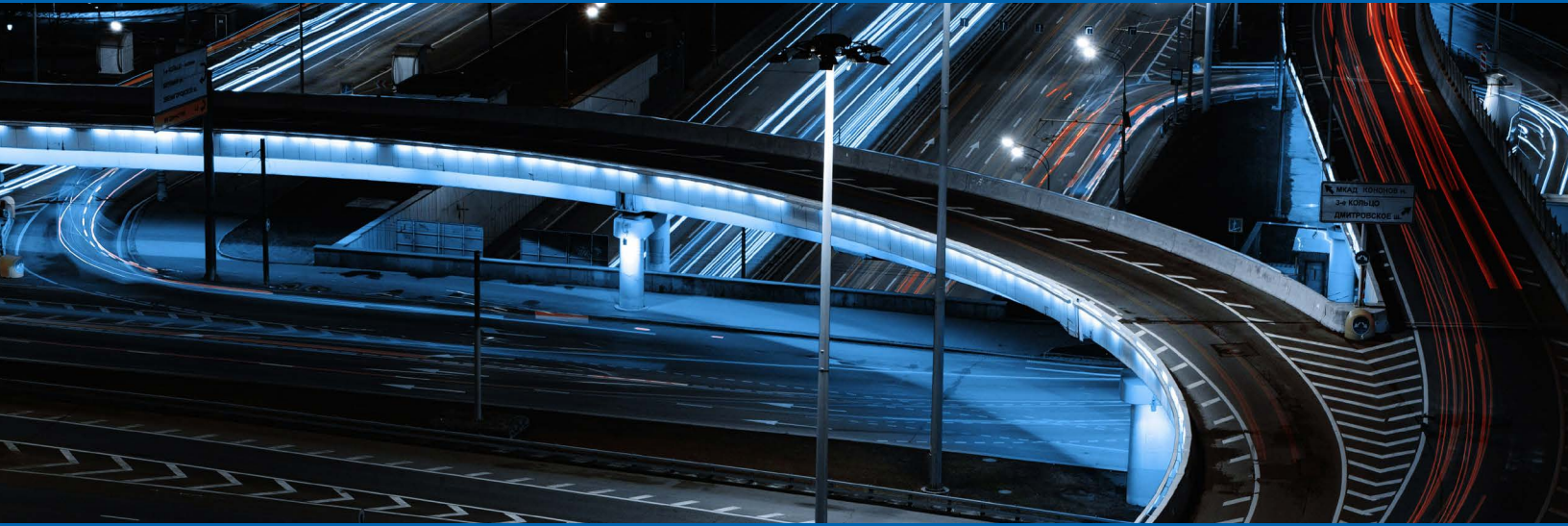


Transition Project



Scenarios for Democratic Transition

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Under what circumstances could the collapse of Putin’s regime occur, what will replace it, and under what conditions is a turn to democracy possible? In this chapter, we will consider only those basic scenarios of regime change that could lead the country to the start of a democratic transit. These scenarios are based on the general international and Russian practice of personalist dictatorships. These regimes usually end as a result of the death of a dictator (the death of Stalin in the USSR and Franco in Spain), a coup from the top (Portugal, African countries) or a popular uprising (the Philippines, the Arab Spring).

At first, we propose to consider three scenarios in an isolated “pure” form, then we will elaborate on what is needed for the turn to democratization to be realized in each of them.

Three basic scenarios

The first scenario is a **popular uprising**: people take to the streets, clashes with the police begin, the police fail, power is seized and the current elites are displaced. As of spring 2024, the probability of such a scenario is very low. Most of the near-liberal opposition organizations are currently banned in the Russian Federation, and their leaders have been pushed into the opposition. If there is an uprising in Russia, it is more likely to take place under radical left-wing or far-right slogans, similar to the rebellion of Yevgeniy Prigozhin in June 2023. It is very likely that the weakening of the central government as a result of such an uprising will lead to the strengthening and coming to the fore of regional elites and leaders, who, similar to the 1990s, will seek autarchy. If there is no convincing leader and force in the capital capable of uniting the country on new grounds, the strengthening of separatism is inevitable, at least in a significant part of the Russian regions.

The second scenario is a coup **d’état or the sudden death of a dictator** as a result of poorly verifiable causes. The impetus for such a coup could be the growing yearning in the elites for “Putinism without Putin,” as [described](#) by

Nikita Savin, a lecturer at the Moscow Higher School of Social and Economic Sciences (Shaninka): “The notion that there were many good things about Putinism and that, if not for the war, this regime could have outlived its creator and gradually democratized, is now increasingly gripping the minds of those who were generally satisfied with the state of affairs before February 2022. The war ... has turned Vladimir Putin into a major threat to Putinism. Neo-Putinism can unite the notional oligarchs, the state bureaucracy, and citizens who are tired of war and economic hardship but are not ready for radical change.” Today’s Russia is undergoing forced demodernization, which is manifested in the systematic and cynical violation of law, the constant fomentation of the darkest ideas in the public space, and the decline of the urban educated class. This demoralizes a significant part of the elites, not to mention frustrating the relatively small educated stratum of society. The feeling of discomfort and threats to the established order create preconditions for a “reverse rebound” — a desire to develop in a different way. This scenario assumes gradual liberalization by analogy with the transition to “collective leadership” in the 1950s, the condemnation of the “cult of personality” and the release of political prisoners.

Vasily Zharkov, a historian and guest lecturer at the European Humanities University in Vilnius, calls the third scenario the “**baobab effect**” — Putin’s outwardly stable system collapses under its own weight, as it is corroded inside by corruption and the moral decay of civil servants.

Possible paths to democracy

A popular uprising in the context of growing repression and the “digital gulag” is not very likely. Nevertheless, it cannot be completely discounted. The experience of Romania in 1989, in particular, shows the possibility of many thousands of people suddenly taking to the streets and successfully resisting despite a regime based upon open terror. Today, the Russian authorities are doing everything to prevent such a scenario. Putin was personally traumatized by the events of the popular revolution in the GDR 35 years ago and is constantly taking preventive measures against its repetition in Russia. How successful his attempts will be, history will show. In any case, left-democratic rather than right-liberal forces will be at the head of the rebels. These are the people to whom Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation is now appealing, gaining new audiences inside Russia. There is a latent demand in Russian society for the creation of a free and fair state, and significant actors

in the sustainability of democratization will be the key actors — in [Chapter 11, “Securing Support and Buy-In from the Russian People,”](#) we talk in detail about how to engage society in the reform process.

Once people judge that participation in political protests is unlikely to expose them to violence by the authorities, the **return of the masses to politics will become almost inevitable**. And this will be generally good news, because democratization is impossible without the broad participation of a critical mass of citizens. Democracy cannot be effectively built from above, so even if changes in the country do not start with mass popular demonstrations, they will definitely be involved at the next stage. Representatives of the expert community should stop being afraid of this scenario, because only it is capable of ensuring a successful transition to a democratic form of government. The only “but” here is the fact that broad popular support can be used by one of the forces to establish its own political hegemony, as happened with Yeltsin in 1991. Therefore, it is **very important to ensure the diversity of political forces in their struggle for power, relying on the support of the street**. In this case, instead of transition to another regime of personal power through an era of new “turmoil”, it will be possible to launch the successful development of sustainable and effective democratic institutions.

The longing for early Putinism and the inconveniences caused by sanctions are not enough for the scenario of a **coup from the top to** materialize. Under the conditions of personalist dictatorship, not only the social masses but also the elites are deprived of subjectivity and agency. Having no ground for cohesion and action and being under the close watch of the security services, they are forced to go with the flow and wait for the hour when the dictator himself will pass away. Dialogue with different groups in the elites and society and attempts to involve them in anti-Putin activities are necessary for the success of the subsequent transit — we will discuss this in detail [in Chapter 10, “Power Coalitions.”](#) Today’s **anti-war movement in exile needs to think about expanding its social base of support inside the country** through dialogue with those layers in the elites and Russian society who are skeptical of the war, but frightened by the seeming total rejection of everything Russian in the West and obliged to put on the mask of fervent patriots.

The chances of democratization after the death or removal of a dictator increase in the case of an “elite split,” when none of the existing factions is capable of establishing supremacy and concomitant subordination of the others. This situation forces the elites to reach an agreement by creating and developing public institutions of power based on the rule of law and public

control. They will begin to do this because in the absence of obvious supremacy on the part of one of the oligarchic groups and the increase in the number of actors due to the inclusion of regional elites and middle layers of bureaucracy and business in the struggle to solve controversial issues, the dictator's office, where previously there was enough space for the meeting of the seven most significant businessmen in power, will not be enough for them. In order to balance the interests and power of numerous groups and players, mere collusion will no longer be enough. The **“fight of bulldogs under the carpet” will inevitably be brought into the public space, and its moderation will require not “the word of a kid,” but laws and procedures that are understandable and acceptable to all parties.** Power, having been taken out of the Kremlin offices, will become public. Thus, there will be a pragmatic demand for democratic institutions - parliament and political parties, which will become an arena for open balancing and harmonization of interests of different groups of influence. Disputes over property and other business interests will be resolved in courts. Taken together, this new reality will create a demand for the development of effective judicial and executive institutions, which will be promptly satisfied for purely pragmatic reasons.

Now let us look at the **scenario of the collapse of the system** due to natural causes. The structure of the “baobab” of Russian statehood is actually amenable to political analysis, and its future can be predicted with a certain degree of certainty. We can estimate the extent to which its core has decayed. We can also guess what will remain intact after the system is finally rotten, i.e. the “baobab effect” is realized. This analysis allows us to see in the future a possible hybrid scenario of a coup from the top and the collapse of the current (doomed) Putin system due to natural causes.

Nikolai Petrov, political scientist, economic geographer, and visiting researcher at the Foundation for Science and Politics in Berlin, proposes to divide the “baobab” into a “core” and a “bark”, to distinguish two models of state governance — conditionally Putin's, to which he gives no more than five years, and conditionally technocratic, or Mishustinian. This technocratic system deserves close analysis.

The technocratic managerial model emerged with the arrival of Mikhail Mishustin in the prime ministerial position in 2020, developed and strengthened in a pandemic situation, and was further developed during the war. Its expansion was facilitated first by Putin's self-isolation and then by his focus on war and foreign policy. The new model is gradually growing through the old one, which is less and less active and capable.

Putin's model, which is running out of steam before our eyes, relies on powerful corporate bosses and the power resource (fear). It is based on siloviki and on chaebols — state corporations directly subordinate to the autocrat, inefficient and performing any task assigned from above. The president appoints to all important positions people who are unpopular even in their own corporations. This is done to prevent executives from establishing a support base within their corporations instead keeping them completely dependent on the head of state who appointed them. Inexplicably, employees of corporations who are unhappy with such executives, nevertheless remain loyal to the President, in line with an old Russian adage “the Czar is great, it's his boyars that are the real problem.” This arrangement is detrimental to the effectiveness of corporate management, but quite rational when considered as a mechanism of sustaining the power of Putin as the system's overlord. Putin's model is characterized by supercentralization, autonomous systems of information gathering by intelligence services, and control through managed conflicts and repression. Formats of collective discussion and decision-making in this model are very few, since all important decisions are made by one person.

The technocratic (Mishustinian) model is more institutionalized and somewhat less centralized. It allows for delegation of authority, relies on teamwork with headquarters, established information support and feedback. Mishustin initially came with a team of deputy prime ministers. With no authority to form his own team of ministers, he purged and radically restructured the government apparatus to suit himself at the turn of 2020 and 2021. In size and partly in function, it is now the prime minister's personal staff, the “Big Premier,” just as the presidential administration is the “Big President.” The difference is that the “Big Prime Minister,” composed of Mishustin's deputy prime ministers and government staff, is not exclusively monocentric and has built-in formats for collective decision-making, such as strategic government sessions on key areas. It is more dynamic and expands both in terms of ministries through replacement of deputy ministers, i.e., strengthening the government apparatus, and in terms of regions: these include deputy prime ministers in charge of federal districts as government envoys, a system of trips by the prime minister and deputy prime ministers around the country, and regional management centers. To solve complex and urgent problems, there is the Government Coordination Center and a system of sectoral operational headquarters.

Putin's model is based on fear and rare handouts, while the technocratic (Mishustinian) model is based on positive incentives and more subtle tuning. As a result, there is a contrast in effectiveness: Putin has both worse results (war) and failures (Prigozhin's mutiny). And what works more or less for him

belongs more to the new technocratic model.

So, **when Putin's system collapses, what will remain is a shell — a technocratic system of governance**, created over the past few years under the leadership of young, smart and ambitious officials, efficient, based on operational staffs and information gathering, which, unlike Putin's system, which is atrophied within itself, has feedback. The technocrats came to power in the past decade in a significantly stronger position than their predecessors because they represent a team. We are talking about a vertical of civilian management of the country, understandable and transparent for citizens through the one-stop-shop system "My Documents," the application "My Tax" for the self-employed, etc. This system is efficient and workable in contrast to the "core" in the form of special services and state corporations, which devour huge resources and are unable to cope with the growing challenges inside and outside the country.

In the scenario where Putin's «baobab» collapses naturally, technocrats, if they manage to maintain control over the situation, will seek to establish feedback from society through the development of democratic institutions and procedures as a critical missing component in completing their management model. Russian technocrats, unlike their Chinese counterparts, are much more Westernized, in terms of values. Many younger generation of Russian managers have studied and worked in the U.S. and the U.K., they are used to leading a Western lifestyle and have personal ties with the EU and the North America. They would be eager to finalize the system of the Russian state in the image of Western liberal democracy.

These technocrats with a Western way of thinking undoubtedly realize that a system of governance hedging on a singular autocrat, where everything is decided "in manual mode," is extremely unstable and ineffective. It depends too much on subjective factors — views, mood and even psychophysical state of one person. Life in such a system is unpredictable and does not guarantee any certainty about any project in the future. Technocrats are usually interested in long-term development and are ready to invest in the future if it is clear and predictable. In order to avoid a repeat of the case of Mikhail Khodorkovsky's seizure of Yukos and the current even broader review of privatization in Russia, they would have to respect the norms, rules and institutions that ensure the rule of law, legitimacy and transparency of private property and investments in it within the country.

Therefore, **they look at democracy as a necessary tool of governance**, as seeking to cut off radical populist forces but ensuring political representation

for the majority of citizens who are also interested in a normal and predictable future. Democracy is the last stone in their construction, whose place is now occupied by Putin's rotten core. In case of its self-destruction, the technocrats can put democracy in its proper place. Therefore, they will have to combine the described scenarios in practice.

It is difficult to imagine any one of the three scenarios described above being realized in a pure form. Rather, on the contrary, a hybrid model combining their elements is more likely. For example, in the case of the beginning of the obvious collapse of Putin's core political structure, technocratic elites may begin to take active steps to change power. At the same time, the people may realize that participation in mass demonstrations is no longer dangerous in terms of the threat of police violence and jail time, that it is possible to protest legally and freely, and tens and hundreds of thousands of people may take to the streets. We have already seen this happen between 2018-2024, when the authorities were unprepared for mass protests on occasions unrelated to the federal political agenda (protests of local communities in the Arkhangelsk region, Yekaterinburg, and Bashkiria, including environmental protests against construction that contradicted the interests of residents). We can also recall the very recent mass protests with mass detentions (after the arrest of Alexei Navalny and the start of the full-scale military aggression against Ukraine), and the long lines of citizens waiting to vote for anti-war presidential candidates this spring. People's desire to express their political will has been stable. If the technocrats in power gradually and at least partially decriminalize participation in mass actions, as was the case under Gorbachev in 1988-1991, street activity would increase dramatically and on a national scale.

Thus elements of the three scenarios will be combined in one — the real one. Democracy and transition to it are impossible without the inclusion of the widest possible layer of citizens.

Thus, **Russia's movement towards democracy is possible only if Putin's regime collapses due to its limited capacity and futility from the point of view of the country's development objectives.** The rationality of the elites' choice in favor of democracy would be due to their desire for long-term and transparent rules of the game, making the results of their investments predictable and providing firm guarantees resting upon law and respect for it. Such guarantees can be made only on the basis of the primacy of the law, the rule of law and equality of all before the law.

Broad social strata are also potentially interested in their share of political participation and expanding their influence on power. The main thing is that

none of the elite groups should be able to subvert or do an end-run around the system by resorting to populist appeals to seize and consolidate power. Therefore, it is very important that political pluralism return to politics as widely as possible, which will help to guarantee against the usurpation of power by one of the political groups and the creation of stable public institutions to harmonize the interests and claims to power of various segments of the elite and society. Such a hybrid scenario of the beginning of the transit looks optimal from the point of view of the necessary results.

Objectives and time horizons of the opposition

The mood within the elites will be crucial in terms of launching a democratic transit. Broad public interest in supporting democratic transition is critical to its successful implementation and completion. It is therefore critical for the opposition in exile and at home to engage on both fronts: to seek opportunities to interact with constructive parts of the elites and to try to engage the masses in a broad democratic movement. At the same time, it is very important not to forget about international support for Russia's democratization. All three components should form the basis of the opposition's strategy in the medium and long term. Let us address these three components separately.

After the death of an autocrat, one can expect the formation of a coalition that begins to distribute spheres of influence. "I see the scenario of 1953," Nikolai Petrov argues. "The leader leaves, a coalition emerges, which will be mainly ensured by a strong governance model and a strong prime minister." The personalist regime is replaced, at least for a while, by a more competitive model, at which point there is a window of opportunity for a variety of democratic institutions. This can lead to the formation of coalitions through elections (we talk more about this [in Chapter 9 on the sequence of reforms](#)), attempts by the new government to find allies in middle business, regional elites, etc. **Institutions — be they elections, federalism, or local self-governance (all three are necessary for building a sustainable democracy in Russia) — once established, have greater inertia.** If the new Russian government manages to secure and shore up democratic progress, we may see a democratic Russia within about a decade as these practices and social capital build up.

Speaking about international support for change, Nikolai Petrov is sure

that it makes sense for the Russian opposition to convey its position to Western politicians in the expectation that it will be included in general packages of measures. “If we believe that a mandatory institutional condition for transit in Russia is the restoration of the system of elections and changeability of power, this can be put into the mouths of Western politicians at the moment when rational technocratic players (Mishustin’s tentative team) come to negotiate with the West on the easing of sanctions,” the expert says.

Vasily Zharkov also believes that Russians in exile may try to influence the formation of the West’s strategy toward Russia. Now everything is reduced to Kennan’s thesis about the need to contain Russia — this approach did not work very well during the Cold War and even less so in today’s multipolar world. The big question is whether it remains central to determining the West’s long-term foreign policy toward Russia (at least many think tanks insist on continuing the containment policy even after Putin’s departure). If this is true, this approach to Russia is myopic.

The policy of containment in the case of the situation of the second quarter of the 21st century may be too limited in its actual possibilities. First, deterrence of Russia would be successful only if China and other countries of the Global South joined the Western coalition. Since this is not expected to happen in the coming years, there is a huge gap in the chain of containment through which the Putin regime conducts trade and financial transactions with the entire world, including some partners in the West itself. Second, the containment policy serves as an incentive for mobilization within Russia itself. The Putin regime has additional arguments for elites and society as to why war with the West is inevitable and the costs of war must be borne. Just as the policy of containment in the late 1940s led to the Cold War and the mobilization of the USSR’s military-industrial potential over the next several decades. Similar actions now could lead to Russia becoming a military camp besieged and ready for endless continuation and expansion of hostilities.

Finally, the policy of containment weakens the country’s prospects for democratization, because in the context of isolation and the presumption of hostility toward every Russian citizen, especially those with a lot of money, neither Russian elites nor Russian society see any sense in fighting Putin’s regime. While containing Russia’s current aggressive actions in Eastern Europe (in Ukraine and the Baltic states) and in the Middle East (in Syria and Libya), the Western alliance needs to offer the forces within the country capable of forming an alternative to Putinism a roadmap for détente and a way out of the new Cold War that suits all sides of the current confrontation. Russia

needs to be integrated into the system of international relations (we discuss this in detail [in Chapter 8 of the Transition project](#)).

In projecting Russia's democratic future, the opposition should first of all seek dialog with the main social forces within the country. This should be done at the level of both the elites and the people as a whole. Democratization of the country cannot be done from above, without the active participation of society. Therefore, the **main task of the opposition today is to explore the possibilities of supporting democratic changes inside the country and to** assist the forces capable of realizing them at the level of each of the possible scenarios and when they are combined at the level of real practice. This is why it is so important to seek dialog with all possible stakeholders.

The Russian opposition in its agenda should become more responsive to the interests and aspirations of the people inside the country. This means carefully analyzing and responding to the popular demand for social justice. Opposition leaders need to stop apologizing for the reforms of the 1990s, of which Russian society has a very negative memory. On the contrary, they should embrace the concept that Putin's regime is the direct result, consequence and continuation of a policy that was anti-human and cruel to millions of people. Recognize the unjust results of privatization in Russia 30 years ago and propose a compromise and a way forward, fair for all parties, to break through the current trap where the only way to hold on to one's personal wealth (expropriated from the national coffers) is by remaining in good graces with Putin's personalistic and petulant regime.

The democratization of the country is impossible without engaging wider segments of the society, not only the remnants of the middle class in the big cities, but also the broader working class and the poor throughout the country, and securing their buy in of transformation. The Russian opposition needs to make a left turn in its rhetoric and political course — only this can win the support of millions. At the top of the agenda must be overcoming the poverty and disenfranchisement of the tens of millions of Russians forced to live under the oppression of Putin's regime without the slightest hope for real representation of their interests within the country. When the opposition manages to become a force that resonates with the people's aspirations, it will have a chance of success.

Russia's protest infrastructure has been destroyed by years of repression. However, civil society in exile and inside the country is training important skills for solidarity-based political action, participating in education and outreach programs supported by Western donor NGOs, and donating to opposition

public initiatives and media outlets. People are ready to take to the streets any time it becomes possible to do so legally and safely. The coup d'état activates the sleeping “change agents” in society. Supporting the street through mass demonstrations can galvanize elites to take more decisive action against the dictator.

Independent research centers in the West need to continue to study the mood of people in Russia, their values, fears, and needs. The image of the future should be simple and understandable to all recipients. At the same time, it should not involve the destruction of existing norms, rules and institutions, but rather their improvement and gradual transformation. If we destroy everything at once, we will get not long-term democratization, but a failure into chaos and at the next step — another round of tyranny.

We can already look for negotiators among adequate representatives of the elites. Sociologist Anna Kuleshova from Social Foresight Group says that both representatives of law enforcement agencies and judges come to her for anonymous interviews. “The fact that there are people who disagree with the war at the lower level of these structures allows us to hope that there are also people at the upper levels. Right now, for both the elites and ordinary Russians, democracy is not so valuable; it is associated not even with a temporary, but with a permanent deterioration in living standards. No one understands what will happen to them after Putin; all citizens without exception need a guarantee of a normal life. **If the understanding that after the change of power it will not be worse, but rather better, becomes widespread, the unlikely scenario of serious changes will be possible.** There is interest in serious changes, people are not interested in the preservation of Putinism.” Independent media can be used to spread this understanding.

It is now quite difficult to predict the timeframe for the realization of each of the three scenarios. The experts interviewed for this chapter are more inclined to believe that the count is years. The first symptoms of the “baobab effect” are already manifesting themselves as the authorities demonstrate their diminishing ability to protect people from winter frosts, spring floods and Islamic terrorists all year round. Prigozhin’s attempted mutiny could happen again at almost any time with the participation of one or another group of security forces. Popular demonstrations are least likely, at least until there are groups within the elites interested in supporting the street.

The only thing that can be stated with certainty at the moment is that the historically existing Russian regime is doomed, and the sooner it falls, the faster and more successful the process of its democratization can take place. The

current regime is much weaker ideologically and structurally than the Soviet regime that preceded it. It persists not so much because of its power as because of the lack of strength and organization of its opponents. In any case, while the Soviet regime degenerated and moved toward its collapse within 40 years after World War II, the current Russian regime is definitely less than a decade away from its final collapse. The fatal symptoms of this are already visible now.

Russia without Putin has a chance for a normal future, and there are groups in power that are capable of negotiating. Getting in touch with them and offering them an adequate alternative to the current “besieged fortress” model means working for the preservation of the state as such after Putin’s departure.