

Synopsis of *Failed State: A Guide to Russia's Rupture*

Janusz Bugajski

Posted to the World Orders Forum: 29 May 2023

Janusz Bugajski is a Senior Fellow at The Jamestown Foundation in Washington, DC, and has authored 21 books on Europe, Russia, and transatlantic relations. His recent books include *Failed State: A Guide to Russia's Rupture* (2022), and *Eurasian Disunion: Russia's Vulnerable Flanks* (with Margarita Assenova) (2016). Bugajski has been a Senior Fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) and was Director of the New European Democracies program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC. He has served as consultant for the US Department of Defense and US Agency for International Development (USAID) and was a course chair for Central Europe and South Central Europe Area Studies at the Foreign Service Institute, US Department of State.

Since its emergence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation has proved unable to develop into a nation-state, a civic state, or a stable imperial state. Even Russian identity is a source of domestic dispute, on whether it should be ethnic (*russki*), imperial (*rossiski*), or civil and non-ethnic. Moscow's extensive war against Ukraine launched in February 2022 has exposed Russia as an anachronistic imperial and colonial state. The approaching rupture of the Russian Federation will be the third phase of imperial collapse following the unravelling of the Soviet bloc and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Some historians even posit that the dissolution will be a continuation of the collapse of the Tsarist empire and the resulting civil wars over a hundred years ago.

The war in Ukraine has unearthed Russia's multiple weaknesses, including a contracting economy that is increasingly squeezed by international sanctions, over-dependence on energy revenues which will plummet throughout 2023 largely because of the loss of the European market, drastically decreasing state revenues and restricted access to international financial markets and investments, military losses in Ukraine that reveal the incompetence and corruption of Russia's ruling elite, growing opposition to regime policy among various sectors of the elite and *siloviki*, and disquiet in numerous regions over their shrinking budgets. The skyrocketing defense budget will lead to less flexibility in government spending, greater burden sharing on defense by regional budgets, and declining spending on essential infrastructure, pensions, salaries, and social services.

The disproportionate mobilization and deaths of non-Russians and poor Russians in the invasion and occupation of Ukraine will aggravate frustration in national republics and regions over Moscow's internal imperialism. Disquiet will be driven by an accumulation of pre-existing grievances, including sharply rising poverty levels, stark socio-economic inequalities, falling federal financial subsidies, deteriorating local infrastructure, environmental disasters, collapsing health care services, rampant official corruption, and additionally in the national republics

intensifying russification and destruction of ethnic identities. Moscow will be increasingly perceived as the exploiting colonial metropolis that has failed to protect and provide welfare to its subjects.

Although Russia's 1993 Constitution defines the country as a federation, in reality it is a centralized and authoritarian neo-imperial construct. As war losses escalate in Ukraine the regime will exhaust its repressive capacities to hold the country together. It will come under increasing domestic pressure and power struggles will be evident between the Kremlin and its critics in the military and security services, between rival nationalist and imperialist factions, and between Moscow and several disaffected republics and regions. We are already witnessing this in the mysterious deaths of over a dozen oligarchs and senior officials, frequent military purges and reshuffling of officers, and open disputes between the Defense Ministry and General Staff and several private armies that have been sponsored by the Kremlin.

The Russian Federation confronts an urgent existential paradox. Without political pluralism, economic reform, and genuine regional autonomy, the federal structure will become increasingly unmanageable. However, even if democratic reforms were undertaken by a weakening central state confronting a destructive war and tightening international sanctions several regions could exploit the opportunity to secede. The chances for violent conflicts may diminish in the event of systemic reform, while the prospects for violent conflict substantially increase if reforms are indefinitely blocked. Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrates that the Kremlin does not respect the international borders of neighboring states. This imperial policy will rebound on Russia itself, as the country's external and internal borders become increasingly disputed by its numerous republics, regions, and neighbors. The loss of captured Crimea and four Ukrainian *oblasts* officially declared as subjects of the Russian Federation will become symbolically and politically important in demonstrating that Moscow is losing territory.

Russia's rupture will not follow a single pattern but is likely to include elements of both the Soviet and Yugoslav scenarios from the 1990s. It will not be a single event but a number of rolling crises, breakdowns, and revolts. Even the collapse of Yugoslavia was not uniform for each emerging state, as several republics largely avoided violent conflicts while the process of disintegration lasted for over a decade. While a number of republics may exit the Russian Federation relatively unscathed, outright conflicts could materialize between the center and several federal subjects, especially those with significant resources. In some parts of the country, Russia's rupture could lead to border disputes between neighboring republics and regions aspiring to independence. It will also embolden the emergence of new states and regional federations in the North Caucasus, Middle Volga, and Siberia seeking to control their own resources and no longer dispatching their men to die for the Kremlin's imperial ambitions.

With thousands of de-mobilized troops returning with weapons to a deteriorating economy and disdainful of the country's political leadership the opportunities for violence will escalate. If Moscow deploys Russian ethno-nationalism in attempts to keep the federal state intact, this will provoke an assortment of ethno-nationalist responses across the country and contribute to more extensive violence. Fanning xenophobia, Islamophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiments could light a fuse that Moscow would be unable to extinguish. Moscow can try to emulate Serbia in the 1990s

by mobilizing ethnic Russians to carve out ethnically homogenous regions from rebellious republics while expelling non-Russian populations, but this will simply hasten state rupture.

The demographic decline of ethnic Russians poses challenges for the country's social, political, and territorial cohesion and will encourage movements for autonomy, secession, and independence. According to census figures between 1989 and 2010, in 14 of the 21 republics the ethnic-Russian population steadily decreased proportionally to the titular nationality. In 13 republics, ethnic Russians form less than half of the total population. In nine republics, ethnic Russians form less than a third of the total population. In 11 republics, the ethnic-Russian population is smaller than that of the titular nationalities, including Chechnya, Chuvashia, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kalmykia, Sakha, Tatarstan, and Tuva. The shrinkage of ethnic Russians continues amidst growing suspicions that the results of the 2021 census were falsified to mask the true extent of contraction among Russian ethnics.

Some national republics where the number of ethnic Russians is shrinking will seek full emancipation and statehood. Moves toward separation by any of the non-Russian republics will also provoke demands for self-determination among several regions with ethnic Russian majorities. This would significantly weaken the center. Instructively, in the early 1990s when the Soviet Union began to unravel, 40% of the predominantly ethnic Russian regions pressed for greater autonomy and some veered toward sovereignty similar to the national republics. Separatist movements often start with demands for economic decentralization and then escalate in response to central government actions and soaring public aspirations. Several predominantly Russian-ethnic regions in Siberia, the Urals, and Far East will benefit from sovereignty and control over local resources, such as fossil fuels, metals, and precious minerals that Moscow exploits much like a colonial empire. As rebellion spreads, the weakened regime with a depleted military and a falling budget will not have the capabilities to simultaneously subdue dozens of republics and regions seeking to control their own resources and obtain genuine sovereignty and international recognition.

Escalating instabilities and growing fractures in the Russian Federation will have an impact on all neighboring countries. Some states will be vulnerable to spillovers of conflict or subject to Moscow's provocations designed to divert attention from domestic upheaval in Russia. Other countries stand to benefit from Russia's weaknesses and cleavages by easing their security concerns, expanding their influence, and even regaining territories lost to various iterations of the Muscovite imperium. 35 republics, *krais* and *oblasts* share a frontier with 14 foreign countries. In addition, several federal subjects that do not currently share borders with foreign countries have long-standing ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic connections either with Russia's immediate neighbors or with nearby states. Such linkages will encourage several neighboring states to play a prominent role in the kindred regions of an unstable Russia, whether to influence political developments, prevent violence, or forestall economic collapse. Some capitals may also recognize kindred entities within the fraying Russian Federation as independent entities, contribute to state-building, and even push for unification and absorption.

Russia's urban and European-based democratic opposition is incapable of transforming an empire into a democratic state. Their insistence on preserving the state in its current borders is also viewed with increasing suspicion among non-Russians, regionalists, and several of Russia's neighbors.

This opens the terrain for alternative voices, particularly for nations and regions demanding self-determination. The message from Washington and European capitals to Russia's citizens during the rupture process needs to be positive, with clear backing for pluralism, democracy, federalism, civil rights, and the autonomy of republics and regions. The population will also need information that Moscow suppresses, especially the advantages of independence and the cultivation of peaceful and productive relations with neighbors. This can help embolden citizens by demonstrating that they are not isolated from the West. Supporting republican and regional self-determination, independence, and statehood will provide hope to citizens in the midst of uncertainty, chaos, and conflict as the imperial state ruptures.