

The tragic future of a ‘many russias’ hypothesis. Foresight and scenarios

O futuro trágico de uma hipotética ‘muitas rússias’. Previsões e cenários

Armando Marques Guedes*

*Observatório Político | Political Observatory (OP/ISCSP-ULisboa); NOVA School of Law, Portugal; amarquesguedes@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2622-331>

Isidro de Moraes Pereira*

*Institute of Social and Political Sciences, University of Lisbon, Portugal; isidromoraispereira@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0650-1107>

Abstract

Under international law, the territorial integrity of Ukraine must be ensured in accordance with the collectively agreed 1991 borders. Should the Russian Federation collapse, the Wider West and particularly Europe, should manage a stable sphere of military security on the Continent and a better articulation of North America and beyond it. A Russian defeat in Ukraine creates opportunities as well as risks. Trusting that a defeated Kremlin will abandon its imperial designs could be a mistake. In this article, we have drawn out several prospective scenarios to which we assign different degrees of probability.

Keywords: Territorial integrity, defeat, scenarios, opportunities, challenges, Wider West.

Resumo

Nos termos do Direito Internacional, a integridade territorial da Ucrânia deve ser assegurada de acordo com as fronteiras internacionalmente acordadas em 1991. Caso a Federação Russa soçobre, o Ocidente Alargado e particularmente a Europa, deverão gizar uma esfera estável de segurança no Continente. Uma derrota russa na Ucrânia gera oportunidades e também desafios. O que exige um reforço da segurança militar existente na Europa e uma mais estável articulação dela com a norte-americana e para lá dela, no Ocidente Alargado. Confiar que um Kremlin vencido abandonará os seus intentos imperiais seria um erro. Neste artigo gizamos vários cenários prospetivos aos quais atribuímos diferentes graus de probabilidade.

Palavras-chave: Integridade territorial, derrota, cenários, oportunidades, desafios, Ocidente

Alargado.

Preamble¹

The war unleashed on Ukraine by Vladimir Putin on 24 February 2022 was conceived and planned to become his greatest politico-military strategic success. In Putin's mind, it would surpass the impact of his success in the Second Chechen War, achieved between August 1999 and the end of April 2000 with the destruction of Grozny, the gains he achieved in August 2008 with the quick partition of Georgia, and in February and March 2014 his seamless annexation of Crimea, followed by the Syrian intervention he began in September 2015. But the blitzkrieg success he expected in Ukraine in 2022 did not come about. Putin was wrong.

The invasion of Ukraine that Putin embarked on early last year did not at all have the swift victory that he hoped for. Quite unexpectedly, events on the ground resulted in a humiliation of enormous proportions for him and his closest circle. One that, indeed, came as a surprise to everyone. One year later, the Ukrainian forces, supported more and more by a broad coalition led by the United States of America, NATO, and the European Union, have managed to bring together a coalition of more than 50 states that provides them defensive weapons, some of an offensive nature as well as a continuous military training still sustaining Kyiv's troops with rather good results. The Russian invasion was unsuccessful on several levels. It did not succeed in gaining the quick victory that the Kremlin expected and there are many indications that it will probably not have it at all, at least in the near future. Moscow's initial expectations of an easy victory have been clearly dashed. As things stand, Putin might actually lose the war he confidently began.

The unexpected course of the war became a nightmare for Moscow. Things moved fast. The so-called Wider West and its allies rose against a Federation bent on changing the international order set in place since 1945, began to admit it was possible to inflict a military defeat on the Kremlin that would force the Russian invading troops to entirely withdraw from Ukrainian territory. Contemplating a disaster for Russia, or even willing it, was nothing new. Indeed, a few years ago, steely US strategists like Zbigniew Brzezinski went as far as to recommend a *coup de grâce* that would lead to Russia's territorial fragmentation, inflicted so that it would never be able to get back on its feet², *mutatis mutandis*, echoing to some extent the harsh Morgenthau Plan devised in 1944 for the future of Nazi Germany once the armistice and post-war period had come to an end³.

On the other side of the barricade, after Yeltsin's faltering government fizzled, the emergence

1. This article is the result not only of a series of short texts we have written and lectures we have engaged in, but also of reading numerous studies, such as Liana Fix and Michael Kimmage "Putin's Last Stand. The Promise and Peril of Russian Defeat", published on 23 December 2022 in *Foreign Affairs* and the short opinion piece entitled "How to contain a recalcitrant Russia", published in the *Financial Times*, in February 24, 2023 by David Manning and Jonathan Powell (2023).
2. An ardent follower of George Kennan and Henry Kissinger, the National Security Adviser (1977-1981) appointed by President Jimmy Carter and driving force behind the *Trilateral Commission*, took this firm stance in his so-called Brzezinski Doctrine. Zbig, as liked to be called, passed in 2017. For a rich analysis of his possible response to the current events, see the recent article penned by Piotr Pietrzak (2023), "The Brzezinski Doctrine and NATO's response to Russia's assault on Ukraine", *Modern Diplomacy*, available here <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2023/01/12/the-brzezinski-doctrine-and-natos-response-to-russias-assault-on-ukraine/>
3. A Plan outlined in 1944 regarding the future of Nazi Germany once the post-war period arrived; Henry Morgenthau, Jr. former US Treasury Secretary, who proposed to F.D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, without success, a fragmentation of the country, accompanied by its deindustrialization, which would be reduced to units of an agricultural and pastoral nature. As well as the article published in *Jamestown* by Sergey Sukhankin in mid-December 2022, entitled: "A 'Morgenthau Plan' for Russia: Avoiding Post-1991 Mistakes in Dealing With a Post-Putin Russia".

of then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Chancellor Yevgueni Primakov coolly calculated a strategic redesign, largely spelled the beginning of a restoration of Russia's old geopolitical objectives. It is worth highlighting here the basic idea of the Primakov Doctrine – ones according to which Russia should refocus its attention on Eurasia, thus re-establishing its traditional spheres of influence while advocating a multi-polar international system, thereby creating a revamping that would result in a change of the current international order. A *soft*, though clear, version of the previous Brezhnev Doctrine which limited, as a first step in the “near abroad” of the Federation, what the USSR called “limited sovereignties”.

Vladimir Putin's ascension to the presidency in 2000 was to initiate two decades of a slow but sustained reconstruction of Russia's national power, based mostly on the export of surplus energy, oil and natural gas and on the legacy of the Soviet science and technology so as warrant a rapid reconstitution of its industrial-military endeavors – cloning the US terminology of Dwight Eisenhower talking about the American “military-industrial complex”. The three decades after the end of the Cold War witnessed successive waves of a NATO eastern expansion encompassing most of the former Warsaw Pact, a then defunct entity eclipsed by the losses and imperial restructuring associated with the collapse of a Bolshevik empire that suddenly imploded in 1991.

The current war in Ukraine, launched in 2014 with the invasion of Crimea and its “annexation” as well as that of the Donbas, led to many unexpected outcomes, ignoring facts such as the firm Ukrainian desire to join both a European Union which would offer economic advantages and a NATO that would provide them with a badly needed protection. Confronted with what he saw as unacceptable challenges, Putin and his *siloviki* decided to quickly engage in the reconstruction of a wider Russia deemed as diminished and claimed ‘the Motherland’ was under threat. The Kremlin drew a “red line”, considering the expansion of the Western Alliance as a containment manoeuvre with essentially aggressive intentions – casting it as an unbearable risk for their desired recreation of a “sphere of influence” needed by a Russia bent on regaining the status of a global Great Power. That made sense to Vladimir Putin who argued that the fall of the USSR amounted to “the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century”⁴. Annexing (indeed, *re-annexing*) Ukraine would be a decisive step in for rebuilding the Russian Empire for which they longed. They consequently densified their old imperial and expansionist worldview, asserting that the Alliance's continued eastern expansion would amount to “an encirclement” and therefore created an “existential threat”, therefore rebuffing the very essence of a NATO that sees itself, instead, as a mere defensive Alliance centered on containment⁵.

So, step by step, the Kremlin began a process of returning to what it perceived as its ‘manifest destiny’, again heedlessly expropriating an old American paternalist expression⁶. Fascinatingly,

4. Many analysts quote Vladimir Putin, who has declared he is acting “*as an attempt to rebuild Russia's lost empire,*” patching up what Putin famously described as “*the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.*” Referenced in “*The greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century,*” Helmut Sorge, 22 July 2022, *Policy Center for the New South*. Luís Tomé, (2018/2019), “*Geopolítica da Rússia de Putin: não é a União Soviética, mas gostava de ser...*”

5. As Piotr Pietrzak wrote, op.cit., “*the problem with Russia was not just one man but rather a systemic feature of the Russian soul inherently prone to expansionism, megalomania, and continual fear and insecurities because of the perpetual feeling of being encircled by enemies caused by post-Napoleonic and post-Second World War traumas and insecurities.*”

6. One with strong colonial overtones. The French called it “*mission civilisatrice*” and the British alluded, instead to “the White Man's burden”. These expressions are mere ‘cultural beliefs’ dating back to nineteenth-

Putin began by disparaging the United States of America and NATO as effective malevolent powers ultimately unconcerned with the European West and mostly focused on its exploitation. Putin consequently decided to set about reconstituting a Russia that, together with China, generated a Eurasian linkage he saw as “predestined” to play a pivotal role in a new multipolar order.

Ukraine’s solid response to Putin’s 2022 invasion was rather surprising. Kyiv put up a strong response and Ukrainian combatants proved to be unexpectedly effective – much to their own credit, but also thanks to a steadfast assistance of the United States and other Western allies. In truth, and by contrast, as far as the Russian Federation is concerned, Moscow’s military exposed a clear incapacity to plan and conduct the campaign unleashed in Ukraine at strategic, operational and even tactical levels. Kyiv rejoined quickly and in a large-scale with well-synchronized organized operations. Moscow did not even come close to that. The political, strategic, operational and tactical system behind later Russian combat actions rendered clear that the Federation was incapable of stepping back and absorbing even the lessons learnt from the mistakes made in the first days of the invasion.

Well aware of its inability to politico-diplomatically influence Putin’s decisions and affect his decision-making cycles, the Wider West astutely responded with the *Most Dangerous Course of Action* in mind, in order to avoid any geopolitical disasters. For once, the West reacted by progressively mobilizing political, financial and military support, acting as a surprisingly cohesive group of allies. The course of Russia’s war in Ukraine has rendered hollowed initial conjectures that Ukraine would bleakly succumb in response to the very first clashes. Quite the opposite: instead, pragmatically speaking there is much that indicates a path that could well lead to a slow but harsh Russian military defeat, in an about-turn many considered impossible. A military victory looms in the air.

What forms and contours Russia’s defeat could take is a critical question that we shall ponder here. It is one for which there seems to be at the moment no complete answer. We can, however, envisage some possible scenarios picturing an abrupt fall of the Federation.

1. Pushing forward some scenarios

It seems unlikely that Russia will simply bow to a defeat by agreeing to a negotiated settlement crayoned in Ukraine’s terms. Indeed, there is little hope that such a possibility will materialize. At the moment there is no practical expectation of a viable diplomatic dialogue between the main players, Russia, Ukraine and the Wider West, since the demands made by the parties are clearly irreconcilable.

It is easy to see why. The intent of the Russian invasion and the scale of the war crimes committed by Russia render it impossible for Ukraine to accept any kind of diplomatic agreement that does not include an unconditional withdrawal of Russian Federation troops from its entire territory. Moreover, Kyiv further demands justice via the intervention of the UN, led by the ICJ, the ICC, or an ad-hoc Court convened for the purpose, a response also backed by the Wider West. On the Russian Federation side, the issue has become quite complex: an executive power – led by Putin or some potential successor – may seek to retain Crimea, the Donbas, Zaporizhzhia,

-century America and Europe, concocted as a justification for westward and southward expansion and as conceptual underpinnings for precisely that end. As concerns the US case, this a belief made very explicit in Steven Clark Cunningham’s (2021) article, “Manifest destiny, American exceptionalism, and the city on a hill seen through Winthrop, O’ Sullivan, and Bush: Opportunities for peacebuilding”.

and Kherson in exchange for peace.

In order to save face domestically, the Moscow executive could venture into such a scenario, possibly from then on going through its usual moves: planning for a long-term response by resolving the Ukrainian issue with new, more muscular military offensives, i.e., 'freezing the conflict' and seeking to eventually annex the whole of Ukraine once and for all. Moscow may even point fingers at NATO, the United States and all others involved, in order to justify and express for domestic consumption its regret and anger as an excuse for its own failures – on script weaponizing the argument that the steadfast, widespread and growing support of the Alliance's members (downplaying Ukraine's and Zelensky's remarkable military endurance) was really what prevented *ab initio* a rapid Russian victory. But for such a bleak narrative to gain traction among its largely controlled domestic opinion, the Kremlin would likely have to eradicate its pro-war Party hardliners or, at the very least, shut them off. Mother Russia, her history suggests, does not forgive either losers or failures⁷.

A second possible scenario, one perhaps less likely, is that of a pure and simple Russian military defeat. In such a scenario, the Kremlin would likely seek to prolong its war on Ukraine with concomitant acts of sabotage. Perhaps together with interventions, carried out as hybrid wars in neighboring non-NATO countries like, say, Moldova and Georgia. In a higher-intensity version of this scenario, the Kremlin could launch nuclear, likely tactical, attacks on Ukraine. If so, Joe Biden dixit and Jens Stoltenberg echoed in a flash (as did China and India), the conflict would culminate in a direct military confrontation between NATO and its allies against Russia. In that case, rather likely, Russia would likely swamp into a rapid process of conversion from a revisionist state to that of a pariah one. Surely the Kremlin knows that. We therefore all but rule out this extreme version of our scenario, as we consider it unlikely.

A third scenario for the end of the war, one we consider more likely, would be the defeat of Russia through a precipitous fall of its political regime – with decisive fights taking place, not in Ukraine, but rather in the corridors of power of the Kremlin itself and/or even in the streets and squares of Moscow and St. Petersburg. That may take time, however. For now, everything suggests Russians, be they ordinary citizens, oligarchs, military, and *silovikis*, shall continue to pay tribute to their "Leader". But it may come about, since while the resilience of the Russian people is great, it does have limits – namely when narratives and reality, in the eyes of the Russian population, incongruous perceptions leading to dissonance increase. A collapse of the regime would almost immediately result in the sudden war's end, given that the Kremlin rapidly would become far less capable of engaging external combats given the expectable atmosphere of a chaos internally induced. However, while it is likely that if a military defeat of the Russian Federation

7. A point often reiterated, notably in the recent *Foreign Affairs* article, to which we have already referred, by Liana Fix and Michael Kimmage (2022) "Putin's Last Stand. "The Promise and Peril of Russian Defeat", *op.cit.* This is a point we ponder, albeit from different angles to these two authors' article, in the final sections of this paper. See also, the study entitled "How to contain a recalcitrant Russia" by David Manning and Jonathan Powell, published on 24 February 2023 in the *Financial Times*. Sir David Manning was British Ambassador to Washington and NATO and served in Russia between 1990 and 1993. Jonathan Powell was Tony Blair's chief of staff between 1995 and 2007. It should be noted that as far as the break-up of the USSR was concerned, George Kennan suggested *containment*, as spelt out in his famous 'Long Telegram' of 22 November 1946 and in his *Foreign Affairs* article signed as X that followed a year later in 1947. Recovering the substance and current relevance of these Kennan documents, it will be useful to read the brief article by Manning and Powell supporting Kennan's position.

brought both advantages and opportunities, it is certain that Europe and the United States would have to deal quickly with situations of potential regional, or even global, disorder that would undoubtedly virtually immediately emerge. Should Russia spiral into an even more radical escalation, or fragment into chaos as an alternative to accepting defeat through negotiations, the shock waves would surely be felt in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. The ensuing disorder could take multiple forms of nationalist separatism and numerous latent conflicts that would, with a high probability, flare up both within the Russian Federation and in its periphery.

A prospective sub-scenario, more complex but less audacious than this one third that we have outlined, can be envisaged: while spreading the war beyond Ukraine's borders does not require securing control of the territories Putin wants, doing so may in some way prevent Ukraine and the Wider West from winning without directly and decisively engaging against Moscow. In essence, in this kind of warmongering narrative, we could merely have to stave off lower-intensity escalations in which the Russian Federation would seek to exploit, through the use of hybrid forms of warfare combined with conventional tactics, the asymmetric advantages to which it has accustomed us, in a comparatively lighter but much longer zero-sum game.

2. The internal question, echoes, and resonances

Many Russians may not believe in Putin or trust his government, especially in the face of defeat. But as we pointed out, popular ancestral pride may make it difficult for the population to accept that their loved ones wearing uniforms of the Russian Federation army get defeated on the battlefields of a Ukraine they claim as their own. Accustomed to the status of a Great Power and kept somewhat isolated from the West, the vast majority of Russian citizens would most surely not wish to see their homeland lose influence and power in Europe and the world. A protracted conflict would expose Russians to fears of an inauspicious future that could ignite the spark of internal revolutionary action. Russian casualties have been extremely high – perhaps already exceeding 200,000 deaths, according to data from the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense and corroborated by credible Western sources like the Institute for War Studies, among others⁸.

Moreover, the stampede of many hundreds of thousands of young Russian adults (the estimated 600,000 to a million deployable men) became an unexpected exodus. With the passage of time, the combination of war and economic sanctions coupled with the mass brain drain will produce a loss that is difficult to calculate – and sooner or later Russia's citizens will likely blame Putin who started his President career while proclaiming himself a modernizer⁹. Up to now, the generality of Russian citizens has been protected from the various wars that preceded the February 24 invasion, since they mostly took place far from the home front, in the Northern Caucasus, Central, and Southeastern Africa, or the Middle East between the eastern Mediterranean and south of the Strait of Hormuz – all of those wars not requiring any sort of mass mobilizations. This is not, however, the case in the ongoing Ukraine war. The common Russian people are finally beginning to feel what the Kremlin's expansionist adventures mean, and cannot miss the many vicissitudes of a country at war with a nearby neighbor.

As mentioned above, the history of Russia, that the USSR as well as that of the Czars, sug-

8. For the ISW, see the link <https://www.understandingwar.org/>

9. Herman Gref, "St Petersburg International Economic Forum, on the impact of Western sanctions imposed on Russia for the war in Ukraine".

gests that what has happened in the past could take place, namely regime change after lost wars or even badly resolved crises. Moscow's unexpected defeats in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 and the First World War culminated, respectively, in an attempted coup in 1905 and then another successful one in 1917 with the Bolshevik Revolution. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 came almost right after the culmination of a decade of failures and embarrassing performances by Soviet combatants in Afghanistan, in which 15,000 soldiers died in less than a decade; soon Leonid Brezhnev and Yuri Andropov were gone and Andrei Gromyko and Mikhail Gorbachev emerged¹⁰. Real revolutions have taken place in Russia whenever governments have failed to achieve their stated vital objectives – proving unable to respond to the crises in which they became embroiled. As a rule, the obvious losers end up being rejected as does the ideological framework on which their governing activities were based. Be it the illegality of the monarchy and tsarism due to famine and widespread poverty, or given a faltering war effort, as was the case around 1917, under the humiliating Treaty of Brest-Litovsk¹¹, which resulted in the extermination of Nicholas II and his nuclear family. In 1989-1991, the loss of the “colonies” captured in the Great Patriotic War and the unraveling of the eastern and southern peripheries of the USSR led to M. Gorbachev's rapid fall. As had previously been the case with Nikita Khrushchev after President John Kennedy forced him in 1962 to remove the numerous missiles the Soviet Union had installed in Cuba¹².

Putin shall likely not be the exception that confirms the rule. Indeed, the way Moscow ran the war is widely perceived as a complete disaster. Moreover, the Russian economy is finally contracting. The most optimistic forecasts point to a decline of around 2.5% in GDP in 2023. Next year, that of 2024, the fall shall likely be greater. Faced with reality, Vladimir Putin in abject denial still insists that the so-called special operation is being carried out successfully and according to plan. The option for a repressive course may even momentarily staunch some of its greatest vulnerabilities – such as, for example, the imprisonment and summary trial of the major dissidents or those refractory to the war, which may break the potential impact of the initial protests. However, Putin's autocratic baton may also lead to a rise of popular and elite rejection.

Should V. Putin be suddenly ousted, it would be difficult to say who would emerge as his replacement. We seem to be facing a paradigm shift, as Putin's “vertical power” – based on a very centralized hierarchy and mainly on criteria of loyalty to himself – seems to be losing effectiveness. Apart from Dimitri Medvedev and Valery Gerasimov, two other possible candidates outside the usual structure of traditional Muscovite elites could be Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of PMC Wagner, and Ramzan Kadyrov, the current leader of the Chechen Republic. Whomever emerges, might opt for the simple elimination of the existing hierarchical-functional organization, stimulating internal guerrilla warfare within the regime apparatus in order to occupy crucial positions in a new central power structure of the Federation.

Another possibility would be a more direct strategy, i.e., someone simply claiming power. Kadyrov and Y. Prigozhin in particular have been fiercely critical of the political status quo,

10. Much has been written on this period and topic. See, e.g., the article by Rafel Reuveny and Assim Prakash (1999), “The Afghanistan war and the breakdown of the Soviet Union”, *Review of International Studies*, 25, 693-708, published by the British International Studies Association.

11. Charles M Dobbs, Michael Tucker, et al, (2005), *Treaty of Brest-Litovsk*, 3 March 1918.

12. Two studies will do for all: Phillip Zelikow, and Allison, Graham (1999), *The Essence of Decision. Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, and Michael Dobbs, (2009), *One Minute to Midnight*.

exerting unacceptable pressure on the leadership of the Russian Armed Forces and especially on the Ministry and the Minister of Defense – clearly seeking to place on them the onus of military failures in Ukraine in an explicit attempt to increase their popularity ratings, particularly among ultranationalist and pro-war groups. Will Putin become a target too? A myriad of other possible candidates could emerge from the more traditionalist circles of the elites that gravitate around the Kremlin. To be sure, in order to avoid entanglements and intrigues in the Kremlin ‘Court’, Putin surrounded himself over two decades with mainly ‘moderately intelligent’ and in some cases even mediocre *compagnons de route*. But in the face of the many military setbacks of his Ukrainian adventurism, Vladimir Putin’s state of grace may be coming to an end. In his latest public speeches, the way he has been portraying his own reality may be leading many of his subjects to believe that the leader is trapped in a kind of labyrinth, cast in a world of pure fantasy.

We consider it highly unlikely that a true pro-Western democrat will become the next president of Russia, ushering in a new era of cooperation with the West. Navalny? Our conviction is that after Putin another autocratic leader another autocrat shall emerge, in the good old Russian tradition. Whomever he may be after Putin’s deposition (she appears to be out of the question) will have to face up to great trials and strains. The war itself is, obviously for the moment, the greatest challenge. Another, perhaps more arduous and complex development would certainly be to set in motion when attempting to design a political project capable of restoring Russia’s longed-for superpower status. A new leader shall need unequivocal popular support to overcome challenges. For that to be the case, any up-and-coming autocrat will have to conceive something that receives unrequited popular support and the approbation of traditionalist sectors. Truly a combination that does not seem plausible. Once again eyeing a likely worst-case scenario, the outbreak of internal turbulence on such a scale would set in motion a civil war after the overthrow of Vladimir Putin. If so, the entire existing vertical power structure would be called into question and would run the serious risk of pulverizing the Russian state. That would not be novel, as it would take us back to the “Time of Troubles”, or “*smuta*”, a term that commenced in the decade-and-a-half-long crisis of succession in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. A tumultuous period that witnessed a rebellion with moments of marked rioting and even foreign offensives. One that remains in the collective imagination of Russians as a period of humiliation¹³.

Today, in this more digital and connected 21st century, such dilemmas can quickly converge with the emergence of new warlords. Their origins shall most likely be the internal and external security and intelligence services (the so-called *siloviki*). Or, instead, the leaders of separatist movements stimulated by the economic problems of the most disadvantaged and complicated regions of the Russian Federation, especially in areas where such phenomena are based on the usual feelings of despise and loathing for the most war-suffering and disadvantaged ethnic minorities. The possibility of Russia engulfing into a state of anarchy and social upheaval may help Ukraine achieve peace culminating in a negotiation process that may turn out in its favor.

This is where Russia’s weakness and social and political disorganization may well lead us. To this we now turn.

13. Ka°re Johan, Mj°r (2018), “Smuta: cyclical visions of history in contemporary Russian thought and the question of hegemony”, *Studies on Eastern European Thought*. See the link <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11212-018-9298-0>

3. Chaos and disorder in broader framework: The fall of the Russian Federation. A few tragic scenarios in a 'many russias' future

This renewed wave of imperialist expansionism, in the style of Peter the Great and Catherine, but now led by a Putin who wanted to reach his peak with the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, constitutes the practical materialization of a first decisive step towards the “restoration” of a new Russian empire. Many Russians want it too, even those who do not support Putin but who have ‘imperial blues’¹⁴. But for now, colonial expansion seems to be having an unwanted effect, eating away at the Russian economy, ingathering and uniting the Wider West, as never before, around the ideals of freedom, democracy, the uncompromising defense of our international order anchored in the UN Charter – and, of course, galvanized by an inspiring Volodymyr Zelenskyy and by a common enemy that cuts them off from the light they crave. As a consequence, Russia is being pushed into the arms of China, the expanding real Asian Great Power. The hard-core of the former USSR, the erstwhile all-powerful Eurasian superpower of the Cold War, is rapidly plunging into a process that could lead it into a relationship of “vassalage” towards a China that, in the Russian imagination, has never been anything but a second fiddle. A non-place.

Another possible consequence is a clear decrease in the Russian Federation’s ability to coercively control the entire ring of instability that surrounds it to the south, its current soft underbelly. We are referring, for example, to the republics of the North Caucasus, now still within the Federation, but in which latent conflicts are raging, while waiting for any slight Russian weakness to rise with redoubled vigor. We may already be witnessing the spread of chaos to some extent along this periphery surrounding the “Third Rome”. Just remember that when Azerbaijan entered a border dispute with Armenia in 2021, Moscow chose not to meddle on the latter’s behalf, even though it is a historical formal ally. In the North Caucasus, which is majority Muslim and lodged within the Federation, we may well come to witness a revival of old disputes. Turkey may want to persist in its support for Azerbaijan against Armenia set in controlling the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave. In such a scenario, it is not unreasonable to consider the possibility that Turkey, in defiance of Russia, might wish to stimulate Azerbaijan to pursue renewed attacks on Armenia. Ankara could also intensify its military presence in Syria by stepping up its anti-terrorist campaign against the Kurdish PKK, should Moscow withdraw from the North Caucasus.

Further north, should the Russian Federation’s military pull back from this region, antagonisms could acquire renewed dynamics between Georgia and the two regions controlled by Russia since 2008, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. If today’s Russia collapses, Georgia may well also try to take advantage of this potentially chaotic regional conjuncture. Perhaps Tbilisi would then be encouraged enough to become a full member of the European Union, even though its wish would be ignored in 2021, due to internal disorder and the absence of the necessary internal reforms demanded by an EU that is always worried about its eastern flank and the influence of the Visegrad 4 – Poland, Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia – a foursome that has so tormented the European Union with “illiberal” and increasingly thinner democratic inclinations.

On the opposite coast of the Black Sea, a somewhat similar rejectionist movement could well take place in Moldova, namely in the separatist region of Transnistria, where Russian soldiers

14. See for all the article by Luís Tomé published in 2019 and entitled “Geopolítica da Rússia de Putin: não é a União Soviética, mas gostava de ser...” [“Geopolitics of Putin’s Russia: it is not the Soviet Union, but it would like to be...”], in *Relações Internacionais*, 60.

have been stationed on a preventive basis for now over 20 years, since 1992. Moldova's candidacy to the European Union declared in June 2022, could be the exit door to this latent conflict. For its part, the European Union would certainly be very willing to find solutions for the pacification of these countries, since it would guarantee invaluable access for the Union, from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea – a much better future for Brussels than the one that Russian, Chinese or Turkish domination would spell.

To the east now, it should be noted that something similar is underway in Kazakhstan. Everything leads one to believe that if Kyiv had capitulated, Putin could risk an invasion of Kazakhstan, with the same kind of narrative¹⁵. This former USSR republic is home to a vast population that considers itself Russian. As is well known, since 2008, Putin has simply ceased to respect the principle of the inviolability of borders, enshrined in the United Nations Charter. It seems clear to us that if this war ends up leading to regime change in the Kremlin, the Kazakhs who identify themselves as such could use the window of opportunity and react by reducing many of their current dependencies on Russia.

Turning to the west-north of the Federation: changes in the Russian leadership here too would surely cause shock waves in Belarus, where Alexander Lukashenko is propped up by Moscow's military and financial resources. Should Putin be deposed, Lukashenko could be the next to fall. There is already a Belarusian government in exile; Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, living in Lithuania for the moment, became the leader of the opposition in 2020 after her own spouse was arrested when he tried to run against Lukashenko. If Belarus were able to free itself from its ties to Russia, it could organize free and democratic elections that would lay the foundations of a new regime. The emergence of such a political change in Belarus would in itself guarantee a kind of *buffer zone* for the Baltic States, Poland and Ukraine. On the other hand, a situation of great internal instability in Belarus would have negative effects on the security environment of the above-mentioned countries. The much-troubled *Suwalki Gap*, that forms the last stretch from the Russian Federation with its Kaliningrad exclave, with Lithuania to its north and Poland along its south, would cool down, potentially largely isolating the former Prussian capital¹⁶.

A potential disintegration of the Russian Federation would lead to a loss of influence over the whole of Eurasia, opening wide the way for other regional actors to yield influence, thus filling in the power vacuum. China would naturally be profiled from the outset. India, Iran, and Turkey would also realign themselves, looking towards Beijing. Before the war in Ukraine, China exercised a sizeable economic influence in this region. Today, everything seems to point to a trend of sustained growth in what concerns China's military influence in the Eurasian context. The Southern Caucasus and the Middle East may thus constitute new regions for expansion in its near abroad. It is obvious a defeated Russia going through internal convulsions would facilitate the rise a new paradigm for our global order – or, at the very least, of broad adaptations to the international system in force in this hefty region.

A depleted, defeated and disorderly Russia does not necessarily mean the rebirth of a new era of world order and stability, at least until a new balance for global power distribution is finally

15. In 1999 ethnic Russians accounted to 30% of its population: the percentage is now down to 13%.

16. It is worth reading what we consider to be the best work on the Suwaki Gap, characterized as “*the most dangerous place on Earth*” and “as NATO's chokepoint”, Janusz Bugajski (March 26, 2018), *The Suwalki Corridor*; CEPA. For a short and lucid analysis, see also the short article by Richard Milne, and Urté Alksninté, entitled “Suwalki Gap fears recede as NATO rethinks strategy”, *Financial Times*, 2022.

found. Surely, a defeated Russian Federation would embark on a new course, very different from the one followed in the last twenty years. Should Russia be militarily defeated in Ukraine, the usual political ideologues and all those who deliberate the modalities of political action will be obliged to take into account either the possible survival of a residual, real or perceived, power, the eventuality of its accelerated decline, and even its very indiscernibility in the vastness of a then practically ungovernable swath of territory. Nevertheless, however, a Russia devoid of power would certainly retain some influence on warlike confrontations of potentially high intensity, a little all over the globe in, say, Africa, the Middle East, and most certainly Europe, if only as a destabilizing force.

The current liberal international order gravitates around an international and democratic rule of law. This means placing multilateral institutions in the spotlight and giving paramount importance to the principles that shape them and frame their activities in the global domain. The paradigm of competition between great powers, the model of choice for John Mearsheimer or Donald Trump, stood, instead on a balance of power politics.

Would that lead to a stable world order?

4. Rewinding on the path towards a possible disintegration of the Russian Federation and its eventual return

Despite Putin's aggressive stance, most visible since 2008, and its remarkable nuclear arsenal, the Russian Federation cannot credibly establish itself internationally as a real competitor to China, let alone the United States. In fact, its strategic potential is incomparably inferior to that of China and the United States. As Barack Obama rightly declared in The Hague on 27 March 2017, to Vladimir Putin's great fury, "*Russia is a regional power showing weakness over Ukraine*"¹⁷. The US President was reckless - but in truth, he was right. Although the Russian Federation is the largest country in the world, it has a small, ethnically fragmented population and a weak economy. Its GDP is, in absolute value, similar to that of Spain, the latter with a population almost 100 million smaller and a territory 34 times smaller. Moreover, strategically considered, Russia includes a countless number of vulnerabilities. It is true that, on the side of power factors, in addition to a large territory, there is the fact that it possesses in its nuclear triad around 6,000 warheads - incorporating some more sophisticated and up-to-date means, but most of them lacking modernization. Putin's ill-calculated adventure in Ukraine suggests that there was much that he did not know how to ponder properly. To cope with a prolonged, high-intensity conflict, a sufficiently robust economy is always needed to support it logistically. Putin should have thought of this. Will it come to the analytical reading that he was locked in a bubble of the *yes-men* surrounding him?

A military defeat in Ukraine that would cause a fragmentation of the Russian Federation would probably result in a major shock to the international system. A military hecatomb by Moscow could have positive effects for many countries in its neighborhood. To better understand these effects, it is enough to revisit the near past, when the loss of power caused by the implosion of the USSR made possible the emergence of more than a dozen free countries. A more self-contained Russia would help promote a "Europe whole and free", as the then US President George H.W. Bush suggested¹⁸. Chaos in Russia could lead to a spiral of instability, giving rise to

17. See, for all, the article in the British *Guardian* on the subject and the jocular tone of the US President.

18. The original phrase "*Europe whole and free*", uttered by this US President in a speech in the city of

a possible succession of regional conflicts, catastrophic migratory flows and further volatility of the global economy. A collapse of today's Russia could trigger a chain-reaction, without any kind of *hedging*, generating a situation that neither the United States nor China would bet on – since both would be forced into damage control mode. In such a situation, the West would have to make in many cases difficult choices, finding itself in the contingency of having to clearly define at least crucial strategic priorities.

It would be impractical, as too ambitious, to try and fill the entire vacuum of influence on a global scale that a disorderly Russian failure might leave open. Nature, like power, abhors a vacuum. It is therefore advisable to find a formula which guarantees that a Russian military defeat in Ukraine can happen without provoking a hecatomb leading to a balkanization of the Federation. Therefore, concomitantly creating an unprecedented challenge both to the Wider West, China, Turkey, or even India. Regions such as Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus, the USA, Canada and Europe would see their chances of preventing the People's Republic of China, and even Turkey and/or India, from occupying the power vacuum left open. It cannot but follow that a good strategy for the West, endowed with some realism and political pragmatism, could involve simply trying to contain a Russia in shambles, limiting its influence, collaborating and cooperating with all other powerful states, especially China. Whatever the form of defeat inflicted on the Kremlin, stabilizing the whole of eastern and south-eastern Europe, including the Balkans, will surely stand as an arduous task.

It could be argued that Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova look like the last territories in Europe that Russia appears unwilling to give up, as part of its aspirations to reconstitute its prestige and its consequent status as a Great Power on a global scale – or at least on the scale of its “wider regional dominance”, to invent a concept. We think it prudent to realize that a devastated and bankrupt Russia would not fail to retain some conventional military capability and its vast nuclear capacity. It should be noted that in 1917 and 1991, Russia, in two versions and in the framework of different regional and global conjunctures, went through critical moments – and it nevertheless was always able to get back on its feet and reconstitute itself and its ambitions. In essence, the former republics that are not yet integrated into NATO and the EU. Here lies the tragedy.

Brief conclusions

In summary, Ukraine's territorial integrity must be clearly restored under international law. This restoration must be based on Ukraine's borders as defined in 1991. Should the power of the Russian Federation decline, the Wider West, and particularly Europe, will gain from taking advantage of the opportunity to build a strategic security and defense sphere that protects its members, allies and partners, as D. Manning and J. Powell asserted this last February. On the other hand, a Russian defeat would create many opportunities, but it would also pose just as many challenges.

One such challenge would be to expect a militarily defeated Kremlin to give up for good its imperial designs on Europe. Russia's history suggests that it would one day rise again and quite possibly again try to achieve its immemorial strategic goals. In other words, we believe that with renewed power the Russian Federation would again first dream about and around its historical

Mainz, then West Germany, on 31 May 1989 in the context of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

ambitions. We therefore seriously consider what seems obvious to us: the West should always be prepared both for a military defeat of Russia and for its reinvigorated return. Guaranteeing a stouter European defense architecture is thus of the essence.

Received: 15/2/2023

Accepted: 01/06/2023

References

- Bugajski, Janusz (2018), *The Suwalki Corridor*, CEPA.
- Cunningham, Steven Clark (2021). "Manifest destiny, American exceptionalism, and the city on a hill seen through Winthrop, O'Sullivan, and Bush: Opportunities for peacebuilding", *Sociology Compass*, Vol 15, Issue 12.
- Dobbs, Michael (2009), *One Minute to Midnight*, Vintage, New York.
- Dobbs, Charles M., Tucker, Michael et al., (2005), *Brest Litovsk, Treaty of (3 March 1918)*. Available online.
- Fix, Liana and Kimmage, Michael (2022), "Putin's Last Stand. The Promise and Peril of Russian Defeat", *Foreign Affairs*, 23 December.
- Gref, Herman (2022) "St Petersburg International Economic Forum, regarding the impact of Western sanctions imposed on Russia for the war in Ukraine".
- Manning, David and Jonathan Powell (2023), "How to contain a recalcitrant Russia", *Financial Times*, 24 February.
- Milne, Richard and Urté Alksninté (2022), "Suwalki Gap fears recede as NATO rethinks strategy", *Financial Times*.
- Mjør, Ka're Johan (2018), "Smuta: cyclical visions of history in contemporary Russian thought and the question of hegemony", *Studies on Eastern European Thought*, 70: 19-40, Springer.
- Pietrzak, Piotr (2023), "The Brzezinski Doctrine and NATO's response to Russia's assault on Ukraine", *Modern Diplomacy*, January 12.
- Reuven, Rafael and Prakash, Aseem (1999), "The Afghanistan war and the breakdown of the Soviet Union", *Review of International Studies*, 25, 693-708, *British International Studies Association*.
- Sorge, Helmut (2022), "The greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century", *Policy Center for the New South*, Rabat, Morocco.
- Sukhankin, Sergey (2022), "A 'Morgenthau Plan' for Russia: Avoiding Post-1991 Mistakes in Dealing With a Post-Putin Russia".
- Tomé, Luís (2018/2019). "Geopolítica da Rússia de Putin: não é a União Soviética, mas gostava de ser... ", in *Relações Internacionais*, 60. Lisbon: pp. 69-99, IPRI-UNL.
- Zelikow, Phillip and Allison, Graham (1999), *The Essence of Decision. Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Pearson P T R.

About the Author

ARMANDO MARQUES GUEDES, Full Professor (ret.), NOVA School of Law, UNL. Holds a Bachelor's in Government at ISCSP, University of Lisbon, a BSc and an MPhil at the LSE, London, a Diplôme de l'École at EHESS, Paris, all in Social Anthropology, and a PhD at FCSH, UNL. Aggregation in Law, NSL. Was Portuguese Cultural Counsellor in Luanda, Angola and President of the Portuguese Diplomatic Institute, Portuguese MFA.

[ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2622-3311>]

ISIDRO DE MORAIS PEREIRA, Major General do Exército Português na situação de Reserva. Mestre em Ciências Militares, a frequentar um Doutoramento em Relações ISCSP da Universidade de Lisboa. Com experiência nacional e internacional incluindo o desempenho de funções e operações no âmbito da NATO.

[ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0650-1107>]

Sobre o Autor

ARMANDO MARQUES GUEDES, professor Catedrático, reformado, NOVA School of Law, UNL. Bacharel em Administração no ISCPS, Universidade de Lisboa, BSc e MPhil no LSE, Londres, Diplôme de l'École, EHESS, Paris, todos em Antropologia Social, e Doutoramento na FCSH, UNL. Agregação em Direito, UNL. Foi Conselheiro Cultural Português em Luanda, Angola e Presidente do Instituto Diplomático no MNE Português.

[ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2622-3311>]

ISIDRO DE MORAIS PEREIRA, Major General Portuguese Army (ret). Has a Masters's Degree in Military Sciences. Currently, a Doctoral Student at ISCSP/ University of Lisbon. With national and international military background to include NATO positions and operations. Served as Defense Attaché in Washington D.C. and Ottawa.

[ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0650-1107>]