

Prepare for the disappearance of Russia
Alexander J. Motyl (Opinion Contributor) - The Hill



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It's 1991 again and, now as then, Western policymakers and analysts are terrified of confronting the two big "what if" questions raised by Russian President Vladimir Putin's calamitous war with Ukraine: What if the Russian Federation is following in the Soviet Union's footsteps and is on the verge of collapse?

What if, once again, the process is driven by internal factors and there's nothing we can do about it?

The Soviet collapse was both a surprise and an annoyance for much of the West. Few government leaders expected a superpower to disappear overnight and even fewer greeted the prospect with enthusiasm.

President George H. W. Bush's infamous "Chicken Kiev" speech, in which he warned Ukrainians against pursuing "suicidal nationalism" and thereby risking undermining the Soviet state, became emblematic of Western fears of a Soviet collapse. The speech was also testimony to the belief that Western policy could prevent such an outcome.

A similar inability to imagine the unimaginable appears evident today. Eurasia Group's Ian Bremmer [typifies](#) this inability to think beyond Russia: "Gone are the days when Russia's war aims consisted solely of 'de-Nazifying and demilitarizing' Ukraine.

Also gone are the days when U.S. and allied governments limited their involvement to helping Ukraine defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity," he writes. "... The result is a new Cold War between Russia and its opponents — one that promises to be less global than its 20th-century counterpart but also less stable and predictable."

Despite all the portentous changes that Bremmer foresees, Russia's collapse as a state is not one of them.

And yet, it's perfectly possible, possibly even probable. And the sooner the West starts thinking about what a Russian collapse will look like, the better — not because there is much we can do to stop it, but because it will have earth-shattering consequences for the world.

Putin believes that whatever problems arise within his realm must be the handiwork of foreign forces. Soviet leaders held similar views. In fact, the weaknesses of their states were the products of their dysfunctional political and economic systems and of policy mistakes the leaders made.

Soviet totalitarianism and central planning were good at mobilizing people and resources for mega-projects such as industrialization, collectivization, and war (while also killing millions in the process), but they failed miserably as systems of governance in modern societies.

Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika was a conscious effort to fix the malfunctioning Soviet system — and not to rid it of nefarious Western influences. Quite the contrary, Gorbachev understood that opening the USSR to the world could save it.

The Soviet Union fell apart because Gorbachev emasculated the Communist Party, thereby destroying the linchpin of totalitarian rule and both enabling and compelling the non-Russian republics to seek salvation from a decrepit system through independence.

Putin's fascist Russia is no less dysfunctional. The hyper-centralization of power in the hands of a possibly irrational leader with delusions of grandeur is a recipe for institutional decay, as bureaucrats attempt to survive by empire-building, compartmentalization and buck-passing, and for policy disaster.

It was Putin and a [small coterie](#) of his [sycophantic pals](#) who decided to invade Ukraine, thereby dooming thousands of Russian soldiers to an early death and exposing Russia's efforts at building a powerful military [as fictional](#). Corruption thrives in such circumstances, while the ability to pursue imaginative policies of economic and political reform atrophies under the dead weight of a dysfunctional and corrupt bureaucracy.

If the Russian Federation falls apart, it will be due to the strains and weaknesses inherent in the system, the inability of Putin to keep its parts together and its elites happy, and the catastrophic impact on Russia of his idiotic decision to invade Ukraine with an army that was unprepared for such an adventure.

Western military and economic [assistance](#) to Ukraine has strengthened Ukraine and improved its war effort, but the disintegrating processes currently affecting Russia would be taking place even if Western assistance had been minimal.

Now, as in 1991, the Russian Federation's provinces and non-Russian autonomous republics will be forced to fend for themselves as they witness the Russian political and economic system crumble around them.

There was already a “parade of sovereignty” during the dysfunctional 1990s; there will be another one in the 2020s. The Russian Federation could metamorphose into 10 or more states, only one of which would be known as Russia. That would change the face of Eurasia forever.

Stopping this process likely will not be possible. If the West were to abandon all [its sanctions](#) tomorrow, disintegration would be slowed down, but not halted. Indeed, slowing it down might be worse than letting it take its course. The longer the disintegration, the greater the cost in lives. All the West can, and must, do is prepare for a probable outcome: the disappearance of Russia as we know it.

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