

The last mobilisation?

The recent ceremony at the Kremlin when V. Putin announced annexation of four Ukrainian regions was as futile as it was emblematic of the current state of affairs in Moscow. Its importance lies not in Russia announcing another success in 'reunifying' ancient Russian lands with a blatant violation of international norms, but in admitting the failure of initial goals of invasion of Ukraine and the bankruptcy of Kremlin's foreign policy. Together with grotesque mobilisation and occasional nuclear threats, it confirms how vulnerable and feeble the equilibrium among the Russian political elite is becoming. This trend will only gain on strength in the upcoming months.

Linkages between damaging the Nord Stream pipelines, partial mobilisation, quasi-referendums, the bizarre ceremony at the Kremlin and the time gap between announcing the annexation and approving it by the rubber stamp parliament point to one crucial trend: Russia is weakening at a high pace

What is there beyond Kremlin's fog of war

Putin's speech on September 24 was probably one of the weakest, most repetitive ones we have heard during his presidency. It was deprived of the usual justification of Russia's actions, wrapped in a quasi-legalist and a quasi-academic packaging. He used old slogans without even trying to pretend he believed in them. The same goes for the guests of the ceremony. The Great Hall was full of bored personas, such as Valentina Matviyenko and Ramzan Kadyrov, deprived of their usual fake attentiveness and seriousness. They were there because they were told to but they did not care to show enthusiasm anymore.

These theatricals matter for over the last decade the Russian power vertical has become untransparent much in the Chinese or sometimes even North Korean style. This time there is a number of events that, if linked together, can give us an interesting overview of the current state of affairs in Russia despite the fog of war surrounding the Kremlin.

Reports of Russian occupational forces preparing a referendum, in its form and essence similar to the one carried out in 1939 in eastern Poland, were surfacing already in mid-summer. They were supposed to take place in four regions of Ukraine when the Russian army would take full control of them. They, however, coincided with successful Ukrainian counteroffensive on both northern and southern axis. The latter affected Kremlin's plans so much that the preparations intensified and finally came to fruition in late September.

Its organisation came across as a sign of Russia's strategic defeat in the war which had been supposed to be a blitzkrieg, overthrowing Ukrainian authorities and installing a puppet government or even some form of annexation of the country. Not only did this plan fail, but it turned out to be phantasmagoria due to the catastrophic state of the Russian army, low morale, mistakes made by the supreme command and inferior technologies used in the battlefield. Russian soldiers seemed to have been more busy stealing cars, electronic and underwear than liberating Malorossiya and Novorossiya from a "Western-installed Nazi regime in Kyiv."

Because of the losses and mistakes made during the invasion, Putin announced the so-called partial mobilisation. Its main result has been the outflux of hundreds of thousands young Russian men unwilling to die for the fatherland. The announcement also revealed the scope of corruption among Russian drafting commissions and police forces. It has been yet another loose cog in the kleptocratic wheel. This time, however, its malfunctioning has uncovered growing cracks in the Russian power vertical that became visible thanks to other events accompanying and following the referendum.

Blackmail via destruction

The reports of gas leaks close to the Danish island of Bornholm and the coastline of mainland Sweden came about very unexpected although there had been reports indicating such possibility. Apart from the damage's short- and long-term environmental impact, it brought many questions of geopolitical nature such as: was the leakage done or orchestrated by Russia; what would it gain by making pipelines it constructed at such a high cost inoperable; is it a sign of Kremlin's *désintéressement* about trading gas with Europe?

For one, with a high degree of likelihood we can assume it was an attempt to show the EU and NATO states that Russia is capable of targeting critical energy infrastructure on the Baltic Sea close to their territorial waters. More importantly, it happened right before the

symbolic launch of the Baltic Pipe by Danish and Polish prime ministers, critical for diversification of gas supplies in the region. For the other, the damage occurred just two days before the referendum in the occupied parts of Ukraine.

It is hard not to link the two events given the Russian political culture and the scope of challenges the Kremlin is facing. While sending the threatening message in the Baltic Sea, Russia tried to show it is still ready for dialogue albeit specifically understood. This message was likely sent to all those in Western Europe, in particular in Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, that in the face of skyrocketing gas prices it would be wise to come back to some form of business (almost) as usual. All those countries had been benefitting from Nord Stream 1 thanks to the interconnectors. Even after the leaks they would be able to use the fourth, untouched strand. The message was thus clear: there is still time to back off, but only on Russian terms.

At the same time, the Kremlin sought to leave some field for negotiations over the future status of Ukraine in the view of the successful Ukrainian counteroffensive and the failure of initial goals of the 'special military operation.' While Russian president announced the annexation of the four regions on Thursday, September 29, the parliament was to approve it only on Monday, October 3. During this time, the Kremlin apparently expected some Western governments or political forces in certain countries to consider striking a deal over some sort of territorial division of Ukraine that would end the military phase of the conflict. Again, on Moscow's terms.

Cracks under and on the surface

Such a proposal, albeit might seem unrealistic, points to the scale of problems Russia is facing after over 7 months of war. With apparent political pressure on military commandment, malfunctioning supply chains and low morale of the army, Kremlin's field of manoeuvre has greatly decreased both in international and domestic policies. Many events back this hypothesis, such as Ramzan Kadyrov's and Igor Girkin's growing criticism of Sergei Shoigu and high rank officers or, previously unheard, ambiguous comments made by members of the political elite. The alleged unity of the inner circle, although it has never been there, now has publicly showed significant cracks.

Unless Russian forces start resisting Ukrainian attacks, Vladimir Putin and his acolytes need a way to stop the hot phase of the conflict in order to prevent the total degrading of

Russian military, which would have devastating effects on the system of power created in the last 22 years and is often referred to as Putinism. Yet it is not a fully accurate term. Russian president is the product of a compromise struck by the elites that at some point came to a conclusion that it would serve them best to end the Hobbesian war of all against all. Putin is merely a referee who, although built his own position over time, is not irreplaceable. In this sense, the decision to annex the four Ukrainian regions is a sign of weakness, not strength.

What is next in the pipeline?

By likely damaging (or making them unrepairable) the Nord Stream 1 and 2, as well as annexing parts of Ukrainian territory, Russia attempted to achieve de-escalation by escalation. Now the Kremlin has opened new possible points of confrontation and it has put additional pressure on itself.

The message stemming from the pipelines is clear: Russia will remain a destructive actor in an otherwise successfully integrating Baltic Sea Region. With Finland and Sweden about to join NATO and Denmark having dropped the opt-out clause on the EU defence cooperation, it is likely that the Baltic will turn into a basin where Russian will perform its usual provocative actions with at a higher intensity than ever before. The ports of Baltiysk and Kaliningrad are already serving military and domestic cargo needs. The former is believed to have had a role in the Nord Stream destructive operation (unit no. 45707). The latter is required to secure the flow of supplies to the semi-exclave although it will not be achieved without substantial (and not very likely to happen) investments.

Russian authorities will also apply pressure on Belarus to improve their ability to perform attacks on central and western parts of Ukraine. As gains stemming from the recently announced mobilisation are doubtful, it will be tempting for the Kremlin to make use of the Belarusian army. For Alexandr Lukashenka, it will be a decisive moment that could deprive him of power one or another. If he succumbs, he will become fully vassalized by Moscow. If he objects, the latter can use a web of influence it has been carefully crafting for the last two decades either to replace Lukashenka or to attempt to annex Belarus.

The second scenario should not be rejected a priori because of its apparent propaganda dimension. There are few people in Russia that consider Belarusians as a separate nation. To them, Belarus is a *Saisonstaat* with weak institutions and high degree of Russification of

the population. Such a step, if it does not trigger reaction from NATO states, would lead to yet another ground-breaking change of security environment in Europe, exposing the Baltic states and Poland, as well as NATO and the EU as a whole, to new types of hybrid and classic threats.

Conclusion

1. Linkages between damaging the Nord Stream pipelines, partial mobilisation, quasi-referendums, the bizarre ceremony at the Kremlin and the time gap between announcing the annexation and approving it by the rubber stamp parliament point to one crucial trend: Russia is weakening at a high pace. Its situation will be further deteriorating as the Western sanctions will be even more painful and the support for Ukraine will widen the technological gap between Ukrainian and Russian armed forces.

2. In the perspective of a few months, it can lead to the erosion of the current personal and institutional setting among the Russian *verkhushka*. Putin, like any other leader, is not irreplaceable. Russia's history is full of both violent and velvet coups d'état. Should this happen, however, it will not necessarily mean to pulling back from Ukraine and concluding peace. After all, 'the collective Putin' can easily change into 'the collective Dyumin' (Aleksey Dyumin is the governor of Tula Oblast, and is believed by many to be one of possible successors of Putin).

3. Those who can take control of Russia might want to gain public support and eliminate internal opposition by going over the top. It might not lead to the use of nuclear weapons but an even stronger push to use the country's economic and human resources to reverse the course of action on the front. As much as such a plan is bound to fail, it will prolong the conflict and will increase the probability of things going out of control.

4. It seems the indolence of Russian military and state apparatus under his rule shows no signs of change for the better. As long as the West keeps a unified stance towards Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and the Western societies manage to make it through the winter without much discontent, chances are Russia will be unable to fight a similar war in the years to come and the mobilisation announced by Putin could not be repeated in a foreseeable future. Paradoxically, for now Putin is the West's tactical ally.

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