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# How Exactly Could the Putin Regime Collapse?

By Leonid Gozman

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Everyone, except perhaps Putin himself, understands that his regime is nearing its end. At the very least, discussions about the country's future are being conducted in Russia as if neither Putin nor his system still existed. The question is: How exactly will the regime collapse?

For a long time, the hope was that elections would bring down the government, even though Russia hasn't had real elections in at least 15 years. But some still hoped that even a small number of independent deputies might change the atmosphere within the country, while others believed that elections might overturn the regime. None of this is currently possible.

The Kremlin has made the situation impossible for nearly all opposition politicians, jailing them or barring them from running for office on preposterous grounds. The referendum to change the constitution and extend Putin's reign endlessly showed even the most optimistic observers that the regime does not care what anyone thinks, and that if it excels at anything,

it’s falsifying election results. Any election under Putin can only be a farce.

There was also a hope (and, simultaneously, a fear) that the regime would succumb to a revolution, that perhaps the people would lose their patience and topple the government, and that the security forces would not dare to go up against hundreds of thousands of protesters. However, the events of the past nine months have made talk of a revolution sound like fantasy.

Now Putin is “at war” with the United States and NATO, two entities the majority of Russians see as enemies. Now Putin’s opponents are not seen as being on the side of the people but rather on the side of the United States, and therefore they cannot count on popular support. Together with the regime’s willingness to use force, this makes a revolution in the foreseeable future impossible.

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At the same time, the regime has no chance of survival in its current form. The lack of a path to victory not only in Ukraine but in general, the absence of a vision for the future, the depletion of moral and political resources, the inability to exist in conditions of isolation, and the emigration of large segments of the population all make changes inevitable. Ukrainian military strikes and Western sanctions will not allow the system to infinitely prolong its demise.

There is, of course, a possibility of nuclear war, but setting aside the scenario of global apocalypse, there are only two somewhat realistic scenarios for the end of the Putin regime: one is horrific and the other has little to do with democracy, but at least gives Russia a chance at a future.

The first scenario is the rapid collapse of the Russian government. Essentially, the government is already in decline: it is clearly losing control, orders are not being followed or — as in the case of mobilization — being followed in such an unorthodox manner that negative consequences far exceed positive outcomes for the regime.

However, Ukraine’s counteroffensive and growing socioeconomic problems could create a snowball effect, and all stability could be lost. This has already happened once: in the last days of the Soviet Union when Mikhail Gorbachev was issuing decree after decree, which no one had any intention of following, and which he had no way of enforcing.

Back then, there were institutions that stepped in and prevented chaos: the party organizations of multiple republics and in the Russian regions, Boris Yeltsin’s team, and the new institutions of power in the Baltic republics. Contemporary Russia has no such institutions.

This means that a rapid collapse of the regime would inevitably result in a free-for-all: military formations with various leaders would clash; Putin’s “footmen” — Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and Wagner Group founder Yevgeny Prigozhin — would enter the fray along with their fighters, and other regional structures headed by ambitious generals and governors would join in the fighting. The level of violence and bloodshed would be unimaginable; it

would be apocalyptic.

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A less terrifying scenario is a "palace coup." This does not necessarily have to be an assassination. It is possible that Putin could be ousted or convinced to step down from power. His entourage certainly understands that he forced the country — and, what they care more about, them personally — into a dead end. Their main problem isn't Ukraine or Russia, but rather their ability to personally reconcile with the West and regain their ability to use their assets and bank accounts. Putin's entourage understands that as long as Putin is in power, they will never be able to do this.

There is a chance, especially in the event of large-scale military losses, that several of Putin's most trusted advisers might offer him an exit strategy. Perhaps some minor figure who would be easy to manipulate could be appointed president. This nominal leader would be tasked with ending the war, making all possible concessions to the West, and thus "buying forgiveness" for Putin's inner circle. The West would most likely cooperate in the interest of preventing World War III.

We don't know whether there are people in Putin's inner circle who are brave enough to bring him such a proposal as he's been surrounding himself with spineless yes-men for years. We also don't know whether Putin would accept such an offer, especially since former Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev — who was convinced that he would be able to maintain his influence when he handed over the presidency to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, a man he trusted and considered close — lost all power and influence in the span of just a week when Tokayev asserted his independence. Now even Nazarbayev's very freedom and life depend on Tokayev.

An even more frightening example for Putin is that of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milošević, whose own people sent him to be tried in The Hague.

Anyone in Putin's inner circle daring to approach the president with a proposition to step down would also need to be someone prepared to take further measures should the proposal not be accepted. Otherwise, I fear that our country's chances of survival are nil.

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

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