

UC Irvine

CSD Working Papers

Title

Should Russia Break Up

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/50z1k7m5>

Author

Taagepera, Rein

Publication Date

1999-09-01

CSD Center for the Study of Democracy

An Organized Research Unit
University of California, Irvine
www.democ.uci.edu

We might well ask whether Russia still exists as a state. On paper, the Russian central government is strong, with enormous presidential powers, and restricted by few checks and balances. In reality, governors of many of the ethnically Russian provinces and presidents of the ethnically distinct republics do pretty much as they please. If they are checked at all, it is not by the central government but by industrial barons. The multiple fiefs of the latter may be small, but they carry more clout than many a regional government. Over 80 percent of Russia's finance capital stays in Moscow, badly short-changing the regions. In turn, some regional leaders refuse to transfer tax money to Moscow.

At times the emperor has no clothes. Some other times the clothes have no emperor inside. Has Russia become a military shell with no civilian body in it? And who moves this shell? When after Serbian surrender Russian units unexpectedly seized the Pristina airport in Kosovo, Yeltsin disclaimed responsibility. Since then the pretension that the president of Russia is in charge of its nuclear missiles sounds hollow.

Russia Has Fractured

Depending on geography and the character of local power-holders, the degree of local autonomy varies from abject dependence on handouts from Moscow to extensive autarky, including preparations for launching local currencies if and when the ruble fails completely. In fields like foreign relations the central government still has appreciable power, but it is steadily eroding. This is not a well-regulated federation, where central and local rights are spelled out and uniformly implemented. Increasingly, might makes right.>

History offers us many previous examples of sub-units gaining factual independence while still paying lip service to an empire (or other unifying concept) that is just an empty shell. This applies to the Egyptian Old Empire after 2300 BC, the Contending States emerging from Chou Empire after 600 BC, the Caliphate after 850, France after 900, Germany after Barbarossa, and arguably the post-Kiev Russian states after 1100. Such an arrangement was often connected with feudalism.

Such quasi-feudalism is not necessarily bad in our own times, when other options are limited. But in present-day Russia it is a halfway house where the people are getting the worst of both worlds. The industrial and territorial barons enjoy privileges without responsibilities. For

REIN TAAGEPERA has taught political science at the University of California, Irvine since 1970 and also at Tartu University, Estonia since 1992. His books include *Seats and Votes: The Effects and Determinants of Electoral Systems* (with Matthew Shugart, Yale UP 1989), and *The Finno-Ugric Republics and the Russian State* (Hurst 1999).

one, they can undertake actions that undermine the ruble, and stick the central government with the task of propping it up. If Governor Evgeni Nazdradenko of the Vladivostok area or president Kirsan Iliumzhinov of Kalmykia led fully independent states, the weakness of their separate currencies might well marginalize them. If the governors ran separate states, at least the more responsible leaders could save their own fiefs without having to absorb the side effects created by the more reckless ones. Alternately, a genuinely strong central government could call the reckless to order and also rein in the industrial barons. A clear move in either direction would be preferable to a prolongation of the present situation.

Which alternative is more likely to prevail? In other states, once fractionalization set in, the original imperial center has rarely reasserted itself. Yes, the Capetians gradually restored royal power in Paris. More often, however, the emancipation of successor states runs its course. Reunification comes about only when one of these new states, often a geographically marginal one, becomes a new power center and gradually absorbs the rest: Ch'in among the post-Chou Contending States, Muscovy in post-Kiev Russia, Prussia in Germany. Re-consolidation of post-imperial China under Mao also fits this pattern.

If the Russian Federation seems able to beat the odds and become more united again, there are definite grounds for helping it to do so, because break-up of the Federation would mean tremendous economic, political and military disruption. However, if fractionalization has advanced beyond recovery, then struggling against the current may only prolong the agony and delay genuine unification under a new management, possibly located elsewhere.

The title of this essay can be read in two ways. *Should* Russia break up, because such a course is preferable to the present halfway house? And what should the world do, if Russia breaks up, irrespective of the desirability of this course of events? Two distinct aspects are involved. One deals with Russia itself. What are the deep causes of present difficulties, and how likely is the Russian Federation to overcome them? Would independent successor states be in any better position to cope with them? The other aspect is international. How calamitous would a further stage in the break-up of the Soviet empire be, compared to the previous stages? How strongly should the international community persevere in upholding the status quo, even against overwhelming odds? Both aspects need serious discussion now.

Democratization and Marketization-Plus De-colonization

Russia is undergoing three revolutions simultaneously: democratization, marketization, and de-colonization. Each separately imposes major stress. Together they have become overwhelming.

Post-Franco Spain emerged to democracy safely, at least in hindsight, as if its people had matured since the anarchic democracy of the 1920s, despite the dictatorial interlude. Even so, it was a close call in 1981, when a rogue military faction seized the entire parliament. Yet Spain faced only democratization; the basic elements of market economy were in place, and de-colonization for the nation involved minor territories.

Communist-ruled countries west of Russia have recently had to face both democratization and marketization. The goings have been rough, and major shocks may still be ahead, but they have made notable progress. Only Russia and Serbia have had to face de-colonization too. Losing an empire is not only destabilizing economically but also painful psychologically. Vienna only gradually found its place as capital of a much smaller state: Austria's pre-1914 Ministry of War building now houses a number of ministries. It took France

and Britain decades to adjust to the loss of their empires, even though the shedding of colonies came gradually and democracy and the market were already in place.

In Russia all three revolutions arrived simultaneously and suddenly. No wonder some Russians still dream of restoring control over what they insist on calling the "Near Abroad", while Russia's GNP has shrunk by some calculations to Denmark's level. This shriveled entity still commands thousands of nuclear weapons and is understandably unsure of its present and future role in the world. Meanwhile, Russia's pensioners eke out a miserable existence on pittance from the state. Even worse, they sometimes have to feed their working-age children because wages are paid even less regularly than pensions.

It is not helpful to simply blame the Russians for bringing all this onto themselves (by hanging on too long to an absolute monarchy only to replace it with an even more absolutist regime) and just wash our hands of the problem. However they got into this situation, coping with democratization, marketization and de-colonization at the same time is enough to break the back of any nation. Now it is a question of finding a way out before the side effects began to overwhelm us too.

Could passage through the three revolutions be sequenced? This appears unlikely. Democratization and marketization seem inextricably linked. Democratization presumes steps to break up the economic monopoly of state enterprises. Marketization, in turn, requires democracy; under authoritarian rule it is likely to lead to crony capitalism rather than the genuine article. The experience of the nations west of Russia shows that simultaneous democratization and marketization is feasible. The extra burden facing Russia is de-colonization.

It is a problem of a different kind. Democratization and marketization are active goals where abolishing the previous regime is not enough and something new must be built. In contrast, de-colonization is a passive goal, achieved when the colonies are released and all plans of revanche are shelved. Perhaps Russia should now be trying to complete the de-colonization process it has already experienced in this decade, so as to clear the way to proceed to the other two revolutions. Most of the old Russian colonies have already achieved independence. What remains is for Russians to come to an acceptance of the loss of this empire and to face up to the need for some remaining de-colonization within the Russian Federation itself.

The Federation includes a number of ethnically distinct peoples who are chafing under Russian rule. The degree of resistance varies, from Chechens in the south to Volga Tatars in the center and Komis in the European north, where colonization has submerged but not obliterated the indigenous population. Equilibrium in relations with these peoples has not yet been reached. Moreover, Moscow's traditional rule in the outlying areas that are ethnically Russian, such as the Far East, bears a stronger colonial stamp than British rule ever did in the Thirteen Colonies - and Vladivostok is actually further from Moscow than New York is from London. Up to now, Russian nationalism has held the Federation together, but it is close to exhaustion. Disintegration is a possibility. There is no inherent reason why all Russian-speaking areas across two continents should form one state, when the English-speaking areas are happily living in several distinct states and the same is true in the Spanish, French, Portuguese and German language areas.

At a minimum, de-colonization within the Federation is incomplete regarding several ethnically distinct republics, and Chechnia demonstrates the difficulties involved in proceeding piecemeal. (The cost of the previous war in Chechnia certainly contributed to Russia's current economic woes, and the present one will worsen them.)

At the same time Russia remains so large that many Russians can entertain dreams of recouping the former Soviet republics, if not the outer empire that existed in Central Europe and

Mongolia. Like post-Versailles Germany, Russia's loss of territory is too great to accept, yet too small to leave no other choice (whereas Germany wound up losing further territory east of the Oder in 1945 and readily reconciled itself, as a result, to losing them). Russia's current foreign policy towards its neighbors bears this stamp. More serious than this, its domestic politics caters to revanchist tendencies, thereby distorting economic priorities and straining democratization.

In many respects, the closest parallel to the situation in Russia is Ukraine, the cradle of Kievan Rus' that shares the same East Slavic and Orthodox culture. Ukraine has had very difficult moments since independence, and its present condition remains precarious, but a condition of near-collapse has hit Russia and not the Ukraine. Russia's de-colonization pains are responsible for the difference. This is so even though Ukraine faces the extra challenge of nation building in a country that lacked independence during the last 400 years, in contrast to ex-communist countries further west. Nation building, strenuous as it may be, is still a more positive challenge than de-colonization.

There is also the matter of scale. Russia is a more difficult case because it is much larger than Ukraine and remains multinational. Interconnected with de-colonization, its large size distinguishes Russia from all the more successful post-communist states. If size matters, then a break-up into smaller states, at least temporarily, may be a prerequisite for success in democratization and marketization.

Indeed, different regions may need different solutions, as was arguably the case for Czechia and Slovakia, given their disparate industrial profiles. Once independent, various regions within the present Russian Federation could experiment with different approaches, and the more successful could later be emulated elsewhere. As of now, local progress in Novgorod, Saratov or Nizhegorod oblasts is obliterated under the dead weight of other regions, not to mention the sinkhole in Moscow.

Undoubtedly, a break-up would bring problems akin to those that accompanied the dissolution of the Soviet empire: the disruption of economic channels, nuclear weapons in the hands of several successor states, and some border warfare. With the former Soviet republics, these challenges proved manageable (outside of Russia itself). Economies were reoriented, more or less, painfully and slowly. Ukraine did give up the nuclear missiles it inherited. Warfare was limited (Transcaucasia, Moldova, Tajikistan) and has subsided rather than engulfing neighboring states. What would be different, if the Federation itself broke apart?

For one, the preservation of the Russian core of the former Soviet Union made parts of the earlier transition, such as control of nuclear weapons, easier. Yet in other ways Russia played a destabilizing role, such as when it helped foment ethnic warfare in Moldova and Abkhazia and applied economic pressures on the Baltic states. Thus the positive and negative impacts of maintaining a residual core may cancel out, so that further break-up could create as many problems as the previous stage.

Another difference is that the independence of the union republics came at a time when some economic and social reserves still existed. The emergency aid required from abroad remained minimal. In contrast, a break-up of the Russian Federation would take place in a context of utter economic dilapidation, social disruption and psychological exhaustion. Massive humanitarian aid from abroad might become imperative, regardless of whether the present formal Federation survives or not. Open political break-up could make the delivery of such aid even more difficult.

Ironically, the prospect of massive humanitarian aid may also be taken to mean that the optimal moment for dissolution has already been missed. Russia represents about one half of the

former Soviet population. Why is it that such an emergency may well arise regarding the half that held together and not the other half that fell into smaller pieces?

All things considered, it may be asked how hard the world should try prevent the Russian Federation from splitting into more manageable pieces. It is not a question of outsiders dividing up the Federation, nor even of encouraging centrifugal forces within. It is a matter of not actively supporting the centralizing forces either. A calm analysis is needed of the pros and cons for at least temporarily allowing different regions find their own solutions to the present impasse.

Which Status Quo?

For the international community the main advantage of a Russia formally undivided is maintenance of status quo. Known ills are preferable to unknown ones, as Hamlet well realized (though it did not save him). A basic principle of international relations is that changes to the political map are unwelcome, be it annexation of Kuwait or secession by the Kurds. Most governments, including the U.S., discourage such changes, regardless of the particular case, because they make all states feel more insecure regarding their borders.

President George Bush followed this principle when he expressly discouraged independence in talking to Ukrainians during his visit to Kiev in mid-1991. Contravening the equally hallowed principle of non-interference in a state's internal affairs, he actively took sides in a domestic matter. Indeed, even though the U.S. had steadfastly refused since 1940 to recognize the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states, the Bush administration back-pedaled when de-annexation became a realistic possibility in the late 1980s and urged the Balts to go slow.

The corollary of status quo maintenance is that once an area successfully asserts its independence, despite international reluctance, the change soon becomes part of a new status quo. Temporary exceptions occur, like the continuing refusal to recognize Chechnia for what it is-a separate state. More generally, however, "status quo" does not carry the original meaning of *status quo ante*, aiming at restoration of a previous configuration, but rather *status quo nunc*, maintenance of the present one.

American diplomats will extend congratulations to Ukraine or Latvia on the occasion of their Independence Days, and no local dignitary will remind them that the U.S. recommended going slow on independence at a time when American help would have come in handy. It is not only politeness on the part of the locals. They know that now that they have become part of the status quo, U.S. support will go beyond congratulations. Witness the Baltic Charter and U.S. support for NATO expansion.

However, while preservation of the momentary status quo is a sensible guideline it should not be a blind article of faith. At times other considerations enter in. These may be moral, as was the case in dismantling the West European colonial empires. At other times the situation on the ground may have slipped irretrievably, so that the defense of *status quo ante* is in conflict with *status quo nunc*. Support of the past status may then only prolong a painful gray period. During his visit to Kiev, President Bush was in just such a bind in the opinion of many observers at the time-and many more have agreed in retrospect. This is not to say he should have voiced support for Ukrainian independence, but he should have avoided taking sides.

It is hard to foster ever more separatist pressures around the world. Preservation of the existing situation is a sound precept when applied in moderation-and when this existing situation is well defined. In times of rapid change, however, it should not be a knee-jerk reaction based on

possibly outdated givens. Information lag time-both physical and psychological-should be taken into account. Little is gained by fighting a rip tide head on.

What is the actual situation in the Russian Federation? It is a crazy mix of centralization, supported by tradition and an ultra-strong presidency, and *de facto* anarchic sub-unit autonomy. Apart from some ethnically distinct republics, the regions have not actively set out to weaken the center-it has just collapsed, forcing the regions to take on more responsibility. Some of the local leaders are democratically minded, while others are utter tyrants. Add the quasi-feudal industrial and banking magnates whose extra-territorial power is subject neither to local nor to central government, and one may ask how much Russia still exists as an organized state.

One possible reply is that it better exist, because the alternatives are too horrible to contemplate, given the nuclear hardware and know-how floating around in the area. This is a good reason for propping up the central government for as long as possible. But for the same reason, one should prepare for the eventuality of its collapse or, worse, its falling into a prolonged coma. Pretending that Moscow is in control of all nuclear materials cannot substitute for reality. Unless one prepares in time for various outcomes (and this includes contacts with local power-holders), the worst options may materialize-complete anarchy, nuclear weapons in unknown hands, fighting, famine, and millions of refugees trying to make their way somewhere, mainly west.

Could the very talk about Russia's break-up cause it to happen? I doubt it. If a structure is so weak that talk can tilt it, then it is already on its last legs. Genuine non-interference implies neutrality between the centripetal and centrifugal forces within the present Russian Federation. The only active stand voiced by the international community should be assurances that no external power would be allowed to use Russian weakness to carve out pieces for itself. Internal break-up is one thing; a land grab from the outside would upset the status quo in vastly more dangerous ways.

Size and De-colonization

Let us return from our obvious considerations about missiles and maintenance of status quo to the equally important goal of securing the well-being of the population, in the long run by successful democratization, marketization and de-colonization. The triple task is overwhelming. The two first goals are interwoven and can be achieved (witness Central-East Europe), provided that de-colonization can be separated. The latter is connected with size.

The Federation can not receive foreign aid now without most of it ricocheting nearly at once to Cyprus, Switzerland or New York. Domestic remedies originating in the central government shatter on the sheer size of the territory. If they originate in a province, they flounder due to Moscow's interference and exploitation - both by government and the financial barons. De-colonization remains incomplete, with several ethnically distinct republics aching to leave. Chechnia's precedent indicates how incapable Moscow is of letting even marginal regions go.

It is easy to criticize the West in general and the IMF in particular for giving Russia wrong advice that considered only finances and neglected the social aspects. But the IMF gave similar advice to all the former communist-ruled countries, yet almost everywhere the outcome has been less dismal than in Russia. The few collapses, like the meltdown of government in Albania, have been contained because of the limited geographical area involved, so that the collapses have been overcome relatively quickly. Unless one blames the Russian national character, a questionable approach, size emerges as a major factor.[1](#)

One conceivable way out is a more extensive genuine autonomy for the republics and oblasts, so that they could experiment with various approaches. Western aid could then be directed selectively to those regions least subject to corruption and pillaging so as to build up centers of hope and excellence worth emulating. In principle, it would require only extensive autonomy rather than political independence.

Unfortunately, the centralizing urge is so deep-rooted in Moscow, ever since it destroyed the merchant republics of Novgorod and Viatka in the late 1400s, that the only way to have autonomy may be independence. Throughout tsarist and Soviet times, every pretense at decentralization has become a joke. The present *de facto* decentralization is of a negative nature. The center is unable to assert itself in the regions, while the regions are unable to interact with the outside world except via the ponderous and corrupt center. Perhaps only independence can enable the regions to set up their own rules for trade and investment, without officials and financiers in Moscow taking their cut.

The de-colonization pains also hinge on Moscow. The Moscow-centered state has still dreams of recouping some former territory and international prestige. This diehard imperialism is natural and understandable, but it adds an extra burden. A set of smaller successor states might view this as an idea devoid of content.

Consolidation Through Disengagement

Independence would likely be a temporary stage for most sub-units. There is every reason to believe that some of the Russian successor states would solve the democratization-marketization conundrum about as quickly as Poland or Romania. Success is not guaranteed everywhere, but chances of it would be enhanced in many regions and reduced in none. Given the common culture, a nucleus of co-operation would likely emerge among the most successful successor states.

This new core might admit new members if and when these are sufficiently reformed so as not to be a drag on the others - the pattern of expansion thus far in the European Union. The new center might be St Petersburg or some unanticipated place. In this sense, the road to a healthy, genuinely decentralized Russian Federation could be through a temporary disengagement, while a desperate attempt to keep the present structure together could prolong the misery indefinitely.

An alternative perspective is successful Russian states gradually joining the European Union. Perhaps this could be the smoothest way to reintegrate Russia into Europe. The entire Russian Federation, even if it becomes a going concern, would obviously be too big to join the European Union without causing many disruptions.

One should be cautious about trying to give history a push. The impetus for splitting up must come from the inside. It is not other states' business to encourage it. But neither should they automatically view it as an utmost calamity, to be actively discouraged under any circumstance. An open break-up of Russia may become preferable to a hidden one. If and when such a possibility looms, then a future American president visiting St Petersburg, Kazan or Vladivostok should not do what Bush did in Kiev.

Note

1. History shows a trend toward ever-larger polities. However, extreme empire building during the nineteenth century has been followed by a reverse move that still continues, because the world is still over-concentrated, compared to the average trend of the last 5,000 years. Being the world's largest state in terms of area, Russia would seem a prime candidate for de-concentration. See Rein Taagepera, "Expansion and Contraction Patterns of Large Polities: Context for Russia," *International Studies Quarterly*, 1997, vol. 41, pp. 475-504.