HOW THE PAST AND PRESENT WILL SHAPE RUSSIA'S FUTURE

Announcer 00:00

Please welcome the panel to the stage.

Julia Ioffe 00:38

We're talking about the future of Russia, right? And before we get really started, before we dive in, I wanted to do a speed round at the beginning to kind of gauge where each of our panelists is. I—basically since February 2022—I've been asking everybody I know from the sphere of Russia, everybody that I've met there, et cetera, when do you think we'll get to go back and why? So if we could just go down the line, and if you can tell me when you think we'll get to go back to Moscow and why, very quickly, and then we'll—I think that'll kind of establish where we are. All right, Lyonya [Leonid]?

Leonid Volkov 01:26

In five to seven years, just a beautiful, democratic, Russia of future.

Julia Ioffe 01:31

Okay, why do you think five to seven years?

Leonid Volkov 01:33

That's my gut feeling. That's how I feel, the realistic speed of change. I'm not very optimistic in this regard. So it will not happen tomorrow, unfortunately, but it will happen one day, I'm quite sure.

Julia Ioffe 01:47

Okay. Daniel?

Daniel Treisman 01:48

I remember being asked in 2010 how long I thought Putin would last, and I was wrong. So I'm sure I'll be wrong now. I would say that we'll be able to go back after Putin leaves the stage, and not before, and when that will be is anybody's guess.

Julia Ioffe 02:09

What did you say, out of curiosity what did you say in 2010?

Daniel Treisman 02:12

I said pretty high odds within 10 years.

Julia Ioffe 02:16

Okay, all right, not totally off.

Daniel Treisman 02:20

I was wrong.

Julia Ioffe 02:21

Okay.

Maria Snegovaya 02:23

I think they definitely will have to wait until Putin is gone. Most likely it happens naturally. Putin is about—around his 70s, so he can easily live for another 10 to 15, years, and even then, unfortunately, based on the current trend and reshuffling of the Russian society, the new Russia is not going to be—look as pretty and beautiful as we hope.

Julia Ioffe 02:43

Okay. Pavel?

Pavel Khodorkovsky 02:45

Yeah—no, I agree. I think it's a very personalistic regime. Brezhnev left the stage at 86. Putin doesn't have a very deep bench, so the fundamental changes in the regime are likely to happen only after his demise.

Julia Ioffe 03:00

So when do you think that is? Give me a—

Pavel Khodorkovsky 03:02

10 to 15 years.

Julia Ioffe 03:03

10 to 15 years. Eric?

Eric Green 03:06

I agree that I wouldn't go back until Putin is gone. But even after that, I wouldn't be certain that the next leader of Russia will be significantly different. So I would have to wait and see. But I think Putin is quite healthy and—unfortunately—and I'm thinking more like 20 years, even, until he passes from the scene.

Leonid Volkov 03:37

So I was the most optimistic in the room with my very pessimistic forecast.

Julia Ioffe 03:41

Right. But that's also, I would say, very characteristic of you as part of the organization that Alexei Navalny founded. I mean, that was very much founded, I would say, on— extreme optimism.

Leonid Volkov 03:54

We keep saying that optimism is a job requirement—in our organization.

Julia Ioffe 03:59

Okay. So that gives us a range of, you know, of opinion on what Russia's future is going to look like. What do you think explains the longevity of this regime, and why has it been able—you know, in 2022 when he went into Ukraine, full throttle, there was a sense of, okay, this is—this can't go—this can't last very long, right? But the economy has adapted, the regime has consolidated control. I would say Putin is probably more powerful than he's ever been. What do you think explains the strength and longevity of the regime and the economy?

Daniel Treisman 04:47

Well, I would say it's a combination of a great deal of luck, which we underestimate, and skill. And if we look at the economy, I think we had exaggerated ideas of how much the sanctions were going to harm the Russian economy. We've seen the economy prove remarkably resilient, with trade really holding up despite all our efforts to reduce it, exports haven't actually dropped. India took over the oil purchases from Europe. If we look at domestic economic activity, there's been this massive fiscal stimulus, about 3 percent of GDP a year. So, in part, Putin had saved revenues from oil for a long time, and not all of those were frozen in the West, not all the reserves, and he's used those so far to maintain economic health, and wages have even increased. But over the long trajectory, I think it's been a changing story. Initially, it was just this enormous rebound of the economy. During those first eight years, he created a pretty sophisticated system of manipulating information, establishing lots of different groups within the elite that had an interest in the regime's survival. And then, since about 2012 when protests broke out against him, he's been consolidating the regime and making it more repressive, and he has done that in a pretty thorough way by this point. And basically, I think there's very little that threatens him, the opposition—Lyonya [Leonid], Pavel, outside Russia—there's very little opposition within Russia, and that's just the current reality.

Julia Ioffe 06:50

So Cliff Gaddy once described—we discussed this earlier—Cliff Gaddy once described the Russian economy as a "cockroach" economy, in the sense that it is very rudimentary and that it can survive pretty much any shock. Why do you think this economy has been able to survive?

Maria Snegovaya 07:10

Well, Russian economy, in a lot of ways, is very primitive, in the sense that it largely is an export-oriented economy, where most that its people are doing, they're exporting oil, selling it. And because of that, it's highly vulnerable to oil shocks, but also otherwise highly resilient, because you cannot easily substitute for oil. Russia, right now produces—controls—about 10 percent of the oil market in the world. And we see, by the way that the sanctions that were designed by the West deliberately were very cautious about not to—eliminating Russia from the markets, because it would just—be too destabilizing, plus it's an economy that has in a lot of ways inherited this large, industrial defense in [the] military complex based from the Soviet times. And Putin was able, very successfully, to combine these two factors, reviving this military industrial complex and creating a lot of early winners from this war. So it's true that it's highly traumatic event for many within the society, but it's also something that created a lot of opportunities for the Russian society, for the Russian elites. The average salary has grown and, in general, the public sentiment is quite optimistic, despite all of the horrors that have taken place.

Leonid Volkov 08:22

I also would like to add that, I mean, you quoted that, like, Russian economy is able to survive any shock. Maybe, but we didn't yet have a chance to prove if it's true or not, because there was no shock. The sanctions that were applied after the annexation of Crimea were applied, like, very gradually and slowly, and then also the response that followed after February 24, 2022 was also like, much, well, softer or like—I mean, it was not real shock. They actually, they were given time to get adjusted. I mean, of course, we cannot speculate what would happen, but it would be real stress if actually, — Russian economy would be cut off swift on February 25 and —the really tough personal sanctions that we advocated for were applied, like in March 2022. It would be a shock, and it would be a different story. But now, I mean,—they were given many years to, to domesticate the production of many crucial things, to domesticate—the internet, to make it— quite independent from the international infrastructure, to rebuild the agriculture, —especially after the premier sanctions, etc, etc.

Julia Ioffe 09:48

To what extent, though, is it even possible to do what you are saying, given that there is a China now, right? So the US could have cut Russia off on February 24th but there's always China, to some extent, India, who can help Russia bypass all these Western sanctions. We're not the only game in town. Eric, Pavel, what do you think?

Eric Green 10:16

Yeah, I mean, as Stephen Kotkin has said: You can't quarantine Eurasia. And Russia does have options. And I think it's important also not to over-promise and overthink what sanctions can actually accomplish in terms of changing Putin's behavior. He's dead set on dominating Ukraine, and the only way to change his calculus is first and foremost on the battlefield. The economy is an important factor in his calculus, but it's not the main one. And I think he also needs to see unified resolve from the West to make him understand that we are in this for the long

haul. Ukraine will continue to be supported. And I think he also needs to feel some pressure from below on his own hold on power, and maybe Pavel and Leonid can speak to that. But I think you can't just think that sanctions by themselves are actually going to materially influence his actions.

Julia Ioffe 11:28

Yeah, he—I think he has come to see them more as kind of the cost of doing business, rather than—

Eric Green 11:34

Absolutely.

Julia Ioffe 11:35

Rather than something that would sway him or change his course of business. To what extent do you think that this defense spending that has, you know, lifted all boats in Russia has—I know so many people who have made a ton of money bypassing sanctions, bypassing all these export controls. Everybody I talked to in Moscow says there's never been this much money, they've never seen this many Rolls-Royces around ["Patriarch Ponds" in Russian] Patriarch Ponds. Is this a "sugar high"? Or is it going to like—because as long as the war has been going, right, we've been hearing, "any day now, they're going to run out of runway", or "it's a sugar high, they're going to crash". Do you think that's true, or do you think that this kind of restructuring of the Russian economy, can last indefinitely?

Daniel Treisman 12:27

I think it's really both: a sugar rush and a more serious restructuring of the economy. So the economy is very different from the economy in 2019, say. It's being reoriented towards import substitution, producing the things that previously were supplied from abroad. It's been—the connections to the outside, well, to the West, have been cut to a great extent, and the internal economy has been stimulated, but all these other friendly countries have been undercutting the sanctions, providing the goods: China, but also India, Turkey, Kazakhstan, many others. And the economic elites in Russia have changed. So the old oligarchs are decimated, basically powerless, and there are a whole lot of new oligarchs who have obtained the assets that Western companies were forced to abandon, basically, or they would get a third to a half of the value of their assets when they left. And a lot of these new oligarchs are pretty happy with the situation. Some Russian businesses actually like the sanctions because it reduces competition from outside. And there are many corrupt, and even uncorrupt ways that people are getting rich from this. Plus the—as Masha (Maria) mentioned, very big increases in real wages in the last couple of years. So all of that, I think, is a serious restructuring of the economy, towards the military, towards production for the domestic market. But at the same time, there's—it is a sugar high. There are problems arising. There's 10 percent inflation at the moment. The deficit has been small, but they're running out of liquid reserves to cover that, so there's about—in the national wealth fund, there's about enough left to cover one year's deficit. And in the long

run, they're losing technological competitiveness. They're getting by, but they're going to rely on China for technology in the future, and that's going to gradually reduce the growth rates. We already see the growth rates falling. So we're going to have inflation and stagnation, you know, classic stagflation, I think, in the next few years.

Maria Snegovaya 14:52

Ironically, we at CSIS are about to release a report entitled, "From Sugar High to Hangover," ideally, so you basically anticipated it. Precisely, along with what Dan is saying, we are showing that indeed, the original bump in the growth is your classic military Keynesian economy. When you just take a lot of money in it, you have a stock, put it all into the economy, and you have a temporary increase in incomes and well-being, at the expense of the high inflation. But right now, already, we see the signs of stagnation and even decline in non-military, defense-linked industries. So we definitely see that this effect is gone, primarily—is going away. But it doesn't mean that Russia is about to collapse. They, unfortunately, can manage—muddle through at this stage, very—for quite a long—quite an extended period of time. And very importantly, even if the sanctions lift, if some sanctions were to be partially lifted, say, by the United States, it wouldn't radically alter this current economic model, because the major shifts—have already taken place, and they're so major that no amount of sanction investment—sanctions list, sorry—is going to change this current status quo. More than that, there's so many new stakeholders that they radically, actually, oppose a sanctions lift, because it will create the competition from the Western companies, potentially, that the Russian businesses that benefit from this new situation do not like. Basically, the key takeaway is that we are in this new reality for quite a while, Putin will keep pumping up his military- industrial sector and, unfortunately, Russia will continuously be a threat to the Western liberal order for quite some time.

Pavel Khodorkovsky 16:30

I would just add really quickly that there has also been a de-dollarization of trade. More than 50 percent of trade is now done in Russian rubles, and only 17 percent is in currencies of unfriendly countries, i.e., US and European—Europe, so that dramatically reduces the effectiveness of sanctions.

Julia Ioffe 16:57

I just want to remind everyone, you can submit questions that I will see right here and can integrate into the discussion. So we're not going to have—dedicated Q&A time at the end. —

Leonid Volkov 17:15

Yeah, I wanted to add few things to this discussion. I'm not an economist, so I don't understand much about this, like macro indicators, but from our perception (and we do a lot of research inside Russia still, I mean, we still do have a lot of supporters there. We try to stay in touch with them. We do a lot of polling, and—qualitative research as well) I would characterize the situation as—more complex, not only a bloom and sugar rush. Putin is basically a very good tactician and very bad strategist. And they are now in the situation of —problem solving. They see

tactical problems, they find tactical solutions. Don't think too much about the long-term perspective, and we can discover it through our research. For instance, for many years now, we have a—polling department since 2013 as a part of the Navalny foundation. For many—for many months now, we discover that more and more people tend to tell us they're most concerned about health care. So—suddenly, health care has become, like the leading issue. We start to dig deeper, try to find out why, why of all, things health care? Then we realize that, first of all, —it was heavily defunded because it was a militarization of the economy. And second, and that's what we reveal in qualitative research, it actually suffers heavily under sanctions. Sanctions were designed to prevent Russian military industry, from—being able to produce—high precision missiles and so on. But unfortunately, to build a missile, you— need a microchip which can be smuggled in a backpack through the — endless Russian-Kazakhstani border, so they still are able to import all the microchips they need. What they can't do: like Siemens MRI machines, or like ultrasounds, or like things like this, there is a—terrible shortage. And —people start complaining, like, where "I had to wait like, a week to get an appointment for ultrasound, I now have to wait, like, for three months," something like this. So this is like they—I mean, they know what their main problem is, like military production, like military capacities, they devote all their efforts to this, and they don't care about other sectors of economy. Then when the problems in these other sectors become too problematic, they try to solve them, but sometimes it's too late. This is what happened with—real estate and construction market,——because there was never any real, like, popular support for the war. People didn't line up to to sign up, —to sign the contract to join the armies. They had to increase the payments they're doing, like 25-fold from the beginning of the full scale war. They had to print a lot of money to pay these ridiculously high contract payments, like sellers and so on, which resulted in a huge inflation in the—and now in the central bank, base rate of 21percent and then more mortgage rate of 30percent so now that's like, no one's building anything. It's just not possible to sell like— apparently mortgage with 30percent interest rate is not affordable. Now they're speaking a lot about, how can we solve it? But maybe it's even too late. So my prediction of five to seven years is based on this thing, that they are doing a lot of crisis management. They are living in this crisis management model. But doing this, they are inducing new and new crises. And they're not getting younger, not getting smarter, not getting more efficient, and one of these crises will kill them.

Julia Ioffe 21:20

So thank you everyone for sending in questions, these are excellent. I actually wanted to—the very first question I got I want to send to Eric: Does China want a strong Russia to offset US power, or a weak Russia that they are basically turning into an economic colony of China?

Eric Green 21:36

I think China and Russia have a shared objective, which is to weaken the United States and to reorder the world system. So China will modulate its relations with Russia based on that common goal. And I think that they are very comfortable with the current status quo, where Russia is becoming increasingly more dependent on Beijing, particularly as people mentioned, to help Russia in the war effort. So Russia continues to kind of rack up debts to China, both political and economic. Will that reach a breaking point where the Russians will kind of rebel against that? That's something that I imagine the Chinese are conscious of, but I think they're handling that quite well at the moment. And I think China is probably the biggest beneficiary of what's happening globally, with the disorder created by the last several months and the continuing kind of balance in Eurasia between themselves and Russia.

Julia Ioffe 23:01

So I mentioned before we started with that round—with that lightning round question at the beginning, that this is a question I ask of everybody. And I spoke to somebody recently who kind of tongue-in-cheek said, "will return to Moscow on the back of a Ukrainian tank". Right? Obviously tongue-in-cheek. Obvious why it's tongue-in-cheek. I feel like the—you know, the kind of elephant in the room. Here is the war in Ukraine and the battlefield—what's actually happening on the battlefield. And the peace negotiations, such as they are, with Steve Witkoff, going back and forth and getting the runaround from Putin. And some of the questions I'm getting from the audience are about this, what do you think the end of the war looks like? And kind of more proximately, what is the Trump administration doing right? What are they doing wrong in their approach to trying to end the war? Whoever wants to take it, jump ball!

Daniel Treisman 24:05

Well, it's easy to say what they're doing wrong: giving everything away before you start negotiating, announcing that Ukraine will never be part of NATO, basically, very visibly taking Putin's side on all the key issues. So obviously that doesn't lead to a sustainable negotiation and an agreement that both sides can accept. What are they doing right? I really don't see very much. I mean, got to be honest, it's good that there's some effort to get beyond the kind of calcified positions, but you can't do that if you're basically not a fair broker, you're on one side rather than the other. How will the war end? I really don't see it ending. I see it perhaps—you know, the temperature going down, and then maybe going up, going down, going up. Putin sees himself as in a permanent war against the West. And it's not always going to be a hot war with invasions and military conflict. It's on many different levels, cyber infiltration, spying, sabotage operations in Europe. I don't think that's going to end, as long as Putin's there and this particular regime is in power. So there could be some ceasefire at some point, I don't see it right now, Putin's clearly not interested in the ceasefire. Trump is frustrated, and he says he's going to walk away. Well, maybe that'll help things a little, but I don't think it'll produce a ceasefire. So at some point, there may be a ceasefire when the two sides are exhausted, but I think it will be temporary, and we'll still have to watch the whole range of arenas where Putin is going to try to get advantage and destabilize the West. Sorry? [Two brief commentss here attributed to Daniel Treisman but it seems they should be matched to Eric Green. Please check & amend as necessary.]

Julia Ioffe 26:15

Well, you clearly haven't read The Art of the Deal. I said you clearly haven't read The Art of the Deal.

Daniel Treisman 26:19

I confess.

Julia Ioffe 26:22

Yeah, so I just want to ask you this. You've been in the room. You were on the NSC. If you were to—let's say Steve Witkoff were to call you up today and say, "Eric, what am I doing wrong? What do I need to know about how to go about these negotiations?" What would you tell him?

Eric Green 26:41

I think that first of all, you know, before the Trump administration, it was quite clear that we had a coalition that the United States led, of US, Europe and Ukraine, facing off against Russia. We had moral clarity about who was at fault for the war and, as a result, we had a clear objective in mind, which was to preserve Ukraine as an independent, sovereign actor, free to associate with the West, free to join Western institutions, to develop its security relationships with the West, and to be able to defend itself going forward. And when the new team came in, they kind of threw all — that capital that we had in the bank, they kind of flushed that away, including by insulting our allies and also calling into question, like who was at fault in the war. So I think the first thing that we need to do is to establish, kind of, the moral position of the United States. And then tactically, I think it's not bad to talk to the Russians. I would encourage him also to visit Ukraine and talk to that side. And I think he could also, you know, benefit from maybe relying more on the experts. When we see him going into these meetings, it doesn't appear that he has staff from the State Department or the National Security Council with him. So there are things at the strategic level down to the tactical level that I would advise him. But I think again at the strategic level, as Dan said, we have to recognize that Russia is at war with the West, at war with us, and we can't pretend otherwise. We need to view this as a confrontation, not—and we don't have the luxury of kind of being mediators who can settle this dispute. And also, they need to recognize that Russia's objectives are to dominate Ukraine to prevent it from having this freedom of choice. It's not a territorial dispute, as Witkoff has described it.

Julia Ioffe 29:33

Not a real estate dispute, yeah. But to play devil's advocate and any of you can take this: if Russia is just constantly at war with the West—to your point as well, Daniel—doesn't it kind of add things to be like, "Hey, we're actually on your side. We're not on the—we're not on opposing sides. We're actually allies rather than foes."

Eric Green 29:57

I think that's exactly what the Soviets thought when they signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact: that they could get on the side—they could make nice with Hitler and buy themselves some time. But ultimately, we know how that ended.

Julia Ioffe 30:18

Didn't end well? Did not end well?

Eric Green 30:20

It did not end well.

Maria Snegovaya 30:22

Can I just jump in to say that in defense of the Trump administration, somewhat, there's one thing they're doing right, I think, from the viewpoint of Ukraine, and that is the—basically, the economic war with China. Because China is one of the major reasons why Russia is able to sustain this war. First of all, the two economies are complementary, meaning that Russia sells energy to China, China sends products back to Russia and is able to substitute and compensate for the effect of the sanctions. There is less economic growth in China, there are fewer products to send to Russia, and altogether, there's economic turbulence. And declining growth rates in China are contributing to declining oil prices, which is one major reason why Russia was able to sustain its oil revenues. So from that perspective, Russia does not benefit from the current tariff war situation, and we know already that the central bank and other Russian macroeconomic institutions are sort of in a panicky mode about the situation. So that is one of the major reasons why Russia cannot be aligned with the United States. They definitely have very different positions vis-a-vis China, and this will not change, because, from Putin's perspective, China is a long-term reliable ally, the United States is here today, tomorrow—God knows what happens during the midterms or the next election. Well, this is clearly not going to be sustainable for him, and that's one of the reasons why he's not buying this whole peace agreement offer that the United States is giving to him.

Julia Ioffe 31:49

Yeah.

Daniel Treisman 31:50

I would just echo that. I think one thing that the Trump administration is doing—well: causing a global recession that's not going to be good for Russia, either.

Julia Ioffe 32:03

One silver lining. Yeah, last question about this, or actually, last two—the—we heard in 2023 that Russia can't sustain this war much longer, that they're running out of materiel, or they're running out of men. And then that didn't happen. Then we heard all of 2024 that this was the last year they were able—they're going to be able to maintain it at this level. And now people are saying, "Okay, no, really, 2025 is the year." Is there an end in sight or how long can he maintain this? Lyonya (Leonid)?

Leonid Volkov 32:41

2025 was the year—like before January 20th anyway—I mean, they were running out of everything. It's not because everything's so fancy and nice on the Russian side that they were like importing Iranian drones, North Korean cannons and North Korean troops. That's obviously not a sign that everything is going according to the plan, and that, like resources are sufficient and so on, they were not. But like this war after Putin's blitzkrieg on Kyiv failed, became a war of attrition. A war of attrition means a war that can't be won, that can be lost. It's not about who wins, it's about who loses first. And yes, it requires, like, a lot of patience, a lot of like, stamina, a lot of like, carrying on. And in a way, like the good plan for 2025 was to do nothing. I mean, to keep doing what was done. The idea that we were like going to resolve this within 24 hours created a lot of optimism, also in Russia, like the Russian society that we are studying a lot was actually really exhausted in Fall 2024 the—like, all the indices like, of optimism, of expectations, of like, "what do we think will happen to our family next year?" were all like below historical lows. Now they are back to optimism, because people got a new hope that maybe this going [to] end. Like the vast majority of Russians want this to end. Putin is the one who doesn't want and I completely second—to what, like Daniel said, like it's an obvious fact, Putin equals war, and when, when Putin is still there, the war will not end. It can transform to something else, but it will not end. Russians will want the war to end, and now, kind of like they were very exhausted after all three years, but now there is a new hope. And of course, they can sustain, like, their morale based on this new hope for another year or two, maybe, kind of like this clock was reset, and it was a mistake.

Julia Ioffe 35:07

One of the questions we got here, and we were talking about this a little bit backstage, Pasha (Pavel)—that the war is also—like, not just the economy, but the Russian—the war is really transforming Russian society, the Russian sense of identity, Russian sense of their place in the world. And again, this is for Pasha (Pavel), for Lyonya (Leonid), anybody: what is your sense of how the society is changing, not just the economy, but Russians ideas of themselves, of their country, of their place in the world? And are these long-term changes? Can they be undone?

Pavel Khodorkovsky 35:43

Well, I would say that first of all, we've seen a dramatic shift in attitudes towards China. If you look at the data from 2014, I think 34 percent of the population viewed China-Russia relations favorably, and now that marker has moved up to 82 percent in the beginning of this year. So there is a clear shift there and [settled?] opinion. And I would say that's not a historically natural outcome for the Russian society. One other thing is the elites have been pushed away by continuous sanction pressure from this idea that I think was dominant in the beginning of the full scale war, that this is temporary, that sanctions—that some kind of deal will be made, sanctions pressure will be removed, and basically will go back to business as usual. I think, three years—more than three years into the war now, there is the idea of Fortress Russia. Putin was able to convince a lot of his key business supporters that they're better off pulling the capital and keeping it inside the country and, in a way, propping up the Russian economy.

Julia Ioffe 37:13

Lyonya (Leonid), what do you guys say?

Leonid Volkov 37:14

I just agree. Unfortunately, the critical mistake was made in like September 2022 like when Russia actually started losing with like Ukrainians liberating Kharkiv region, and then later Kherson. And then Russian elite started to find ways—started to look for the ways to jump ship. They started to reach out to, like many international organizations and entities, and also to the opposition, trying to find like a way to—like an off-ramp and exit strategy. And the West had to find a way to act promptly and actually to help them, like part ways with the regime, which would create a lot of trouble. This never happened, and now, yes, the elite is consolidated again, and this like mindset of "Fortress Russia" is unfortunately prevailing among the elite. Not among the ordinary people, though, for the like majority of Russia, ironically, not much has changed. And even though, like, of course, everyone is aware of the war and the price that the society had to pay, still the country is too large,—life in the big cities is still like, very similar to how it was like before the war, which is in a way bad—but talking about like rebuilding everything back to usual after it, it also gives some hope.

Julia Ioffe 38:55

So let's get back to our premise from the beginning of a post-Putin Russia. What does a post-Putin Russia look like? Is it democratic? Is it as some, for example, in the Biden administration feared that it would be, even worse? That the person who comes after Putin is even worse? What do you think? Eric, what do you think, you were part of that?

Eric Green 39:19

I think a lot of—a lot depends on the war again and how it ends. But generically, I would say that, you know, considering Russia's history and internal practices, that you're likely to get a much more pluralistic, Politburo-type leadership arrangement in—at least in the early stages, and that does create some opportunities for creative diplomacy and trying to strengthen the—maybe the more liberal, more progressive factions that may be in that collective leadership. But I don't think you're going to have a rapid kind of evolution towards a democratic Russia. —I think—I'm an optimist in the long term, but I think Putin has done so much damage that it will take many, many years to get back on a positive trajectory.

Maria Snegovaya 40:27

I think one of the consistent features of the Russian post-Soviet trajectory is the failure to reckon with the past. Because in order to radically alter your future, you need to recognize the atrocities that have been committed by various regimes. It's not just Putin, right? It's much of the Soviet period. Instead, the society thinks of it as the period of greatness. In a lot of ways, Putin is kind of catering to that particular feeling that we are great, we are fighting with the West, we are like belonging to this community that is unique, of—one of a kind, and is projecting

its questionable values to the new—so called [Inaudible], the post-Soviet space. And that is unlikely to disappear. In fact, right now we see that propaganda is doubling down primarily on that area. And I think this desire, internal, inner desire to belong to this great community with—among many Russians, is something that we have under—underestimated before. Now, it's also reinforced by these economic stimuli that we have discussed. And even with Putin gone, this general reality will not change. That is why it's very unlikely that we're going to see, just as Eric pointed out, liberal, democratic Russia emerge, particularly given that Putin, unfortunately, at this point, is very unlikely to lose this war, and by lose, I mean Ukraine recovering all of the territories Russia occupied since 2014. Given this reality, most like—but also the spreading fatigue within the Russian society so—they sort of want the war to stop, but they also don't want to give away the territories that they occupied. So it's most likely that there will be demand for some sort of normalization. So the new guy may be moderately autocratic, some sort of reset of relations with the West without radical altering of the previous models of the kind that we've seen in some Central Asian republics in the past. I will also add that, unlike what we've seen in late 80s and early 1990s, the West unfortunately has lost its soft power, the appeal they like, the beautiful America that used to actually create this pull towards a more liberal democratic model. That is no longer the case, and that's one of the reasons why Russia is unlikely to follow that trajectory.

Daniel Treisman 42:34

Look, I don't totally disagree, but—so there's always two views of thought about what is going to happen to Russia and other countries over time. There's the historical perspective, which says, well, Russia has never been a real democracy. It has this history of over-centralization of rule by monarchs and so on, and society has never—has always had that urge for authoritarianism. And then there's the view of political science, or at least some comparative political scientists and political economists, who say, "Well, let's look around the world and see what different countries look like and what seems to go together". And I'm more in that camp. And when we look around the world, there are very few countries that have a high level of economic development and don't have massive amounts of oil. I mean, way more oil than Russia has, that aren't democratic. So almost all the rich countries that don't have massive amounts of oil are democracies. In fact, there's only one exception, that's Singapore. Over time, as countries develop economically, as the population gets highly educated, as civil society develops, as people participate more in different spheres, as they self organize, they become much harder to control through old fashioned authoritarian mechanisms. Authoritarian regimes can get more sophisticated and develop new methods, but those are hard to maintain, too, as the society continues to develop. So I've always been relatively optimistic compared to most people about Russia's future. I'm a little less optimistic these days, because Putin really is trying to demodernize Russia. So he's changing the educational system in a horrible way. He's—so the proportion that are highly educated in Russia is extremely high, but it will probably fall somewhat, and he's creating this sort of horrible culture of cruelty, basically, which—oriented around the military, around foreign conquest and so on, which is just kind of bizarre in the 21st century. But there it is. So I'm a bit less optimistic because of that, but still, Russia hasn't radically demodernized yet, and I think there are all these forces that Leonid sees in the surveys in Russia, that is groups that still want to see a freer society to have more say in their own lives at the local level and even at the central level. So I would say Putin is trying to become Singapore. I think he's lost that.

Julia Ioffe 45:31

I think he was trying to become Singapore, and all those mechanisms you were describing were true until Putin realized what those things were leading to and he decided to push that all back. And I want to put a pin in that, you know, de-modernizing, de-educating, because now Putin is not the only one doing that to his country. Put a pin in that. Lyonya (Leonid), Pasha (Pavel), I want to ask, I have a feeling you don't agree.

Leonid Volkov 45:58

Yeah, I mean, I can't stand this trope of "even worse", I mean, like someone who could be even worse.

Julia Ioffe 46:07

You had a physical reaction when he said that.

Leonid Volkov 46:08

Yeah, I mean, really. I mean, first of all, Putin did his best to prove that no one can be worse. And what else do you need? But second and more importantly, once again, this is a highly personalistic regime. Everyone's built on, like personal ties and relations. There is no such thing as a successor, and there can't be such a thing as a successor. That's the idea of Putin's regimes that no one of his lieutenants has—is more than like 10 percent minority shareholder in the structure of power, so they can't become strong enough. So no matter who comes next, and if—I mean before Putin killed Prigozhin, — journalists were asking, "but if it were not Putin, it could be Prigozhin, could be even worse". They would say no—just because—even if it were Prigozhin, he would not become a worse version of Putin. He would have to find compromises to build like very strong, very complicated relations, and would probably fail. The natural historical comparison is, of course, Beria who tried to dismiss the gulag and radically democratize—

Julia Ioffe 47:27

And reunify Germany.

Leonid Volkov 47:28

Yeah, Soviet Russia, after Stalin died in 1950—[Inaudible] before being killed by more successful competitors. When Putin is gone, there will be like a royal battle with no one being strong enough to reverticalize the regime, which will at least create an enormous political turbulence and enormous space of opportunities. Of course, we can't say that [Inaudible] will, just like see a democratic revival. But there will be still a lot of options available, a lot of opportunities. There will be, like, a very natural, like democratization of political life, because no one will have a full, like grip of control over the repression apparatus and so on. And there will be chances, and it will be much better than now. no matter what the name of the interim ruler will be.

Julia Ioffe 48:31

I have to say, I think this idea that, you know, yes, [In Russian: If not Putin, then who] "If it's not Putin, then who? And whoever comes after Putin is worse," is one of these—I think, Putin thinks that he's kind of planted in our heads to psych ourselves out, that and the and the nuclear threat, right? I feel like are very much a way for us in the West to be like, well, let's be careful. Lyonya (Leonid), I want to stay with you for a second. The other elephant in the room is—especially when we're talking about a post-Putin Russia—is Alexei Navalny is gone, unfortunately. What does a post-Putin Russia look like without him? What does civil society look like without him? And is there kind of—to Maria's point—is there a desire, is there a demand in Russian society for something that does look more democratic?

Leonid Volkov 49:33

First of all, it is a loss which can't be undone, recovered, or substituted for. Alexei was very unique, as a very talented politician and leader and thinker and public intellectual and so on. And he—was very good at, like, building very complicated, like, political structures—

Julia Ioffe 49:56

He was a once in a century, I would say, kind of guy.

Leonid Volkov 50:00

Yes, but having said that, and I mean and thinking of him like every day, we didn't have like Alexei Navalny in—1989 so—and it was still not an obstacle for the democratization, because when it started to happen, like, hundreds of new leaders, very naturally, like emerged [Russian proverb: *Свято место пусто не бывает*, nature abhors a vacuum]. I mean, if there is a space like in political life, there will be new leaders, there will be political competition, and suddenly we will see some new names and the framework that we've built, educating hundreds of thousands, okay, tens of thousands of young activists across the country. Building the structures of like civil society, giving people experience how to campaign, how to crowdfund, how to organize. So this—it still persists. Those people are there. They didn't leave the country, and under different circumstances, they will be revealed as a very important political force in Russia.

Julia Ioffe 51:19

Pasha [Pavel]?

Pavel Khodorkovsky 51:20

Now I just wanted to build on that, because I think the important point to make here in the US is that to—for Russia to have a chance at democratization after Putin, we here in the US need to embrace the idea that this period of transition will have to be dynamic. There will be a little bit of turmoil, and we have to be okay with that here, and to reflect that in our foreign policy towards Russia. Because if we look at, you know, I think we can take example from the democratization of the second and third wave. It was never characterized with, you know, entirely peaceful transfer of power within the existing structure. We can draw a parallel with Chile and the US putting diplomatic pressure on Pinochet to ensure that during the plebiscite, there was no repression and people were not thrown in jail, and that the government allowed it to continue and take its course, and that paved the way for eventual democratic transition for Chile. So I think there is a learning there to be done, and the US has to incorporate these lessons and prepare for this dynamic period of transition whenever it comes in 10 or 15, years.

Julia Ioffe 52:35

So the state—I want to get to the state of the Russian opposition, which right now is, I would say, diplomatically, it's quite pitiful. I mean, we had the attack on you, sponsored by one of your father's lieutenants. There's this constant infighting, constant backbiting that often is—happens very publicly. To what extent, A) does that play into Putin's hands? And to what extent does it serve to kind of turn off potential supporters?

Leonid Volkov 53:12

First of all, I mean, political competition is okay, and disagreements among opposition are totally okay unless arms are broken, but it's totally normal. Like during the times of like Soviet occupation, Poland had up to three governments in exile. Estonia, which is a small country, had two. And that's fine. Russian opposition are the people inside the country. Like, once again, they are there. So we see the Russian opposition through the prism of like this, like political immigration, which is like very visible on the social media, which are banned inside the country. But 1.2 million people left the country, like after February 2022, 30 to 40 million people who oppose Putin are still there inside. They can't be vocal. They can't be seen. They live under enormous repression. They will become visible once the situation changes like, once again, referring to what happened, like, 40 years ago, all around Eastern Europe, we didn't see like millions of people, or any people on the streets, like in 1986 we saw millions, in 1988 from like Warsaw to Vilnius, from Prague to Moscow. They didn't fall from Mars. They were there. They just, they, there was a wind of change. They-they felt this wind of change, and they turned up and they—well, they defeated the communist regime—not the West, not anyone else. And this is the chance for Russia and I mean, I see that from like the current viewpoint, it seems like improbable, but I would use this Sherlock Holmes approach here, If there are several options and all but one are ruled as impossible, the remaining one holds, no matter how improbable it looks—, right? Do we see as possible, like Ukrainian tanks in Moscow? I mean, no. Do we see as possible like that—like Russian elites will, like kill Putin in one of his palaces? I don't think so. See, who can—the only actors that actually can bring democratization to Russia are Russians acting from inside Russia, and the long term strategy should be focused around them, reaching out to them, connecting to them, supporting them, helping them, considering them as an important actor of the future. Now, like the policies of all the western countries are focused around Putin, as if Putin were like a long term factor for international order, etc. He is not. He is, hopefully,

a mortal creature. Putin will go. Putin will disappear. Russia will not. And like Russians, the society will not. So any long term strategy should be focused around those people who are still inside the country.

Julia Ioffe 56:27

Pasha [Pavel]?

Pavel Khodorkovsky 56:29

I think the US needs to understand in terms of its foreign policy formation that for this new field of potential contenders for the future of Russia to emerge, there needs to be a space allowed for that to happen. And I think one of the biggest issues that I encounter here in the US when speaking with policymakers and policy influencers is perennial question of who is going to replace Putin. Tell us today, who do we basically put our stock with? And I think we can't know that. We can't possibly know who is going to emerge through this tumultuous process in 10 to 15 years time. But that space for the opposition to produce new leaders needs to be helped by apt foreign policies of countries like the United States and neighboring countries in Europe.

Julia Ioffe 57:28

Which has just cut Radio Liberty, Voice of America, all these funds—National Endowment for Democracy. This is actually what I wanted to end on and somebody has asked this question: Do you see any similarities between the sophisticated control of information, which started in Russia over a decade ago, and the current environment regarding the US press and the Trump administration? And let me just expand that question a little bit, and we'll do a lightning round before we end, we have a couple of minutes left. Looking at where we ended up and where the Russian opposition was a decade ago, are there lessons there for how to—for the kind of opportunities missed, to preserve that little baby plant of democracy that the US and US civil society is missing? Are there lessons you would like to impart to Americans for how to preserve our democracy and protect it? And that goes for not just Lyonya (Leonid) and Pasha (Pavel), but everybody on stage who's been an observer of this space. So start with Lyonya and go down the line.

Leonid Volkov 58:36

Well, the short answer to this question, as it was asked, is no.

Julia Ioffe 58:41

No similarities?

Leonid Volkov 58:42

No significant similarities. I mean, you and me would be very angry if anyone, I don't know, compares, like broken arm to holocaust. This is of the same nature. I mean, don't devaluate. I mean, we have, like a full pledge, like a total censorship, a like total, like, an enormous level of political repressions, like people being killed for their for their political urban and social policy (USP), people being tortured, being imprisoned and so on. There are problems also in different countries, but I don't think that direct comparison is a proper thing. And a lesson, real quick, a lesson for Americans for how to make sure it never gets that bad?

Leonid Volkov 59:28

Well, no, I mean defense of institutions, of course.

Daniel Treisman 59:31

Look, Trump is very different from Putin today. He's not as different from Putin 10 years ago, or even 15 years ago, or even 20 years ago. I think he is interested in the same sort of centralization of power and control over civil society. He's doing things which look very familiar, which we've seen in Hungary, we've seen in Russia. But I hate it when people jump from that to the conclusion that we're facing exactly the same threat as in these other countries, because what's different is American society. And we can think about lots of things, and all of them are not responding perfectly yet, but there's the courts, there's universities, there's lawyers, there's local government, state governments, there's NGOs, there's just ordinary people in public opinion, and there's even the markets, which have already had some impact on Trump's policy-making process. I think all of that means that the task—plus I should mention the Constitution. The American Constitution makes doing an Orban much harder. All of that makes it much more difficult, even for somebody who might like to imitate Putin, to get away with it.

Julia Ioffe 59:31

Daniel? Okay, 30 seconds each. Lessons for Americans.

Maria Snegovaya 1:01:00

The key difference, and the lesson learned, in my opinion, is the role of the civil society. Alexei Navalny tried, courageously, bravely, to awaken the Russian society, unfortunately, not very successfully. And we remember how many people showed up in the streets when he got back to Russia and got arrested, and ultimately, when he got murdered. That's the key difference I see here. Since here, we see the people are not indifferent to what's happening to the country. And most importantly, I think where Putin won or where Alexei Navalny is in answering to the question who we are. And that's the key difference about Russia, is that the Russia lacks the civil democratic nationalism which Alexei Navalny tried to offer, but consistently got beaten by Putin, who won by offering this status imperialist version of Russia's nationalism, which right now tends to dominate. Answering to the question of

who we are, agreeing with each other is the key element to successful collective action in defense of democratic institutions, and that's what Russia lacked. Unfortunately, hopefully, that's what the United States has.

Julia Ioffe 1:02:00

Pasha (Pavel), 30 seconds, and Eric, 30 seconds.

Pavel Khodorkovsky 1:02:02

I think the lesson No. 1 for the US is that Russia's—the Presidential model is not right for Russia for any chance of resisting authoritarianism, it needs a parliamentary democracy model. And whatever limited influence that the US will have during the time of transition, it needs to try to shift Russia towards that track.

Julia Ioffe 1:02:23

Thank you. Eric? Right. Thank you everyone. Thank you everyone for coming. Thank you for your excellent questions. I'm sorry we didn't get to all of them, but we—I think we got to a lot. This was a fascinating discussion. I know I learned a lot, and I hope you guys did as well. Thank you all.

Eric Green 1:02:24

Yeah, I guess my lesson is that individuals matter, and we've spent a lot of time talking about Putin, and now in this country, we spend a lot of time talking about our president, and we need to recognize that our institutions are really dependent on the people who populate them and who play their roles in order to keep democracy functioning.