

Russia as a Failed State: Domestic Difficulties and Foreign Challenges

By Paul A. Goble*

When the Soviet Union collapsed almost 15 years ago, almost all Western analysts and many Western governments who had been convinced that ethnic assertiveness could never bring down the USSR reversed themselves and decided that the future of the Russian Federation would be like the past of the Soviet Union. And as a result, they argued that ethnonationalism was the single most serious challenge to the stability of that new country.

Such a shift, while perhaps understandable among a group of individuals and governments who had been almost unanimously wrong in their assessments of the

survivability of the Soviet Union, had two disastrous consequences with which we are still living.

On the one hand, it led ever more governments to adopt the view that they had a vested interest in preventing „any secession from secession,“ a position that signalled to non-Russian groups that the West would not support their aspirations for independence and to Moscow that the West would tolerate repression to keep the country in one piece. Russian behaviour in Chechnya is one of the results of this position.

But on the other and more seriously, this focus on the imperial dimension of

the Russian Federation – and it would of course be wrong to ignore it – had the effect of detracting attention until very recently of what has been really going on there. What we watched under President Boris Yeltsin was effectively the death of the state, of the central institutions that are capable of governing the country.

There were of course three compelling reasons why few in the West wanted to talk about this in addition to a understandable desire not to offend our new-found Russian friends. First, if one said that Russia was a failed state, then the question would inevitably arise as to who is in control of that country’s nuclear

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stockpile. It is one thing to talk about a failed state in a place like Somalia or Eritrea; it is quite another to talk about it in the case of a country with the second largest nuclear arsenal in the world.

Second, states that fail – and enough have done so even in modern times to generate an impressive scholarly literature about this phenomenon – almost never recover without the use of violence against their own populations and/or against their neighbours. Given the difficulties of governing the space called the Russian Federation and the weaknesses of many of the states around it, few analysts and even fewer governments wanted to look into this potential abyss.

And third and perhaps most important is the following fact: while states do fail with impressive regularity, most of those that have done so have been small and weak. The last time when the state in a major power failed was Germany in November 1918. Because everyone knows how that event contributed to the rise of Hitler, no one wants to talk about something that might mean we would have to

take seriously that there is a risk that developments in the Russian Federation will not lead to the appearance of a democratic, free-market ally of the West but instead to fascism and a new division of the world.

But states, especially large states do not stay dead. They invariably seek to reconstitute themselves, and the task of any serious analyst of this process is to specify what factors will be at play and hence which outcomes are the most likely and which are ones over which outsiders may have some influence. Now that Russian analysts like Sergei Karaganov have acknowledged that the Russian Federation is a failed state and that Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that it is his task to rebuild the power of the state, it is time to consider seriously just what these factors will be in the Russian case not only for Russia itself but even more for Russia's neighbours.

More than two centuries ago, the great French philosopher famously observed that "the Holy Roman Empire was not holy, was not Roman and was not an

Empire but that otherwise this was a very good name for it." Perhaps the best way to begin to understand the problems of rebuilding a failed state in the Eurasian heartland is to consider not what the Russian Federation is but rather examine what it is not. Today, the Russian Federation is clearly not the Soviet Union. It is not Russia. And it is not a Federation. Other than that, of course, the Russian Federation is a very good name for what it is.

That the Russian Federation of today is not the Soviet Union of the past has both a positive and negative meaning for those who would reconstitute the Moscow-based state. First, on the positive side, the Russian Federation is far more ethnically homogeneous than the Soviet Union was. While polyethnic countries are typically more dynamic and more interesting than ethnically monolithic ones, no one would doubt that it is easier to constitute or in this case reconstitute state power.

Unfortunately for the leaders of the Russian Federation, this relative homo-

generacy is likely to be shortlived. The demographic collapse of the ethnic Russians combined with continued growth of non-Russian groups within Russia means that Moscow is already the largest Muslim city in Europe, that by 2010 – only six years from now – 40 percent of the country's 18-year-old males will be from traditionally Muslim nationalities, and that by 2030, the Russian Federation will have a non-Russian and quite possibly non-Slavic majority.

Another advantage is that the non-Russian peoples living within the Russian Federation have less experience with, interest in, or ability to pursue independence. Sakha, a republic larger than all the European Union countries put together, might be a candidate for independence if it had ports on something other than the Arctic Ocean. Buryats continue to look longingly at Outer Mongolia but not with much expectation that they will ever gain independence. And Tatars might pursue independence if it were not surrounded by a sea of ethnic Russian territories.

And a third advantage for Russian statebuilders is that the United States and other Western countries as noted above have changed the rules, tilting their support to anyone who promises to prevent border changes rather than backing those pursuing the historical right of nations to self-determination.

But if the pluses of the Russian Federation not being the Soviet Union are enormous, the negatives of this situation are even greater. First, Russians have experienced a terrible sense of loss and displacement now that they live in the Russian Federation rather than the USSR. While wags may point out that they have gone from living in a very large country to being citizens of only the largest country on earth, Russians have good reason to feel that they have been the losers in many key dimensions: They are no longer a superpower. Their military cannot even deal with the Chechens. Their economy has fallen by 60 percent in the last 15 years. They now are an exporter of raw materials rather than an industrial giant. And life expectancy, often a key indicator of

where countries are, has declined for men by more than eight years over the last ten – the largest decline in life expectancy among a significant population in peacetime ever recorded.

As a result, Russians remain traumatised by a sense of loss rather than energised as are at least some of the other post-Soviet states by a sense of achievement, even historic victory. That has deprived the Russian government of the ability to mobilise people to achieve new goals by invoking authenticity when it is unable to deliver the goods, an approach many other post-Soviet states have done and continue to do.

Second, with the collapse of Soviet power, the Russian state has lost most of the key institutions that controlled the country in the past, and it has not yet been able to create new ones that are equally effective. The Communist Party is gone. The KGB has been reduced to a shadow of its former self, however threatening it may still appear. The armed forces are a hollow shell, one made ever more so by demographic decline and the shortage

of funds. And the interior ministry and its police are simultaneously weak, incompetent, and corrupt.

Not surprisingly, with the demise of these formerly powerful institutions, a population that had never known freedom behaved as many teenagers do when they first acquire a car and a credit card — irresponsibly and sometimes violently. Learning to obey law because it is part of a social compact rather than because you will inevitably be punished is something that takes a long time to instill in people as all Western countries have learned. Achieving that when there are no stable political institutions, when the courts and police are corrupt, and when the spirit of the times seems to be to grab as much as you can handle was certainly too much to expect.

And third, the collapse of the Soviet Union called attention to what may be called the fundamental tragedy of the Russian people over the last half-millennium. That tragedy can be summed up in a single sentence: *The Russian state became an empire before the Russian people be-*

came a nation, and as a result, the Russian state has never been a nation state, a compact between the government and the people, but the Russian people have always been a state nation, a nation defined not by itself but by those with power.

This underlying reality has a large number of consequences but one is especially significant to our story here. This relationship of state and people means that the amount of nationalism Russians feel tends to track with the amount of power the state displays. When the state is strong, Russian national identity and nationalism are strong. When the state is weak, so too are identity and national aspirations.

That pattern is exactly the opposite of the situation in most other countries in the world. Because state power and nationalism feed on each other rather than counterbalance themselves, Russian political development tends to go through a broader and potentially more unstable amplitude than is the case in other countries. That in turn makes it more difficult for the Russian state to recover from a period of weakness and more likely that

when it does recover, it will overshoot the mark with state power and nationalism combining to push the state into an ever more aggressive stance *vis-à-vis* not only its own people but those living around it.

The second “not” in the equation we are considering is that Russia is not Russia. There are three ways in which this is so. First, no Russian in Soviet times — and very few even in post-Soviet times identify with the entity then known as the RSFSR and now as the Russian Federation. Because they enjoyed extraterritorial linguistic rights across the entire Soviet Union, Russians either thought of their *rodina* as the Soviet Union or as a more limited place like Moscow or the Urals. And polls show that they continue to do the same, seeing that they continue to do the same, seeing that they continue to do the same, as either much larger or much smaller than they are on the maps. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, such attitudes meant that Russian nationalists constantly talked about rebuilding the USSR rather than working to build their own coun-

try. Or post-Soviet Russians identified with regions like Siberia and the Far East. In both cases, such identities undermined the possibility of the rise of a national community that a government could use to promote state authority and hence state power. All this too set Russia apart not only from her neighbours but from countries further afield and means that overcoming the situation of a failed state there has been far more difficult.

Both because of the nature of the relationship between state and society mentioned above and because of the Faustian bargain the Soviet state offered Russians – they could rule the country but only by denying to the world that that was what they were doing – ethnic Russian identity was far weaker and more uncertain than that of any other major ethnolnational group in Eurasia. One measure of this is that Russians are still debating who is a Russia and who is not, a debate that has effectively been over in most countries – including not insignificantly all 11 former Soviet republics and all three formerly occupied Baltic countries.

Second, there are now almost 20 million ethnic Russians living in the 11 former Soviet republics and three formerly occupied Baltic countries as well as more than 30 million non-Russians living inside. If the latter poses a threat that is likely to grow with time, the former represents a political challenge that no Russian government can ignore. But in considering the impact of this on Russian state building, it is very important to keep in mind some facts because these are facts that Moscow and its supporters routinely ignore.

Of these 20 million ethnic Russians abroad, more than 90 percent are citizens of other countries, and fewer than 400,000 are citizens of the Russian Federation to whom Moscow should have consular access under international law. In Estonia and Latvia, there are some Russians who lack citizenship in either the Russian Federation or in the country where they now reside: in the Russian Federation because in general Moscow has not been interested in extending citizenship to them, and in Estonia and Latvia because occu-

ried countries are not obligated under international law to give citizenship to anyone moved onto their territories by the occupying authorities. Many Russians find this intolerable, and this issue is the kind of continuing irritant that helps to inflame Russian attitudes about neighbouring states.

And third, no Russian views the map of his or her country the way we do. When we look at a map of the world, we see a very large country in Eurasia that is still pink on most maps. That is not what a Russian sees. Stalin's programme of ethnic engineering means that the 22 non-Russian republics, oblasts, and districts form 53 percent of the country's territory even though the titular nationalities involved make up less than 20 percent of the country's population.

To imagine the psychological impact of that on Russians, consider how Americans might view their country if Washington had lived up to all its treaties with the Indians and then had consolidated all the reservations into a single territory. That super reservation would cover all the

land West of the Mississippi River, and Americans would see their country in a fundamentally different way.

This is only one aspect of the problem of the existence of these non-Russian political formations. There are three others. These formations still have more rights on paper than do Russian regions, a source of continuing irritation and something it is almost impossible to cope with except in an authoritarian manner. (Reducing their rights will spark protests among them; not doing so will help power anti-regime Russian nationalism.) They are increasingly dominated by the non-Russians and thus constitute an indigestible element in the state. In 1989, only six of the 22 had non-Russian pluralities. Now more than a dozen do. And by 2010, most will.

These non-Russian areas within the Russian Federation will then present a far greater challenge than they do now – especially given their diasporas in major Russian cities like Moscow. And as a result, Chechnya may be only the beginning. Other non-Russian regions are in-

creasingly likely to challenge the center, if not militarily than in other ways including simply ignoring what Moscow wants. All that only adds to the burdens of those who would reconstitute the Russian state.

And then there is the third “not.” The Russian Federation is not a federation. In many ways, it is even more imperial than was the Soviet Union. Moscow decided on both the borders and the status of all the groups within it in an even more thoroughgoing manner than was the case with the former Soviet republics and occupied Baltic states.

Moreover, Russia lacks the ingredients to hold a country of its size together. Many people were impressed when President Vladimir Putin announced last February the completion of the first trans-Russian highway from Vladivostok to St. Petersburg. But few people paid attention to the fact that this project has been under way for more than a century, that fewer than half of the kilometers of this highway are paved and that fewer than five percent of its length is more than two lanes wide. Indeed, the Russian Fed-

eration today has fewer kilometers of paved highway than do many mid-sized American states.

How does one try to run a country without the kind of links that highways are perhaps the best symbol of? There are essentially two choices in the absence of a democratically based consensus, something that has never existed in that country. On the one hand, one can send out plenipotentiaries who one hopes will do ones bidding but who will almost inevitably “eat” off the local population or be coopted by them. And on the other, one can create institutions like the Communist Party nomenklatura that give the center some possibility of enforcing its writ even where the roads do not run. The first of these leads more or less directly to uncontrolled decentralisation of power, the second to hypercentralisation and authoritarianism.

President Putin has been praised for his decision to create seven federal districts and to name personal representatives as super-governors to run them. But this system has not worked as intended

for at least three reasons: Mr. Putin quickly found himself trapped by the choice of giving these people enough authority to do their jobs in which case they would become a threat or of not giving them enough authority and hence seeing them turn into little more than lobbyists for the regions and another bureaucratic obstacle for the implementation of central and regional power.

In addition, Putin chose, unlike Nikita Khrushchev who tried much the same thing almost a half century ago to make his federal districts co-terminous with the country's military districts rather than its economic zones. That may have appealed to his security officer's sensibilities, but it has meant that this reform has backfired, undercutting the possibility of social mobilisation on a democratic basis and of economic growth in any rational, non-defence-related way.

And, finally, this bureaucratic „innovation“ must, like Putin's current plans to end the direct election of governors, has had the effect of creating what some have described as „unstable stability“ in

place of what they believe was „stable instability“ in Yeltsin's time. What do these analysts have in mind? Yeltsin's system was stable precisely because he allowed a great deal of instability. By not challenging any number of elites, he did not generate an opposition and thus gave the country some chance of drifting through its crisis. Putin, who clearly wants to put both the crisis and the weakness of the state behind him, has put himself and his regime on a collision course with many key players. His regime looks strong, but his moves are generating opposition. And that is especially dangerous because he is closing down most of the public channels for this opposition to express itself.

None of these means that the Russian state will not come back from its near death experience in the 1990s. Nor does it mean that the Russian Federation will collapse or fail to move toward democracy, free markets, and greater ties with the democratic West. But it does have serious consequences for Moscow's approach to security questions and especially to its relations with its nearest neighbors. I would

like to consider three that are the most directly related to the process of Russian attempts to reconstitute the Russian state and reconsolidate the Russian people.

The first of these is Moscow's continued reliance on nuclear weapons. Such weapons are less about security per se than about the status they give Russia internationally. To understand how important they are, one need only ask how the rest of the world would treat the Russian Federation if it did not have them. Indeed, along with Kaliningrad and the Kuriles, Russia's trophies from World War II, its nuclear weapons are the basis of its role in the United Nations, the G-8 and many, many other places. Consequently, even though these weapons do little to enhance Russia's military security and do a great deal to distort its defence spending, Moscow almost certainly will continue to rely on them because of these status concerns.

The second combines two policies typical of formerly strong, newly weak countries, and it is thus a replay in many ways of how a weak Soviet Union sought to deal with its neighbors in the 1920s. On

one hand, Moscow has done everything it can to get others to do the heavy lifting for it abroad by attempting to redefine many of its national interests into broader international values. Thus, it has sought to involve the United States and the European Union to put pressure on the Baltic countries over their treatment of Russian-speaking minorities.

And on the other hand, it has used a combination of non-political measures, ranging from economic pressure to outright subversion through the corruption of the political elites of neighbouring countries by various means. Economic pressure *per se* is not necessarily a problem; many countries use it. But subversion through covert means of bribery and covert support of particular parties and personalities is quite another. Sometimes, however, it works extremely well, but it can backfire as the Russian government is now learning.

But it is a third area that is perhaps the most worrisome because it is the least attended to by those involved in security issues. It concerns the flow of drugs and

disease and the trafficking in persons that a weak or failed state cannot stop. HIV/AIDS, antibiotic resistant tuberculosis, and other diseases threaten to become pandemic in the Russian Federation, and the Russian government is not willing or in some cases able to do anything about this. Unfortunately, this makes these things a security threat to Russia's neighbours, one that few discuss now but that is likely to move to the center of conversations about security in the near future.

It is an old observation that the West finds Russia either too strong or too weak. Just now, Russia is too weak but it wants to become strong again. That process will not be easy domestically for all the reasons outlined above. But even more it will pose new kinds of security threats to Russia's neighbours, security threats that will not look like the earlier kind and hence cannot be addressed in a customary manner. And that in turn means that the current failures of the Russian state may be compounded by failures in Western security thinking, a development that would threaten both Russia and the West.