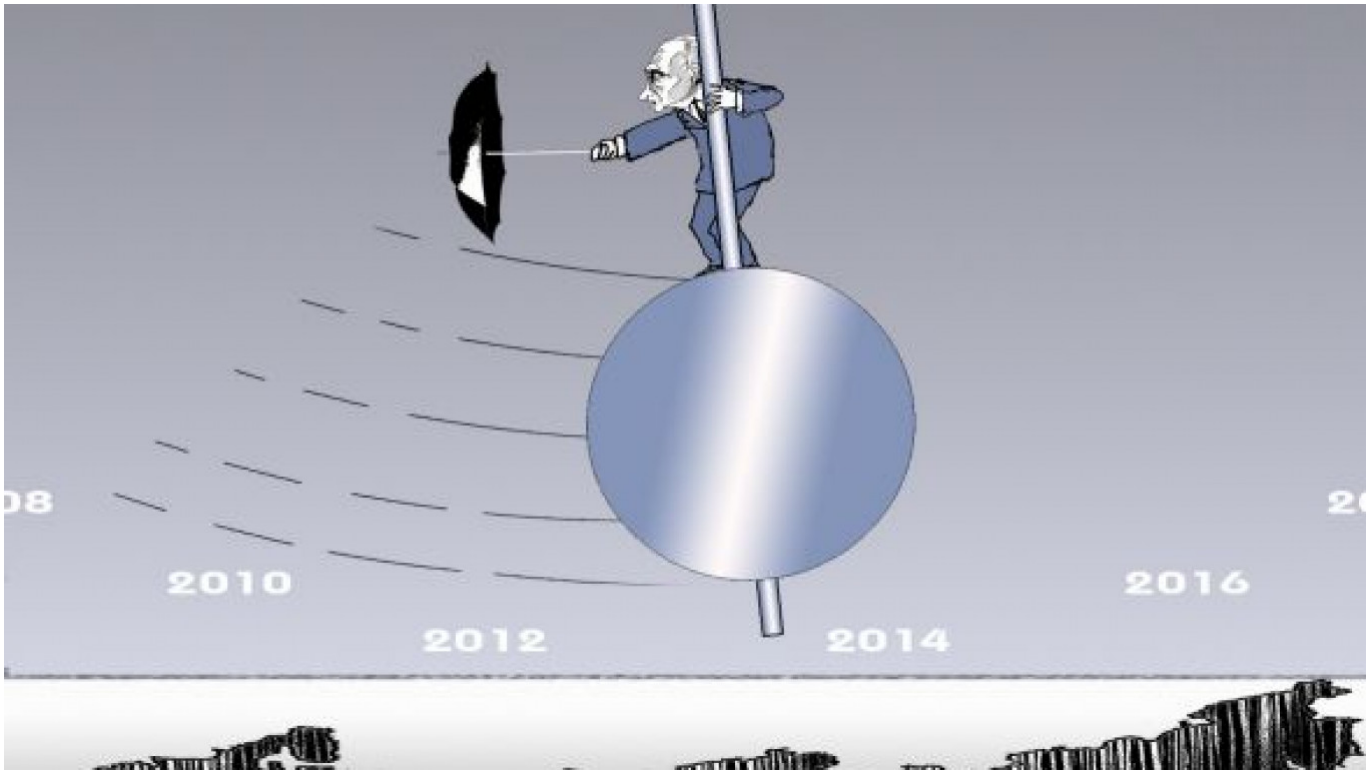
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

What Lies Ahead for Russia in the Next Decade

By Maria Lipman

May 12, 2013



Analysts have been releasing various scenarios of how Russia might develop over the next 10 years. Although each scenario is different, they all have some features in common. Below is a list of the commonalities that form a picture of what awaits Russia over the next decade.

The first in a series of possible junctures emerged with the presidential election last year. Following his successful bid for the presidency, Vladimir Putin had the option of delegating some of the leadership duties to former President and current Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. However, because that arrangement would have provided less room for political maneuvering, Putin appears to have decided to remain both the nominal and actual leader of the country.

The second fork in the road will arrive either this year or in 2014, when limited budgetary resources will force the authorities to make cuts to social spending, thus altering the relationship between government and society. At that point, the leadership will pursue one of three paths: moderate modernization, stagnation with elements of political

modernization, or greater authoritarianism.

After Putin's re-election, Russia faces two more key junctures. The Kremlin will have to deal with limited revenues and an election cycle.

The third juncture will come with the series of elections in 2016-18. If the authorities are pursuing a path of moderate modernization at that time, the elections will either leave control of the process in their hands, or move it beyond their control, as happened with former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. If the country is following a path of stagnation, economic and political crises will force it to move toward moderate modernization or authoritarianism.

Let's examine exactly what each of those policy options would look like in practice.

Moderate modernization involves leaving the overall political system intact but strengthening the independence of political parties, with United Russia becoming the true party of power. This would increase political competition and activity to levels last seen in 2002-03. Leaders would restore elements of federalism such as the direct election of governors, and would once again make the Federation Council a functioning body representing regional interests. The government would also play a more market-oriented role in the economy.

At the same time, the moderate nature of this approach does not rule out the possibility of a crisis resulting if the changes in various areas are implemented at different speeds or if conflicts develop between the differing elements. Course corrections will have to be made or the government will shift into a more authoritarian mode as a result of those tensions.

Accelerated modernization would entail full-fledged federalism with a two-party system and a real separation of powers including parliamentary control over activities of the government and the siloviki.

Under authoritarian rule, the political system would become wholly centered on a single individual, elections would be reduced to a ritualistic demonstration of loyalty, and the transition to a single-party system would be made complete. An even more authoritarian system might also be put in place by combining and enlarging the regions, turning federal districts into direct extensions of federal authority, strengthening various authoritarian power verticals by beefing up siloviki structures and establishing a type of "politburo" for reaching agreements between the main ruling clans.

Apart from outside factors such as fluctuations in the price of oil, each of the three basic paths of development is prone to internal problems stemming from bad decision-making by the authorities or from unexpected circumstances. Here are several scenarios that might play out

separately or in combination.

"Russia without Putin." The basic strength of the system could be evaluated by conjecturing what would happen if Putin were forced to leave office due to a sharp decline in popularity. The struggle for power by feuding elites coupled with the country's weak institutions of government would lead to serious instability — much like what happened following the death of former Soviet leader Josef Stalin.

"Quiet collapse." This might be set in motion not by secessionism but if the central authorities attempted to take control of functions that are beyond their ability to carry out. This could prompt some regions to withdraw from Moscow's legal and governmental orbit and to become separate federal entities or to regroup into new, independent configurations. There is a serious risk that the Chechen model could spread to other regions, primarily in the North Caucasus and especially if Chechnya were to expand its borders.

"Schism among the elites." A split could easily occur among the ruling elite if Putin's role as arbiter were diminished by a drop in his popularity, or if business/political clans were forced to compete for shares of a diminishing pie of natural resources income.

"A local crisis grows into a national emergency." Repressive and ill-conceived tactics by the federal authorities could destabilize any Russian region, including Moscow. A single local crisis — and especially several occurring simultaneously — could start a chain reaction culminating in a nationwide crisis.

"A third war in the Caucasus." Many different factors could cause a serious deterioration of the situation in the Caucasus. Federal and regional authority — especially in Chechnya — could become too focused on individuals, effectively holding the fragile balance of power in the region hostage to relations between those leaders. In preparing for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Moscow is calling on the local political elites to focus more on stability than on developing modernization strategies for the future. At the same time, local political clans are using increasingly archaic methods of governance. The inevitable cutbacks in federal funding that will follow the enormous outlay for the Olympic Games could lead to destabilization. And finally, the smoldering civil war in the region could morph into an anti-colonial conflict.

"A shift toward nationalism." Nationalism might develop spontaneously from the grassroots or serve as a political card to be played by the ruling authorities in an effort to consolidate their hold on power. This could come as a response to freer elections. An obvious risk connected with an increase in nationalism is an escalation of tensions in the North Caucasus and the final forcing out of all ethnic Russians from the region. Russia's movement toward becoming a nation-state and similar trends in a number of ethnic republics sets the stage for a conflict between differing nationalist movements.

"The European option." Russia would move closer to Europe only if the domestic economy plummets or relations with China take a sudden turn for the worse. Greater cooperation with Brussels could lead to fundamental political reforms but could also spark an upsurge in reactionary nationalism.

"A bloggers' revolution." A clumsily repressive move by the authorities, their campaign

against anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny or an attempt to restrict access to the Internet and social networks could cause a massive backlash among urban, computer-savvy citizens. Taken alone, that might not threaten the ruling regime, but it could serve as a trigger or detonator to larger events that could capable of changing the political landscape.

The authorities might be able to continue the present course while avoiding any major upheavals or tumult. However, if the present calm is not the direct outcome of the government's policy over the past several years but merely a momentary lull in the pendulum's swing over the last two decades, then the period from 2013 to 2015 is likely to witness changes in the relationship between the government and citizens, and between the federal center and regions.

Beginning with the economic crisis of 2008, Russia has entered a period of change. The authorities have expended colossal effort to slow its progress, but they are only delaying the inevitable.

Maria Lipman is editor-in-chief of the Pro et Contra journal, and Nikolai Petrov is a professor of political science at the Higher School of Economics. This comment appeared in Vedomosti.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/05/12/what-lies-ahead-for-russia-in-the-next-decade-a23922