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THE DEMISE OF RUSSIA: THREAT OR OPPORTUNITY?

A dread, droll, and disgraceful place.
– Dmitriy Bykov, a Russian writer, about his home country [1]

Over the last two decades, the development of Russia has led to a number of phenomena that have resulted in sweeping changes both domestically and internationally. While claiming no comprehensive analysis of these events, I will attempt to outline at least the major challenges besetting modern Russia and share my vision of its future prospects.

My analysis will be primarily based on Russian sources, thus avoiding accusations of Russophobia. This, however, is not to say that I agree with the perspective, all assessments, and approaches of the authors cited.

1. Government and Society

Presidential dictatorship has become the source of power,
reducing other institutions to dust.
– Liliya Shevtsova, a political scientist [2]

The years of 2020 and 2021 have marked several milestones in Russia: Amendments to the constitution and relevant legislation, poisoning and persecution of political opponents, human rights violations, press crackdown, social media censorship, etc. have ushered in a transition of the Russian political system to a different quality. Here is how it is described by opposition figures.

To some experts, the 2020 constitutional amendments **put an end to the legitimacy of government and the Russian state itself**. This view, for instance, is held by political scientist Valeriy Solovey [3]. P. Basanets, a foreign intelligence service veteran, believes that ‘...by illegally amending the Constitution and resetting the clock on his presidential terms, **Putin has carried out a coup d’état**’ [4]. According to Sergey Udaltsov, the leader of the far-left movement Left Front, the constitutional amendments are ‘a nasty and hypocritical **sting operation aimed at a blatant usurpation of power**’ [5].

In turn, expert Yuriy Rarog believes that today's Russia is '**an authoritarian regime** relying on military, police, and state bureaucracy as well as predominantly oligarchic capital. **It stands out for its aggressive foreign policy, bellicose nationalism (represented as Rushism), demagoguery of "traditional" values, including the "correct" church**' [6]. A dictatorial regime is mentioned by political columnist Kiril Rogov: He argues that in 2020, '**Russia definitively reasserted itself as a dictatorship**' [7]. According to Yuriy Pivovarov, a corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, modern Russia is an '**anthropological dictatorship**', dividing people under 'friend-or-foe' principle [8].

Other experts are somewhat more emphatic. For instance, Gleb Pavlovskiy, a political scientist, says that Russia's contemporary development is 'a velvet fasciation' [9]. Igor Yakovenko, a philosopher and cultural expert, shares a similar, albeit far more acute, belief: '**Putin's Constitution, approved by tree stump voting on 1 July 2020, is a constitution of a corporate or, simply put, fascist state**' [10].

As for the 'corporation' that has seized power in Russia, experts' views are nearly identical: This is a bloc of security forces combined with local oligarchy. In the words of Andrey Illarionov, a political expert and Putin's former adviser, in Russia, '**...all power** (political, legislative, judicial, administrative, investigative, financial, and so on) **rests with the Corporation of Security Officials (CSO)**' [11]. According to blogger **Igor Eidman**, when the USSR collapsed, a part '**... of the empire ruled by former communists called itself the Russian Federation and soon recreated the empire, this time as a gangland**' [12]. Vladimir Ryzhkov, a politician and historian, is of the opinion that '**... Vladimir Putin is the leader of a certain coalition consisting of chekists, security officials, the military and industrial complex, state corporations, and nominally private oligarchs, also incorporated into the system, that are seeking to restore Brezhnev's Soviet Union from symbols and rhetoric up to repressive practices**' [13]. In turn, opposition politician A. Navalny, who rose to fame after surviving an attempted poisoning carried out by Russia's Federal Security Service, explicitly stated that the **Russian authorities are 'a bunch of criminals** temporarily vested with power' [14].

Experts also take cognisance of another essential element of modern Russian statehood, its imperial nature.

As philosopher and social columnist Vadim Shtepa stresses, 'Those believing that the empire tumbled down together with the collapse of the USSR are still living in a great delusion. **The empire has just slightly shrunk in size**' [15]. '**Russian statehood, dating back to the Muscovite Tsardom of the latter half of the 15th century, has always pursued a path of imperial expansion**', expert in international relations Pavel Luzin says, adding that, 'Today, it is **a colonial empire**' [16].

This is but a small portion of what is said about the country by the Russians whose consciousness is not yet soaked in their government's propaganda.

Thus, what are the main features characterising modern Russian statehood as seen by Russian experts able to think critically?

1. **The Russian government is illegitimate** because a coup d'état took place in the country in summer 2020.

2. **The current illegitimate government in Russia can be described as authoritarian, dictatorial, and corporate in nature, thus imparting fascist hues to the state or even making it altogether fascist.**

3. **This state is run by a corporation of security forces and local oligarchs.**

4. **Russia remains an empire, though somewhat reduced in size.**

Are these conclusions sensational? I would not say so. They only confirm that after a very short period of the so-called 'Yeltsin's thaw' Russia returned to its usual state of the reactionary 'Arakcheyev regime', authoritarianism, and dictatorship with elements of fascisation. Even the era of 'sovereign democracy', with its restrictions and prohibitions far from normal democratic practices, has sunk into oblivion. The government has deprived Russians of any chance to have their own opinion and protest. It has brought them back to the total bondage of submission and disempowerment. Conceivable in the 19th and even 20th century, this is completely anachronistic for civilised countries in the 21st century. The examples of North Korea, China or Belarus are hardly inspiring for the democratic society.

It has become clear that the government and those thinking critically are parting ways. The rift between the two is widening, which the ruling elite is inherently unable to prevent. Unfortunately, we can't predict when, but this rift will eventually turn into an abyss.

Two different Russias are emerging inside the country.

This is the first profound and systemic issue of modern Russia.

Typographic emphasis is taken from the author's original version.

The author's full material has been published as a separate part of the series Library of the Scientific Yearbook Diplomatic Ukraine.