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Struggle for succession – could Russia have a more dangerous leader than Putin?



Russia has a remarkable ability to re-enact events from the past or even imitate characters from Russian classical literature, among many other peculiar and extremely Russian characteristics.

Putin's summit with African leaders held this week in St. Petersburg could easily be compared with the events and characters from Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*.

When observing his current behaviour, Vladimir Putin today exhibits most of the traits of Madame Ranevsky from *The Cherry Orchard*.

There is no happy end for Putin and his *Cherry Orchard*, which could relate to Russia, but he still keeps pretending and throws parties as Madame Ranevsky did in Chekhov's play.

The Russian patriotic majority is impressed with Putin's African charade, which the Russian propaganda presented as a significant milestone.

But, while organising this glittering summit, Putin has been intensifying pressure domestically: increasing the drafting age from 27 to 30, imprisoning even those Russians, such as Igor Girkin (Strelkov) who have been loyal to the Russian imperial agenda, but have been criticising Putin for being too indecisive about striking Ukraine hard.

An inner circle preoccupied with succession

Even though they are aware that few African leaders accepted the invitation to St. Petersburg, Russian oligarchs and the upper-class act as though Putin's meeting with his African friends was impressive.

They have been preoccupied with reminiscing Chekhov's great play, identifying with the character of Lopakhin, a newly wealthy man who would inherit the estate of a disgraced aristocratic family.

It is unclear who would be revealed as Lopakhin in today's Russia. There is a chance that a group of Russian nouveaux riches will take over the *Cherry Orchard*, which now belongs to Putin.

Most likely, but not necessarily, those Russians who could succeed Putin would be among the top Russian stakeholders who are close to him and are not Forbes magazine stars.

The responsibility of the West

Part of the responsibility for the fact that Putin is still the "owner of the orchard" lies at the expense of the West and its long-standing assumption that Putin is not the worst possible Russian leader among all candidates.

It's the complete opposite. Putin is by far the worst among any of the other current Russian hardheads because he has been in power for too long. Over time Russian patriotic majority has developed nearly religious adoration towards their leader.

Any new Russian leader equal to Putin in deviation would still pose less of a threat to the West because he would be too new to own the souls of the Russian patriotic majority and, therefore, more vulnerable.

Moreover, any new Russian leader, even someone as the head of the intelligence community Nikolai Patrushev or Strelkov (Girkin), would immediately blame Putin for all Russian failures and reconcile with the West because this would be the only way to save the Russian economy and therefore, the whole country in the hands of the new "owners".

What is the plan?

Understandably, the West is afraid of having a chaotic Russia since this country is a nuclear superpower.

But what is the plan then? Russia will keep producing new people like Putin or Stalin,

motivated by the Russian imperial majority to expand the perceived Russian greatness with territorial gains and undermining the West.

Adding pressure gradually is probably good in some scenarios, but in the Russian case, it just delays the inevitable sale of the Russian Cherry Orchard to the new Russian owner. Moreover, it offers Putin additional manoeuvring space.

Years back, President Obama was convinced that supplying anti-tank Javelins to Ukraine would provoke Putin. Now we see that Putin can accept supplies of tanks and Patriot anti-missile systems to Ukraine.

Russia cannot do any significant game-changing evil apart from a single tactical nuclear strike which would clearly cause immediate and absolute demolition of the Russian army in Ukraine by Western allies.

Putin probably understands this, but he could be manipulated to order a single nuclear tactical strike by other hardheads similar to Igor Strelkov, particularly if the Kremlin has already exhausted all other options by then.

Procrastination works best for whom?

It is crucial that Russian operations in Ukraine end quickly and sow discontent and unrest among the Russian elite and ruling class as soon as possible in order to prevent any additional Russian evil initiatives.

Alternatively, the Kremlin would switch Russia and its people into suffering and surviving mode and prepare for a long standoff.

The Russian people endured centuries of serfdom and communism. Therefore, the prolonged conflict in Ukraine serves the interests of the Kremlin alone.

Putin will eventually increase the level of his aggression on Ukraine and will do something outrageous even though the West was gentle about Putin's feelings and did not supply

Ukraine with long-range missiles or F-16 planes earlier.

The more time Putin has – the more tempted he will be to test the willingness of the West to respond even more decisively. This gives him hope and motivates him to search for additional opportunities, which will be more atrocious than the previous ones.