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## Why Russia needs decolonisation for its future democratisation

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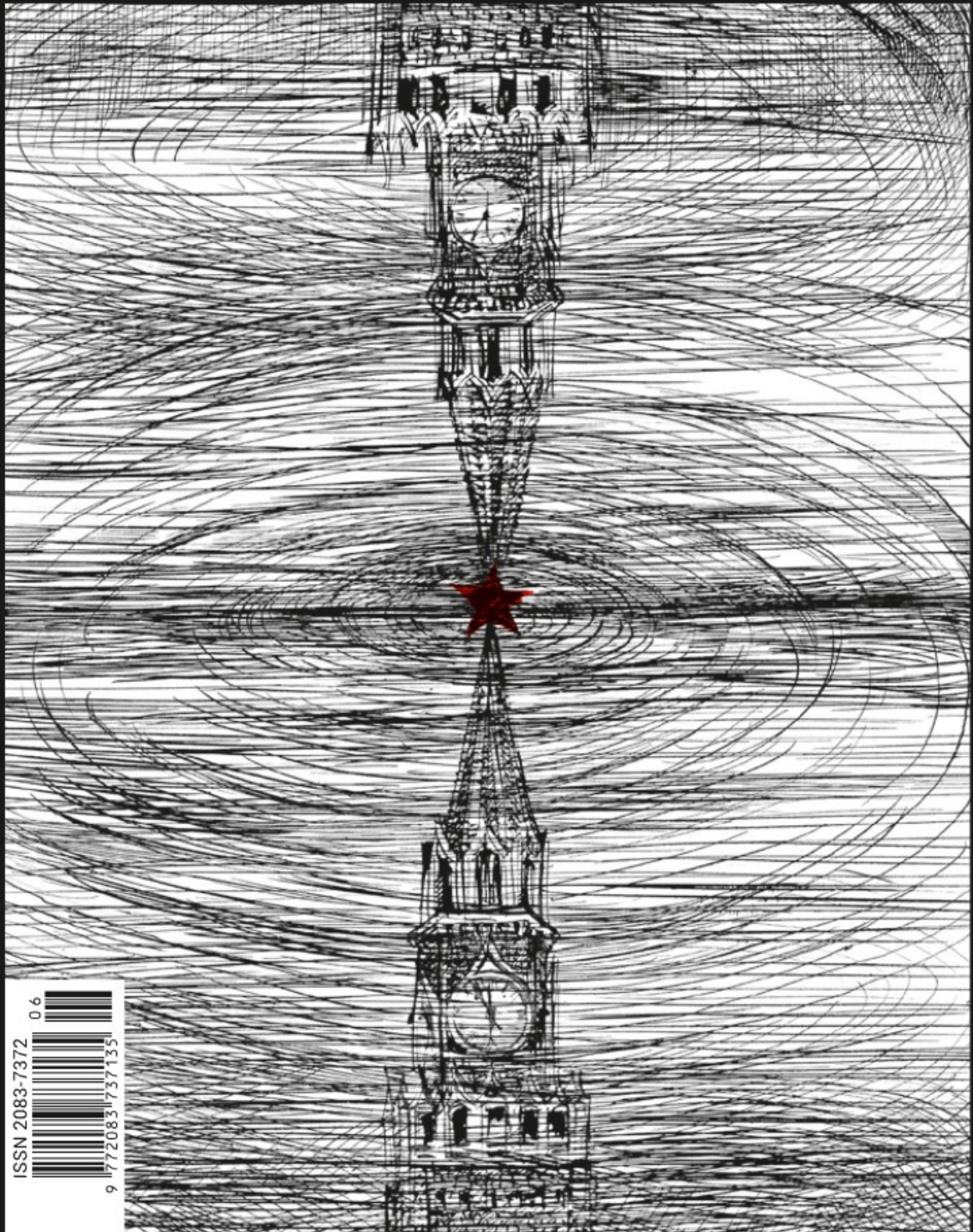
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# New Eastern Europe

## POINT OF NO RETURN

Scenarios on future relations with Russia



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DEAR READER,

These past nine months of Russia's aggression in Ukraine have not only revealed the incredible resilience of the Ukrainian people, but also the fact that the relations of the democratic world with Russia will not be the same, at least in the foreseeable future. With this in mind, we asked the authors of this issue to analyse some different scenarios for the development of the future of relations with Russia. It is very clear that from the perspective of the West, we have already passed the point of no return. Hence, new thinking is needed in policies towards Russia, in whatever form it will take after the war. We look at this topic from various perspectives - from broader ones such as how the West should react to a Russian collapse, to more specific ones such as how Germany needs to entirely rethink its view of Russia. Common themes emerge, including overcoming Russian imperialism, structuring reparations to Ukraine as well as how non-ethnic Russians should be seen.

One more important theme we address is the current situation in Belarus, two years since the unsuccessful protests that were organised following the fraudulent presidential election. Our authors analyse the sober reality in the country which is characterised by repressions and growing totalitarianism. Nearly all democratic forces have fled the country or are in prison. And the regime's support of Putin's war in Ukraine only makes it more difficult for Belarusians who desire freedom and independence.

In fact, all of these topics in this issue are connected to the single most important event in our region this century - Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The only way out of this situation is with Ukraine's victory and a restoration of its sovereign territory. Only then will there be a new hope for positive change in the region and beyond. Let it be our wish for Ukraine, our region and the world for this holiday season as well as the oncoming New Year.

As always we invite you to follow us online and on our social media. Our weekly podcast "Talk Eastern Europe" is also available there. We count on your interest and support.

*The Editors*

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# Why Russia needs decolonisation for its future democratisation

MIŁOSZ J. CORDES

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Ukraine's recent success on the battlefield has encouraged discussion on potential **changes to Russia's political setup**. While a new leader would be needed, more fundamental change would be required if the country is to embark on a path towards democracy. The key issue lies in Moscow's relations with its periphery, an exploitative relationship that has persisted for centuries.

---

The war in Ukraine has been made possible by Russian and Soviet authorities continually focusing their ideological and political attention on European Russia over the centuries. In doing so, they have been ignoring the interests of other regions of the country, as well as their non-Slavic populations. In this sense, 75 per cent of Russia's territory acts as Moscow's internal colonial empire. Not only is it financing the war with its oil and gas, but it is also providing cannon fodder for Russian military commanders, who do not value the lives of Buryats, Tatars or Chechens as much as those of the Slavic citizens. As a result, decolonisation is essential to ensuring the democratisation of Russia.

## Europe first

The year was 1582. The Cossack Ataman Yermak embarked on what was then the private enterprise of a merchant family. The Stroganovs were looking for ways to secure their trade routes to the East, repeatedly plundered by Siberian warlords. Although Yermak died in an ambush shortly thereafter, he paved the road for another expedition, this time commissioned by the tsar. Moscow's rulers rapidly expanded their rule eastward. Their authority reached the north-western shores of the Pacific Ocean in less than 200 years. From a small duchy on the outskirts of Rus', Moscow transformed into the Russian Empire, stretching from the Baltic Sea all the way to Korea and Japan.

Yermak could not have known that his expedition would lead to the emergence of a new colonial power. Unlike its Western European counterparts, however, its colonies were officially part of the metropolis. Because of this fact, Russia has only been subject to partial decolonisation. It lost its external dependencies after the Soviet Union collapsed, but it has kept its internal colonies. The results of this phenomenon are blatantly visible in Vladimir Putin's actions in Ukraine, where he is trying to regain territory that he considers essential for the wellbeing of the metropolis. This is being pursued through the use of material and human resources provided by peripheral territories.

In doing so, Putin acts on behalf of merely 25 per cent of the country's total area at the expense of the remaining 75 per cent lying east of the Urals. This is much like how any European power in the 19th and 20th centuries treated their dependencies in Africa, America or Asia. In other words, an area 30 per cent larger than the United States or 65 times larger than the United Kingdom is being exploited in an almost openly colonial way 60 years after the peak of decolonisation around the world.

There are two factors that explain this phenomenon. The first relates to narratives on history and the politics of memory pursued by the Kremlin at least since 2012. These ideas are in fact deeply rooted in Russian imperial rhetoric. The second is the ethnic composition of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine, especially in the face of the recently announced partial mobilisation, and the losses that non-ethnic Russian soldiers have been suffering.

## Slavic Pan-Russianness

When Putin announced his return to the presidency in 2012, he published a series of articles, setting the stage for his "new-old" role. More specifically, he de-



scribed Russia as a distinctive civilisational entity based on the legacy of medieval Rus', Orthodoxy and traditional values that Russians have supposedly kept over centuries. Putin's texts partly explain the way he perceives the spatial dimension of Russia's foundations. Its roots are limited to Eastern Europe and to the three Eastern European ethnicities Putin sees as three branches of one Russian nation (*triyediniy russkiy narod*): Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians. They are the backbone of today's Russia, Putin argues, stemming from the alleged unity of medieval Rus' and the dominant role of Moscow.

This partly explains Putin's fixation on Ukraine, as Kyiv was the place where the first Ruthenian Orthodox metropolis was erected. To him, controlling Ukraine is essential to securing the core of Russian civilisation. He confirmed and refined this point of view in July 2021, when in another article he tried to convince the readers that Ukraine is part of Russia.

By pursuing such a narrative, Putin seeks to downplay the influence of other political entities on this vast area, such as the proto-democratic merchant Novgorod Republic or the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. At the same time, he completely ignores the role of non-Slavic nations in the development of Russia's power. Although they have populated the majority of Russia-controlled territories since the rapid expansion eastwards in the late 16th century, they have never become an equal part of the official Russian narrative of history. Children in Khabarovsk and Vladivostok are taught about developments in culture and politics that took place several thousand kilometres away, being told to treat them as their own story.

As a result, today's Russia remains the world's only colonial empire that exploits its own citizens without any apparent legal discrimination. It has never been decolonised for three main reasons, which also partly answer the question that we have all been asking ourselves since 1991: how can Russia ever become a full-fledged democracy?

### **Internal colonies**

Russia's colonies constitute an integral part of the country's territory, much like Algeria was a part of France. The difference is, however, large parts of northern Eurasia east of the Urals that Russia took control of have always been scarcely inhabited and deprived of strong political organisation. It was relatively easy for Moscow and St Petersburg to exert control over lands free from highly organised peoples in spite of their distinctive cultures and awareness of a non-Russian past.

Russia created the bulk of its colonial dominium within its own territory through direct incorporation. Over the centuries it has applied different methods of eco-

conomic exploitation, as well as political and cultural violence. It is important to mention that I am not talking about the peoples living on the southern borders of Russia in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Their political traditions and established cultural heritage have encouraged them to struggle against Russian domination numerous times.

This viewpoint can be explained by looking at what was going on in the west of the empire after the First and Second World Wars. Russia and the Soviet Union first gained and then lost control of areas populated by peoples sharing a strong sense of national identity, often backed by a tradition of their own statehood: Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians or Ukrainians. Their language, culture and elites managed to survive Russian domination and regain political sovereignty when the moment was right – in 1917–18 and 1989–91. They were not Russia's dominions, but rather provinces in the ancient Roman sense of the word.

As for Russia itself, Putin often mentions its multi-ethnic, multicultural and multiconfessional composition. Yet this is only a figure of speech that justifies Moscow's political control over non-ethnic Russian territories. He is the acolyte of Joseph Stalin, who cut short the policy of *korenizatsiya* (indigenisation) aimed at luring non-Russian elites to the Bolsheviks. This move originally served to consolidate the government's power, still unsure after five years of civil war. However, from the early 1930s onward, Russians were again promoted in the administration and the military, and Russian became the lingua franca of the empire, much like in the tsarist times.

This policy had an equally important economic dimension. Most of Russia's riches lie east of the Urals. They have almost exclusively been employed in the struggle for gaining and maintaining territories and influence in Europe, and to build up the European part of the country. Revenues from oil and gas from the non-ethnic Russian Nenets, Yamalo-Nenets and Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrugs fuel investments in Moscow and St Petersburg, and prevent regions like Novgorod, Bryansk or Pskov from economic collapse. This is a typical model of economic exploitation known from the Congo, Egypt or Latin America. In this sense, one could argue that the Russian regions east of the Urals are part of the Global South.

### **Non-Russian cannon fodder**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been another exemplification of such colonial thinking. Following successive defeats in Ukraine and Kyiv's successful counteroffensive that struck at the heart of Russia's occupational forces, Putin announced mobilisation. As we see now, this is mostly being carried out in regions where

Russians do not constitute a majority or among non-ethnic Russian inhabitants of the country, such as Buryats, Dagestanis or South Ossetians. Already before mobilisation the backgrounds of the dead soldiers on the Russian side showed that the Russian military command was using non-ethnic Russians as cannon fodder. Now the situation has only intensified.

The Kremlin used mobilisation also to get rid of people who are considered political suspects (or politically suspicious). By the beginning of October, some three thousand inhabitants of illegally annexed Crimea had been drafted. Half of this number was made up of Crimean Tatars even though they are only 15 per cent of the region's total population. Providing recruits that are bound to be killed in battle is way easier than resettling the whole ethnic group, just like Stalin did in 1944.

All in all, Moscow seeks to wage war in Ukraine through the use of ethnic minorities to protect the Russian core of the nation, as well as take advantage of relatively worse educated and poorer citizens. For many people east of the Urals, deprived of steady sources of income and economic opportunities, joining the army is the only way to earn decent money.

It is also easier to make them believe that Ukrainians are Nazis as there is no real or imagined ethnic, cultural and historical proximity between the two groups. You would think twice before you would kill a cousin or a neighbour but you do not have to hesitate if your mindset is shaped by aggressive state propaganda that pertains to some remote areas of a vast country. In addition, the memory of fighting against the Germans during the Second World War is still present among the peoples of the Asian part of Russia.

Such a mindset laid the foundations for the atrocities committed in Bucha. The 64th Motorised Rifle Brigade from Buryatia was based there. Later on, the remaining soldiers of the brigade were sent to the most difficult parts of the front in the Kharkiv area. Some experts argue that the Kremlin want it to be destroyed to conceal its actions in Bucha.

Moscow seeks to wage war in Ukraine through the use of ethnic minorities to protect the Russian core of the nation.

### **No simple remedy**

With western military and financial support and their own determination, Ukrainians are likely to win the war. Although it will leave the country devastated and deeply wounded, it will also provide the final piece in the construction of Ukrainian national identity and statehood. But what about Russia? Even if Putin is

overthrown, will the country embark on a different path or will it remain the pariah of Europe and perhaps even the world?

From my perspective, an answer to these questions to a great extent lies in decolonising Russia. Its political and economic elites (no matter who they will be) need to admit that their task is to govern in the name of all parts of the country. Changing the colonial optics needs to lead to a more equal distribution of wealth,

The Asian part of Russia needs its own Memorial Association, which until recently was uncovering crimes committed by the Soviet regime.

public investments and development strategies.

The Asian part of Russia needs its own Memorial Association, which until recently was uncovering crimes committed by the Soviet regime. It also needs to involve local non-Russian leaders, not those who are nominally so (like Sergey Shoigu) but in fact pursue the interests of the European part of Russia and ethnic Russians.

At the same time, however, the mobilisation has triggered a massive exodus of young Russian men. Data presented by think tanks such as Bruegel suggest that the number now exceeds 700,000. This is on top of the four million people that have already left Russia

since the beginning of the invasion. With non-ethnic Russians being sent to certain death on the battlefield and ethnic Russians fleeing the country, Russia will face an even more serious demographic crisis in the years to come.


### **Reform or collapse?**

The Russian federal system, nowadays existing only on paper, has to become the country's new reality. All subjects of the nominal federation have to be able to exercise their theoretical rights and gain new ones over time – not on paper but in reality.

Should this not happen, the negative consequences of the war might even go as far as the breakup of Russia. It is not that unrealistic of a scenario given the scope of problems the country suffers from: dependency on fossil fuel exports, lack of innovation, demography and ethnic tensions. Even now Moscow is contributing to increasing the population's discontent by imposing a new war tax on the regions. Their authorities are now obliged to purchase selected equipment for the army when told to do so by local military commanders.

This raises another question crucial to understanding the scale of kleptocracy and corruption in today's Russia: if the municipalities are supposed to purchase the helmets or vests on the free market, does this mean that Russia is full of eas-

ily obtainable military equipment? If so, it can only come from army storehouses. This means that it all has been stolen by the army itself at some point. By buying it, Russian taxpayers are effectively legalising a very sketchy funding scheme.

All of these problems are brewing under the surface of the authoritarian regime that for now keeps them at bay. If that regime ceases to exist, however, the path to Russia’s democratisation must occur through decolonisation. Otherwise, both the Russian society and the West will be reminded of the existence of “collective Putinism”. 

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