

## **Russia's Disintegrating Neighbourhood and Putin's folly in Ukraine**

**A report on the AEJ's meeting with Tom de Waal, Senior Fellow at Carnegie Europe**

**by Jonathan Stoneman, former BBC Balkans analyst, and William Horsley**

Tom de Waal, a seasoned observer of the former Soviet space and onetime foreign correspondent in Moscow, addressed journalists and students at Regent's University, London, on 23 November. He began by declaring that Vladimir Putin's personal decision to invade Ukraine in February was "not only a crime, it was also a folly".

The Russian army had suffered repeated humiliations at the hands of highly-motivated Ukrainian forces. That had greatly contributed to a wider failure of Putin's imperial ambitions towards Russia's neighbouring states. And Tom de Waal concluded that the 9-month old war Ukraine had turned into "a tragedy, not only for Ukraine, but for Russia too".

The stunning failure of Putin's so-called special military operation to subjugate Ukraine, and the evident setback to Russian "soft power" in its near abroad were the result, he argued, of Putin's desperate attempt to "stop the clock", and reverse the reality of three decades of determined efforts by the former Soviet states to build up their national sovereignty. In that time they had established new and valuable relationships beyond their links with Russia. Today, in what used to be Russia's undisputed geographical sphere, China, the EU, Iran and Turkey all exert strong influence and have established important bilateral relations with the various ex-Soviet states, diluting that of Moscow.

During more than 20 years in power, Vladimir Putin has sought, by a mixture of military force and alliances, to regain and cement Russia's dominant sphere of influence over the surrounding regions. But the attempt to build a kind of "Soviet Union light" through a Commonwealth of Independent States which was meant to coordinate political and security policies, and the related Commonwealth Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in the military domain, had failed to evolve into a serious rival to NATO. And the so-called Eurasian Economic Union, centred mainly on Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, had failed to take off, with recent trade flows diminishing.

Under Putin, Russia has used force to seize territory in Georgia, and in 2014 it annexed Crimea and supported separatists who declared autonomy in eastern Ukraine. In 2020 a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan ended with **Russia sending its own** peacekeeping force to the contested **Nagorno-Karabakh**. **And** In January this year Russia successfully deployed a mixed force of Russian and other CSTO units to Kazakhstan to help suppress an anti-government uprising and secure Russia's key interests in that huge oil and gas-rich central Asian country. But the uprising was itself a symptom of Kazakh peoples' demand for more political freedom. And de Waal suggested that the mass exodus of young Russian men across the country's southern and western borders -- including to Kazakhstan -- to escape being sent to fight in Ukraine, had dramatically reversed migration flows and damaged Moscow's image as a centre of regional gravity and opportunity. Now "no-one is going there.

The generational divide within Russia, and the advanced age of President Putin (70) and those around him, now hark back to the gerontocracy that Soviet Russia had become in the 1980s. Tom de Waal believes that the real cleavage in Russian society is generational. Young people, who have grown up on the internet and social media, are more aware of the outside world and much more skeptical about Putin's war. The older generation still gets its news mainly from state television -- "ten times more powerful as a propaganda weapon" - and has largely swallowed the official narrative about the war.

However, signs of public dissent have multiplied, and it has grown harder to conceal the reality of Russia's international isolation and the army's losses in the war. Public opinion polls show a distinct

fall in popular support for the war and its declared aims. Tom de Waal mused that Russian youth may now see Putin's Ukraine adventure as him trying to "steal the future from the younger generation".

So how might this all end? Tom de Waal believes that there is now no conceivable way in which Russia can "win" the war. The bold attempt to seize Kyiv and replace Zelensky with a pro-Russia leader has failed. The Ukrainians have made amply clear they would never submit to Russian occupation. But if Russian forces are able to stay deeply dug in on the east bank of the Dnieper River, Putin could still hope to claim a kind of victory by hanging onto substantial territories of eastern Ukraine which his army has seized since February. If a long war of attrition drags on, popular support in the West for Ukraine will be sorely tested by the call to go on spending six billion dollars a month to keep Ukraine going.

De Waal was cautious of predicting anything like regime change taking place in Russia soon. It was in the nature of autocracies that it is impossible to predict when or how an autocratic leader will fall. The Russian elite has been "purged". The military has no tradition of intervening in politics. Any potential challengers, like the jailed Alexei Navalny, have no means of mobilising their supporters.

As for the long-term implications of Russia's self-inflicted injury on its "neighbourhood", he cautioned against assuming that a Russian retreat would usher in an era of more democratic and liberal governments. "If the Russian policeman is weak, who steps in?", he asked.

China had already staked its claim as a future dominant force across the great expanse of Central Asia. Former imperial powers Turkey and Iran both nurture historic as well as 21<sup>st</sup> century ambitions in the south. As for Russia, Tom de Waal reminded the meeting that Vladimir Putin's imperial ideas were motivated by a concept of Russian "exceptionalism" that had deep roots in the country's history. And Russia was not alone in the modern world in having leaders who believe that their country possesses a unique right to break the rules of international relations to achieve its goals.