

## “Russia: After the Reset”

Featuring

David Satter

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The Russian political regime has the appearance of being tightly run and generally stable. It is in fact a closed, corrupt, monopolistic and autocratic political system. And like the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East being shaken by the Arab Spring, Russia too is surprisingly brittle. Russians perceive this instability. Those with the means and opportunity are hedging against incipient turmoil by moving their money, property and families out of the country.

Satter laid out 3 sources of instability; the first being *political*. Political power has been steadily concentrated in Vladimir Putin’s executive branch. There are almost no alternate centers of power, for example, in the legislature, media or business community. Oligarchs loyal to the Putin regime are lavished with spoils / patronage. Persons seen as opposing this system face arrest and detention.

- In such a context, there are no correctives to bad policies, nor channels / safety valves for dissipating popular dissent.

The second source of instability is *economic*. The Russian economy is propped up by the export of raw materials / commodities, such as oil. Economic sectors are run as uncompetitive monopolies in collusion with political bosses.

- The problem going forward is that these types of extractive, non-inclusive economic institutions do not lend themselves to innovation and longer-term growth.

The third source of instability is *nationalist / racist*. The Chechen wars of the 1990s bred a broader Islamic insurgency in the Russian Federation’s North Caucasus region, occasionally involving terrorism. Right-wing, xenophobic Russians return, and in some cases provoke, discrimination and violence against non-Slavic North Caucasians.

- This reservoir of nationalist-racist ill will does not bode well for democratic governance.

These simmering instabilities may well explode into political upheaval over the next 3-5 years.

- Russians were politically passive and exhausted in the 1990s following the privations of the Yeltsin years.

- Russians remained politically passive in the late-2000s, desperately hoping that new President Medvedev's liberalizing rhetoric signaled a change.
- Yet domestic hopes for reform were finally quashed by what were widely viewed as fraudulent Parliamentary elections in 2011, and Putin swapping himself back into the Presidency in 2012.
- Russia needs a new Constitution and a return to "glasnost."

In bilateral relations, the enhanced consideration and stature accorded to Russia by Washington as part of the so-called *Reset* have not been reciprocated by Moscow. Satter offered some guidelines for U.S. behavior and interests going forward.

- Don't withhold deserved criticism of Russia in such areas as human rights.
  - Overlooking these obvious problems makes Americans appear imperceptive and naïve, and thus even less deserving of cooperation and support.
- Focus less on the Russian state and more on the Russian people.
  - Washington's interests are less in a certain political regime-type, and more in a system that is sustainably legitimate and accountable to the Russian people.
- The U.S. should avoid fatuous gestures of goodwill. If there are mutual interests we should not hesitate to cooperate.

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