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RUSSIA AFTER COMMUNISM

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So far in this Gresham Lecture series we have heard how the October Revolution transformed Russia into a Soviet Communist state and what followed under Lenin, Stalin and then the Cold War era of Khrushchev and Brezhnev.

In this lecture, we are going to look at Russia after Communism. How did Russia fare when the Soviet Union disappeared? How far has today's Russia been able to put the legacy of its Soviet past behind it? And how far does the country, its leaders and its people still live in its shadow?

Whereas the first three lectures were from distinguished historians, my approach is slight different - that of a journalist and at times an eye witness to some of the events we'll be charting. So where appropriate, I'll be drawing on my own experience.

But before we get to Russia after Communism, I'd like roll the clock back to the lead up to the Soviet collapse, to explore why it happened the way it did and what it felt like at the time.

One of the most surprising things about the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 was that yes, this was a cataclysmic event in historical terms - the demise of a far-reaching Communist empire, the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a newly independent Russia; and yes, the moment of transition was literally marked by explosions: a massive firework display, lighting up the night sky around the Kremlin just as midnight struck on December 31, 1991. But when it came, the event was almost an anti-climax.

The old Soviet Union disappeared not with a bang, but a whimper. State collapse had come to seem almost inevitable, the inescapable outcome of a steadily deepening economic, political and social degradation.

It was of course the decision to elect Mikhail Gorbachev as Kremlin leader in March 1985 which set in train the final act of the drama that was the end of the Soviet Union.

As Professor Polly Jones said in her Gresham lecture, his initial 'perestroika' aim was not to sweep away the Soviet Union at all, but to revitalise a moribund and dysfunctional system. To begin with, he and his aides had only an inkling of the problem. It was only when they got past the extravagant claims of Soviet rhetoric and read the secret Politburo papers which exposed how rotten the country's economy was, that they realised that much deeper reforms would be needed. I remember Alexander Yakovlev, one of Gorbachev's closest allies in the Politburo at the time, telling me that it was like peeling an onion: you took off one layer, then stripped off another and another, but then found that all you were left with at the core was a tangle of lies and corrupt practices.

Moreover in 1985 Gorbachev had personal reasons to seek evolutionary rather than revolutionary change. At Moscow university in the 1950s, one of his closest student friends had been a young Czech called Zdeněk Mlynář who later became a leading figure in the Prague Spring - the socialist reform movement in

Czechoslovakia which in 1968 was suppressed by a Soviet led invasion. Years later I interviewed Gorbachev for a TV documentary and he confessed that the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 had left him sick to his stomach. It convinced him that any future reform in his own country would only succeed if it was done cautiously, step by step, to avoid a violent backlash from reform opponents in the Party leadership.

So when Gorbachev came to power, his approach was a deft game of brinkmanship which was in fact a balancing act: keeping the Communist old guard on board by convincing them that some updating of the system was in their interest, while fuelling a popular appetite for change from below by lifting the lid on censorship – his policy known as 'glasnost' or openness. In effect, the idea was to enlist the people's support to strengthen his position against his own sceptical colleagues in the Soviet Politburo and other conservative Communist leaders in Eastern Europe.

But Gorbachev's attempts to proceed slowly did not work. Not only had he and his fellow Kremlin reformers underestimated the depth of the country's economic problems; they had not reckoned on the extent of popular disillusionment with the Communist Party and its 70 year monopoly on power – both in the Soviet client states of Eastern Europe where discontent simmered, barely concealed, beneath the surface, and in the Soviet Union's own increasingly restless republics and eventually even in Russia itself – a challenge which was to become an existential battle for the Soviet Union's continued survival.

Ironically – given the decades of suspicion and hostility between the Cold War rivals - what proved easier to manage was embarking on a new era of international relations, and in particular a series of ground-breaking arms deals with the United States to slash back stockpiles of nuclear weapons.

The first superpower summit between Mikhail Gorbachev and the American President, Ronald Reagan, took place in 1985. Several more followed, and were continued by the next US President, George H. Bush. And these summits were about much more than nuclear weapons. Personal contacts between the leaders and other senior officials broke down years of mistrust on both sides and opened doors to other sorts of collaboration.

One, perhaps less well-known, aspect of these contacts was that it proved to be a way to help Gorbachev better understand the workings of a modern market economy – something his education based on Marxist Leninist economic theory had left him ill-prepared for. President Reagan's Secretary of State at the time was George Shultz, a Professor of International Economics from Stanford University in California. He once told me that on his many visits to the Kremlin he took to bringing the flow charts and diagrams he used in his student seminars, to illustrate to an eager Gorbachev how global macro-economics and international trade patterns worked.

This story of the warming up of East-West relations was at the time expressed above all as a moral imperative: the mutual obligation of the two Cold War superpowers, who between them held more than 90% of all nuclear weapons, to work together to pull the world back from the danger of a nuclear conflagration.

But on the Kremlin's side it was also driven by economics. The Soviet Union had to reduce its military expenditure. The cost of an escalating arms race, recently ramped up by President Reagan, was unaffordable, especially if Gorbachev was to have a hope of tackling the dire inefficiencies and shortages which left Soviet consumers so frustrated.

The country needed to catch up with the West technologically. In the late 1980s the US and Europe were moving towards personal computers and mobile phones, but Russian shopkeepers were still totting up bills on abacuses.

And the Soviet oil lakes of Western Siberia, which since the 1950s had been an easy source of domestic energy and provided crucial export revenues, were beginning to run dry: deeper drilling and an injection of foreign know-how were urgently needed. Adding to the economic pressure, the global oil price also dropped, reducing the amount of foreign currency coming into the government's coffers – to this day a vulnerability which periodically shakes the Russian economy.

It's worth noting that the narrative you hear from anti-Western commentators in Russia today about the 1980s is that Gorbachev was hoodwinked by the Americans and other Western leaders into pursuing policies at odds with the Soviet national interest. The argument goes that the real aim of the West (then as now) was not to help the Soviet Union sort out its problems through reforms, but to find ways to weaken and ultimately destroy it. The ramping up of the arms race, the push for political and economic liberalisation, even the drop in the oil price, it's claimed, were all engineered to lead the country to collapse, and Gorbachev was an idiot for going along with it.

In fact, the United States in particular had a lot invested in supporting Gorbachev and the continuation of the Soviet Union – not least because if the Soviet Union disappeared, what guarantees would there be that any new leader would adhere to all the carefully crafted US-Soviet arms control treaties? In the summer of 1991 George H Bush even travelled to Lithuania and Ukraine to urge the growing nationalist movements there not to break ties with Moscow. His appeal to the people of Ukraine to stay inside the Soviet Union for the sake of the greater good is now known as his 'Chicken Kiev' speech.

It was in the Baltic States that the first serious cracks in the Soviet edifice emerged. These three tiny republics had been occupied and then annexed by the Soviet Union during World War Two and always maintained an independence of spirit and a reluctance to see themselves as part of the Soviet Union.

In August 1989 citizens from all three countries joined hands to form a long human chain, stretching hundreds of miles from Estonia in the north, through Latvia, to Lithuania in the south, just one of many mass protests against what they claimed was an illegal Soviet occupation.

Their campaign for independence was reinforced by what happened in Eastern Europe. In late 1989 the Berlin Wall came down and before long across Eastern European Communist governments were being replaced by non- Communists who swiftly opted to leave Moscow's security alliance, the Warsaw Pact, and turn their countries westwards.

Rejecting the Brezhnev doctrine which had led the Soviet Union to crush the Prague spring in 1968, Gorbachev made it clear that he was not prepared to use force to retain Moscow's hold on Eastern Europe. His foreign policy spokesman, Gennady Gerasimov, joked that now there was a 'Sinatra Doctrine', each country was being told it could decide its future course for itself and 'do it my way', like the Frank Sinatra song.

If Gorbachev had anticipated a slow loosening of ties it would have allowed a new pan-security umbrella to emerge across East and West Europe – a 'new European home', as he called it. He was mistaken. Instead, Soviet power and influence in Eastern Europe evaporated precipitously. Gorbachev did a deal with the German Chancellor Helmut Kohl to accept German reunification if West Germany helped fund the repatriation of Soviet troops. But the issue of what future arrangements there should be for European security remained contentious. Gorbachev subsequently complained (a complaint Vladimir Putin took up after him) that NATO leaders had promised that their Alliance would not extend eastwards. The Americans say there were no firm commitments.

Over the next two decades NATO enlargement did indeed take place, to meet the demands of first Eastern European nations and then the Baltic States to be allowed under the NATO security umbrella, in part out of fear that one day they might need protecting from a resurgent Russia. At one point during George W. Bush's Presidency the possibility of NATO membership was even dangled in front of the former Soviet republics of Georgia and Ukraine, to the anger of Moscow. The result, as we now know, is that the issue became a major point of disagreement between Russia and the West. But in the chaotic days of Soviet collapse, just predicting what would happen next week, let along years later, was all but impossible.

Not everyone saw the implosion of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe coming. Vladimir Putin, then a KGB officer in Dresden in East Germany, was one of those caught out. In his autobiography, First Person, he describes how he and his colleague burnt classified documents day and night, fearing that a lynch mob might break in and

confiscate the secret material. In their fluster to destroy it as quickly as possible, they managed to set the furnace on fire.

This glimpse of frantic a young KGB officer, wrong-footed by events which seemed to have come out of nowhere to destroy his country and his own professional career too, is instructive. It helps explain why later President Putin was to call the breakup of the Soviet Union 'the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century. It was an early incident which probably helped underpin his later suspicion of popular revolts in Georgia and Ukraine, as well as the Arab uprisings in Cairo and Tunis in 2011, where mass crowds succeeded in ousting unpopular (but he would argue still legitimate) governments.

Back inside the Soviet Union in 1990, the Baltic States were first in the queue to follow Eastern Europe's lead in pushing for greater freedom from Moscow. Gorbachev tried to resist, but by now he was unable to stop the process which he had initiated.

Not only was the Soviet economy in crisis and the Soviet Communist party no longer all powerful, but the demands for more autonomy or even outright secession were soon echoed in other Soviet republics, including the two most important republics: Ukraine, where a nationalist movement called The People's Movement of Ukraine', or 'Rukh', was becoming increasingly radicalised, and in Russia itself, where a campaign for Russia to be allowed to run its own affairs became the rallying cry of a new Russian leader called Boris Yeltsin.

In August 1991 the crisis came to a head when Soviet military and security chiefs, desperately trying to turn the clock back, staged an attempted coup to try to stop the process of disintegration. Within days the coup failed and served only to hasten a final collapse.

By the end of December 1991 Gorbachev had no choice but to stand down as Soviet President, hand over the codes for the nuclear suitcase to the new Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, and make a dignified exit into a long retirement. The Soviet flag was lowered from the Kremlin flagpole and the Russian tricolour raised in its place. The fifteen Soviet republics, including Russia, became independent nations. The Soviet Union was no more.

It's hard now to remember that when Boris Yeltsin took over from Gorbachev as the first ever Russian President to occupy the Kremlin, he was still hugely popular. In the Putin era the tendency has been to remember him as a figure of ridicule who was an embarrassment to his country. But back then in early 1992 he was seen as energetic and courageous, a symbol of the renewal that Russia desperately needed. He was the hero who stood on a tank to urge the Russian people to defy the August 1991 attempted coup, the reformer prepared to take radical decisions where Gorbachev had been prone to hesitation, and a new President who was making it possible to revive Russia's national identity from its near death during the Soviet era.

However it did not take long for it to become clear that the new Russian President's behaviour was somewhat troubling. He would disappear for days at moments when a clear sense of direction was urgently needed, especially to tackle the floundering economy. When he did emerge into public view, his speech was sometimes slurred and elliptical. His aides claimed it was due to medication for old sports injuries, but other rumours suggested alcoholism. It was as though the impossible burdens of the state were physically overpowering and aging him. His absences reinforced a growing sense of chaos and uncertainty.

The challenges he and his new government faced were astronomical. Their economic plan was known as 'shock therapy'. The aim was try to move Russia as fast as possible into a market economy. The new reformers believed that only by swiftly eliminating the vestiges of the old Soviet state controlled system and stimulating private enterprise, could the country hope to kick start its economy again and avoid the danger of a counter coup – a stealthy return to old bureaucratic habits and backhanders by those too invested in the old system to relinquish it.

Small scale private enterprise was sanctioned virtually overnight. Price controls were lifted, and prices on all but a few basic food stuffs were allowed to float as high as the market could bear. It was a radical move to stimulate

productivity, in order to refill the empty shop shelves and deliver to Soviet consumers the goods they had for so long been unable to access.

So, whereas in the Soviet Union I once saw an old lady arrested for the innocent crime of selling home-made cakes to commuters at a bus stop, now such activities were positively encouraged. Kiosks selling snacks and trinkets popped up overnight on pavements and in underpasses. Corner shops selling groceries became commonplace. Amateur traders lined up outside metro stations to hawk anything they thought there might be a market for, from buckets of potatoes and flowers from the gardens, to family antiques and second hand clothes, to live kittens snuggled inside an overcoat.

But on a larger scale, introducing private enterprise to a centrally planned economy which had been focused around heavy industry and an outsized military sector for several decades was no easy task. In Soviet times, private ownership had been banned, so the state was the country's only employer. State factories and collective farms did not just provide jobs for local people, they also ran local schools, kindergartens, culture centres and polyclinics.

The new Russian government came up with a scheme to distribute vouchers to citizens so they could participate in a nationwide privatisation scheme. This was all very well, but where a factory came with school and hospital attached and was loss making and uncompetitive, who would want to buy into that burden? And if not, who should shoulder the responsibility for the social services? In some places the local economy of a whole town or city was totally dependent on a single metalwork factory, tannery or smelting plant. Many of these were in remote provinces where people lived much of the year in harsh wintery conditions. To leave such enterprises prone to bankruptcy in the new unforgiving world of capitalist Russia risked seeing whole communities go under with them.

To make matters worse, the old system of trade barter between factories and suppliers in various parts of the Soviet Union no longer functioned properly, now national borders had replaced the once invisible boundaries between different republics. To begin with the old rouble still functioned as a currency across most of the former Soviet space. But as time went on, alternative currencies emerged, and new customs and trade arrangements took hold. Russia, at the heart of the old Soviet web, was often the loser.

As a result, Russian industrial production plummeted. Enterprises once seen as symbols of Soviet pride closed down. Many of them, especially in smaller provincial towns, remain empty and discarded to this day. This photo of a now defunct industrial zone in south west Moscow was taken in 2015 (accompanying slides can be found on the Gresham College website). The area is still virtually abandoned. Some of its outhouses are rented out as storage space to intrepid start-ups in need of a Moscow address. Sometimes, apparently, the location is hired to movie companies making World War Two films and in need of a suitably derelict backdrop to stage battle scenes.

Not all industry went under. Some enterprising young businessmen bought up loss making plants at knock down prices in return for supporting Yeltsin in his re-election campaign in 1996. The deal became known as 'the sale of the century'. They snapped up failing enterprises in potentially lucrative sectors like oil, gas and precious metals, aware they could turn them into multi-million dollar profit-making export businesses. In time these entrepreneurs became some of Russia's richest men – the so-called oligarchs of Russia.

So what did it feel like for ordinary Russian citizens to be plunged, virtually overnight into this new post-Soviet universe?

Let's be clear that not all of it was bad. Many in Russia were jubilant at the changes. For some it was a liberation. The last remaining restrictions on what could be said in public or published or performed were lifted. Those who were educated and entrepreneurial, or had foreign languages, now had the chance to travel, start new businesses and develop their own individual potential.

As a foreigner living in Moscow, I remember the extraordinary impact of suddenly feeling free from being observed or reported on. It was well known that the KGB monitored foreigners, carefully controlling and even restricting their movements. When I arrived in Moscow as a correspondent in 1989, you needed a special permit even to drive beyond the Moscow ring road. Now, in the early years of post-Communist Russia, we foreigners could travel freely throughout country. And relations with Russian friends became less complicated. A psychological barrier was lifted. No longer was there the fear that someone might be eavesdropping or keeping an eye on you.

But for many Russians, especially those who were part of the old system – Communist party members, government officials, or (like Vladimir Putin) members of the KGB security services or the army - what had happened was a tragedy. They were now being blamed for all the ills of the old system. And those who found themselves pensioned off and out of a job had to scramble to find new careers as consultants or commercial dealers.

Mr Putin reinvented himself to become deputy mayor of St Petersburg and from there leapfrogged into a political career in the Kremlin in Moscow. But for other Russian citizens, trapped in remote parts of the country such opportunities were non-existent For these people with little experience of the outside world and little understanding of the risks as well as the benefits of a market economy, the transition wasn't just scary, it was terrifying.

The old world may have been characterised by food shortages and miserable living standards, and restrictions from the Party on what you could say and do, but at least everyone had a job, and prices always stayed the same. Now suddenly there was no proper state safety net and rampant hyperinflation. Many people stayed in jobs even when their firms couldn't afford to pay them, out of fear of being left with nothing. I can remember men on the factory floor telling me they had been working for six months without pay, just the odd bag of oranges or slab of meat as compensation for unpaid wages.

In the first week after price controls were lifted in January 1992 I went out on the street to gauge the reaction. Ordinary people- especially the elderly on low incomes - were panic-stricken. It wasn't just the new prices - one egg suddenly cost one old lady's monthly pension - but a terrible realisation that free prices meant tomorrow's egg could be even more expensive.

Even for younger people who spoke English and had a modern education it was a huge adjustment. Not all shopkeepers wanted to shoulder risk for the first time and lose the comfort of being a state employee. "I'd rather go back to being a state shop. This is too stressful," I remember one bookshop owner telling me, when I went on a tour of newly privatized shops that had been proudly organized by the World Bank.

Some people took a while to grasp fundamentals. I sat in on one seminar for Russian banking officials run by a British accounting firm. At the end of the presentation one young Russian accountant put up his hand and asked in English: "Excuse me, what is profit?"

By contrast some saw the new Russia as a lucrative business opportunity, especially those who had learnt the tough rules of competition from the cutthroat and once underground illegal world of the Soviet black market.

Interestingly it turned out that quite a few of Russia's oligarchs had been schooled in mathematics or theoretical physics. I once remarked on this to one of them and he jokingly replied: "In our university seminars we had to solve theoretical problems in five or six dimensions: adapting to the new rules of post-Soviet society was easy: just like solving a new problem."

But for most people the confusion caused by the end of the Soviet Union was overwhelming; the rupture of economic links with former republics; the new refugees; the hyperinflation; the scary and unfamiliar prospect of unemployment; and the disturbingly violent clashes which erupted first between President Yeltsin and his own parliament in 1993, and then a damaging and disruptive war against separatists in the southern region of Chechnya.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the upheaval and stress many experienced. In four short months at the end of 1991, the Communist apparatus that ruled Russia for over 70 years was outlawed, the Soviet Union was abolished and Russia's new President Boris Yeltsin brought in a new young team of reformers who removed price controls and began large scale privatization. Each of those changes was revolutionary.

Imagine the impact on Britain of something like that.

Taking everything into consideration, it is not surprising that life expectancy levels in Russia plummeted. Between 1987 and 1994, according to one RAND research paper, the number of people dying each year in Russia went up by nearly a million. "You normally would only expect to see a population decline like that when a country had been through a war," one World Health Organization official once told me.

That was the world many Russians found themselves in when the Soviet Union collapsed. No wonder the buzz words 'democracy' and 'liberalism' became pejorative. And 'business' which had always meant shady dealings in Soviet times, was now equated with thievery and corruption.

Added to that was the bewilderment they felt when it came to their own identity. One moment they were citizens of an international superpower, a country with as many nuclear weapons as the United States, as many Olympic medals, celebrated Nobel prize-winners, a world class tradition of literature, ballet and music, and a space programme which was actually in better shape than NASA's. The next minute that country had vanished overnight, and the new Russia which took its place was an economic basket case saddled with debts it couldn't service, treated as a poor relation by the West, a land littered with bankrupt factories, and poorly protected by an army which couldn't even feed itself or maintain its equipment.

I remember visiting Sevastopol in 1994, the port at the southernmost tip of the Crimean peninsula where the Russian Black Sea Fleet has its home, leasing it from newly independent Ukraine which had inherited Crimea when the Soviet Union fell apart. Every morning the sailors would swab the decks, and line up to salute the Russian flag. But the big grey vessels never left harbour. They couldn't even afford the fuel to go out on exercise.

Incidentally, even then Sevastopol was a bastion of Soviet patriotism. Walk down the main street and you could be forgiven for thinking the Soviet Union was still alive and well. Statues of Soviet military heroes still graced the city squares. Red Communist party slogans hung from the rooves. No wonder, as we'll hear, Vladimir Putin some twenty years later was able to use the city's patriotic fervour and nostalgia for the Soviet past to demonstrate why Crimea should re-join Russia.

Much has been said about the sense of Russian loss and humiliation following the Soviet collapse. And rightly so. It should not be underestimated. To Western observers, the end of Soviet Communism seemed like a good news story- for Russians as well as everyone else. An extraordinary end to over 70 years of political oppression, and a revolution which happened almost without bloodshed.

I remember a series of BBC radio documentaries I made at the time which we called - 'A revolution without shots.' And I have often thought since what a credit it was to the Russian people – and their leaders – that they managed this painful transition so peacefully, in comparison to the bloodshed and near anarchy which followed the end of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, for instance, or the end of Colonel Gaddafi's long rule in Libya, or the long civil war in Syria.

But it turns out that my assumption this was a revolution without shots was probably too glib. A devastating second war with Chechnya in 2000, a short war in Georgia in 2008 and the simmering conflict in Eastern Ukraine since 2014 were also lingering consequences of the Soviet Empire unravelling. It's just that it took a while for the after effects to erupt into bloodshed and violence.

Let us fast forward through the 1990s to December 31, 1999 and the moment when Boris Yeltsin out of the blue announced that he was resigning and handing over to a young relatively unknown official called Vladimir Putin.

Yeltsin was in part responding to the popular mood. He was visibly ailing and although he had won re-election in 1996, his domestic support had all but evaporated, especially after a shock financial crisis in 1998, triggered by an overnight decision by the Russian government to devalue the rouble and default on its domestic debt. It was an economic adjustment which the country as a whole recovered from relatively quickly. But the many Russians who had hidden money beneath mattresses because they did not trust the country's banks, found their life's savings were wiped out. Moreover negotiations to end the war in Chechnya had not succeeded in ending terrorist attacks by Chechen rebels, some of them in the Russian heartlands. The country seemed to be in inexorable decline. From the grass roots to the country's elite, there was a feeling that change was needed.

Putin, only recently appointed as Boris Yeltsin's fifth prime minister in two years, was at first a rather grey figure, as befitted a man who had made his early career in the KGB. He seemed to have been selected for his loyalty, an impression reinforced when his first gesture as Mr Yeltsin's chosen successor was to guarantee the former President a comfortable retirement and immunity from prosecution.

Subsequently some officials and oligarchs with close links to Yeltsin said Putin had looked like an efficient administrator who could be relied upon to push through the basic reforms needed to stabilise the economy and encourage growth. He seemed committed to an agenda of economic liberalisation and good relations with Western allies; and he was young and in vigorous good health, unlike Yeltsin.

Now some of these same people say privately that they bitterly regret the choice, and would never have supported him if they had realised he might fall back on his KGB instincts to make national security such an overwhelming priority, to the exclusion of civil liberties and economic considerations. But in late 1999 and early 2000s, the new acting President seemed a solid bet for the country. He soon emerged from the shadows to position himself as a man of action.

His insistence on starting a new war in Chechnya, after Chechen militants invaded a neighbouring territory, marked him out early on as decisive, brutal, and something of a risk taker. One former senior Kremlin official once told me that Putin's advisers had warned him not to start a second war in Chechnya, recalling that the first disastrous campaign had nearly cost Yeltsin his re-election. But Putin, determined to root out what he saw as a major Islamist terror threat in southern Russia, went ahead anyway.

Some Kremlin opponents have suggested a darker side to the start of the second Chechen campaign. They point to the terrible apartment bombings in Moscow and other cities in September 1999 which killed more than 290 and injured over a thousand people, spreading shock waves across the country. The former Russian KGB agent, Alexander Litvinenko – later to be assassinated in London – was one of several outspoken critics who suggested the bombing might have been staged deliberately by the Russian security services to increase public support for a new Chechen war and enhance Putin's popularity, paving the way for him to be confirmed as Russia's President a few months later. Putin dismissed such allegations as 'delirious nonsense'.

In other ways Putin's early moves and statements boosted his popularity more unambiguously, both at home and abroad, His first address to the nation called for Russia to overcome its past by fashioning an economy that would generate stability, prosperity and restore its international prestige. To do this, he argued that better relations with Western leaders and deeper reforms to attract foreign investors had to be a priority. Before he had even been elected President he invited NATO's Secretary-General to Moscow to smooth over the row between Russia and the West over NATO's 70 day bombing campaign in former Yugoslavia over the issue of Kosovo. In a BBC interview in 2000 Putin even went so far as to declare that he 'wouldn't rule out' the possibility of one day joining NATO and confirmed that he saw Russia as part of 'European culture.'

If Western leaders were encouraged by these first steps from the new Kremlin leader, the response inside Russia verged on adulation. Helped by a flat tax which nudged people into paying taxes for the first time and bolstered by a welcome steep rise in global oil prices, he was soon able to show that much needed money was pouring into the government's coffers. This enabled the government to increase pensions and some public sector wages, as well as pay off the country's foreign debt and start building up a sovereign wealth fund. The turn-around from the calamitous financial crisis in 1998 was dramatic. Between 1999 and 2006 real disposable income doubled. Russians had entered a period of unprecedented prosperity. Their country was back on the world stage

again as an undisputed global power. They began to feel that Russia deserved to be called 'great' again, and they had their President, Vladimir Putin, to thank for it.

There was plenty of reason for different sectors of Russian society to rally round their new President: the pensioners who for the first time saw their monthly incomes rise to a level which it was possible to survive on; the more educated Russians from the so called Soviet 'intelligentsia', who in the 1980s had applauded the end of state control and move to liberalise the country, but who in the 1990s saw their own benefits and job security dwindle as market forces replaced the old guarantees of state support; those who had served in the armed forces, police and security services, who welcomed his moves to revive the country's global reputation and prioritise its security needs; the workers who directly benefitted from the turn-around in the economy, with back salaries now being paid, and new jobs on offer.

But before long it became clear that President Putin was only prepared to go so far in opening up the economy to the outside world and in particular to Western partners.

On the domestic front, alongside the early calls for deeper reforms and more western investments, came moves designed to strengthen control over many aspects of Russian society. First of all oligarch owners of independent TV stations were targeted, leading all main national television channels to fall under state control. Then the entire clan of oligarchs were summoned to the Kremlin and instructed to stay clear of politics altogether. When one of them, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, ignored that order he was arrested and given a long prison sentence. Further measures to increase central control over politics included new rules to make it harder for opposition parties to enter parliament, and a provision to give the Kremlin final say over the appointment of regional governors. Alongside this was a steady shrinking of the airtime and public space available to Kremlin opponents.

In foreign policy, Putin's apparent growing disenchantment with Western powers led to warnings that Russia would not allow itself to be taken for granted or ignored, especially when it came to issues of its own security, and especially in the former Soviet republics which President Putin insisted was still rightfully to be regarded as Russia's sphere of influence, a security cordon to keep foreign threats at bay, as it had been in Soviet times.

On this score, the growing crisis in Putin's relations with the West first came to a head in 2008. Two former Soviet republics, Georgia and Ukraine, now governed by pro-Western leaders who came to power in through popular uprisings, signalled that they were keen to join NATO.

You only have to glance at a map to realise that if you were a Russian President with a KGB background who had always been fixated on control and security, and who was by now deeply suspicious of the West, this looked like a NATO plot to take over the Black Sea coast, right the way round from Georgia, through Turkey, to Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine – including Crimea –, leaving Russia with just a small coastal foothold.

Russian retaliation came that summer. Up till now Mr Putin's assertiveness had been largely rhetorical – the threat of placing Russian nuclear missiles in Kaliningrad to oppose America's planned missile shield in Europe, a belligerent speech at the annual Munich Security conference to warn the West it ignored Russia at its peril. But suddenly in early August 2008 Russian troops, tanks and other hardware stationed in the Caucasus rolled across the border into Georgia to conduct a short but bloody war and bring two chunks of Georgian territory, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, under de facto Russian control. They remain under Russia's thumb to this day.

At the time, to avoid a dangerous confrontation with Moscow, the West more or less accepted Russia's claim that its troops had intervened on a humanitarian mission, to come to the rescue of its peacekeepers caught up in a skirmish with Georgian soldiers.

In retrospect, though, Western views changed. Now it is accepted that the invasion was at least in part a well - planned operation to send a deliberate message to NATO not to intervene in Russia's back yard. Indeed the Russian Prime minister Dmitry Medvedev even admitted as much in a chance remark.

And that suspicion was confirmed when six years later, in 2014, Russian troops intervened in a neighbouring republic again. This time the former Soviet republic which had angered Moscow by seeking closer relations with

the West was Ukraine. And Moscow's punishment was to annex that strategic foothold in the Black Sea, home of its Black Sea Fleet, a region which had once belonged to Russia before it was handed by Soviet leaders to Ukraine in the 1950s –the triangular rocky peninsular called Crimea.

Vladimir Putin initially denied his troops' involvement in the takeover of Crimea, claiming the 'little green men' in charge of the operation were not Russians but local volunteers. But within weeks he had formally confirmed Crimea's annexation by Russia and declared he was prepared to intervene in any country where he felt Russians were at risk. Then he unashamedly, even defiantly, held a ceremony to award Kremlin medals to the Russian forces involved. Within a month the conflict had spread to Eastern Ukraine where a low level damaging conflict simmers to this day.

The Russian justification for what it did was that the interventions in Georgia and Ukraine were no less and no more than what NATO had done to support Kosovo's bid to break away from former Yugoslavia in 1999 – based on humanitarian need and the right of small entities to self-determination. The West had set the precedent, said Moscow, and if now it didn't like it when someone else played by the same rule book, well it should have thought of that before.

And the message to the West from the Kremlin also began to change. Where once Russian officials complained their country had been the victim of lazy stereotypical Cold War thinking in the West which unfairly painted it as a menacing bear, now Putin seemed to relish the image, noting that a bear's claws could inflict real damage. He warned the West that if it would not accept Russia's demands – for proper respect and an equal say in everything, with new rules of the games which offered proper parity not unipolar dominance -, then there would be no rules at all, with the attendant risk that the world would descend into chaos.

While he played up Russia's supposed strength, at home President Putin also warned Russians they needed to be ready to defend their country. The wider message, repeated to a domestic audience via Russian television was that the United States and the West in general was now the enemy, and once again, as during World War Two against a fascist threat from Hitler and during the Cold War against NATO, Russians needed to be ready to defend the Motherland.

For Western governments the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Ukraine in 2014 was a watershed moment. Diplomats talked of it being the first change of borders by force in Europe since the Second World War. Targeted sanctions were imposed on Russia by the US and the EU and the slide into mutual suspicion and recrimination accelerated.

From now on, NATO command saw evidence of worrying Russian aggression in every direction: in the escalation of its military activity, in the constant massive readiness exercises conducted by its troops, in the frequent buzzing of NATO air and sea defences, in cyber-attacks – first on Estonia, then on Ukraine.

Before long, Western government were looking more closely at the information warfare being skilfully conducted by Russia both through traditional TV and radio channels and less traditional trolling to shape conversations, trends and even election outcomes on social media sites. The old Cold War divide was back.

In the years since the Crimean annexation the crisis in East West relations has continued to deepen. The attempted murders of a former Russian spy and his daughter in Salisbury in the UK led to a full blown tit for tat of diplomatic expulsions, a ramping up of sanctions against Russia by both Britain and many of its NATO allies, and a new round of ferocious accusations on both sides about where the responsibility for the attack lay.

Some analysts have suggested that the Kremlin's increasing focus on the 'enemy without' was not primarily about real external threats at all, but much more about Mr Putin's fear of what could happen to his own power if the 'contagion' spread to Russia: a popular uprising, toppling the President and destroying his power base, so that – like the deposed leaders of Iraq, Libya or Ukraine - all he could do was flee for his life to escape mobbing rioters.

Certainly after the so called Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 which ousted Eduard Shevardnadze and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 which removed – for the first time – Viktor Yanukovich, Mr Putin expressed a deep suspicion of popular 'coloured' uprisings which in the name of democracy and claiming to express the will of the people overturned election results and brought down governments.

Then in late 2011, to the astonishment of most observers and opposition leaders, tens of thousands of Russians took to the street in Moscow and some other cities, incensed at what they saw as widespread fraud in parliamentary elections - apparently to hide the fact that the Kremlin's favoured party was heading for likely defeat. Within days the demands of the crowd had shifted from calling for a rerun of the elections to calling for Putin to step down.

There can be little doubt he must have been profoundly shaken. His authority and legitimacy rested on him being demonstrably the Russian people's preferred choice as leader. Yet here were thousands of people on the streets of the capital, calling for his removal.

The following March, in 2012, he ran for the Presidency to return for a third term. As the polls closed and exit polls began to predict he would win by a landslide, he came out of the Kremlin to be congratulated by a specially gathered crowd of supporters. What was extraordinary was his emotion. His voice was hoarse, tears rolled down his cheeks. His spokesman insisted it was just a cold wind making his eyes water. But it looked like the relief of a leader who had not been sure he could take back the Presidency without mishap.

So when two years later Ukraine's pro-Russian President was once again removed from office, behind Putin's evident fury at the turn of events must also have been a concern that if Ukraine were to succeed in transforming itself into a prosperous, modern, democratic state, it might become a model which could also infect Russia. What if, instead of being constantly grateful to Vladimir Putin for saving them from the nightmare of the 1990s, the Russian people took to the streets again, to call for regime change?

In Putin's view, since members of the US Administration had openly backed first the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, then the street protests in Moscow in 2011 and then the second 'Maidan' uprising in Ukraine in 2014, clearly the US government was essentially hostile and would take any opportunity it could to use the same techniques to unseat him from the Kremlin. By the time Vladimir Putin was once again re-elected in 2018 to start a fourth Presidential term, it was clear that his recipe for remaining in power was try to eliminate any possible challenges which he thought might threaten his position.

There is little doubt that Russia has in recent years been subsumed and shaped by a wave of patriotic fervour, part of it spontaneous and part of it engineered by the government. The Soviet style military parades we now see on Red Square on certain annual holidays are just one expression of that. This patriotic mood has empowered once marginal groups, such as the ultra-nationalists who talk repeatedly of the threat Russia faces from external enemies and internally from 'fifth columnists' and other traitors.

What is striking is that the views of these ultra-nationalists are now part of the mainstream discourse. Members of the Duma, the Russian parliament, as well as powerful players in the media, academia and even in business, will assert that those who oppose the government might well work for the CIA, and should be considered potential threats to national security. It is a message constantly driven home on Russian television.

In some quarters, tougher Western sanctions have intensified the patriotism, feeding suspicion and even defiance. Some Russians have even actively welcomed sanctions, as a way to cut ties with the West and make the country more self-reliant by substituting imports with home grown produce and productions. And the fact of sanctions is also of course a useful pretext for the Russian government to blame the West for any difficulties in the economy. Only those already critical of the government, or sophisticated in their understanding of the economy, point out that many of Russia's economic problems are of its own making.

There are also some indications that this new mood is not just limited to an older population, nostalgic for what they claim were the advantages of the old Soviet system, and resentful of the West for what they perceive as the

humiliations of the 1990s. The patriotic belief that Russia must ward itself against its enemies also extends to a much younger post-Soviet generation.

Some reports suggest that young men are queueing up in some places to join military academies to prepare for any threat that might emerge from a foreign enemy. After-school clubs run by the far-right 'Rodina', or 'Motherland' party, train young boys and girls to load weapons, seek out enemies and see themselves as young holy warriors. At one such club which I visited, the organisers had even taken some of the youngsters as volunteers to help the pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine and to witness war at first hand.

School curriculums have changed to focus on Russian military victories and instances of American aggression. Go into a bookshop and you'll find no books in the history section on the dark side of 20th century Russia – the gulags and repressions of Stalin's Russia. Instead Stalin is painted as a war hero who saved Russia – and Western Europe – in the Second World War and deserves to be better recognised.

Some towns have even voted to put back statues to honour Stalin. Thirty years ago it would have been difficult to imagine such a turn of events would ever be possible in Russia. It is a symbolic gesture which has perhaps more than anything else has felt like a throwback to a former Soviet era.

So what might happen next in Russia?

Is it 'back to the future', with a return not just to the Soviet emblems at parades on Red Square, but an increasingly neo-Soviet retrenchment in political and economic life and a further widening of the breach between Russia and the West?

Or in time could the country return to the process of economic liberalisation and the development of democratic institutions which got off to that shaky start in the 1990s?

In other words, are we observing the likely authoritarian path which Russia might well follow for the rest of the 21st century? Or is the current trajectory not a fork in the road away from democracy, but merely a temporary detour?

All questions about Russia's future tend to come back to the figure of Vladimir Putin, who has managed to centralise so much political power into his own hands and has studiously avoided having a clear succession strategy. As one of his aides said a few years ago in a comment that went viral - "without Putin there is no Russia, and without Russia, there is no Putin."

So what are we to make of his position and intentions?

It is certainly the case that Mr Putin appears to continue to enjoy extraordinary levels of popularity- 80 % or more according to many opinion polls. What is less clear is how deep that support goes and whether these polls can be taken at face value. When surveying the bright lights and smart shops of the capital, it is hard to remember that in large parts of the country many people have not benefitted from the boom years and are vulnerable to any new dip in the Russian economy. In out-of-the-way Russian provincial areas, life is a story of emptying villages and abandoned factories, many of them empty since Soviet times. There is a constant concern at the lack of resources to keep local services going and a constant fear of rising prices and fewer job prospects.

Unlike in the Gorbachev era when a green light from the Kremlin reassured the people that they could speak out without being punished, it is no longer clear that many Russians are prepared to voice their frustrations in public. In the current climate those who criticise the President run the risk of being accused of treachery.
It could well be that society is more polarized than it appears; that those who support Mr Putin speak out, but those who do not, stay silent – out of fear of the authorities, and the possible opprobrium of others

So could this change?

Certainly if oil prices plummeted again, as happened in 2014, or if the long term impact of the latest Western sanctions forced the Russian economy to contract, the spectre of economic decline could be a problem for the Kremlin. It would challenge Putin's claim that during his time in office he has delivered increasing levels of prosperity and stability. It could raise the spectre of a return to the miseries of the 1990s which were supposed to have gone forever. So what happens to the Russian economy – as so often in the last few decades - could be a critical factor.

For as Kremlin consultants will tell you, Russia may now be under authoritarian rule, but it is not true that Russia is a dictatorship. Putin's popularity matters. He needs to show he has public support to validate his mandate, and to prove to those around him that he is really is irreplaceable. He is an Emperor, and part of the trick is he has to get the crowd to believe he does have clothes, that he is the best answer to Russia's problems. If the illusion is broken – and a serious recession in the economy could shatter many hopes - then he could find his aura of invincibility would also begin to fracture.

In theory Putin is due to step down again from the Presidency in 2024, because according to the Russian constitution he is not allowed to run for a consecutive third term. But some Russians are already thinking ahead to contemplate his possible subsequent return. There are already precedents elsewhere, in Kazakhstan and China for instance, where powerful leaders have changed the constitution to that they can remain presidents for life.

But there is another possibility: that Putin leaves the constitution as it is and - as he did in 2008 - swaps places with a loyal acolyte who takes on the mantle of the Presidency but allows him to remain the real power behind the throne. For let us remember that in Russia's relatively short post-Communist history there has already been a third Russian President: Dmitry Medvedev.

Medvedev was nominated by Putin and elected President in 2008, only to exchange places with Putin in 2012 and become Russian Prime Minister, a post he still holds. Despite repeated rumours that his time might be up, he still remains the only member of government who joins Putin to sit alongside him on photo shoots designed to show the head of state relaxing – skiing, working out in a gym or drinking a cup of tea.

So I'll leave you with a Russian anecdote, which was doing the rounds in 2008. Then it was funny because it seemed such an absurd prediction. Today it sounds like an unsettlingly eerie forecast of a possible future:

The year is 2024. Two old men are sitting in the sun on a bench drinking beer.

One says to the other: "Vladimir Vladimirovich, I can't remember, which of us is President and which is Prime minister?"

The other replies: "It doesn't matter Dima, I'm still in charge. Fetch me another beer."